### Into The Fire

**Summary**

Dean accidentally kills Castiel, and is tormented by grief and guilt afterwards. Dean becomes convinced Cas still exists somehow, and that he will be resurrected; Sam's not so sure, but is determined to help his grief-stricken brother recover. Meanwhile the Darkness is eating away at Creation, and soon both brothers realize they may have to embark on their longest and strangest journey yet. This time they might not come back. Will they have to fight their last battle without Castiel?
A/N - Welcome to my post-S10 summer fic! Canon-compliant up to the S10 finale. Starts 3 months later.

... um ...

SERIOUS WARNING: THIS FIC IS VERY DISTURBING. I am deliberately telling everybody the main point of chapter 1, even though it's a spoiler, just to make sure readers are sufficiently warned: Dean kills Castiel right away in chapter 1. And it is really, really bad. (Those who've read my other stuff, this is much worse than anything in any of my other fics.) EDIT: For the 2016 summer hiatus I've altered tags and added some spoiler tags to give readers a clue as to the eventual outcome. This is to broadcast the fic more widely to readers who might have missed it originally. The original tags will go back in place in the fall. I'll probably continue cycling the spoiler tags on & off the fic periodically.

Destiel readers: This is a no-smut fic. Honestly this fic is a little hard for me to categorize as Destiel or not, but I am thinking of it as "repressed Destiel" - repressed on Dean's side, that is, and unrequited on Cas's. So the Destiel is mostly in the form of unrequited longing and regret. I do not rule out the possibility, though, that things may shift (whether this might be past or future I cannot say...) I'm trying to keep it very canon-compliant but am also letting the characters guide me, so this may evolve during writing.

WARNING: TORTURE, DEATH, MISERY, INSANITY, GRIEF. I'm not kidding.

THIS IS YOUR LAST CHANCE! STOP HERE!

It should have been an ordinary hunt.

It should have been easy. Just another ghost, just another monster. Dean had been certain it would be easy. The three of them — Sam, Dean, and also Cas these days— were only working a simple case: a few strange deaths in a small Ohio town.

Just a handful of deaths. Nothing unusual.

Well, except that the deaths were maybe a bit more grisly than the norm. And a bit sadder than the norm, too. Five separate people had each slaughtered their friends and families, all in messy bloodbaths. Perfectly ordinary people, with no history of violence, had just snapped out of the blue, and had gone into what seemed to be some kind of a psycho-killer frenzy.

Three of the suspects had then killed themselves right afterwards. The other two had gone insane.
Dean shuffled his feet, and tugged at his collar. The trusty old FBI suit didn't seem to fit too comfortable anymore. The jacket seemed pretty warm in the August heat, the shirt was itching, and the dress shoes seemed to be pinching Dean's feet.

He tried to focus. They were at the fifth death scene—a tidy little suburban home in Sandusky, Ohio. Last night a young mother had somehow managed to slaughter her entire family using only a broken vodka bottle. She'd slit her own throat right afterwards.

*More dead folks,* Dean thought, looking around once more at the bloody scene. *Guess the reapers are all still in business?* The death of Death, and also the still-closed Veil, seemed to have had no visible impact at all. People still seemed plenty able to die. (Though what happened to their souls afterwards, he had no idea. Even Cas had no useful insights about that.)

The last of the bodies had just been taken away, and most of the cops had left by now. One last local cop was standing with them in the blood-spattered living room, droning through a pretty tedious history of Sandusky and all its local gossip, while Sam nodded attentively and took reams of chicken-scratch notes on a little pad of paper. Cas, who had accompanied them on this trip (though he'd insisted on driving his own car) was pacing around the edges of the room studying the blood splashes.

*Jeez, was the FBI getup always this hot in summer?* thought Dean, tugging again at the shirt collar. Sam paused in his chicken-scratch notes to slant a sideways look at Dean, and Dean had to force himself to stop fidgeting.

Truth be told, it was a bit difficult to concentrate on the case.

Okay... *real* truth be told, it was a bit difficult to focus on *any* case these days. Any case at all. The FBI suit wasn't the real problem, Dean knew. He just wasn't comfortable in the role anymore. Here it was the end of summer already, months since the removal of the Mark, but Dean was still finding it a struggle to get back in the groove.

For one thing, the Darkness was a perpetual worry. Sure, it had scattered pretty rapidly, after its first appearance back in May—that terrifying black storm-cloud had just rolled over the Impala harmlessly, wafted off into the distance and disappeared, and there'd been no sign of it since. But Dean knew, he just knew, that the Darkness was out there somewhere. There'd been an uptick in weird cases recently, for one thing. And earthquakes. And sinkholes. And trees disappearing. Just last week an entire mountain in the Andes had reportedly vanished into thin air. That seemed a little ominous.

And then there was the set of big dark sunspots that had appeared on the surface of the Sun last month. It had been playing hell with radio transmissions. And apparently this wasn't supposed to be a major sunspot year. There was even a dark spot on Jupiter, too, right smack in the middle of its big Red Spot, which was now shrinking pretty fast. Might just be coincidence, but...

Dean couldn't shake a conviction that the Darkness was slowly nibbling away at the fringes of Creation. Gobbling stuff up, maybe? Bits of the Earth? Maybe even bits of the Sun and the rest of the solar system?

Which seemed like it might be bad.

Then there was the whole different problem about hunting. This was at least the tenth case that Sam
had tried to take him along on, but every time Dean had had to struggle to get back in the game.

It wasn't just because of distraction about the Darkness. The real problem with the hunts was that every time Dean had to do anything the least bit aggressive or violent — pull his gun, or throw a punch, or even just yell at someone — he usually ended up puking his guts out in the nearest bathroom right afterwards. Anything that reminded him of the Mark seemed to set it off — any hint of anger or rage and he ended up with nausea, headaches, the shakes, nightmares, the works.

Sam thought it was some kind of Mark-withdrawal that would improve with time. Dean wasn't so sure.

Sam had sure had his hands full, that first month. Dean had been curled up in his bedroom for a while first, feverish and headachey, and puking his guts out about every other minute. Cas had turned up a few days later, plenty sick himself; turned out he'd been hit by some weird spell from Rowena. He'd survived, but apparently it had knocked all the mojo out of him again (he'd said that healing from the spell had "drained his grace," whatever that meant). Since Dean had been pretty deep in the shakes-and-fever part of whatever weird withdrawal he was going through, Cas (who was too wobbly to help much anyway) had ended up just getting out of the way. He'd settled in on a cot way up in the bunker attic.

Cas had recovered much quicker than Dean had (though Cas still seemed to be pretty low on power). Cas had tottered on down to the library pretty soon and then spent most of June trying to help Sam sort out the jumbled library books. Dean spotted them flipping through the books sometimes and whispering to each other. They were both obviously trying to find out something useful about the Darkness. Fat lot of good it probably would do any of them now.

Dean, for his part, couldn't stand to be in the library (it reminded him too much of a certain fight he'd had in there) and he spent most of May, and then quite a lot of June, lying on his bed staring at the ceiling. But he heard Cas now and then puttering around, shuffling stacks of books here and there, or sometimes lugging some books upstairs to read them up there on his own. Cas pretty much moved into the bunker, in fact. There'd been no real discussion about it, but Cas seemed to have finally decided to ignore Dean's long-ago decision, almost two years back now, to kick him out.

Cas had even been trying to entertain himself a little. Dean heard him plunking away sometimes at an old guitar that he'd picked up at a thrift store.

It should have been good to know Cas was settling in. (The kicking-out thing had always nagged at Dean. For two years.) But mostly the guitar sounds just made Dean's perpetual headache worse. As did Cas's choice in music, which was currently running toward old sixties folk songs.

But at least Cas was better.

But Dean?

Well... at least the puking had slowed down a little.

He'd been hearing Cas and Sam talking about him, recently, in the bunker. Murmuring quietly together. They probably thought they were being totally subtle, of course, but their voices carried more than they realized, and once Dean was on his feet and roaming around the bunker more, every now and then he overheard their whispers. Usually something like, "He's still adjusting," or "He may
need more time," or "I suspect he's still having nightmares," or "Has he ever talked to you? About... the... y'know."

That last one was always Sam talking to Cas. About that one time. In the library.

That time when Dean had battered Cas to within an inch of his life. That time when Dean had nearly killed Cas, and Cas had just let it happen.

No, of course they'd never talked about it. It got so that Dean could barely stand to be in the same room with Cas at all. He just couldn't seem to look Cas in the eye. Or talk with him. About anything. The most Dean seemed able to do was listen to the distant guitar strumming in the evenings, lying on his bed and hearing the faint sounds drifting down from the stairwell, and think, *I gotta go up there someday and talk to him.*

He never did. The most talking Dean did these days was usually just to burst into pointless rounds of bitching now and then, at both Cas and Sam, about the damn spell and the friggin' book and poor Charlie, and how it was all Cas's and Sam's fault that the Darkness had got out. Some days Dean couldn't decide who to be more pissed at: Cas, for going ahead with that harebrained spell idea and pretty much starting another Apocalypse? Sam, for pushing Cas into it? Or both of them, for trying to save Dean at all?

But of course Dean knew damn well whose fault it really was.

---

The cop finally left. Sam flipped his notebook closed. "There's definitely some kind of common thread here, to all these deaths," he said, "But damn if I know what it is. Cas, you spotting anything?" Cas was still pacing slowly around the bloody living room, now with a rather puzzled look on his face.

In answer, Cas closed his eyes and held out one hand into the air. "There's a signature of some sort in the air," he said, eyes still closed. "Something odd. Something I haven't felt before. I wonder..." He still had his hand out, waving it around now like it was some kind of antenna.

"Wait, Cas," asked Sam. "You're picking up something? I thought you were all out of mojo. Is your grace working again?"

Cas gave a little shrug. He opened his eyes and dropped his hand down to his side, frowning down at the bloodstained carpet. "Not really. I do still have a small grace, but it's still very low on power. But sometimes I do sense things. There's sort of a trail in the air. It reminds me a little of..." He paused.

His eyes slid to Dean.

*It reminds him of something evil,* thought Dean immediately. *Something bad.*

Cas looked away. "A demon, maybe," he said. "Or something else. I'm not sure. But I might be able to track it."
Cas's faint spidey-sense eventually led them to the foggy Lake Erie shoreline. It took a while, but by nightfall Cas, leading the way in his gold Continental, had homed in on a set of five ramshackle warehouses in a big old dockyard by the lakeshore. After some sniffing around and some more Obi-Wan style hand-waving, Cas announced that the thing he'd sensed before, whatever it was, was probably inside one of the warehouses.

But now Cas seemed uneasy.

Dean and Sam were standing at the Impala's trunk near the first warehouse, bickering about who was going to check which warehouse and whether to stay together (Sam's vote) or split up (Dean's vote). (On almost every hunt these days, Dean found himself wanting, sometimes wanting very much, to march into the most hazardous possible situations all on his own. With no backup. He didn't think too closely about why.)

But Cas didn't even seem to be listening. He was standing a few feet away staring out into the foggy night.

Cas broke into their argument with, "Something's wrong."

"What do you mean?" said Sam.

"I don't know," said Cas. He turned in a little circle, scanning all five warehouses. The warehouses were huge, lined up in parallel and receding away in the fog like a series of rectangular mountains. The closest one loomed overhead; the last one or two were only half-visible through the wisps of fog.

Cas couldn't seem to explain the worry that had come over him. He looked around a while more and then shook his head. "Sorry," he said. "I don't know what it is that I'm sensing."

"You're just worried, Cas," said Sam, walking over and clapping him on the shoulder. "It's probably just that you know you don't have your powers now."

"Or he's freaked out by being with me? thought Dean. He always avoids me in the bunker. He hardly ever comes with us. He didn't even want to drive with us."

"But we'll be fine," Sam was saying. "Weapons work pretty well too, you know. We'll be fine. Quick in-and-out." Cas gave him a somewhat skeptical look, but Sam grinned at him and said, "Let's stick together. We'll all stay together and check the warehouses one at a time. C'mon, first one."

The first warehouse was empty. The second was empty. The third was empty. The fourth...

It should have been easy.

All the warehouses were pretty much identical in structure, and by the fourth one they knew the layout. Sam busted through a padlock on a small side door with a pair of boltcutters, and they made their way through a long, empty entry hallway, and then through another little door that led to a vast open interior. Skinny windows loomed high overhead, most of them broken, letting in just enough of the foggy glow of the streetlights to get a sense of the space. It was a huge, cavernous work area like
all the others. Great big wooden pillars holding up the roof, dilapidated piles of equipment sitting around, and a few abandoned wooden pallets heaped against the walls.

Sam flicked his flashlight into all the corners. Nothing was in sight. Nothing behind the equipment, either. Dean started checking the stacks of pallets, and had just started to say "Well, on to the fifth," when it jumped him.

It'd been hiding behind a pallet. Dean didn't even get a clear view of it at first, just a jumbled impression of a huge horrid dark spidery thing that darted right up at him with heartstopping speed. It was on Dean in an instant, pinning his arms to his sides before he could even bring his pistol up, and hurling him to the floor. Cas and Sam flew into action and actually jumped right on the thing. There was a bewildering scuffle, all three of them rolling around with the spidery thing. Sam took a pretty rough blow and went flying, but Cas had his angel-blade out by then and he managed to slice off one of the thing's black, twisted limbs. It howled and loosened its hold on Dean enough for Dean to yank his trusty demon-blade out of his boot. Dean plunged the demon-blade deep into the thing's torso. It let out a squeaking sound, finally let go of him and flipped over, the wound leaking dark smoke.

Dean scuttled back on his hands and knees, gasping. Sam slowly sat up from where he'd been flung, rubbing his head. Cas was poised near the spider-thing, his angel-blade up. They all watched it as it writhed for a moment.

It glowed with a vivid purple light, let out another big puff of black smoke and collapsed, dead.

Sam and Dean heaved a sigh of relief. (Cas didn't; he was already scanning around the room again, still looking worried.)

Sam said, "Hey, that actually didn't go so bad."

Dean had to agree. "Scared the bejeezus out of me, though," he said, getting to his feet and brushing the dust off. He scratched an itch on his left arm. "Jeez, that thing was fast." Though, Dean realized, at least he wasn't feeling any of the post-fight nausea that he usually felt. He'd fought, he'd stabbed the thing, and... no nausea!

In fact, Dean realized, he felt pretty good. Maybe he was getting his hunter legs back after all!

Castiel said, "We'd better burn the body. Just in case."

Dean scratched his arm again. At that point it began to occur to Dean that he was going to want to spend some time here, with Cas maybe, and that maybe it would be better if Sam went elsewhere.

"Hey, Sam," Dean said. "It's getting late and none of us have eaten. Why don't Cas and I wrap up here— we'll burn it, and make sure it's down to ash, and how about you go get us some dinner in the meantime. Pick up some takeout or something, and meet us at the motel?"

Sam glanced back and forth between Cas and Dean. He actually looked a little happy about this plan, for some reason, and he nodded. Dean tossed him the Impala keys. Sam brought in some salt and lighter fluid for them before he left, and then off he went.

Dean thought he would feel the usual cringey awkward guilt, being all alone with Cas like this, but instead he began to feel almost relaxed. Why had he been feeling guilty about Cas, anyway? Just
becasue of that little library fight?

If anything, Cas was the one who should feel guilty. Cas had totally pushed Dean into that whole fight anyway. Not to mention all the other things he'd done wrong. None of it had been Dean's fault at all.

This cheery thought relaxed Dean further. Cas was now shooting him questioning looks now and then, but Dean ignored him and focused on the fire. Together they set up a little pyre in the middle of the cement floor. They broke up some of the wooden pallets for fuel, Dean added some salt and lighter fluid, and soon the spider-thing's corpse was burning away.

When it was all over, Dean poked the warm ashes with his foot. "See, Cas," he said, "All just ashes now. Feeling any better now?"

Cas gave him a distinctly uneasy look, his mouth pressed into a tight line. "Not really," he said. "Actually the sensation is getting much worse."

"You getting any clearer idea what it is that's bugging you?" said Dean, scratching his left arm again.

Cas looked around. "Something bad coming, I fear." He looked up at the high ceiling, at the great wooden pillars all around them and the shattered skylights high overhead, and turned in a little circle to look at all the walls too. "Dean, I'm really getting quite worried. I think something bad is going to happen. Maybe we missed something?"

Cas began to pace around the perimeter of the room, inspecting all the corners again and looking carefully behind every remaining wooden pallet.

Dean's left arm was really itching quite a lot. He finally looked down and realized he had four thin, long scrapes across his elbow. Whoa. What was that? Claw marks?

Tooth scrapes, maybe?

He glanced at his other arm, and was startled to see a faint ghostly impression of the Mark fade into view.

A brief surge of panic flickered through him. A dawning horror...

... and then Dean forgot all about it.

Everything was all right. Everything was just as it should be.

Cas was still checking through the far corners of the rooms, saying, "Dean, I'm starting to suspect I may be experiencing some sort of premonition."

Dean sighed to himself. There Cas went again... Cas and his squirrelly theories. Which no doubt were wrong, since Cas was always completely wrong about everything. Always making mistakes. Always fucking everything up.

And sure enough, Cas then started going on and on about some idiotic theory of his, some tedious nerdy explanation about how angels' sense of time occasionally stretched slightly into the future, and how they could sometimes detect if something really horrible was about to happen. Soon Dean found he was getting more and more irritated just at the sound of Cas's voice. Dean finally snapped, "Would you just shut the hell up?"

Cas turned and looked at him. Dean was standing by the door, clutching his left arm; Cas was at the
That idiot frown Cas practically always had— it was just so fucking irritating. Dean said, "I don't know why I even agreed for you to come along on these hunts. You always get everything wrong. Not to mention, you've betrayed me so many damn times already, I don't know why I even thought I could trust you for even a second."

"Dean...," said Cas. He inched a little closer, scanning Dean from head to foot. Dean scratched his left arm again, and Cas narrowed his eyes and said, "What's wrong with your arm?"

"What the fuck do you care?" Dean snapped. "I scratch my arm and suddenly you're all worried about it? How about thinking about something useful, like, oh, the fact that you've gone and started another fucking Apocalypse? After fucking LYING TO ME for months about what you were up to? But, oh, wait, that's what you do, isn't it! You lie, and you fuck up. You always lie. You always fuck everything up!"

Cas blinked at him. His eyes flicked down to Dean's arms. Without thinking Dean turned a little to hide the faint imprint of the Mark on his right arm, but instead Cas caught a glimpse of the scratches on his left.

Ah, now Cas was doing that damn head-tilt.

"Dean, did it bite you?" asked Cas, quietly. "On your left arm?"

"Would you stop tilting your head like a goddam dog, Cas, you look like a complete fucking moron when you do that," said Dean. "You fuck up quite a bit, did you know that? How many sins have you piled up now? Oh wait. Let me list them." All of a sudden it was seeming highly relevant, necessary in fact, to try to figure out how many sins Castiel was guilty of, and just how bad they had been. So Dean started to tick off a list on his fingers. "Let's see now. Let's start right after the Apocalypse, shall we? Sin number one— lying to us about the Purgatory souls, and Crowley and Raphael, and what you were doing for an entire friggin' year."

"Dean, listen to me," Cas said, his voice tense now. He started to edge a little to the side, obviously trying to sidle around Dean toward the door. "I think you may have been bitten. You're feeling hatred, aren't you? Directed at me? But it's not real, Dean—"

"It's as real as it gets, Cas, and the reason I'm feeling hatred is because you deserve to be hated, Cas," said Dean, talking right over him. As Dean spoke, he felt a wisp of power starting to thrum through him. It was just a faint shadow of the exhilarating power he'd felt all last year, the power he'd been desperately missing ever since he'd lost the Mark, but even just this little whiff of it felt intoxicating. I bet I can take him, Dean thought. I bet I can take him. With that "depowered grace" he's gotta be weaker now than he was that time in the library, right? Hell, I bet he can't even heal like usual.

Dean began unloading his shotgun, dumping the salt cartridges and swapping them out for ones with real buckshot. "TWO," went on Dean, "You decided to try become God. God. Seriously? For real? How many sins does that even count as? And then you murdered I don't know how many people."

"Dean," broke in Castiel, "Please listen to me. You've been bitten— those scratches on your arm— you've been infected by something. And you can't hide the Mark from me; I see it too. I think I know now what this creature was. It was a manifestation of the Darkness. And its task was to turn you into the most destructive version of yourself. It's using you as a tool of destruction, Dean, that's what the Darkness— it destroys things."

"Don't fucking change the subject, Cas," said Dean.
"Dean, I think it may be turning you back into a torturer of Hell, into the bearer of the Mark. Into a destroyer. I can see it in your eyes, Dean, please—"

Dean ignored him. He had the shotgun loaded now, and he hefted it one hand, his pistol in the other hand, both trained right at Cas now. Who was, sure enough, backing away across the room. He's acting like he's vulnerable to gunfire, Dean realized with delight. Which probably means he IS vulnerable to gunfire. This is better than I thought. Cas tried to turn away, and he was fishing in his pocket now too, so Dean fired the pistol, aiming two feet to Cas's side.

The shot boomed through the vast room, shockingly loud. Chips of cement went flying. Cas froze.

"Don't you fucking dare touch your phone," spat Dean, for he knew that's why Cas had been reaching into his pocket. "Don't you fucking dare try and call Sam or I'll shoot your legs off right now and then shoot him too. Throw the phone on the ground. Toward me. NOW." There was an exultant rage building in Dean. It was partly the Mark again, of course (or some kind of strange ghostly memory of it at least), bringing with it a taste of that delicious anger.

But as Cas slowly tossed the phone on the floor, Dean realized something else had returned as well.

Righteousness.

Righteousness, and the cold judgmental fury that went with it.

Dean had long known he had a bit of a righteous side. Especially when he'd been younger. Cas had called him "the righteous man," of course, and though Dean hadn't really believed that he was the "Righteous Man," something about the phrase had rung true. Dean knew he'd been a little arrogant, even. Arrogant and sure of himself and always trying to do the right thing.... and raining down death and destruction on those he viewed as evil.

And that was exactly why Alistair had chosen him to groom as a torturer of Hell.

The righteous always made the best torturers, Alistair had explained.

"Would you deny, Castiel," said Dean, "that you have sinned?"

"No," said Castiel, standing very still, his voice low. "I don't deny any of it, and I have paid. And clearly I continue to pay. But this isn't you, Dean. You've got to try to remember who you really are —" Cas forgot himself and started to take one step forward, so Dean fired the pistol, a bare inch over Cas's head this time. Cas froze in mid-step.

Dean said, "One more step, Cas. One more step, and I shoot you where you stand. And you're not exactly sure how much damage that would do, are you? You know you can't really heal yourself very well right now, isn't that true? Such a pity. So here's what you should do: Do not move. Cause I'm not done listing your sins. I'm not even halfway through. Let's see, where was I, Castiel? Angel of the Lord? Soldier of God? Where was I now? I was at sin number three, was I not? THREE! You turned the Leviathans loose! And just how many people did THEY kill? Like, oh, for example, Bobby?"

It was all coming clear in Dean's mind now. It was all so crystal clear. How much Cas had sinned, how much he'd done wrong, how many awful mistakes he'd made, and, most of all, how much Cas needed to suffer.

Cas needed to be punished.

Dean began advancing on Cas slowly.
"Dean, please—" whispered Cas. "All of that—Raphael and my, my, my failure as a god, and the Leviathans—I truly was trying to save the world—I didn't know the Purgatory souls would take me over like that, I truly didn't know. Nor did I know about Metatron's spell, nor about the Darkness—"

"Yet you barged on ahead anyway every single time," said Dean, taking another step forward, "and made the worst fucking mistakes possible every single time, too. Isn't that right?"

"Please, Dean, after Metatron I stopped even trying to do any of that. I knew I'd failed. But I did want to help you, still— and, Dean, you know how I regret my mistakes, you know I have tried to repent—you must know that—"

"FOUR!" interrupted Dean. "If I can go personal for just one moment here, just to point out that you DID NOT even help me. You don't even take care of your very, very, VERY few friends, because, four, you FUCKING ABANDONED ME in Purgatory! FIVE, oh, do you happen to remember that one time you turned into a HOMICIDAL ROBOT and tried to kill me?" Dean's phone vibrated. He fished it out of his pocket with two fingers, keeping the shotgun trained on Cas.

It was a text from Sam. He'd picked up a couple pizzas and was heading to the motel.

Dean laughed. "Sam got pizza for us," he told Cas, dropping the phone back in his pocket. "Pepperoni okay?"

Cas just gazed at him.

Dean dropped the phone back in his pocket. "I'll take care of Sam later. He's made quite a few mistakes too."

"Oh, Dean," whispered Cas. "Not Sam too—"

"Then, SIX," went on Dean, "you stole the tablet and you didn't come to me for help, remember that little episode? And you ignored all my advice and you screwed up AGAIN with Metatron, didn't you, and it is because of YOU, because of YOU, Castiel, angel of the Lord, soldier of God, that all those people were exploded by angels for months after. SEVEN... unleashing the Darkness, and I don't even know how to count that one up. Creation is going to be eaten up, from crown to core—" (Dean had no idea what this phrase meant, or how he knew it; it had just surfaced in his mind, his arm itching furiously all the while.) "And it is all... your... fault."

Dean began to walk toward Castiel again, slowly, one step at a time, his pistol in one hand and the shotgun in the other. "That is seven times you've sinned, Castiel," said Dean. "You so-called servant of Heaven. And if only stupidity counted as a sin too, well, then, you'd be up in the thousands of sins, not just seven, wouldn't you? Now, what do you think you deserve for all that?"

Cas suddenly had his angel-blade in his hand. But he didn't move.

"What's the matter, Castiel?" said Dean. "You could skewer me in the chest with that angel-blade with one throw, couldn't you? Why are you hesitating?"

Cas flipped the blade around in his hand, staring at Dean. "Dean," he said, "This isn't you. This is what you were becoming in Hell, before I pulled you out. It was what the Mark was going to turn you into, too, eventually. But it isn't you."

"You're thinking about throwing that blade, aren't you," said Dean, taking another step closer, and another. They were only about ten feet apart now. "You're thinking about it. Throwing it right into my heart. Go ahead. Go ahead. I'm wide open." He moved his hands apart, holding the pistol and shotgun well away from each other, giving Castiel an easy target. "Just one quick throw, and I'll be
dead too. And that'll be just one more death on your conscience, won't it. Just one more little death. What's one among thousands? What's stopping you?"

A pause. Dean stood there, his arms spread, smiling. Cas was fidgeting with his blade.

"Dean, I know you're in there," said Cas at last. "I know you can hear me."

"Oh, that's cute," Dean said, laughing, for Cas was parroting the phrases that Dean had used once, to snap Castiel out of his homicidal-robot trance. "Just one problem with that strategy, Cas, this is actually is me. You can't snap me out of a trance because I'm not in a trance, Cas."

Cas opened his mouth to say something else, but Dean found that he wasn't interested anymore in whatever stupid prattley theories Cas would spout out. It was time to get down to business.

Cas had sinned, and he needed to be punished.

Dean didn't want to kill Cas immediately (that wouldn't be enough punishment) so instead he shot Cas in the leg.

Dean never was sure later how long it had all lasted. They turned out to be fairly evenly matched, Dean's partial resurgence of Mark-like power just about equalling Cas's weakened little grace, and they ended up scuffling on the ground for a surprisingly long time. Dean was heavier and taller and had a longer reach, and Cas couldn't seem to heal his leg, all of which should have given Dean an advantage, but Cas turned out to be just full of unfair squirrelly little grappling tricks. He was even somehow managing to put up a better fight than he had that day in the library. In fact, Cas should probably have won except for the fatal flaw that Cas was still too goddam wimpy or weak-willed or whatever to kill Dean when he had the chance. No less than four times Cas had a solid chance to take Dean out with his blade, and every time he froze up, like the fucking idiotic wimp that he was. And the whole time Cas was keeping up that godawful ridiculous chatter about Dean being "infected," whining endlessly about it, gasping out sappy little phrases like "Wake up, Dean! You've got to snap out of this— It'll pass in a few hours— the other people snapped out of it in a few hours — Dean, you just need to fight it off for a few hours, please!"

Dean ignored all that pointless blather, for Cas was weakening as the fight went on, while Dean was only growing stronger. At last Dean got the upper hand. Soon Dean was battering Cas's face into the floor, just as he had during that wonderful day in the library. It felt simply fantastic to be able to relive that moment and savor it all over again. Dean savored the sound of the cracking bones, he savored the sound of Cas's helpless gasps, and he savored the feeling of Cas going limp under his hands, too dazed to even hold himself up. Once again Dean got him on his back, bloody and beaten. Once again Dean took hold of Cas's blade.

And Dean didn't miss this time.

But neither did he stab Cas in the heart.

That would have been too quick a death.

Instead Dean sliced Cas's neck, and bled his little grace away.

Cas went into a weird stiff paralysis as this happened, gasping "No... " just once and then falling
silent. The grace dribbled out, just a tiny little pathetic wisp of silvery light. It tried, briefly, to flow back into Cas's mouth, but Dean held one hand over Cas's mouth and the other over his nose (Cas seemed too stunned to even move). The grace nosed around at Cas's bloodied face for a moment, and then seemed to give up. It wafted away into the air and dissipated into a thin cloud of very faint little silver sparks, which floated upwards and were soon lost overhead, drifting out of the broken windows up to the sky.

Cas's faint gasps brought Dean's attention back down. Cas was stirring under him once more.

Cas was now entirely mortal.

Cas started scuffling again, trying to squirm out from under Dean's grasp. He was soon muttering the stupid stuff again about "Dean, this isn't YOU," which was getting pretty annoying, so Dean finally grabbed hold of Cas's mangled leg and twisted it brutally. Cas screamed (seemed like it hurt much more, now that he had no grace) and his last weak hold on Dean finally wavered. Dean got achokehold on him and as he throttled Cas into unconsciousness, it was a hell of a relief when Cas at last SHUT UP.

Dean stood, breathing hard, and looked down at him, flipping the angel-blade around in his hand. One quick blow and the irritating angel would at last be dead.

It was quite tempting.

But of course, Cas still needed to be punished more.

Back when Dean had been Alistair's brightest new protege, back in Hell, Alistair had instructed him in some of the finer nuances of torture. There were quite a lot of interesting little psychological details that one could add. For example: If the subject was religious, you could set up the torture scene in a way that mimicked something about the religion. This often added a layer of emotional suffering that gave the whole job just that little additional zing.

Dean considered Castiel to be more-or-less Christian (maybe not exactly, since Cas was older than that; but Cas had hinted a few times that he'd met Jesus personally, and that had to count, right?).

So Dean crucified him.

There wasn't exactly a cross and nails handy but Dean made do. Some pieces of the wooden pallets were still nearby, and Dean soon found a sturdy good-sized plank and some nails. He hammered the plank horizontally onto one of the vertical wooden pillars, about seven feet up. Then he managed to get the angel strung up by a waist rope upright against the vertical pillar. It was a bit difficult; the angel kept coming half-awake and Dean kept having to choke him out again, and also Dean had to build a stack of pallets just to make a crude little ladder to haul him up there. But Dean kept at it and finally got the angel tied up on the cross with some pieces of rope.

Then Dean waited for the angel to wake.

He could no longer remember the angel's name — had it started with a C, perhaps? No matter; it was very clear in Dean's mind that this angel, whoever he was, had sinned terribly and must punished. So he waited till the angel's eyes cleared, and till he managed to raise his head. Dean waited for the angel to start pleading (which the angel did, predictably), and waited a few minutes longer for that
sweet moment when real fear crept into the angel's eyes. Then Dean picked up the angel's own blade. It would do for one wrist. The demon-blade would do for the other wrist. *Pity there isn't a third blade for the feet,* Dean thought. The feet would have to just stay tied with the rope. *Oh well. Can't have everything, I guess.*

There was a special sweet delight in the moment when the angel realized Dean was really going to go through with it.

Dean was glad he'd sent the brother away (whose name he was also having trouble remembering); otherwise the brother would certainly have heard the screams.

The brother would need his own punishment, of course. That would come later.

The angel didn't scream all that long. This was too bad, but Dean had been prepared for that small disappointment. Alistair had explained many times (with many demonstrations) how it was always a little difficult for crucifixion subjects to breathe properly. This meant the screaming inevitably faded away pretty soon. But Dean was a professional, and he didn't let the disappointment get him down; he just moved on to Phase 2, lacerations down the chest (and maybe a little bit of flaying), on a small scale. Cut after cut after cut. Dean's plan was to keep this up as long as he could, but always trying to minimize the blood loss as much as possible, so that the angel would suffer as long as possible. *Because the angel needed to be punished.*

*Because that was what the angel deserved.*

The angel was a sinner. The sinner was an angel.... This concept rattled around disturbingly in Dean's mind. Sinner, angel... something seemed... wrong? Was something wrong?

But Dean finally decided, *It's some kind of a sinner-angel,* and then he was able to keep going.

*It's a sinner, and I must punish it.*

*Because this is my job.*

*Because this is what I am.*

All the stuff about being a Knight of Hell had been a bit beside the point, hadn't it? Dean's real calling, the one he'd worked at for decades, the job he'd been damn good at, *the job he'd spent most of his life doing,* was that of Torturer of Hell.

This had been Dean's job for years, and years, and years, and years. Here in Hell, at Alistair's side. *Where's Alistair?* Dean wondered, glancing around. Alistair must be around here somewhere. He'd probably be back soon. He'd be pleased to see Dean doing such a careful, thorough job. Dean was good at his job. It was all that he was. It was all that he knew. It was the only thing he remembered.

Dean set about his job carefully. Professionally. He estimated he might get as much as forty-eight hours before the sinner-angel finally died, if blood loss could be minimized.

An hour or so went by.

Something odd began happening to the sinner-angel. He was starting to mumble little loops of dialogue, during which he repeated the same thing over and over in a hoarse whisper, like a broken record. For a long time he was stuck on "I know you're in there, I know you can hear me, I know you're in there, I know you can hear me." This was interspersed sometimes with "I need you" or "You're my family" and even with "I love you." All these phrases just made Dean laugh, for he had
no idea what the sinner-angel was talking about. It was just kind of funny.

Once the sinner-angel seemed to have a little burst of clarity and he gasped, "You must remember— later— this isn't your fault— it isn't— I forgive you— Dean, I forgive you—"

Dean absolutely hated it when the sinners here in Hell began to talk like that. As if they had any right to forgive! As if Dean were doing something wrong! As if it weren't all their own fault for sinning in the first place! So the instant the sinner-angel began that line of talk, Dean belted him hard across the face with the butt of the shotgun. The sinner-angel nearly choked, spat out a mouthful of blood, and couldn't seem to talk much after that.

Soon afterwards the sinner-angel started drifting into a delirium. He seemed to be losing his edge; his eyes were unfocusing. Dean looked around, puzzled; had the sinner-angel been losing extra blood somewhere? He finally glanced at the wrists and swore. There was blood dripping from the hafts of both blades. The blades hadn't been angled exactly right, and had been slowly cutting through the bones and muscle of the arms. The sinner-angel had been losing more blood than Dean had realized. Dammit. Dammit! Slanting the blades correctly was basic crucifixion protocol. Dean had messed up! The sinner-angel was not going to suffer for long enough. The sinner-angel's words were even slurring now (always a bad sign); he'd been in a cycle for the last few minutes of muttering "you're my friend, you're my family," but now syllables began disappearing, till he was just muttering "friend... fam'ly... frien'... fam'y..." Dean realized, with some regret, that it would be ending soon.

And then Dean started to get a little light-headed.

A few of those little tiny lights were still dancing overhead. Bits of silver glitter... floating around, very high, up by the ceiling; apparently a few of the little motes hadn't found their way out of the windows. Dean looked up at them, puzzled. There was something about the silver light that was familiar. Something he'd done... something he should undo?

Something was not right...

Dean forgot what he was doing, and stared up into the air at the last few little glittering bits of light as they drifted away. This seemed very worrying, somehow, but Dean wasn't sure why.

The room was completely silent.

The itching in his arm had faded. Dean glanced down; both arms looked normal again. No Mark; no scratches. It seemed like this might be important, too, but again Dean couldn't remember why. He began to feel very sleepy, and decided to lie down on the floor for a quick nap.

Something dripped onto Dean's hand.

He shook it off in annoyance. He was sitting in a chair, on a pier, by a lake, and he assumed that he'd just gotten splashed with the lakewater somehow. Maybe a fish had jumped or something.

"It's not your fault," said Castiel. Dean jumped; he hadn't realized Cas was standing right next to him.

Dean squinted up at Cas. Cas was almost standing over him, just a foot away. He was silhouetted against the sky and Dean couldn't really see him very clearly, but Dean had the impression that
something was a little off.

Cas's face was all in shadow. He seemed to be looking out at the lake.

"What's not my fault?" asked Dean, puzzled.

Cas didn't answer; he just continued gazing at the lake. Dean followed his gaze, wondering what he was looking at, and then realized that the water was red.

The lake was full of blood. It was a lake of blood.

"It's not your fault," said Castiel's voice again. Dean looked up at him, but Cas wasn't there anymore. Dean was alone, sitting by a lake full of blood.

Something dripped onto Dean's hand.

This time it woke Dean up. His head was throbbing terribly. Damn... what a hell of a hangover, he thought, trying to remember where had he been last night. Mark withdrawal, too, maybe? But it felt much worse than usual. Dean blinked, and tried to swallow. Everything was blurry; his eyes were scratchy, his throat sore. He felt simply horrible. He closed his eyes and lay very still, hoping the headache would ease a bit.

It took him a few minutes to realize he wasn't in his bed. Where was he? Had he fallen asleep in front of the TV again? Was he in the bunker? Or in a motel?

No... neither. He was lying on a hard surface. A floor. A cement floor. He blinked, opening his eyes again, and this time he managed to focus on his surroundings. A big, empty room in some kind of warehouse. A wooden pillar was very close to him. Oh great, another warehouse, thought Dean. I must have been on some kind of hunt. Got knocked out or something.

Something dripped onto Dean's hand again.

This time it occurred to Dean to look at his hand, and he realized there was blood all over it. He sat up, thinking, What happened to my hand?, and then saw he was sitting in a pool of blood. A huge pool of blood. Both his hands were bloody. And both forearms, too, were red to the elbows.

Have I been shot? Was I stabbed? But he felt no pain.

Something dripped onto Dean's arm this time, and Dean finally realized that the blood was dripping onto him from above.

It was someone else's blood.

Dean looked up at the wooden pillar. There was a body tied to it.

It was just above him. No—not tied—no, the guy had been—holy hell, the poor guy had been crucified! Dean scuttled backwards in shock as he took in the awful sight. The poor guy's arms had been pinned to a horizontal beam by—good god, were those angel-blades through his wrists?—one angel-blade, at least? And he was hanging there like a grotesque reenactment of Christ himself on the cross. The poor bastard, whoever it was, had been nearly flayed, too; he was shirtless and his whole chest seemed just a mass of bloody red meat, covered with slices, dripping with blood. His
pants were drenched with blood; blood was dripping from his bare feet. His head was hanging
down, his face a mask of bruises and blood, his mouth hanging slackly open.

While Dean stared, blank with shock, a heavy drop of blood fell from the guy's open mouth. His
mouth was slowly dripping blood, and it was this blood that had been falling on Dean's hand.

"Holy shit!" Dean gasped, managing to scramble to his feet at last. "Holy shit, holy shit— what the
—" Where the hell was he? What was going on? Who was this guy? He scanned around the
warehouse quickly, just to be sure that whatever psychopath had done this wasn't right nearby, but
the vast warehouse seemed to be empty.

Dean turned back to the terrible crucifixion scene and reached up to the victim's face to try to figure
out if by any chance the poor guy, whoever he was, might somehow still be alive. He saw that the
fellow was still breathing, though very faintly.

Then Dean took a second look at the bruised, swollen face and this time he noticed the dark hair.
And the familiar line of the jaw.

Dean's stomach clenched; his heart seemed to stop; his breath froze in his chest; for it was Cas. Dean
hadn't even recognized him at first.

It was Castiel, hanging there crucified.

The next moment was the very worst moment of Dean's entire life (and there had been a lot of very,
very bad moments in Dean's life). For in the next moment, all the memories of the past couple hours
came flooding back.

Suddenly it was all back in his head, every single moment, in vivid, scalding, horrific clarity. The
bite on his arm from the Darkness-spider-thing. How it had tossed Dean right back into his worst
demon-self, mentally. The anger—the righteous rage—the maddening thirst for revenge—the
absolute conviction that Cas needed to be punished—draining away Cas's grace—pounding the
blades in—forgetting where he was, forgetting who he was—the screams—Cas begging—Dean
laughing...

"No no no no no no no no no no no no," was all Dean could say. His knees buckled and he crumpled to
the floor, gasping, clinging to Cas's foot as it all sank in. He was sitting in Cas's blood, he
had tortured Castiel, he had crucified him, Cas had been begging him for mercy—

A violent surge of nausea ripped right through him and Dean vomited up everything in his stomach.
He was still retching uncontrollably a minute later, spitting out a thin watery bile, even while he was
trying to untie poor Cas's feet. But Dean's hands were shaking so badly that he couldn't get the knot
undone. He had to undo the knot with his teeth, in between the retching. Then he staggered to his
feet to try to tackle the blades that were stuck in Cas's wrists, but he couldn't figure out how to get the
blades out, and then he couldn't figure out how to support Cas while he got the blades out, and it was
all such a blinding, unthinkable nightmare that Dean began to cry. He cradled Cas's broken, bloody
face in both hands for a long moment, still just saying "no no no no no no." He couldn't seem to do
anything in any logical order, trying to hold Cas up and then trying to take one blade out and trying
to hold him up again and pulling ineffectually at one blade and then the other and then trying to hold
him up again, choking with sobs, gasping "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry—"

Dean finally managed to put together exactly one coherent thought, which was: Call Sam. He
fumbled his phone out of his pocket and called Sam, and babbled something so incomprehensible
that Sam couldn't figure out what he was saying. Sam had to say "DEAN. DEAN! I can't understand
you! Calm down. Calm down. Take a breath. What's going on?" Dean finally managed to say
"Warehouse, it's Cas, come quick come quick I need you." Dean dropped the phone then and finally managed to wrench one blade out, then the other, and at last he had Cas down from the hideous cross.

He dragged Cas a few feet away from the puddle of blood and lowered him, as gently as he could, to the floor, saying, "Cas, Cas, Cas, can you hear me? Oh god Cas I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry, please wake up, please, Cas, can you hear me?"

He had Cas cradled in his lap now. Cas's shoulders were across Dean's lap, his head lying in the crook of Dean's arm.

"Cas? Cas? Cas?" Dean kept saying.

By some miracle Cas's eyes slowly slid open. _He was alive!_

His eyes were glazed and unfocused at first. He seemed to be staring straight through Dean.

"Cas? Can you hear me? Cas?"

Slowly Cas's eyes moved to Dean's face.

"Cas!" said Dean, sagging with relief. "Cas, hang on, you just hang on, you're going to be okay, you hear me? You'll be okay, you'll be okay. Oh god Cas, I'm so sorry! I'm so sorry, Cas, oh god, I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry, you gotta hang on, okay?"

Cas blinked once, a slow blink. His jaw was still slackly open, his breath faint, but Dean saw his eyes focus on Dean's face.

Cas tried to lift one hand.

"Don't try to move, Cas—just take it easy—Sam's on his way, we'll get you to a, a, a hospital, you're gonna be okay, don't try to move—" said Dean. But Cas seemed determined to lift his hand, struggling so hard at it that Dean finally helped him, supporting his elbow. Cas's hand drifted to touch Dean's shoulder; and then came up to Dean's face.

Cas touched the side of Dean's face, letting his hand rest on the side of Dean's jaw.

As he had so many times before. Every time he had healed Dean.

Cas whispered something. Dean had to lean close to hear.

He heard Cas mutter, very faintly:

"...my...friend..."

Dean felt Cas's fingers slide down the edge of his jaw. Cas was looking right at him now, focused right on Dean's eyes.

Cas's arm went limp. His hand fell away.

Dean glanced down at Cas's hand and only then realized that the wrist wounds had again been seeping quite a lot of blood, now that the blades were out. Dean felt Cas sag slightly, and looked back up at Cas's face and—

No.
That unmistakable look. That haze coming over Cas's blue eyes; his eyes unfocusing, the lovely clear blue going grey and cloudy. The long last sigh of air, his whole torso shrinking slightly. The last rough rattle in the throat.

Everything going limp.

The slight stiffening of the face.

The stilling of all motion.

NO.

The scene that greeted Sam, when he finally burst into the warehouse, would haunt Sam's nightmares for months. Blood all over the central pillar, blood all over the floor. And there was Dean, covered in blood, holding Cas, also covered in blood. Dean was sitting cross-legged on the floor with Cas's upper body in his lap, Dean's arms wrapped tight around Cas's shoulders, Cas's head turned so that his face was pressed tight to Dean's chest.

Sam had seen plenty of bloodbaths in his life, of course, and they rarely gave him nightmares anymore. Sam's first clue about what an endless nightmare this would turn out to be was simply the expression on Dean's face.

Or rather, the lack of expression.

Dean was a mess. His face was streaked with blood and tears and snot, he was covered in blood, and he was clutching a bloody, broken Castiel to his chest with all his strength. And yet he was sitting there perfectly still, looking almost serene. There was no expression at all on his face. He was simply gazing blankly across the room. Quiet. Calm.

It took Sam one long, awful second to take the scene in. Then he dashed over and fell to his knees next to them, blurting out "Dean! Oh—jesus—oh my god—what happened? Is he alive? Cas? Cas, can you hear me? Dean, is he—is he—"

Dean didn't answer.

Sam realized that Dean was humming something.

"Dean?" Sam said again. He started to take hold of Cas's hand, to check for a pulse, and then was horrified all over again to discover that both Cas's wrists were a mangled mess of bloody flesh. Sam couldn't even begin to try to find a pulse. Dean had both arms wrapped so tightly around Cas's head and shoulders that Sam couldn't get to Cas's neck to check for a pulse there either. Sam tried to pry Dean's hands away, but Dean wouldn't let go.

"Oh god Dean, what happened to him, holy fuck," Sam said, his hands shaking as he tried to pull Dean's hands off of Cas. "What happened, let me see, Dean, let me see! Cas? Can you hear me? Is he breathing? Dean, let go of him. Dean, you have to let go. Dean! Let go of him!"

It took some struggle before Sam could pry Cas away from Dean even a few inches, even just to check his pulse. Even just to confirm that he was dead.
Sam let go of Cas and sank back to the ground.

The second Sam let go, Dean drew Cas close again, back into the tight bloody embrace. Dean had not stopped humming.

Sam sat there in the pool of blood, looking at them both.

Dean was muttering something now under his breath. Sam couldn’t make it out at first but then caught a few scraps of words. Dean was muttering:

"..comin' home...to a place he'd never been before..."

Dean kept muttering, his voice warbling weirdly. Sam couldn't even figure out what was happening. Then finally he caught a couple more words:

"m'tn... high... col'rado..." said Dean, his voice descending strangely through what was almost a melody.

The melody was almost recognizable. Sam finally placed it; Dean was singing a John Denver song. "Rocky Mountain High." It was one of Cas's favorites. A song Cas had been trying to learn on the guitar. It was a song that Dean had given him a particularly hard time about, actually. And now Dean was singing it?

Well, sort of singing it. Sort of just a hoarse mumbling whisper.

Sam sat there in the pool of blood, staring.

It eventually began to sink in that his friend was dead, and that his brother had apparently lost his mind.

Sam finally leaned forward and took Dean's head in his hands, one hand on either side of Dean's face, thinking to himself don't break down, don't break down, you gotta take care of Dean, you gotta take care of Dean right now. Sam forced himself to take a deep breath, and then he said, as clearly as he could, "Dean, can you hear me?"

Dean was still humming, still muttering broken lyrics under his breath.

"Dean?" said Sam carefully. "The spider wasn't dead? And it... it got him, didn't it? Dean, you have to let go of him. You have to let go. It's time to let him go."

To Sam's surprise Dean actually focused on him. Dean stopped humming and spoke.

"I'm waiting for him to wake up," said Dean.

"Dean, can you let him go? Can you hand him to me?"

"No," said Dean. "I'm waiting for him to wake up." He hummed another broken line of melody, and added, under his breath, "He'll come back...he always comes back..."

Sam spent the next several minutes trying to coax Dean to let go of Cas's body, but Dean simply would not relinquish his hold on Cas. He eventually stopped humming the ghastly song, but then just kept repeating "I'm waiting for him to wake up. He'll come back."

It became clear that Dean was convinced that Cas would be resurrected. Soon. In just a few more minutes. Dean explained at one point, as if he thought Sam were being a little dense, "He always comes back, Sam. Always. It's just taking a little time. We just gotta wait."
It occurred to Sam, as he sat there in the pool of blood, that Dean actually had a point. Cas had been resurrected from death quite a few times. He'd had, what, three or four miraculous recoveries by now?

But somehow this time felt different. There was no Apocalypse going on. For years now there had been no sign of any God stepping in regularly to resurrect helpful angels and push things along. As for demon-deals, they hadn't been able to reach Crowley in months. (Cas had said something about Crowley having been "badly wounded" in some sort of scuffle right after the Rowena spell.) Rowena had disappeared. The other angels seemed unlikely to help. Gadreel was dead...

Even Death was gone.

Sam reached out and touched Cas's hand. It was cool to the touch.

After about five more minutes of trying to pry Cas's cooling body out of Dean's arms, Sam stood and walked over to the little door and walked outside for a moment, so that he could cry without Dean hearing. It was still foggy out, the streetlamps fuzzy glowing yellow patches in the fog, the other warehouses dimly visible as large dark ghostly hulks. Sam stood there alone, just outside the little door, his head down, trying to gulp back his sobs. He couldn't keep it all hidden and some sobs got out, so he gritted his teeth as he tried to breathe.

He tried to wipe his face dry.

He muttered to himself, "I should have been here. I shouldn't've left..."

Sam finally got his breathing back under control. He wiped his face one more time and ran both hands through his hair, staring at the fog. What do I do? he thought. How do I make Dean let go of the body? How can I get Dean back home?

He made himself turn, and he made himself walk back inside.

Sam walked over to Dean, knelt by his side and said, "Dean, why don't we take him back to the bunker. He'll be more comfortable if he wakes up there. On his own bed, right? Let's take him back to the bunker, okay?"

Dean considered this, a faint frown appearing briefly on his blood-streaked face. "Okay, that sounds good," he said at last. He started to struggle to his feet but still would not let go of Cas.

"Why don't we carry him to the car together," suggested Sam. "Let me help carry him. That way he'll be, uh, uh, h-h-he'll be, m-m-more..." Sam just managed to bite back another near-sob, and then had to hold his breath for several seconds, till he got control. Once he could breathe again, he said, "He'll be more comfortable."

Dean thought about that, and said, "No, I want to carry him. I'll carry him."

"Please let me help," said Sam.

"No, I'll carry him," said Dean, calm as ever, struggling now to get Cas's bloody, limp body over his back. Then he tried to stand. But Cas seemed to be a heavy burden, all his limbs loose and floppy and slippery with blood, and Dean could not get to his feet.

"Please, Dean, please let me help carry him, please," said Sam, his voice cracking. Something in his tone seemed to break through Dean's eerily calm veneer. Dean looked at Sam, and for a split second an expression of sheer horror came across Dean's face.
Dean closed his eyes, and his face went blank again.

Dean opened his eyes, his expression still blank.

"Okay," said Dean. He lowered Cas back down to the ground, and took Cas's shoulders. "You can get his feet," said Dean. "Be careful though. Don't hurt him."

"I won't hurt him," whispered Sam, taking Cas's feet. One of the feet seemed to stretch and turn very strangely when Sam took hold of it, and it took Sam a moment to figure out that the entire leg seemed to be flopping bonelessly. The leg had been shattered somehow. Sam dropped that foot as if it were on fire, and had to stare up at the ceiling for a second. Sam looked at Dean (Dean was still just gazing at Sam patiently) and thought *Keep it together, keep it together.*

Sam lifted Cas just by the unbroken leg, while Dean carried his shoulders.

"Don't hurt him," said Dean again.

They began to carry Cas toward the door. But Sam was in front, and the broken leg began to drag along on the ground. It started to fold back under Cas in a truly horrifying way, and Sam said, "Stop." They stopped. Dean said "Don't hurt him." Sam answered, "I won't," and he set down Cas's good leg, picked up the strangely floppy bad leg, crossed the bad leg over the good one, knelt and vomited, tried to stand, sank right back down to his knees again, vomited a second time, wiped his mouth, stood, picked up the good foot, and said "Okay."

They started moving again.

"Don't hurt him," said Dean.

Sam staggered on, walking backwards with Cas's one good foot clamped in both hands, leading the way. The entire warehouse was reeling around Sam now, and he had to call out "Stop" a few more times in order to lean over with his hands on his knees and take a few deep breaths, thinking all the while, *Do not pass out, do not throw up again, don't you dare, you gotta take care of Dean. You gotta keep it together.*

They finally got Cas out the door.

"Don't hurt him," said Dean.

"I won't," Sam said. "I'm not. He's not hurting, Dean."

"Don't hurt him."

"We're not hurting him, Dean."

"Don't hurt him."

This, too, became part of the nightmare that haunted Sam every night for many months after: carrying Cas's ruined body through the dark warehouse, out into the foggy night, through the grasses in the derelict parking lot to the Impala, trying to fold his broken body into the back seat, while a glassy-eyed Dean repeated "Don't hurt him," at least a hundred times.
I am so sorry.

I don't know why this happened. I don't know how this happened. I don't know what is wrong with me.

For a long time it has been nagging at the back of my mind that Dean was a torturer in Hell for a large part of his adult life. It doesn't seem like he should be able to shake that off totally. Way back when I first saw S4's "On The Head of a Pin" I wondered if Cas was going to end up strung up and tortured like Alistair. And ever since, I kept wondering what would happen if somehow Dean were ever mentally sent back to that time. Even now, with everything that's happened between S4 and now, Dean's life in Hell STILL adds up to the vast majority of his adult life. I could not get the idea out of my head, and finally started writing this in S9. I posted the first three chapters originally on a different account over a year ago to see if I should even continue this terrible fic, which I have privately been calling the Fic That Must Not Be Named. Readers said yes, continue; but then the second I saw the S9 finale, I realized this fic is actually an S10 fic. So I have been waiting through all of S10 to see where to place the fic. After the Mark of Cain, demon-Dean, Dean's year-long descent into darkness, that amazingly horrific fight with Castiel, and then at last the unleashing of the Darkness itself, I knew this fic had always been destined to be an S10 fic, and that it should go right after the S10 finale. And now it seems I have to let the story play out, in all its darkness.

Finally - some readers have found they need to ask one or two things about the rest of the story before deciding whether they can go on reading it. I prefer not to do public spoilers, but you can contact me privately on reddit.com. (AO3 does not allow private messages, but reddit does.) I'm active on fandomnatural there, and have the same username there that I do here — NorthernSparrow. So if you find you really really really need to know something about where this story is going to go, find me there, click on my name and then click on the eentsy weentsy bitty tiny "send message" button (over on the right) and you can send me a note. I don't promise I'll give everything away, but I will try to give you at least a hint.

Cas, please forgive me.

(next chapter will be posted next Friday.)
A/N - Thank you all for your encouragement, and your willingness to read such a grueling story.

The worst may be over but that's not saying much, I'm afraid. This chapter and the next will still be pretty grim, and there is a long, long road ahead even after that.

We start with a long flashback that has several scene-lets. The flashback's not over till the next double-line separator, btw.

---

THEN

Cas had first spotted the damn thing in a thrift store in Nebraska.

It was only a month after the Mark of Cain had been removed. They were just doing the usual monthly shopping run to the big stores in Hastings. Just a one-hour drive. But it was Dean's first time out of the bunker in a while, and nearly Cas's first too, and it felt significant to get back out into the world.

Cas seemed satisfied just to curl up in the back of the Impala and stare out a side window. Dean, though, had insisted on driving, determined to show that he was fine. Sam grudgingly let him take the keys.

The second they got going Dean realized that driving had probably been a mistake. For one thing, the June sunlight seemed far too bright and vivid. Actually everything was too bright and vivid. The trees were too green, the sky too blue, the clouds too white, the fields too wide, and it was all giving him a horrible headache. Dean slipped his sunglasses on, tightened his hold on the wheel, and managed to keep going. But soon the sight of the fields rolling by outside began reminding him of the last time he'd driven down this particular road in the Impala, a month or so ago.

Back when he'd still had the Mark. Right after he'd battered Cas silly.

He'd left Cas lying bloody and beaten on the floor, with god knew how many bones broken. He'd left Cas literally choking on his own blood, and Dean had just friggin walked out and had hopped right into the Impala and had just driven away... right down this very road....

"Dean?" said Sam. He'd been watching Dean out of the corner of his eye. "You okay?"

"Yeah," said Dean. "I'm fine." Though "fine" in this case meant it was taking Dean all his concentration to hold the bile down, and drive straight, and not puke all over the car.

Fortunately Dean had had a lot of practice recently at that sort of thing.

Sam seemed willing to go along with the charade that everybody, and everything, was just peachy,
and pretty soon he started up a chipper commentary about what a great day it was and how nice it was to be outside. Next thing Dean knew, Sam was going through the box of cassette tapes, holding the tapes up one at a time and telling Cas about each one — explaining which songs were Sam's favorites and which were Dean's, which bands were better than others, and popping a random tape into the tapedeck now and then for a listen.

Dean knew perfectly well that Sam had steered the conversation this way on purpose to try to get Dean talking, but it was hard to to summon up any enthusiasm. But Cas seemed to perk up a little, and soon he'd started asking questions — about why people liked certain songs and certain bands more than others, why Sam and Dean each liked some things that the other didn't, why some songs became hits and other great ones got overlooked. Sam came up with one bullshit theory after another about all that, glancing over at Dean now and then as if expecting him to jump in. But Dean found himself plenty occupied just trying to drive in a straight line at all, so he sat in silence with his sunglasses on, and listened to the two of them talking.

*Sam and Cas sure seem to have a rapport these days*, Dean thought, listening to their conversation. *It's nice.*

*Guess Sam and Cas have sorta been helping each other out all year.*

*G*uess they're kinda buds now.

Unlike, say, Dean and Cas. Or Dean and Sam, for that matter.

Dean gripped the wheel a little more tightly, and drove on.

Once they got to Hastings it turned out Sam had a bright idea of swinging by the thrift store to buy Cas some more clothes. They were a little short on cash recently, so a thrift store did make sense, and Cas did actually need some more clothes. What with the "depowered grace" and all, his usual magic clothes-laundering skills had become a little unreliable. Even his coat (the one Dean thought of as the "post-Gas-n-Sip coat") had ended up pretty torn and bloodied after the whole Rowena thing, and apparently Cas hadn't been able to summon up enough mojo to fix it up. The rest of his usual outfit was in a similarly sorry state, and he'd even been having to borrow t-shirts and sweats from Sam. (Dean's would have fit better, of course. But Cas had only asked Sam....)

So the thrift store it was. By then the nausea had settled. Dean was encouraged to find that he was able to walk around the store, and look at stuff, and act almost like a normal human being. He even found the jeans rack and started flipping through it, trying to pick out a few pairs of jeans that might be Cas's size.

Soon Dean was heading over to Cas, carrying a set of some maybe-okay jeans. Cas was a dozen yards away, frowning his way through a rack of totally un-Cas-like coats. Dean wandered a little closer, slowing as he approached, holding the stack of jeans in front of him like an offering.

*Some crappy two-dollar thrift store blue jeans'll totally make up for slamming your face into a table a dozen times, and leaving you possibly dying on the floor, right, Cas?*

Dean stopped a few feet away, unable to walk closer.

Cas seemed busy anyway. Dean decided to wait till Cas was done with the coats before
approaching.

He watched Cas flipping through coat after coat, rejecting one after another. Cas kept glancing around the room every fifteen seconds or so, sometimes even tilting his head a little. The room-scanning and the head-tilting were both long-time habits for Cas, of course, and Dean found himself just watching the pattern of Cas's familiar movements: Scan the room, look at a coat, reject the coat. Scan the room, look at a coat, reject the coat. Tilt head a little, scan the room...

What's it really like for him? Dean wondered, watching him. Stuck here in a human body... when he used to be a giant winged wavelength of light or whatever he really is. Now here he is picking out used clothes in a thrift store... what's it really like? Cas did the little head-tilt thing one more time, glancing up at the ceiling slightly as he did so, and Dean had a thought: was the tilted-head thing an instinctive attempt to check for aerial attackers? If you were a member of a winged species, and if you were often under attack by your kin, maybe attacks could come from above. Maybe you would feel like you had to keep watching the skies?

What was it like to be a winged creature who had lost his wings?

Cas had never really talked about it.

Of course, Dean had never asked.

Then Cas flicked the briefest possible glance at Dean. But Cas said nothing; he just returned his attention to the coats, and Dean realized that Cas had, of course, been aware all along that Dean was standing right there with the stack of jeans. Dean felt his courage wilting away (what little there was left of it), and was about to walk away with the stupid stack of stupid jeans that Cas probably didn't even want, when Cas glanced around the room again and froze, his head up. Dean heard his little inhale, and saw his eyes widen slightly. He'd spotted something.

Dean turned to follow his gaze. Cas was looking at a battered old guitar that was behind the front counter.

Next thing Dean knew, Cas had left the coats and had gone over and asked for it, and was holding it, and looking at it.

The stupid thing about it was, of course, that Cas didn't have the least idea how to play it. He even put it on backwards at first — with the guitar neck pointed to his right — and Sam had to walk up and turn it around for him. It was covered with scratches and was missing a couple strings, and the guitar "strap" seemed to just be a piece of twine, but Cas seemed entranced, looking down at it and patting the strings lightly with one hand.

"Sam," said Cas, still looking down at the guitar. "Is there enough money to purchase this instrument? Maybe I don't really need any clothes."

"Well..." started Sam. "Uh. You do need some clothes, though—"

"Are you serious?" said Dean to Cas. "You can't even play it."

Cas gave Dean another of those microsecond glances, and looked back down at the guitar. His expression had gone guarded, but his face softened as he brushed the remaining four strings gently with one finger. They made a godawful out-of-tune twangggg, but Cas said, "Music is a part of every human culture, Dean. Like Sam was saying earlier, you two listen to music quite a lot. You in particular, you always listen to music constantly. I've noticed it for years. You —" Cas stopped, and then went on with, "I know the names of the bands now, and their histories. I can identify the titles of
the songs." (This was true; Cas had somehow picked up a ridiculous amount of trivia about rock
bands and pop music in the last year or so.) "But I still don't really grasp how music is made, or why
certain songs are more appealing to you than others, or why you — I mean, why people like it. I
think I'd like to learn more about it."

A crappy thrift-store guitar will TOTALLY make up for slamming your face into a table a dozen
times, and leaving you possibly dying on the floor. Right, Cas?

Dean bought the guitar.

Of course that meant a couple more errands. A music store, to buy some new strings. And later in the
day, a swing by Lebanon's little library, to get some how-to-play-the-guitar books.

Then Dean (and Sam) had to live through a few weeks at the bunker listening to Castiel messing
around, totally incompetently, with the guitar. First there was the totally incompetent attempt to get
the new strings on (Sam finally had to find him a YouTube instructional video). Then the totally
incompetent attempt to tune them (Sam showed him how to download a tuner app for his phone).
And then totally incompetently strumming a D chord, or whatever the easiest chord in the world was,
TEN MILLION TIMES IN A ROW. (Sam finally got him hooked up with justinguitar.com.) To
give him some credit, at least he stayed holed up in his attic room for all of this, but even so Dean
could hear the faint sounds of that damn D chord (or whatever) wafting down the hallway, even
from inside the darkened bedroom.

Finally, what seemed at least a geological eon later, Cas started actually trying to learn a second and
then a third chord. An "A-minor" and a C or something. And then trying to change from one to
another and back. It seemed to take him about a friggin' hour just to reposition his fingers to switch
chords.

But he did learn the second chord eventually, and the third. He started playing in the library
occasionally. Dean had taken, by now, to hanging out in the kitchen nearby, listening to Cas's
awkward strumming and wondering what he was working toward. It never made Dean's headaches
any better, but he had to admit Cas was actually making some progress. Soon Dean was starting to
think Cas might succeed some day at getting all the way through a genuine, entire song. (Though
possibly at one-twentieth normal speed.)

At last came the day when Dean heard Cas muttering some very slow, very out-of-tune lyrics along
with his super-slo-mo strumming:

"Coming home.... to a place... he'd... never... been before..." chanted Cas.

First of all, it was downright hilarious to hear Castiel try to sing. It was like watching a buffalo try to
waltz. Second of all... he'd apparently picked John Denver's goddam "Rocky Mountain High."

JOHN DENVER.

Dean's ever-present headache was instantly a little worse, and at last he had to speak up. "John
Denver, Cas?" said Dean, walking a few steps into the library. "Seriously? JOHN? DENVER? My
god, I should have known you'd pick the cheesiest music possible."

Cas stopped his growly imitation of singing, stopped strumming, and looked up at Dean. He said,
"Wasn't it a popular song? It did very well, as I recall."

Dean couldn't help chuckling at that. "Word to the wise, Cas, just because a song sold well doesn't mean it ain't crap. Ninety percent of the popular stuff is crap. And, seriously, Cas, John Denver? That's the cheesiest music possible! Why'd you pick him, anyway?"

Cas was silent a moment, looking up at Dean.

"He fell," Cas said at last. He broke eye contact and looked down at the table, where he had a John Denver songbook propped up. Beside it was a little spiral-bound notebook where Cas had been scribbling some notes about chords.

"What?" said Dean, taking another step closer.

"He fell from the sky," explained Castiel, still looking at the songbook. "He made a mistake, and he fell. He tried to recover from his mistake, and he couldn't. He ran out of power and he fell."

Dean blinked at him. He'd entirely forgotten that John Denver had died in a plane crash, while flying his own little plane. The poor guy had run out of gas, if memory served.

"He died," said Cas, still just looking at the book, "but I didn't. Anyway, that's why I wanted to start with one of his songs."

Dean opened his mouth... and shut it again.

Cas looked up at him. He said, a slightly worried look on his face now, "I thought it was pretty. And I like the words. But... you don't like this song?"

Dean tried to give him a smile. "Cas... it's... it's an okay song, I guess. It's... fine. I just had sort of a headache, is all, but it's—"

Cas's face clouded. "Oh," he said, standing up immediately. He still had the guitar in one hand, and he scooped up both books with the other. "My apologies. I usually practice upstairs when you're sleeping; I thought because you were awake that the library would be... I'm sorry. I'll go elsewhere."

Dean realized, then, that this was the very first time they'd been in the library together since the fight. He groped for something to say, but couldn't seem to make his mouth work. Cas began to turn away, and by the time Dean got his wits together enough to call him back, Cas was already out the door.

The next day Cas took the guitar outside. He found a spot on a little hill across a field, under some trees, where he was out of earshot of the bunker.

He practiced there for the rest of the summer, whenever the weather was good. Whenever it rained, he went up to the top floor of the bunker again, where he still had his cot, and Dean knew he tried to strum quietly up there. But Dean could still hear it. He had to laugh a little, actually, as Cas started adding one crappy song after another to his increasingly crappy repertoire, all of which he played... well, crappily. "Sunshine on my Shoulders." "Take Me Home, Country Roads." "Morning Has Broken." "Sound of Silence."

It was kind of sweet how Cas wanted to learn about music, but... folk songs? Folk songs?
Seriously? Of all the things he could've picked, Cas was going for old-school folk music? Dean felt obliged to tease Cas a little about it, on the rare occasions when they even crossed paths. It seemed like it might be a bit of an icebreaker, and, well, folk music was always a reliable joke, right?

Though, as Cas gradually began getting the songs up to speed, sometimes it didn't sound half bad. In fact, as the summer wore on, it was getting so it was almost recognizable as music. On rainy days Dean often found himself standing at the bottom of the stairs, listening to the faint sounds of guitar strumming drifting down the stairwell from the attic. Now and then he thought of walking up there, and maybe sitting a while up there, listening to Cas play. Someday soon, thought Dean, I'll go up there. Maybe I can just sit and listen.

Maybe I could talk a bit with him.

Sometimes he got as far as putting one foot on the first stair.

He sometimes stood there a long time. One foot on the first stair, one hand on the stair-rail, listening to the distant strumming. He never got to the second stair.

NOW

Sam had done some grim drives before.

Drives with a corpse in the car, even.

The worst drive, of course, had been when they'd had to drive their dad's body away from the hospital, to cremate him on a funeral pyre out in the middle of a fallow field. Sam had always thought nothing could ever possibly be worse than that drive. That whole night, actually. The long hours they'd spent finding enough scrap lumber to build the pyre. Dragging Dad up there. Lighting the fire, watching it grow.

Standing there watching it burn.

Bobby, also... losing Bobby had been bad. Really bad. That had been a terrible drive too.

Charlie, most recently. That had gone into a whole different kind of bad. Never before had Sam felt so searingly guilty, and never before had Dean said that it should be Sam who was up on the pyre.

Yet this drive was even worse.

The worst thing about it wasn't just that there was a body in the car. Or the fact that Sam had to drive alone in the front seat. (Dean had insisted on climbing into the back seat with Cas's body "so he won't be alone when he wakes up." ) Or how long the drive was. The worst thing wasn't even the part when Dean wouldn't even let Sam get onto the highway at all till they'd first found a little dirt crossroads, to try the crossroads spell... which nobody replied to. (Dean tried the spell three times. And waited an hour. And then he'd spent another twenty minutes praying to every angel he could think of. There was no answer.)

No, the worst thing was the way Dean kept humming.
Humming, and sometimes singing. First it was just that hellish "Rocky Mountain High" over and over and over, the same thing he'd been humming when Sam found him with Cas's body. Sam was sure he'd never be able to hear that song again without getting nauseous.

After an hour or two, Dean started to rotate through some other tunes that Cas had been learning over the summer, and that (as far as Sam knew) Dean had always pretty much hated: a couple more John Denver tunes like "Take Me Home Country Road" and some other sappy folk songs like "Leaving on a Jet Plane" and "Morning Has Broken." Every cheesy folk song Cas had ever liked. Dean had only ever made fun of these songs, when he'd mentioned them it all, but was turning out now that he'd somehow picked up the lyrics for damn near all of them, and now he wouldn't stop singing them.

As they made the long drive westward out of Ohio in the night, Dean sang for hours, out of tune and out of rhythm, muttering the lyrics almost like a chant, while Sam drove. Sam sat mute in the front seat the whole time, dry-eyed, his hands on the wheel, staring at the white dashed lines ahead of him on the highway. The stars hung motionless overhead. The road was so unchanging that it began to seem to Sam that they weren't actually going anywhere at all; the Impala seemed just a toy car pinned in place, the highway a black ribbon that kept looping under them, the gas stations and interstate exits just a painted backdrop that repeated endlessly. And all the while Dean kept on singing, and all the while Sam could just see, in the rearview mirror, a tuft of dark hair against Dean's chest. Dean had pulled Cas's body into his arms once more, and was again clutching Cas's head to his chest.

Dean's voice got fainter as the hours dragged by, till Sam was just catching the occasional little warble or muttered scrap of lyrics. Near dawn Dean fell silent, and every time Sam looked in the back seat after that, Dean was staring to the side, out the window, his eyes vacant.

Sam asked a few times, "Dean, can you tell me what happened?"

Obviously the spider-demon-thing must've got Cas, but how exactly? Was the spider-demon still alive? Was it still out there?

Sam didn't find out, for Dean never replied.

They'd just crossed the Illinois state line into some of the early morning Chicago-bound traffic, when Dean said "It might take a day," breaking the silence so suddenly that Sam gave a huge startled jump. The Impala lurched into an alarming swerve, and Sam had to fight through two big fishtail wobbles, cars honking around him, before he got control back. He slowed the Impala almost to a crawl afterward, his heart thumping hard in his chest.

"Till he comes back, you know," Dean went on, as though nothing had happened. "I was thinking, when Lucifer exploded him, he was right back as soon as the fight ended, and that was maybe, oh, ten minutes? You probably don't remember any of that."

Actually Sam remembered that particular Cas-death in hideous, almost crystalline, detail. But he wasn't going to get into that now.

Dean went on, "But it's not always right away like that. The first time he got exploded was when he was protecting Chuck, right? And it was a few days till he turned up again." Dean paused, still staring out the window, and then continued, "After that there was the time he carved that angel-
banishing sigil on his chest and got blown out to sea. We thought he'd died, remember? It was days
till we heard from him. Then was the Lucifer one. Then after that, the Leviathan thing, that lake... I
was sure he was gone. Though..." Dean frowned. "All those times, I actually think he might've come
back pretty quick, and it's just that we didn't meet up with him till later. But anyway, I was thinking,
it's probably normal for it to take a few hours. So we should get his vessel all ready for him to step
back into it, but we gotta be prepared for it to be a day or so. He'll probably be back by dawn
tomorrow."

*He was human this time,* thought Sam. He'd seen the cut in Cas's throat. He knew what that meant:
no grace. *He was human, and it's been hours already. A lot of hours. The longer you wait, the
harder it gets. We already tried the crossroads. Crowley won't answer, and apparently no other
demon will deal. We even tried the angels. And we sure can't summon Death anymore....*

Dean paused, and added, "The only thing I'm worried about is..." He trailed off.

Sam thought, *The only thing I'm worried about is... I really don't know if Cas is coming back this
time.*

"The only thing I'm worried about," Dean repeated, "is, I'm not sure if the vessel will get healed up
like normal when he comes back. Because, he might not be a full-power angel again — not
immediately, anyway. Remember when he came back from the fishing boat, he was in the hospital
for a few days? But, the vessel wasn't that damaged. I mean, the sigil was all healed... so... I think... I
think he could heal up a little, but wasn't all the way back to normal, maybe? Anyway I've been
thinking about it, and I think maybe I should stitch it all up, clean the vessel up, y'know, get it all
ready for him."

Dean fell silent for a moment, and said, "He'll be back by dawn."

Then he started humming "Rocky Mountain High." He didn't speak again.

It was ten more hours to Kansas.

---

When they finally pulled up in the bunker's garage, late in the evening, Sam staggered out of the
driver's seat and turned to the passenger door feeling very unsure what he'd have to deal with. He'd
been gearing himself up for, possibly, a catatonic Dean who might just keep humming "Rocky
Mountain High" a thousand more times and who maybe wouldn't even be able to walk on his own.
But instead Dean popped the door open and stepped right out, looking perfectly calm. He turned and
wrestled Cas's body out of the back seat. Rigor mortis had set in and Cas's body was frozen up now,
slightly curled with the arms twisted strangely, but Dean didn't seem to mind. He just set to work,
wrestling the stiffly curled body out of the Impala's back seat, and laying it down onto the garage
floor.

"Watch the vessel for me, would ya?" said Dean, and he trotted off into the bunker.

*Should I follow him? Should I stop him? What the hell do I do?* thought Sam. He made an
exhausted, abortive movement to follow Dean, almost tripping over his own feet as he did so, but
Dean zipped away, and then Sam was alone with the vessel. He was standing right over it. He had to
look at it.

He stood staring at the glazed expression on Cas's face. It didn't remotely look like Cas. The bruises,
the blood... and the eyes were sunken now, and the lips pulled back in a rigor-mortis grimace...

It wasn't Cas anymore.

*It was never really Cas at all,* Sam reminded himself. It had been Jimmy Novak's body, really. Castiel had just borrowed Jimmy's body; Sam knew that perfectly well. But Cas had been in that body for so many years now, and Jimmy had been gone so long, that it had become impossible to imagine Castiel with any other face. The ruffled black hair; the gentle blue eyes; the always-slightly-sad expression; the line of the jaw, the bit of stubble on the chin... it was Cas's face, now.

It was what Sam always pictured, when he pictured Castiel.

Yet this twisted bloody dead thing on the floor seemed to have nothing to do with Castiel.

Sam finally covered Cas with a nearby tarp and staggered off into the bunker to look for Dean.

He found Dean bustling around in the kitchen, filling a bucket with warm water and assembling some first-aid supplies.

"Dean?" said Sam. "What are you doing?"

Dean ignored him. He added some shears to his pile of supplies, and began stacking up a neat heap of washcloths.

Sam put a hand on Dean's shoulder. "Dean," he said, "listen to me. Maybe we should give him a hunter's burial? Send him on his way? He was human this time, Dean—"

"Don't be ridiculous," said Dean, shrugging off Sam's hand. "No way are we burning him. He'll be back soon and he'll want the vessel back, and he'll be pissed if we ruin it." He picked up the bucket, the washcloths and the first-aid kit, and stuck the shears in his back pocket.

"Dean, listen to me." Sam took a breath. "He might not be back this t—"

"He could get another vessel, but he likes this one," interrupted Dean. "He's used to it." He turned away and strode toward the garage, all the first-aid supplies tucked under one arm, lugging the bucket of warm water with the other.

Sam trailed him into the garage, and watched as Dean cut Cas's jeans off with the shears and began to wash all the dried blood off him.

Dean worked very methodically. He washed every inch of Cas's body, with the same calm, focused expression on his face that he had whenever he was washing the Impala. He started by carefully washing all the filth from between Cas's legs (death was like that, Sam knew). Dean was as gentle, and as matter-of-fact, about this task as a parent washing a baby. Once that was all cleaned up, he trotted back to the kitchen for new clean washcloths and new water, and then started scrubbing away all the blood that seemed to have dripped all over Cas's legs and feet. He washed the wounds on the wrists, and the wound on the shattered leg. He washed all the torn, flayed lacerations on Cas's chest. He even rolled the stiff body over to wash its back, and put a clean sheet down under it when he rolled it back. At one point he disappeared back into the bunker, returned with his own bottle of shampoo, and washed Cas's hair.
This all took an extremely long time. It had been just past sunset when they'd pulled in, and Dean was still hard at work as midnight approached. Dean was being excruciatingly meticulous, washing each body part half a dozen times over with clean, warm soapy water and a new clean washcloth every time. He had to keep going back to the kitchen for more water, and eventually Sam took on the job of keeping Dean supplied with constant fresh bucketfuls of warm soapy water, and fresh stacks of clean washcloths and towels.

The night wore on, the dark hours gliding by. Outside, beyond the closed garage doors, Sam could hear the faint, sleepy sounds of the Kansas summer night. Crickets were droning outside in the dark, and an owl called in the trees. But inside the bunker garage, the lights were lit bright, Dean never stopped working, and Sam kept walking back and forth with the bucket: pouring soiled water down the garage drain, cleaning the bucket, carrying it back to the kitchen for more hot water, and bringing it back to Dean.

It was past midnight when Dean finally got to Cas's face. He'd left this till last.

As he moved a clean, damp washcloth to one of Cas's cheeks, Dean's arm started to slow down, and slow further, until Dean was frozen with his hand suspended in midair, gazing blankly down at Cas's face. Sam, standing a few feet away, couldn't help looking at Cas's face too. Cas's whole face was covered with bruises and blood, and now Sam noticed that there were little pale lines through the dried blood. Little vertical lines on Cas's cheeks.

Oh no. Oh no, thought Sam. He had to cover his mouth with both hands and look away for a moment. Up to that moment Sam had been clinging to the hope that Cas might have died quickly; that the spider-demon might have killed him fast, and just torn up his body later.

But those were the tracks of tears.

It had been slow.

It had made Castiel cry.

Until this moment, Sam could not have imagined anything that could make Castiel cry.

And whatever the spider-demon had done to Cas, clearly Dean had seen it happen.

"Dean, let me clean his face." said Sam. He crouched at Dean's side, trying to take the washcloth from Dean and push him gently away, but Sam couldn't pull the washcloth out of Dean's grasp. He couldn't even seem to budge Dean at all.

Dean's arm, which had been suspended in mid-air, finally started moving again. Slowly the washcloth moved down to rest on Cas's cheek.

Very slowly, with no expression on his face at all, Dean wiped the tracks of the tears off Castiel's face. First one cheek; then the other.

He washed Cas's face several times, changing washcloths several times, till it was perfectly clean. But even then then he kept washing it. Dean continued washing Cas's face over, and over, and over, with soft, gentle strokes, changing several times to new washcloths. He wasn't stopping. At last Sam realized that Dean was trying to wash the bruises off. Sam had to sit down next to him and take hold of his wrist, whispering, "He's clean, Dean. Everything's clean. You can stop."

Dean finally nodded, and let Sam take the washcloth away.
But Dean wasn't done working. It turned out he still had another job to do.

Dean turned to his little bundle of first-aid supplies and laid out every package of suture that they had, in a neat long line, and began carefully setting the strips of Cas's lacerated skin back in place. Some skin had been almost flayed off; Dean set the little pieces back in place. Sam realized what he was trying to do, and said, "Dean. You don't have to do this. That's going to take hundreds of stitches, Dean, you should rest now, he's all clean, I can do the rest. Dean. Dean?" Of course Dean wasn't listening, and of course he wouldn't stop, and all Sam could do was sit by Dean's side and watch, to help keep vigil over Cas.

So Sam sat by Dean's side and watched.

Dean set all the bloody strips of flesh neatly in place. He added a few strips of medical tape to hold them in position, and he began to suture the lacerations closed. Tidy little stitches, in neat long rows.

Dean bent over his work, concentrating on each little stitch. Setting the curved needle in place, pulling it through, making a neat little knot, trimming the edges short, moving to the next stitch.

He began to hum again.

It was a different tune this time, another one Cas had liked. Sam finally placed it: "Angel From Montgomery." Cas had started working on that one pretty recently, just at the end of the summer, and Dean had given Castiel particular hell about that one. Sam remembered Dean saying "Angel songs, Cas? Are you kidding me?"

But once again Dean turned out to have somehow memorized the lyrics. He began singing the chorus.

"Make me an angel... that flies from Montgomery," Dean sang now, under his breath, a little off-key.

"Make me a poster... of an old rodeo."

"Just give me something... that I can hold on to..."

"To believe in this living... is just a hard way to go."

Dean never switched to the verses; instead he started repeating the chorus. He sang just those four lines, over and over. And over. And over. Maybe he hadn't learned all the rest of the lyrics.

Or maybe it was just that the chorus was the only part of the song that mentioned an angel.

As the time crept past one in the morning, and then past two, Sam suggested a few times that maybe Dean had done enough stitches. Or maybe he could switch to less frequent or less tidy stitches. Or maybe he could just bandage the strips of skin in place. Dean never spoke, and never answered, and just kept on doing his rows of meticulous, tiny little stitches.

At three in the morning, Sam decided he really should physically pull Dean away from Cas, if just to get Dean to drink some water, or at least take a bathroom break. Dean shrugged Sam's hands off the first two times Sam tried to pull him away. The third time, Dean dropped his needle and thread and wheeled on Sam in a fury, one fist raised for a punch.
Dean froze partway through the punch, as Sam flinched back, raising one arm to block the blow.

Dean lowered his hand, blinking. He turned back to Cas's body silently, picked up the needle and thread, and continued with the next stitch.

At three-thirty Sam finally thought of saying, "Dean, you need to eat something, because... because Cas'll be pissed if you make the stitches all shaky. You should take a break and eat something, or the stitches won't be good." This finally got through; Dean lifted his head, and nodded, and he allowed Sam to pull him to his feet and into the kitchen, where Sam made Dean wash his hands. Or rather, Sam washed Dean's hands for him, putting them under the hot water in the kitchen sink, Dean standing stiffly like a mannequin while Sam scrubbed his hands clean and rinsed them and dried them. Sam gave Dean a glass of water and Dean drank it; Sam put a sandwich in Dean's hands and Dean ate it; Sam steered him to the bathroom and Dean disappeared inside and came out a minute later just as blank-faced as ever, turning and walking down the hallway back to the garage. Dean returned to the stitches, and Sam sat down by his side.

It took over four hours. By the end, Cas, or Cas's vessel at least, was neatly stitched up, with long tidy lines of hundreds of stitches holding all the flayed skin perfectly in position. The terrible wounds at the wrist had been carefully cleaned and bound. Dean had even picked all the buckshot out from the damaged leg, and had splinted the leg. There was a neat bandage across the worst bruise on Cas's cheek, where it looked like he'd been struck by something hard; and several tiny little butterfly band-aids on some little cuts here and there. Each little butterfly band-aid was placed precisely.

Last, Dean slid Cas onto a new white sheet and folded the sheet neatly around him, leaving only the face exposed.

"The vessel's in pretty good shape, don't you think, Sam?" he said, turning to Sam with a truly ghastly smile. "I couldn't fix everything, but... it's pretty good, huh? You think Cas'll be happy with it?"

"Yeah..." whispered Sam. "Cas'll be happy... he'll be happy, Dean."

"I was a little worried he might return while I was still working. Before the vessel was ready," said Dean, stretching his arms over his head. "But it's ready now. He can come back now."

Dean dumped the last of the used water out of the bucket down the floor drain, carried the bucket back over to Cas, flipped the bucket over, and sat down on it, next to Cas's shrouded body.

There Dean sat, looking down at the bundled shape in the sheet.

"Dean?" said Sam. "Maybe you should go lie down? Take a shower, take a rest?"

"Nah," said Dean. "I'll wait for him here."

"Wait for him?" said Sam.

"I'll just wait for him here," said Dean. "He'll be back by dawn and I don't want him to wake up alone."

Sam said nothing, but sat down on the concrete floor, next to Dean, and leaned back on the Impala. And waited.
Sam lifted his head and realized he had gotten weirdly slouched against the Impala's wheel. He could hear birds singing, and there was a scrap of bright blue sky visible through the garage door's little windows. For a long floating moment he couldn't figure out why he was there - why he was sitting next to the Impala slouched in this awkward position, why Dean was sitting there on that bucket, or what was wrapped up in the sheet.

Then he remembered.

*Oh no. Oh no.*

And then he realized the sun was up.

The sun was up. Sam had fallen asleep.

Sam had been trying to help poor Dean keep vigil, trying to be there for his brother, and for his friend. Sam had been trying to friggin' *be there for Castiel* for one last damn time and Sam had *friggin' fallen asleep*. He hadn't been there for Castiel last night either, in the warehouse, when it had really, really fucking mattered, and he hadn't even managed to here for Castiel now, even if just to help keep vigil over Cas's body, even just to keep Dean company. It was a beautiful morning, the birds were singing outside, and Sam only wanted to curl up and cry.

He did curl up, but no tears would come.

Dean was sitting slouched on the bucket, his head down, staring at the still, silent shape that was bundled up in the sheet. It was past dawn. It had been over twenty-four hours. It had been a day and a half, and Castiel was still dead.

"Dean?" Sam said hoarsely.

Dean didn't move for a moment, and Sam wasn't sure he'd heard. But then Dean lifted his head and said, "He'll be back by sunset."

---

*A/N - Next chapter will be up Friday.*
Keep It Together

A/N - This is the last of the 3 chapters that were posted last year. We pick up right after chapter 2—Sam has just woken up by the Impala.

Keep it together, Sam thought, staggering to his feet. Keep it together. Focus on Dean. Focus on Dean. Gotta take care of Dean. Make sure he eats and drinks. Get him cleaned up. Get him to sleep.

Get him to leave Cas.

He managed to coax Dean to follow him back to the kitchen for a bit more food and water. To Sam's relief Dean submitted quietly, letting Sam tug him up off the bucket and lead him back to the kitchen. Once again Sam put a glass of water in Dean's hands and Dean drank it; once again Sam gave him a sandwich and Dean ate it.

"How about a shower?" said Sam, for all Dean's clothes were stiff and stained with Cas's dried blood. Sam found him a set of clean clothes and pushed him toward the bathroom. Dean took the little stack of clothes without comment, and went inside and closed the door.

Sam hovered outside the closed bathroom door a few moments longer, wondering whether he should stay close. In case Dean needed help.

Or in case Dean tried anything stupid.

At last Sam heard the shower starting. Sam gave a rough sigh, running both hands through his hair. Sounded like Dean was at least capable of taking a shower on his own. Maybe it was safe to leave Dean briefly? Maybe Sam could take a quick moment to clean himself up a bit, too? Sam glanced down at his own clothes. His jeans were dark with bloodstains from when he'd sat in the pool of blood, and his shirt, too, was streaked with telltale reddish-brown.

Sam wavered at the bathroom door a moment longer, and finally darted off to the back bathroom. He tried to shower as fast as possible. I gotta get out before Dean does, thought Sam. Gotta be there for him. So, work fast. Soap, washcloth—hurry—skip the shaving—just get clean and get out—But sometimes it just took a while to scrub clean after a hunt. There seemed to be dried blood everywhere (on Sam's legs, on his feet, even on his hair somehow). An image of Castiel's pale face rose in his mind, and Sam had to remind himself not to think about whose blood it was. Don't think, don't think. Just scrub. Soap, scrub, rinse. Good enough—hurry—don't bother drying off—At last Sam was in his room pulling on a clean t-shirt and jeans, the shirt wadding up uncomfortably on his damp skin. But then it took him a minute to find a non-bloody pair of shoes and socks, and before Sam even had the socks on he heard the faint, distinctive creak of the garage bay doors being hauled open.

Sam raced to the garage barefoot, hair still wet, shoes and socks clutched in his hands, to find Dean walking from the wide-open bay doors toward the Impala. Cas's body had been pulled into a corner.

"What are you doing?" asked Sam.

Dean didn't answer. He gave Cas's body an impassive glance as he strode toward the car. The
Impala key was in his hand.

Sam scurried to the driver's door and threw himself against it just before Dean got there.

"Dean, please, STOP," Sam said, putting his hands up, waving the shoes and socks in Dean's face as if that could somehow block Dean's progress. "Give me the key."

"I gotta go, Sam," said Dean.

"Where? Why?"

"Stores open at ten in Hastings," said Dean, glancing at his watch. "It's almost nine."

Sam blinked. "What?"

Hastings, Nebraska? Where they did their shopping runs?

"The vessel'll be okay here for a couple hours," said Dean, nodding toward Cas. "It's pretty chilly in here." Sam glanced over at the awful shrouded figure and was startled to realize that Dean had wrapped it neatly in a blanket.

And put a pillow under the head.

Looked like he'd also put a water bottle, a cell phone, and a little note next to it.

*Water bottle, cell phone and note.*

"Oh, Dean," said Sam, his face twisting.

"It's only an hour drive there, you know that," Dean explained, as he tried to push Sam aside. "Should just take me three hours total I think, maybe four. C'mon, Sam, get out of the way."

Sam could not get Dean to explain why he wanted to go to Hastings, and could not get him to back away from Impala. It seemed like a really bad idea to let Dean drive in this state. (A vision leapt to mind of the Impala zooming right off the road and into a tree. Possibly on purpose....) Sam managed to grab the keys away from him, dropping the shoes and socks in the process. All at once they were scuffling. Dean lunged at Sam and pinned him against the car with an arm against Sam's throat, grabbing wildly for the keys with the other hand, but Sam managed to keep hold of the keys. Then Dean had his fist raised in the air, his arm pulled back, ready to belt Sam in the face. 

And there Dean froze. Arm raised, fist clenched, glaring at Sam.

Dean let out a tiny gasp and went nearly white. A look of complete confusion spread over his face. All the energy seemed to drain right out of him; his fist sagged in the air, his shoulders dropped, and his gaze slid away from Sam's to the floor. He released Sam, patted Sam's shirt sleeve a little awkwardly, took two slow, halting steps back, and then he leaned over and put both hands on his knees, staring at the floor.

He looked like he was about to throw up.

"Dean, it's okay," said Sam, hurrying closer and putting a hand on his back. "It's okay. I know you're freaked out. It's okay."

"I need to get to Hastings," said Dean, looking down at Sam's scattered shoes and socks. He swallowed and straightened up slowly. "I need to get to Hastings, Sam. The stores are there."
“Okay, Dean,” said Sam. “But how about you let me drive. You can grab a nap on the way.” Dean gave Sam a somewhat skeptical look, and Sam said, “I swear I will drive straight to Hastings and to whatever store you want. But please let me drive, Dean. Please.”

Dean gave Sam another long, blank look, and finally said, “Okay.” While Sam yanked his socks and shoes on, Dean walked around the Impala and got into the passenger seat, where he sat very still, looking straight ahead, his eyes unfocused and his hands folded in his lap.

Sam had to put on his seatbelt for him.

They left the blanketed figure in the cool corner of the garage. With the water bottle, the cell phone and the note.

Sam drove down the bunker's long driveway and turned north onto the main road. North, toward Nebraska.

"Dean," Sam said, "You know... I was thinking. I really hate to say this but, Dean... I don't know if Cas will... um...."

Silence. Sam stole a glance over at Dean. Dean was gazing straight ahead at the road.

Sam went on, as gently as he could, "Dean, Cas was human this time. Nobody really knows what happens if an angel dies as a human. I know Gadreel brought him back that one time, but, that'd been, like, one minute. A regular human medical team could've probably brought him back at one minute, y'know, to be honest. But now... it's been a day and a half, and you know how with every hour that passes, it gets... it gets..." It gets impossible. "...it gets more difficult to bring humans back. And, the thing is, angels don't have a human soul, so I don't even know if... if they..."

Dean didn't even seem to be paying attention. He was still just staring straight ahead.

Sam's voice began to falter as he forced himself to continue. "I don't know if someone without a soul, when they die, if they... can... still... be anywhere... or if they go anywhere... I mean... an angel that has no grace, when the vessel dies, is... um... and... Death is gone and... Crowley didn't answer and... it's been more than a day and... so... there's a possibility that... " This was excruciating. "... that... he... might not... come... back."

"Cas always comes back," said Dean.

"I just think maybe we should be prepared for—"

"CAS ALWAYS COMES BACK," roared Dean, in a guttural shout so loud that Sam flinched.

"Dean, I know this is hard, I know this is hard, I know this is hard," Sam burst out, both hands clenched tight on the steering wheel. "I know it must have been so .... so fucking horrible seeing that spider demon do that to him. But you must know it wasn't your fault—"

"Almost heaven!" interrupted Dean loudly.

Sam blinked. "What?"

Dean said, "West Virgin-ia!"
Sam fell silent, baffled. He snuck another glance at Dean; Dean looked completely calm, and was still just staring ahead at the road.

Dean continued: "Blue Ridge mountains... Shenandoah River...."

It was another John Denver song. Sam let out a long, quiet sigh, his shoulders sinking.

"Life is old there... older than the trees," sang Dean, very off-key. "Younger than the mountains... blowin' like a breeze."

His voice trailed off into a soft muttering that was barely singing at all:

"Country roads..."

"Take me home...."

"To the place..."

"I belong..."

Dean sang, off-key and slow, and Sam just drove.

When they got to Hastings, Dean perked up, directed Sam to the Wal-Mart and made Sam park the car. As soon as Sam cut the motor, Dean popped out of the car and strode inside, walking fast. Sam had to hurry to catch up with him. Dean got a cart and rolled it straight to the men's clothing section, where he grabbed some white boxers and black socks. He tossed those in the cart and rolled the cart briskly over to the shoe section. Sam trailed along beside him, still unsure what Dean was even doing.

Dean stopped at the men's shoes and stood a while staring at them. Finally he picked up a black ankle boot and said, "These look about right. I'm not certain, though." He hefted the shoe in his hand, turning it around and looking it over with close attention, and added, "I'm not sure. And I should have checked his shoe size. Do you know what size he wears?"

Oh god, thought Sam. Black shoes. I get it.

"Cas?" said Sam. "Cas's shoe size? Uh... I never asked."

"It's not exactly right, is it?" said Dean, staring at the shoe and turning it around in his hands again. He picked up another short black boot, and then a black dress shoe, tucking the first shoe under one arm so that he could study the other two. He said, "I can't remember exactly what kind of shoe it was. And I should have checked his size. I should have asked him where he got them from." He suddenly looked very worried, his forehead creased with concern as he inspected some other black shoes. He tucked the second shoe under the other arm and picked up a fourth black shoe. And a fifth.

"Sam, I don't know what shoe to get," Dean said at last, staring down at all the black shoes. He repeated, "I don't know what shoe to get." His eyes had gotten wide and worried, and he repeated, "I don't know what shoe to get. I don't know what shoe to get."

Sam scrambled for an answer. "Hey, Dean, you know," he said, "I bet he'll be happy with just any kind of shoe." He pointed at the ankle boot that Dean had picked up first. "That one looks about
Dean looked up at him with an air of a drowning man grabbing on to a lifeline.

"Okay... but..." Dean whispered, "What about the size?"

Sam thought a moment, picturing Cas standing next to Dean. The image that automatically came to mind was that of Cas standing ridiculously close to Dean, peering right into his eyes from just a foot or so away, as if he were trying to stare right into Dean's soul. And Dean would be looking back at Cas, wouldn't he? Dean would probably have that slightly uncertain look that he got sometimes when Cas got close. A little confused, maybe. But amused, too. And fond; Dean would probably even have that half-smile on his face, a corner of his mouth twitching up.

It was an interaction Sam had seen many times.

Up till last year, anyway.

Sam made himself focus on height. Cas would be looking up slightly at Dean, wouldn't he?

Sam said, "He's a couple inches shorter than you. So I bet he wears about one size down from yours. Don't you think?"

Dean seemed somewhat reassured. He dumped his armful of shoes on the floor and picked out a pair of the black ankle boots that were one size smaller than his own. He was still muttering a little about whether the style was right, but at last he put them in his cart.

Then they had to go pick out a white button-down shirt, and a very-dark-grey two-piece business suit (jacket and pants), and a blue tie. (Solid blue, Sam noticed. Like Cas's original tie, from years ago.) And of course, a tan trenchcoat.

Dean got very worried about the coat. What Wal-Mart had apparently wasn't right at all.

"It has to be right," he muttered, rejecting several tan overcoats that Sam brought over to him. "It has to be right. It's the most important thing, Sam."

"You know what, Dean. I don't think he'll mind if it's a little different," said Sam.

"IT HAS TO BE THE RIGHT COAT, SAM," Dean yelled, spinning around to shout right in Sam's face. "THE COAT IS THE MOST IMPORTANT THING! IT HAS TO BE RIGHT!" Sam flinched and took a step back. A half-dozen other people nearby turned to stare.

"Okay, Dean," said Sam gently. "Hastings has some other stores. We can check some other stores."

They paid for what they had already picked out, and checked several other stores without success, searching for a better coat. Dean zipped through one store after another, each time saying, "The coats here are completely wrong." They spent over an hour on the trenchcoat search, Sam stumbling after his brother through store after store, feeling now as if he were floating through an eerie, surreal dream. Maybe this was all some kind of nightmare? Or maybe Sam had somehow gotten stuck in a uniquely horrible Hell?

A Hell called something like Shopping for Dead Angels with Dean.

And then they happened to wander into a JC Penney. They'd just barely got through the doors when Dean said "There!" and he made a beeline straight across the first floor, actually running, dodging his way through rack after rack of clothes. Sam hurried after him. When he caught up, Dean was
standing at a rack of tan trenchcoats that he'd somehow spotted from clear across the store.

"This is it," Dean said, ruffling through them. "These are right. Don't you think?" He held one out, and Sam was amazed. Dean had actually found exactly the right coat. The panel on the back, the length, the belt— it was the original coat! The one Cas had been wearing for those first couple years. Who knew Cas used to shop at JC Penney? thought Sam.

Then he remembered, belatedly, that it must have been Jimmy who'd bought the coat originally.

"What size do you think?" said Dean, and they had to have another fretful discussion about sizes, with Dean trying on several potential sizes and then finally deciding on one that was a little too small for him. They bought the coat, got back to the Impala and Dean set the bags out on the hood. He went through each bag, pulling each item out and looking it over carefully.

"Did I forget anything?" he asked Sam.

"No, you've got everything, Dean," said Sam.

"Boxers, shirt, pants and suit jacket, socks, shoes, the tie, and the coat," said Dean, checking everything one more time. "Is there anything else? I feel like I'm forgetting something."

"That's everything, Dean. You got everything," said Sam. He added half-heartedly, "Cas'll be happy," listening with disbelief to the words that were coming out of his own mouth. Cas will be happy. Not only present tense but goddam future tense.

"You think?" said Dean, now looking through every bag all over again. "You think he'll think it's okay? I'm still worried about the shoes."

"Cas'll like them," said Sam, trying to sound confident. "Besides, he's had totally different clothes recently anyway. He hasn't had this original outfit in a long time, you know. He likes those jeans, actually, you know, the ones you picked out at that thrift store...." Sam trailed off as he remembered that those were the jeans that had been completely soaked with blood, and that Dean had cut off with the shears last night, and that Sam had bundled up in a black plastic bag and carried out to the trash at four in the morning.

"He's been wearing... other clothes," finished Sam lamely.

"Only because I never thought to take him to a JC Penney," said Dean. He lifted his head and stared off into space for a moment, and said, "I never asked him where he'd like to go. When he needed clothes. We just took him to that thrift store. I never asked him what he wanted."

Dean stared at the horizon a moment longer. He blinked and picked up all the bags from the hood.

"You can just put them in the back seat," offered Sam, but then he remembered that the back seat was still covered with dried blood. "Or the trunk. The trunk is good. They'll fit in the trunk."

Dean put them in the trunk.

Sam drove all the way back. He knew he should be exhausted. Two nights ago he'd been up all night, on the Lake Erie shore (the terrible night, the horrible night, the night Sam couldn't bear to
think about); then Sam had driven thirteen hours yesterday; then last night he'd been up till about five a.m., and had only gotten maybe three hours of sleep slouched against the Impala tire. And now the drive to Hastings, and trying to find the damn trenchcoat. And now driving again. Sam had managed to slug down some water but had had nothing to eat the whole time. He knew he should be hungry, and knew he should be very sleepy too, yet he felt almost freakishly wide awake. His body seemed almost vibrating with alertness, his whole mind buzzing with it. Yet at the same time nothing seemed truly real; again the landscape was scrolling past like a two-dimensional painted backdrop.

He glanced over at Dean. Dean hadn't even had the three hours' sleep; he'd been up over forty-eight hours by now. But he was sitting perfectly upright again in the passenger seat, his hands laced in his lap, gazing out the side window at the trees and fields sliding past.

Several times during the drive back to Lebanon, Sam considered asking Dean what had happened in the warehouse. What exactly had happened? How had the demon still been alive? How had it managed to injure Castiel so horrifically while leaving Dean unharmed? Dean must have been tied up or something, Sam thought. Probably saw the whole thing and was trying to get free to help Cas, but couldn't cut through his ropes in time.

Or something like that.

Sam decided not to ask about it.

To Sam's relief, Dean didn't start singing any of the songs during the drive back. Instead Dean started looking at his phone periodically. Eventually he turned it on and off a few times, and twice he asked if Sam's phone was getting any service. He even had Sam call Dean's phone to verify that Dean's phone was working.

Dean checked his phone dozens of times. Till finally he was staring at it nonstop.

Sam finally realized that Dean was waiting for Cas to call.

_I'd rather have the singing_, thought Sam.

When Sam pulled up at the bunker, Dean bounced out of the car and actually ran over to the garage door, unlocking it and pulling it open to peer inside. Sam put his head down on the steering wheel and closed his eyes for a moment, finding he couldn't bear to see Dean's reaction when he saw that Cas was still dead. But when Sam steeled himself and looked up again, Dean was only pulling the door wide open and gesturing at Sam to bring the Impala inside.

Sam pulled in. Sure enough, the shrouded form on the floor had not moved, and the water bottle and cell phone and note were untouched. Yet Dean seemed unfazed. He walked over to the body (Cas, Sam thought, _That's Cas..._). Dean just leaned over it a moment, glancing it over with a calm professional air. Then he popped the trunk and grabbed the shopping bags. He reached down farther, rummaging under the weapons, and pulled out two shovels too.

The two shovels that they always carried in the trunk for digging graves.

"Dean?" said Sam. "Are we going to... bury... Cas?" This was a relief; Sam had been gearing himself to have to convince Dean that Cas should be buried soon.
"Bury the vessel, Sam," said Dean. He set the shopping bags and shovels together on the floor, and walked back over to Cas. "The vessel won't last too much longer," Dean said. "The rigor mortis is already leaving and that's a bad sign. I was thinking, three feet down'll be perfect."

"Three... feet?" Standard grave depth was six feet.

"Three feet is still deep enough to keep animals out," said Dean, pulling the blanket off of Cas and folding it up. He bent down and picked up the water bottle, cell phone and note, and stuck them in his pocket. "You know, coyotes and stuff; three feet will keep them out. But it's not so deep that it'll be hard for him to climb out. Six feet down was damn hard to dig up through. Thought I was gonna suffocate. And it was really hard to get out of the coffin."

Sam stared at Dean. He'd long known, of course, that Dean had once been resurrected. (So had Sam, for that matter.) But Sam had always assumed that Dean had just magically appeared above ground fully intact— which was how it had been for Sam. Dean had never mentioned having to dig himself out of the grave.

And he'd had to get out of the coffin? The coffin that Sam and Bobby had made?

The thought was horrifying.

"Three feet," said Dean, "And no coffin." He folded the sheet more tightly around Cas, and knelt, and started to hoist Cas's body onto his shoulders.

Dean had tried this in the warehouse, too, but back then Cas had been loose-limbed and too slippery with blood. Now, the body was a little stiffer, and was well-wrapped in the sheet, but even so Dean had to struggle. He did manage to get Cas over his shoulders in a rough fireman's carry, but then Dean couldn't seem to get to his feet, staggering a little and falling back to his knees. Human bodies were surprisingly heavy, Sam knew, and could be amazingly hard to carry by oneself.

So Sam jumped forward to try to help. They'd always helped each other carry bodies. They'd helped each other carry Dad; they'd helped each other with Bobby, and even with Charlie.

"I got him," said Dean, waving Sam back. Dean rearranged Cas's limbs a little, tightened the sheet around him, and tried to stand again. Again he staggered; again Sam reached out.

"I GOT HIM, SAM," said Dean. "I GOT HIM. I'LL TAKE CARE OF HIM." He finally managed to lurch to his feet, and caught his breath, bracing himself.

"See, I got him, Sam," said Dean, more calmly. Then Dean took a deep breath and staggered out the door, Cas's white-shrouded body draped heavily across his shoulders.

Just like I carried Dean, thought Sam. Just like I carried Dean.

Back when Dean had been torn up by actual hellhounds. Torn up just as badly as Cas was torn up now. Dragged to Hell itself, on that infinitely horrible night so long ago. Bobby had tried to help carry Dean to the grave, and Sam had waved him off, just as Dean was doing now.

Sam had known he had to carry Dean alone. Dean had died because of Sam, after all.

The weeks that had followed were still a blur in Sam's memory.

But then... an angel had restored Dean to life, and had given Sam his brother back....

An angel named Castiel....
"Bring the stuff," called Dean over his shoulder, breaking into Sam's reverie. Sam jolted back awake, stuck the shovels under one arm and grabbed the shopping bags with the other, and ran after Dean.

He found Dean lugging Cas around the corner of the bunker and through the trees. Sam followed along behind as they left the trees and began working their way through a nearby meadow, an old cornfield that had long ago been left fallow. Sam had assumed they would probably stop here, to bury Cas at the edge of the field close to the bunker, but Dean kept going. Dean threaded his way into the meadow, hunched under Cas's white-shrouded form, working his way through tall grasses and past little saplings. He seemed intent on some unknown destination.

Sam realized they were following a faint trail in the grasses. It led straight across the overgrown meadow and toward a little hill that looked out over the bunker.

Dean was headed to the little hill where Cas used to go to practice guitar.

"Dean, the... the guitar spot?" Sam said, from just behind Dean. "Where he used to practice?"

Dean was breathing heavily now. Between breaths he said, "He'll know exactly... where he is... when he wakes up. And... he likes it there."

"But, Dean, that's pretty far," said Sam. It was a quarter of a mile at least. Most of it uphill. That was a long way to carry a six-foot-tall human body.

Dean just kept walking.

Dean carried Castiel all the way across the meadow, following Cas's faint trail. Dean carried Castiel through grasses and wildflowers. He carried Castiel past bees droning in the daisies, past sparrows flitting around in the shrubs.

Dean carried Castiel up the hill. He slowed down a lot here, till he was taking very small steps, creeping upwards just an inch at a time and gasping heavily for every breath. Head bowed under Cas's weight, one arm wrapped across Cas's shoulders and the other over his legs, Dean kept plodding upwards. Sam made some more offers to help, but Dean had stopped responding to him.

Sam began to get genuinely worried that Dean might collapse, and took to hovering directly behind him, ready to drop everything and grab Cas— and Dean— if Dean needed help.

But Dean didn't collapse. He kept going. His breath was coming in harsh gasps now, till he was sucking in air in great wheezes, but he kept going.

Dean made it all the way up. He followed Cas's path right to the top of the little hill.

The path ended at a flat spot under a handsome old maple tree that was in the first flush of early-September fall colors. Back in June, Cas had brought a little folding chair up here. The chair was still here, facing out over the meadow toward the bunker, a few red maple leaves sitting on the seat.

Dean staggered over toward the chair, sank heavily to his knees, and laid Cas down right next to the chair. The sheet had unwrapped slightly, and Sam caught a glimpse of the lower part of Cas's face and neck. The bandage on Cas's cheek didn't quite cover all his bruises. Also the butterfly bandages across the cut on Cas's neck had come loose; this was the wound that had cost him his grace. Dean
noticed this too, and even though he was still gasping desperately for air, literally on his hands and knees next to Cas, he nonetheless took several moments to press the loose ends of the bandages carefully back into place.

Dean readjusted the bandages several times until he seemed satisfied. He gradually got his breath back, till finally he seemed able to stand up again, and then he began inspecting the ground around the folding chair. Soon he had moved the chair aside and was pacing out the standard grave dimensions. He set four stones at the corners of the grave, kicked some fallen red leaves out of the way, took one of the shovels from Sam and began to dig.

_I have to help with this_, thought Sam. _This part at least._

Sam set down the shopping bags, hefted the second shovel and started digging by Dean's side.

"I got it, Sam—" Dean started to say.

"I have to," said Sam. He kept digging.

Maybe there was something different in Sam's tone this time, for Dean didn't argue. He only glanced at Sam, nodded, and turned back to digging.

They'd dug many graves together in their time, and soon they fell automatically into their usual rhythm, alternating shovelfuls with each other. The pile of dirt on the other side of the grave grew rapidly larger.

Three feet was easy, with both of them working. It went quickly.

When the grave was ready, Dean began to unwrap the sheet from around Cas's body. Sam could not bear to look at the face. That grimace, the sunken eyes... It didn't look like Castiel at all.

But Dean just gazed at it thoughtfully, his head tipped, his hands on his hips, and then he turned to the shopping bags and began setting out all the new clothes, shaking them out one by one and draping them over the chair. He clipped all the price tags off, removed the size stickers, and laced up the shoes. Then he turned to Cas.

Dean started with the boxers. Something about watching Dean put Cas's boxers on — the intimacy of it, the gentle care of Dean's movements — made Sam turn his back. When he turned back around, Dean had finished the boxers and had gotten the socks on as well, and had moved on to the white shirt. But Dean was running into difficulties with the shirt; the sleeves were tricky. Finally he had to ask Sam for help. Sam propped Cas's upper body up from behind while Dean worked the right sleeve over Cas's right arm.

Sam was kneeling behind Cas now, holding him up. From this position, seeing only Cas's uninjured back, and the familiar dark hair, _it looked like Cas again._

Except for the way Cas's head was hanging down so slackly.

Sam was suddenly having some difficulty breathing. He had to look away and take a couple of long, shaky breaths.
"What the hell is wrong with you?" Dean said. He sounded puzzled. "Help me with the other arm."

Sam bit his lip. His throat was getting a little tight, but he managed to keep breathing, and he helped Dean work the shirt around Cas's back and get the other arm in its sleeve. "Okay, you can set him down," said Dean. So Sam lowered Cas back down, very, very gently, trying to make sure Cas wouldn't bump his head. And then out of nowhere Sam remembered that it really didn't matter if Cas bumped his head and all of a sudden Sam had burst into tears. Dean didn't even seem to notice; he simply did up the shirt buttons carefully, while Sam struggled to get himself back under control.

Next was the pants (this again took both of them, and was another awful struggle). But after the pants were on, Dean froze still, staring down at the body.

"Sam... I just realized... Sam..." said Dean. He lifted his eyes slowly to look at Sam; and there was such grief and despair in Dean's eyes that Sam's breath caught once more in his throat.

Dean said, looking absolutely destroyed, "I forgot the belt. Sam, I forgot the belt."

Sam blinked.

Dean stared down at the body, and put both hands on his head, muttering, "I forgot the belt. I forgot the belt!" As if forgetting the belt were the worst thing that had happened in months.

Sam said, "You could use mine," undoing his own belt as he spoke. "It's plain leather. Like his was." He pulled his belt out of his belt loops and held it out to Dean. "It's got extra holes. If you tighten it up all the way, it might fit him."

Dean stared at it a long moment. He nodded slowly, reaching out for the belt. "Maybe he won't mind?"

"I don't think he'll mind," said Sam.

Dean paused, thinking. "If he doesn't like this one," he said, "Maybe I can take him to JC Penney as soon as he's back and he can get the kind of belt he likes."

"That's a great idea, Dean," said Sam. His throat was feeling very tight again. "He'll like that." So Dean knelt by Cas and began threading the belt through the belt loops, working it under Cas's back, and then around the other side, and buckling it carefully.

"It does sort of fit. Thanks, Sam," said Dean.

"No problem," whispered Sam.

The shoes were next. Then Dean spent a long time with the tie, fussing over how to tie it. He finally put it on backwards (the way Cas used to wear it), only to start worrying over how tight to make it. "He usually had it sort of half-loosened, you know?" Dean said, tightening the tie slightly and then loosening it again. "I don't think he likes it super tight." He tightened the tie a tish more, and then loosened it again.

Dean was still fiddling with the tie when Sam said, "He can adjust it when he's back, Dean."

"Yeah, I guess so," said Dean, looking a little bothered. "I just wanted to get it how he likes it. Okay. Jacket and then the trenchcoat."

The suit jacket was a little tricky (sleeves were always a problem, it turned out) but they got it on. The trenchcoat turned out to be the most difficult of all, because not only were there sleeves, but also
it extended past Cas's hips. Sam had to hoist Cas up by the arms, hauling him almost all the way up while Dean tugged the end of the coat into position, and then Sam set Cas down again.

Sam almost lost it again when he finally looked down.

For with that coat on, and the blue tie, now the "vessel" truly looked like Cas.

It was Cas.

And Cas was dead.

The sun was sinking toward the horizon now; it was nearly sunset. It had been two full days, and Cas had not returned. Cas was still gone.

Cas was still dead.

They both stood staring down at the body in silence. At last Sam lifted his eyes to look at Dean, and saw that Dean had that glassy look in his eyes again — that distant, vacant look, as if he weren't seeing anything at all.

"Dean?" Sam said hesitantly, stepping forward to put a hand on Dean's shoulder.

"Right," said Dean, suddenly snapping into motion. He folded the sheet carefully around Castiel, and said, "Hand it down to me."

Dean hopped down into the grave and reached his arms up to Sam, and Sam hauled Cas, now bundled up in the sheet again, over to Dean, and Dean grabbed Cas around the midsection, pulled him down into the grave, and laid him out carefully on the sheet, straightening his limbs.

Last of all Dean pulled something out of his own jacket. It was Cas's angel blade. Dean set Cas's right hand on his chest and folded Cas's fingers around the haft of the blade. "I'd put it in his jacket sleeve," commented Dean, as he began climbing up out of the grave, "but, he might have trouble getting it out when he's still scrambling out of the dirt. I think he'll feel better if he wakes up with it right there in his hand, don't you think?"

Sam couldn't even respond.

Dean picked up a shovel.

"The sheet's still open, Dean," said Sam. "His clothes will get all dirty." He felt strangely bothered about this, though he knew it was a ridiculous concern. The clothes didn't matter. Cas wasn't going to need them.

Dean lifted a shovelful of loose dirt from the dirt-pile from the grave. He said, "It'll be a lot easier for him to get out of the grave if he doesn't have to struggle to get out of the sheet."

"But he'll get all dirty," whispered Sam. "You just got him all cleaned up."

"That was to get the blood off," said Dean. "I had to get the blood off. I had to get the blood off. Dirt's different. It's just part of the earth. He likes the earth, Sam, you know? I had to get the blood off." With that, Dean threw a shovelful of dirt right onto Castiel's legs. Another shovelful followed, and Dean said, "Besides, he'll clean himself up, and his clothes too, as soon as he's back. And if he's not at full power yet—" Another shovelful of dirt hit Cas, this time covering up one hand. "— then I'll wash the clothes for him. And if he needs a shower—" Another shovelful. "— I'll help him."
Dean kept shoveling dirt onto Castiel. Sam couldn't move. He was standing at the foot of the grave now, and was transfixed by the sight of Castiel lying there in the grave, dressed now in that ever-so-familiar outfit. The original trenchcoat...the original blue tie... it was the original Castiel. He was so eerily motionless, his face so strangely stiff and bruised, his eyes closed, but it was unmistakably now Castiel. Shovelful after shovelful of dirt landed on him, slowly covering up the tan trenchcoat, the blue tie, the dark pants and the black shoes. The dirt began to cover Cas's dark hair (still a little damp from when Dean had washed it earlier), and his bruised face, and his mouth, and his hands, and the angel-blade. Shovelful after shovelful. Sam couldn't look away. He stood there watching, till Cas was almost entirely covered up with dirt. Till there was just the edge of his hand visible, and one glint from the angel-blade, and part of his dark hair. Dean seemed to be aiming the shovelfuls now to cover everything up, for the blade vanished in the next shovelful, the hand after that, last of all Cas's dark hair, and then Castiel was entirely gone.

As if a spell had been broken, Sam was at last able to move. He felt as if he still couldn't think at all — all his thoughts seemed to be moving very slowly, his mind just repeating a few things over and over (Cas is gone, Cas is gone... Focus on Dean, focus on Dean... Keep it together, keep it together). But he was able to move. He stumbled over to the other shovel, to try to help Dean fill in the rest of the grave.

Dean was shoveling like a robot now, shovelful after shovelful in an unceasing rhythm. He didn't say a word as Sam joined him. The sun was setting now; the last rays of sunlight slanted over the hill as the two brothers filled in Castiel's grave.

Dean patted the last of the loose dirt in place with the back of his shovel.

"Maybe there should be a marker," Sam said. "A cross—"

"NO CROSS," said Dean sharply. "No cross. No cross."

"Okay, Dean—"

"No cross," said Dean, shaking his head. "No cross."

Sam looked at him, a little taken aback. And then he remembered something.

He still hadn't gotten the story from Dean about what had happened, of course, but now Sam remembered that in the warehouse there had been been a piece of a wooden pallet nailed across one of the wooden pillars. Kind of high up. Kind of like a cross, come to think of it. And most of the pool of blood had been underneath that particular pillar.

And Cas's wrists had been ruined.

It hit Sam like a hammer blow: Cas had been crucified.

*Dean saw Cas being crucified.*

The spider demon had crucified Cas somehow, and *Dean had had to watch it happen.*

"No cross," Dean was still saying, still shaking his head. "No cross."

"All right. All right, no cross," said Sam, "That's okay. It's okay, Dean." He reached out to Dean and gripped one of his shoulders tightly in one hand. "That's fine. That's totally fine. Is there anything else you want to leave here instead?"

That seemed to snap Dean out of his "no cross" repetition. He blinked, and nodded. Dean dug
around in his jacket pocket and pulled out...

... the water bottle, the cell phone and the little note.

Dean checked the battery on the phone, put the phone and note together in a little plastic bag, and knelt to set everything right at the head of the grave. He got back to his feet.

The sun was almost gone now. The light was beginning to fade.

Sam cleared his throat and said, "Do you want to say anything?"

"What? Why?" Dean said. He shot Sam an almost irritated look. "Sam, this is just the vessel, haven't you been paying any attention? He'll be back in a jiff. Right, Cas?" Dean glanced at the setting sun with a hint of worry, and looked up at the sky. "Cas? Castiel? You're hearing me, right? You'll be right back, right? You're just kinda, getting yourself organized or something, right? Filling out the paperwork or whatever?" Dean waited a moment and asked, to the empty air, "Cas? Castiel?"

His eyes searched the sky.

There was no reply.

A soft breeze rustled the leaves of the big old maple overhead, and a scattering of red leaves came drifting down. A few of them landed on the grave.

"Do you think he'll forgive me?" Dean said.

"For what?" Sam said, and then instantly realized this was a dangerous question.

Dean was silent a moment.

Then Dean said, his voice wavering, "For... forgetting the belt?" Dean paused. He started to say, "And..."

Again Dean paused.

"And... the wrong shoes?" Dean finally said.

"Of course he'll forgive you," said Sam. "He doesn't even care about any of that."

"Do you really think so? Do you think he'll forgive me?" Dean's voice was distinctly shaky now.

"He'll forgive you," said Sam, a sick certainty beginning to creep into his heart that Dean was talking about something else entirely. "I'm absolutely certain, Dean."

An expression flickered across Dean's face that was something close to horror, something close to grief. He gave a little choked gasp, blinked, and then the blank expression was back. Dean nodded once, firmly, and said, "I'll take him to JC Penney right away. Soon as he gets back. I'll take him tomorrow." He picked up both shovels, grabbed the empty shopping bags and headed down the hill.

Sam lingered at the grave, torn between watching over Dean and wanting to stay at Castiel's grave.

Castiel's grave. It seemed an impossibility.

It seemed very wrong that there was no marker on Cas's grave. For lack of anything better Sam set the little folding chair at the head of the grave, but this didn't seem like enough at all. He deserves a marker, Sam thought. But what? No cross, obviously. A star of David? A feather? Another angel-
blade?

*How do you mark an angel's grave?* thought Sam.

*How do you mark a friend's?*

He looked down the hill. Dean was still in view, trudging through the darkening twilight toward the bunker, head down, both shovels under one arm and the shopping bags swinging from his other hand. Sam hesitated a moment longer, turned back to the grave and whispered under his breath, "Castiel," but then couldn't think what else to say.

What kind of eulogy can a man give to a billion-year-old angel?

Sam finally said, "You were our friend...."

He could not continue.

_You were our friend._ It was pathetically inadequate. It didn't come remotely close.

Sam glanced over his shoulder and saw that Dean was about to slip out of view around the corner of the bunker. All Sam could think of was to add, hastily, "Cas... if you're out there somewhere, can you help Dean? If you can? I don't know what happened, but, please, please, Cas, if you can hear me, if you're still out there somewhere... please, can you help me take care of Dean?"

There was no reply.

Of course there was no reply.

Sam blinked several times and wiped a hand over his face. He turned and hurried down the hill after Dean, thinking, *Keep it together, keep it together, keep it together.*

---

_A/N -

Poor Sam.

This fic is actually the first time I've ever written from Sam's POV, and it almost feels sadder than Dean's POV because Sam has a clearer view of what is happening. Not only has he just lost his best friend (cause let's face it, it was really Cas, not Dean, who was essentially Sam's best friend for all of S10) but he can see he might be losing his brother too. Sam is also in an awful position in that he knows he can't really do anything to help. All he can do is follow Dean around and worry about him (shades of S10!) - and, also, concentrate on trying to stay sane, since Sam knows, already, that Dean is not very sane anymore. Sam already knows he has to be the one to "keep it together" so that he can try to hold Dean together too.

BTW I looked up Misha Collins' original wardrobe from S4 for this. The original trenchcoat (not the S9-S10 one) did come from JC Penney - who knew? And, yeah, Cas's original shoes were actually ankle boots; I never noticed.

So, this is the last of the three chapters that were posted last year on the DarkSparrow account. From here on it'll all be new. For those who have asked: yes, this fic is fully plotted out (and has been for a year). I know it's been very grim and sad; I'm afraid it'll continue being sad for a while
yet. But I hope you find the journey worthwhile.

Next week: Dean starts having dreams.
A/N - Back to Dean's POV for the next several chapters. I have a lot written but have to rush to a family dinner tonight, so, I will post this part now and the second part tomorrow.

PSA: A self-harm tag has been added. I would categorize it as "mild" self-harm but YMMV.

Two weeks later, Dean was trudging across the meadow again. It was six in the morning, and it was at least Dean's thirtieth trip to the hill.

As he walked along the narrow trail, the long autumn grasses on either side brushed wet stripes of dew onto his jeans. Soon his lower legs were soaked through. It was still pretty chilly. Dean glanced up at the sky; the eastern horizon was glowing with pale light now, but the ground and the underbrush around him were still quite dim. It was barely first light, still nearly an hour till dawn. Fortunately Dean had been along the path so many times by now that he knew every curve of the trail by heart. Even the tree roots didn't trip him any more. He could've done this blindfolded.

He could've come up earlier than six a.m., in fact. He'd could've come up in the pitch dark night. He'd been awake since four, actually, when the nightmares had woken him. But it always took a couple hours to get going after he woke up; usually he needed a little time at first to push away the nightmare images.

Humming some of Cas's songs often worked pretty well, for those early morning hours, when he had just woken up. (It helped to imagine that the songs were drifting down the stairwell; that he was really just hearing Cas singing them, from up above. No need for Sam to know about that, though.) This morning had been especially early, and he'd hummed as quietly as he could, so that he wouldn't wake Sam. Till the image of Cas's bloodied, bruised face had receded somewhat from the forefront of his mind. Receded enough, at least, so that he could think again.

Today that whole process had only taken half an hour. As he'd dressed he'd gotten to thinking about what Cas would need when he got back, and of course he'd thought of a few more things Cas might want. (Seemed like every single morning, Dean thought of something else Cas might want, when Cas got back.) So Dean had spent another hour or so getting those ready for him. By five-thirty, at last, he'd gotten out the door, with all the new things for Cas loaded into the pack on his back.

Dean glanced back over his shoulder. The dark meadow was empty behind him. Felt odd to not have Sam right on his heels.

For two weeks now Sam had been following Dean around from about two feet away, tagging after him like an abandoned puppy, with that worried-Sam look seemingly etched permanently on his face. Sam had also been coming along on all of Dean's twice-daily treks up the hill to check on Cas. But Dean's morning trek had been drifting earlier and earlier. Sleep had started to seem sort of optional to Dean (as had eating, and shaving, and researching for hunts, and washing the car, and a lot of other trivial pointless stuff) and what had started as an eight a.m. daily walk up the hill had gradually shifted to seven, and then to six. And given that Dean also never really felt like going to
bed at night till maybe one in the morning (or at all, really), and that Sam seemed obsessed with making Dean get to bed safely every night — well, sleep time had gotten sort of minimized. Sam seemed to be having a little trouble keeping up. Sam had been barely awake on some of the morning hikes, to be honest.

Today Sam had snored right through the five a.m. alarm that'd been beeping on his phone. Dean had finally crept into Sam's room and turned the alarm off; the poor kid seemed like he needed some rest.

_This is actually the very first time Sam hasn't come up with me in the morning_, Dean thought as he walked along. _First time since — since the thing that happened... since..._

Dean's feet slowed.

_Since Cas's vessel got damaged and Cas had to vacate temporarily_, thought Dean, picking up his pace again. _Poor Sam's still pretty freaked out. He doesn't get it._

Dean had reached the bottom of the hill. He marched upwards briskly, thumbs laced through his backpack straps, making his way nimbly over half-visible tree roots and around dimly-seen stumps. He was still thinking about Sam. Was Sam really okay? Had he been losing weight, maybe? Dean pictured how Sam had looked lying there in bed this morning, half wrapped up in his sheet—

_don't picture Cas, don't think about Cas—_

... _Cas, wrapped up in the sheet, lying on the bunker floor..._

Dean found he had stopped hiking. He was standing still, staring down at a tree root without seeing it at all.

He shook his head, stepped over the root, and got going again, setting one foot firmly in front of the other. _Sam's definitely dropping weight_, he thought, working his way up the trail through the shadowy trees.

Sam had gotten noticeably thinner just in the last couple weeks. Funny, really, because Sam kept trying to make meals for Dean, but it seemed neither of them were eating much. (Dean kept forgetting about the meals. He had to keep checking on Cas. And there were prayers to send out, and demon-summonings to try. Also there so much reading to do. About angels, and souls, and the afterlife. Lot of research to do. Lot of stuff to do. Dean had been pretty busy.) Dean knew Sam was doing his best to keep them both fed, but at every meal Dean found his appetite fading away after just a few bites, and then usually he had a new idea about something Cas might need, or he thought of some way to improve the grave, or it seemed like it might be a good time to go over one of Cas's songs for a while and make sure he remembered all the words... and usually Dean ended up drifting away from the table. Then for some reason Sam always seemed to feel like he had to follow Dean.

So neither of them ended up eating much.
Dean was losing weight also, of course. His belt had already come in a few notches. In Dean's case it was okay, because it didn't really matter. But it wasn't okay for Sam's health to suffer.

_Sam's worrying too much_, Dean thought, marching along. _That's what the problem is. Sam just doesn't get it; he doesn't really believe that Cas is coming back. He hardly ever hints at it, but it's obvious what he's thinking. Funny how he's got such a mental block about it. It's so obvious Cas is gonna be back._

_If Cas is back today_, thought Dean, glancing up at the crest of the hill just above him, _I'll ask him to take a look at Sam. Maybe Cas can do a healing or something. Or at least send Sam to sleep at night. Watch over him a bit._

_Like he used to do for me..._

_Like he used to try to do, anyway. Even when I had the Mark...._

Normally the memory of that would have made Dean falter and stop again, but fortunately the top of the maple tree had come into view, and he realized he was near the grave.

_Maybe he'll be there now. Maybe he's just digging his way out now. He might need some help—_

Dean sped up and broke into the clearing at a trot. He always seemed to end up in a hurried little sprint when he got near the grave. Just in case.

But the grave was undisturbed.

More leaves had fallen off the tree in the night, and the grave was covered now with a light clutter of red and yellow leaves. Dean came to a standstill a few feet away and stood looking down at the grave, catching his breath. He wasn't worried. He wasn't worried at all. He did always get that sort of sinking feeling in his heart at this point, but probably just because he was catching his breath. It was maybe a bit of disappointment, each time, but it was okay, really, because Cas was _definitely_ coming back. Absolutely, one hundred percent, _definitely_.

_Cas was just taking his time, was all._

It was best to check thoroughly, though. Dean got down on his hands and knees by the grave, kneeling in the dew-dampened grass, and he began pulling leaves off the grave. So that he could check it thoroughly. Just in case.

Dean had changed several things in the past couple weeks. He'd been improving the grave. There were some planks set across the head of the grave, for one thing; Dean would check those in a minute. The most important addition, though, was that there was now a little string threading its way out from the loose dirt. Dean plucked all the leaves out of the way and bent over, nose almost right down to the ground, so that he could study the very end of the string in the grey pre-dawn light.

There were some twigs laid across the string, and there was a little gray pebble sitting on the very end. Dean examined the twigs and the pebble. He'd placed them there himself.

What had happened was, on the second day after the burial, it had occurred to Dean that three feet of dirt might be too difficult for Cas to dig his way out of. (What if Cas were too weak? What if he weren't fully healed?!) So Dean had dug back down to Cas's right hand, uncovering it just enough to tie one end of the string to Cas's forefinger. If Cas moved his hand at all (like, say, if he were awake, but too weak to dig his way out), the string would shift. The twigs would fall off, the loose end of the string would tug out from under the pebble, and maybe the string would even disappear entirely under the dirt. And Dean, who came to check the string every morning, would know right away that
Cas was awake and needed some help digging out.

The string hadn't moved. The twigs were exactly where they had been for days. Dean lifted the pebble to double check, and then carefully put it back in position.

Next Dean checked the planks. The planks were pretty new. What had happened next was, on the third day after the burial, the day after adding the finger-string, it had occurred to Dean that Cas might not even be able to move his hand. What if he couldn't heal up his wrist wound? What if the finger-tendons were damaged or something and he couldn't move his finger? Then, too, it was getting late in the year— what if Cas woke up when it was really cold? What if the dirt packed down too tightly in the rain and the string got stuck? What if the ground froze solid and the string froze into a total block of ice or something? Dean had gotten pretty worried about all this, and Sam had found him pacing around in the basement later that day looking for a place where he could store Cas's vessel. Dean had concluded it really would be best to disinter the vessel completely and bring it back to the bunker, but Sam had finally managed to convince him that they had no place cool and dry enough to store a vessel where it wouldn't stink up the whole bunker.

So Dean had gone to the natural next option and had started researching walk-in freezers. But Sam had pointed out that if they installed a walk-in freezer and put the vessel in that, then poor Cas would freeze as soon as he woke up!

That was a good point.

What had happened after that was, on the fourth day, Dean started drawing up some blueprints to build a stone mausoleum on top of the hill, a nice comfy mausoleum where Cas would be safe and dry when he woke up. But Sam had managed to convince him that they weren't going to be able to build a mausoleum immediately. Maybe not till spring. By then a new series of nightmares had taken hold of Dean's nights, all involving Cas suffocating underground, so the next plan Dean came up with was to bury a scuba tank next to Cas, just in case. But Sam had talked him out of that too, pointing out that (a) the tank would rust and (b) if Cas had enough power to put a vessel back together, surely he'd be able to move a few feet of dirt out of the way too.

Dean couldn't stop worrying about it, though, so finally, on the fifth day after the burial, Dean had dug down over Cas's head partway, just enough to make a depression in the ground that was above Cas's head and right hand. The idea was to create a sort of a little air pocket, so Cas could bust through the dirt immediately the first time he raised his hand or his head.

The planks were the newest addition. Dean had added those on the sixth day. (Sam, who seemed to have sort of given up by that point, had actually helped carry them up.) Two light planks, very easy to move, but they'd keep the rain off. The planks would help make sure the rain didn't puddle in the hole that Dean had just dug. (Because, what if Cas woke up when it was raining, and there was a puddle of water right above him, and what if he drowned?) Also, with the planks there, the rain wouldn't pack the earth down too tight.

Maybe I could put up a tent, Dean thought, as he brushed the leaves off the planks. A tent around the grave. Sam might go for that.

Dean lifted one of the two planks a little, to peer underneath. The dirt down at the bottom of the depression was still soft and loose. It looked undisturbed. Dean set it back down in place.

Course, none of this is really necessary, he thought.

Dean was pretty confident that Cas would have enough power, when he returned, that he wouldn't need any of these little precautionary measures.
Best to be on the safe side, though.

"Not yet, buddy, huh?" muttered Dean. He leaned over and grabbed the ziploc bag (the ziploc that had the cell phone, water bottle and note). It was covered with damp leaves; Dean brushed the leaves off, shoved it in his pocket and stood, stretching his back a little. "Taking your time, aren't you, dude," said Dean, glancing around the clearing again. "Good thing I'm not worried."

Dean wasn't actually worried at all, of course. Not at all. Dean wasn't worried. Cas would be back; that was obvious. It was totally obvious. It was really kind of weird how Sam didn't see how obvious it was. It was just taking a little time, that's all. The important thing was to keep checking every day.

And to keep calling Cas. In case he needed waking up, wherever he was.

Time for the prayer.

The folding chair still stood nearby. Dean brushed the leaves off the chair, pulled it a few feet to the side (he didn't like the thought of accidentally sitting on Cas) and sat down.

The eastern horizon was a pale lemon-yellow now, and there was a particularly bright golden glow in one spot, right where the sun was just about to rise.

Dean pulled the backpack onto his lap, hugging it close for a little extra warmth. The chair was cold, and his jeans were still damp from the dew, and he began to shiver a little in the chilly air, but he sat patiently. He didn't start the prayer to Cas yet; he was waiting for sunrise. One of the books he'd been reading, from the stack of books he'd been working his way through about contacting angels, had said that sunrise and sunset were good times for prayers. Apparently that was why ancient monasteries used to do prayers at dawn and dusk. So Dean always waited till sunrise before he started his prayer.

He waited several long, quiet minutes, and at last the edge of the sun broke over the horizon. First it seemed just a tiny flaming spark; then it grew, with surprising speed, into a blinding bright crescent, and the whole upper edge of the sun came into view.

"Castiel?" said Dean, squinting into the brightness. "Cas? Castiel? It's me, Dean. Got your ears on? You hearing me this time? Castiel?"

He paused, listening. He always paused at this point in the prayer. Listening for the sound of wings. Just in case.

But all he heard was the breeze in the trees.

"Cas, you're sure taking your sweet time, know that?" said Dean. "Listen, Cas, I know you can hear me. You heard Claire all those times without answering her... I know you heard me a lot too, but didn't always answer. Cause you're a jerk like that. Heh." Dean tried to laugh. "Listen, it's cool," he went on, suddenly worried he might be sounding too pushy. "I know sometimes you just can't answer, 'cause you're busy or... whatever. That's cool, it's really is, really, but Cas, I'm starting to wonder if you might've run into some snag—"

The image of Cas's bloody, beaten face sprang into Dean's mind.

This happened pretty often: the vivid memories flaring up before him, bright with blood and pain, almost blinding in their photographic clarity. As if it were all happening all over again. Cas lying on his back in the library, barely able to grab Dean's arm, choking on blood....
*Cas hanging on the cross in the warehouse.*

*Cas, trying to touch the side of Dean's face*  
*His hand falling away... his eyes dulling...*  
*... my... friend....*

Dean bit the inside of his left cheek, hard.

The pain distracted him, and the mental image of Cas's face faded away.

He took a few deep breaths. "Sorry about that, Cas," he said. "Got distracted."

The cheek-biting was a trick he’d developed after remembering what Sam used to do. One day last week, when Dean had been crouched in the bathroom on his knees, pressing his forehead as hard as he could against the door (he'd almost been blinded by a scene from the warehouse that had just jumped into his mind), he'd remembered how Sam used to do that thing with his hand, back when Sam had been trying to shake free of his Lucifer hallucinations. Dean had come up with the idea of biting his cheek. (If it was just the inside of his cheek, maybe Sam wouldn't notice.) It had been working pretty well. It worked great.

Though, Dean realized, exploring the area with his tongue now, he seemed to be developing a sort of a raw ulcer there, just on the inside of his cheek, from biting it so often.

But maybe that was good? It made it hurt more.

It wasn't really the same thing as Sam's hand thing, really. It wasn't like Sam's thing at all. Because these weren't hallucinations, not like Sam's Lucifer problem. These images of Cas were memories.

Memories of something that had *actually happened*. Something Dean had *actually done* to Cas—

*It had REALLY HAPPENED—*

—*This isn't you, Dean— Please—*  
—*Please, stop—*

*Cas on the cross, head hanging.*
Dean screwed his eyes shut and bit the inside of his cheek again. It took a little longer this time. He had to bite harder. Till he tasted blood.

Finally the image faded.

"Anyway, Cas, I got you some stuff for you," Dean said, opening his eyes. He unzipped the backpack and pulled out a green trash bag. "I brought you a backpack this time. It'll be by the head of the grave when you wake up, inside this trash bag. I realized the little ziploc bag's too small and it keeps getting covered up by leaves and I wasn't sure if you'd see it. So, big ol' backpack instead, so that you'll see it for sure. In the backpack, when you find it, open it up—" (Dean started rummaging through the backpack as he spoke) "—and, on top here's a flashlight." Dean checked the flashlight, flicking it on and off. "In case you wake up at night and need to come down the trail in the dark and the phone's not bright enough. It's got new batteries. I'll keep checking it. And under it, here's the cell phone like usual. All charged up. I'll keep swapping it every day with the other phone, like I've been doing." (Dean had got a second phone for Cas and had been swapping the phones every morning. Every day he charged one in the bunker while the other sat up here by Cas's grave.)

Dean went on, speaking to the empty air as he rummaged through the pack. "Then there's two bottles of water— I thought, two rather than one, cause, I wasn't sure how thirsty you might be, and damn was I ever thirsty when you brought me back! And a couple of snacks, ones that'll keep. See, I got you some pork rinds." (Dean held the bags of food up in the air as he spoke, showing them around, to nobody at all.) "I remembered you like those. And there's some pretzels and beef jerky too. They all should last pretty well. I triple-bagged 'em to keep wildlife out, but I'll keep checking every day. Okay, under all that is a sweater, and a down vest and some wool socks and some mittens and a scarf. I know how you love that trenchcoat, but it's starting to get cold at night, and if you come back in the middle of the night, I figured, what the hell, you might need 'em. Anyway it's all wadded up here at the bottom of the pack. Finally, this is important Cas, here's a copy of the bunker key. I clipped it to the inside of the bag here so it won't get lost. I know it's a bit of a risk to leave a key out here, but I want to be sure you can get in the door even if Sam and I are out on a hunt or something."

"And, hey... one more thing." Dean pulled something else out of the pack. "Made you something."

Dean had spent most of yesterday afternoon working on this.

It was a pair of little wooden wings mounted on a wooden stick.

He stuffed everything else back in the pack, zipped up the whole pack and set it inside the green trash bag, and then sat for a moment looking at the wooden wings.

"Made you a grave marker," Dean said. He twirled it around. "Just plywood," he added. "Used a jigsaw down in the bunker woodshop. Drew the feathers on yesterday. Just with a Sharpie, but, hey, it looks okay, you think?"

The wings were about a foot wide, and the stick they were mounted on was about eighteen inches tall. They had seemed decent sized when Dean had been working on them in the bunker's little woodshop, but now that he was holding them out here by the grave under the sun, with the huge trees around, the wings began to look pretty small.

The wings were lopsided, Dean realized.

The feathers didn't look right, either.
Dean drew a breath, as he turned the little wooden wings around in his hand some more. "Sorry the wings aren't better," he said, raising his eyes to the silent sun. "Halfway through making it I realized I didn't actually know how to draw wings. Or feathers. Not sure where the joints are. or... what shape angel wings really are? I only ever really saw those shadows of yours, y'know... but... well, here it is."

He leaned over and stuck the little wing-stick at the head of the grave.

It didn't look very good.

It looked like something a third-grader might have made.

A second-grader, even.

"It's kind of crappy," Dean confessed. "But Sam seems kinda bothered there's no marker on your grave. He even snuck those goddam flowers up that one time last week, did you see that?" Dean snorted at the memory. Sam had been lagging a little behind Dean that day and it turned out he'd been picking wildflowers on the way across the meadow, and then, looking abashed but very determined, Sam had absolutely insisted leaving them on Cas's grave. "Said you like flowers," said Dean, "and I don't know how he decided that. He doesn't really realize that you're gonna be back soon. But I figured it'd settle him down if there were some kind of grave marker, so I thought about it and I thought, wings, maybe? I know it's kind of crappy. I'll make you something better, Cas, I promise."

Dean looked over the little wooden wings again and glanced back up at the sky. "It's just that I thought maybe I didn't need to make anything super permanent, y'know? It's just kind of a little placeholder, right? Just to make Sam happy, really. I think Sam actually wants a headstone... but I tried explaining to him that there's no point making a stone marker when it's only gonna be needed for a couple weeks but then he was all, well, why are you drawing up a plan for a stone mausoleum then, but, the mausoleum's just a backup plan, y'know, it's not really necessary, it was just an idea and it's only for in case you need some shelter on the actual day you come back. A grave marker's a whole different thing, right?" Dean gave a sigh. "You know what, Cas... Sam still doesn't get it, he really doesn't. About you. That you're coming back. Can't wait to see the look on his face when you show back up..."

A little smile spread across Dean's face as he pictured how it would be, on the day Cas finally came back. It was one of his favorite things to think about: Castiel appearing at the door of the bunker, at the top of the stairs. Maybe he'd be a little dirty, maybe a little tired, sure. Maybe that brand-new JC Penney trenchcoat would still be all covered with dirt. But Cas himself would be fine, all put back together. No bruises on his face. No cut on his throat. His wrists would be fine, his leg would be fine, and he'd look just like good ol' Castiel. Maybe he'd have one of the water bottles in one hand, and the bunker key in the other, and he'd look as good as new and he'd just walk right in that door and look down at them and say "Hello, Dean. Hello, Sam."

Cas probably wouldn't even act like anything much had happened, knowing him.

Though Sam, being Sam, would probably go way overboard with his reaction — his jaw would drop open and he'd say, "Cas!" and he'd probably gallop right on up those stairs like a big galumphing elephant, just to give Cas one of those goofy Sam bear-hugs. Sam would have the biggest smile on his face.

Then Cas would look over at Dean and he'd say...

Dean, please—
Stop— please—

Cas, trying to touch the side of Dean's face.

Cas's hand falling away... his eyes dulling....

Dean tasted blood again; he was practically gnawing at the inside of his cheek. It wasn't working this time. His hands were balled up into fists, his fingernails cutting painfully into his palm, as he curled up around the knapsack. "I'm sorry, Cas," he muttered under his breath, eyes screwed closed. "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry...."

It took a horribly long time, this time, to get back on track. He had to start punching his own leg before he could break out of it.

At last the image faded.

Dean sat there a while longer. He was breathing heavily. He felt wrung out, as if he'd just run a hundred-meter dash.

"So... Cas," he said. "Sorry, I, uh... I got distracted. I'll... uh... I'll put the backpack... right where you'll see it. Okay?"

A huffing sound broke his concentration. Dean knew what it was. I'll finish talking to Cas later, he thought, turning his attention to the backpack. By the time Sam broke into the clearing, panting for breath, Dean already had the backpack neatly wrapped up in the green trash bag, safe from the rain, and he was printing "CAS" on the green trash bag in big block letters, with the same Sharpie he'd used to draw the feathers on the little wooden wings.

"Dean?" said Sam. He charged right over toward Dean and straggled to a halt a few feet away, gasping. "You okay?"

Dean flicked a glance at Sam and then did a bit of a double-take. Sam looked like crap. He was still wearing the same t-shirt that he'd been sleeping in, his hair was twisted into all kinds of weird shapes, and it looked like he was still rubbing the sleep out of his eyes. He'd forgotten his socks. He didn't even have a jacket on.

"Dude," said Dean. "Did you even shower?"

"Slept through my alarm," said Sam. He was still panting. "Just woke up. You were gone. Sorry, I..."

He looked over the untouched grave, and his eyes lingered a moment on the wooden wings. He cast a worried look at Dean. "You... uh... you okay?"

"You ought to've showered," said Dean reprovingly, as he set the pack at the foot of the grave. "I mean, show a little respect. Jeez."
Once they got back down to the bunker, Sam sat Dean down with a cup of coffee and scrambled up some eggs for breakfast. Sam had gotten into this funny habit recently of making ridiculously big breakfasts. Pancakes and eggs and bacon and all kinds of things. It was weird, really, because it wasn't Sam's usual kind of food. It was more the kind of stuff that Dean used to eat.

Well, back when Dean used to be hungry in the mornings.

Dean sipped his coffee, idly watching Sam load up a plate with eggs, bacon and toast. Sam still looked pretty tired, and more than a little worried.

Dean finally said, "You shouldn't worry that Cas isn't back yet. He's just taking a little time."

Sam gave Dean a thoughtful glance. But all Sam said, as he set the plate down in front of Dean, was "Eat." Sam turned back to the stove to get his own breakfast ready, but Dean could practically hear his unspoken comment:

*It's been two weeks, Dean.*

Dean twirled his fork around in the eggs.

It was getting a little hard to ignore the fact that two weeks *was* a bit long.

Dean wasn't worried, really he wasn't, but it was starting to get kind of undeniable that Cas was certainly in no rush to get back.

Why *wasn't* Cas back yet? What was he up to? Where had he gone? What was the hold-up?

Was there some problem?

What else could Dean do?

*All I can do is make sure everything's ready for him,* Dean thought, setting the fork down. He lifted his head and looked over at the entrance to the hallway. The hallway that led to the stairwell... the stairs that led up to the attic. Where Cas slept.

*Is there anything I could get ready for him, up there? Anything he needs?*

*I oughta check.*

Dean headed over to the stairwell. He paused a long moment, looking up, one foot on the stairs, one hand on the railing.

It felt a little strange to be considering going up there. Dean had never actually been up to Cas's room. Not for the entire time Cas had been there. Dean had been sick most of that time, of course, and that had been a good excuse for not going up, but... well, he'd been a little reluctant to go up, was the truth.

He'd wanted to give Cas space. Make sure Cas felt like he had his own little spot.

He'd wanted to make sure Cas knew he wasn't going to be kicked out again.
Make sure he knew Dean didn't have a problem with him being here. After the thing that had happened. Not the thing two weeks ago. Not the library fight, either. There was a different thing. A subtler thing. An older thing, that had happened not two weeks ago, not two months ago, but two years ago.

Even Sam didn't know about it.

Nobody knew.

And, Dean felt sure, Cas had never wanted to be around him since.

A/N - Next chapter is all done and I'll post it tomorrow. I know I promised you a dream - that'll be in tomorrow's chapter. Along with the explanation about "that thing two years ago" that Dean is talking about.

More tomorrow.
A/N - I've just realized I might've been kind of dumb in promising this chapter today rather than saving it for next week - because I forgot I have trips on both the next two weekends and might not be able to get much writing done! I'll do what I can but updates might be erratic for the 4th of July weekend and also the weekend after. But in the meantime, here's one more chapter.

Again we start with a flashback...

---

THEN

Rexford, Idaho

Two years ago

It was bizarre to see Cas acting so very human.

Dean had been trying his best all evening to act like it was totally normal to see Cas like this: slogging away at a minimum-wage job, cleaning bathrooms, going on dates. (Or, trying to go on dates, anyway). Dean had even assumed, at first, that it was almost a sort of play-acting for Cas—something like slumming with the locals, maybe. Going native, just for the fun of it. Dean had even needled Cas a little about working a job that seemed so beneath him.

It wasn't till later in the evening, when Dean burst into Nora's house to find Cas desperately close to losing the battle with the Rit Zien, that Dean realized his mistake.

Cas really was human. In all ways.

Dean had known that, of course. Or he should have. Cas had lost all his angel powers, obviously. He'd even been stabbed by that reaper chick a few months ago. He was vulnerable physically. There were the other little physical things, too: he ate now, he took showers now. (And he had sex now, apparently. Which was, to be honest, rather an interesting thought....)

Dean knew all that. But somehow it had all seemed like kind of minor physical stuff. Dean had still been thinking of Cas as his angel protector, an alien being who could just skate effortlessly above the crowds of teeming humanity... and so Dean had somehow also assumed that Cas would be just fine on his own. It hadn't really sunk in just how one hundred percent human Cas was, with everything that came with that: Hunger. Poverty. Fear.

Loneliness.

Cas was human, and hurt, and alone, and scared.

The realization was terrifically unsettling. Dean tried to cover his confusion by volunteering to take care of the Rit Zien's body while Cas dealt with the baby's fever. The body actually took a lot of time
to deal with, and Dean managed to get himself a little settled down during the long process of hauling it away and finding somewhere to dump it. It wasn't till after the Nora had shown up, past midnight, that Dean finally had another chance to talk to Cas.

As Cas said goodbye to Nora and walked over to the Impala, Dean watched him approach. Cas had a rather remote look on his face. (More remote than normal, that is.) He didn't even bother answering when Dean asked him where to go next; he just gave Dean one of those classic silent stares, and glanced away, looking up and down the street at... nothing, really.

Cas opened the Impala door and got in. Dean got in too, still expecting Cas to steer him toward wherever he was living— some apartment or motel.

But Cas was silent.

Dean took a closer look at him. Cas had said his wrist was "a little sore" earlier, after the fight, but now Dean noticed how stiffly Cas was holding his left arm. And how he was cradling it now with the right. And how pinched and drawn his face was.

"Dude, wait," Dean said. "Is your wrist broken?"

Cas glanced down at his wrist. "I think so."

"Why the hell didn't you say something?"

Cas gave a little shrug. "I didn't think it was worth bothering you. There's nothing I can do about it, anyway. I can't heal injuries anymore."

"There's this thing called a 'hospital,' Cas, remember?"

Cas was silent a moment.

Then he said, "I scarcely think I deserve human care at this point. Let alone from this town."

"What? What are you talking about?"

Cas was avoiding his gaze, looking out the window. He drew a breath, and said, "Dean... all those people died because of me. The Rit Zien came to this town because of me."

"What do you mean?"

Cas finally looked over at him, his gaze darting briefly to Dean's face. "The Rit Zien was homing in on my pain. He said so. He was hunting me to put me down." He looked down at his wrist again. "If I hadn't been in this town nobody here would have died."

"Cas, stop that, it's not your fault. So it sensed your wrist pain or whatever—" (Cas flicked another glance at him) "— it's not your fault. Look, let's just head to the local ER and get that wrist taken care of."

Dean started up the car.

It wasn't till after they were sitting in the ER that Dean realized his mistake: the "pain" the Rit Zien had been homing in on couldn't have been the physical pain of Cas's broken wrist. The wrist had only been broken during the fight; the Rit Zien had come to the town days earlier.

The Rit Zien must have been sensing some other kind of pain.
Dean tried to ask about it, but Cas didn't seem like he wanted to talk very much.

Through the whole the hours-long wait at the ER, Cas answered Dean's occasional questions only in the briefest possible monosyllables. It was clear the wrist was hurting him quite a lot. It was long past midnight by the time the ER docs finally got to him, but at last they diagnosed a fracture, sure enough— fortunately, "just" a stress fracture that wouldn't require a full cast, though it was apparently still pretty painful. By about two in the morning Cas finally had some pain meds, and a pretty young female nurse was carefully adjusting a splint around his wrist.

Cas was sitting on an exam table in one of the ER's little bays, looking down at the nurse as she bent over his wrist. His eyes glided over her with almost clinical interest.

*She's a cute one,* Dean thought, leaning against the wall with his arms folded while he watched the nurse working on Cas. Dean felt a little bit like he ought to be checking out the nurse, but instead he seemed to be mostly checking out Cas checking out the nurse. Wondering, *is he into her?*

But Cas didn't really look all that interested.

The nurse left to get a different-sized velcro strap. Cas watched her go, a thoughtful look on his face.

"You'll find another girl, Cas," said Dean, giving him a cheerful grin. "You'll have another date before you know it. A real date."

Cas looked up at him. "Oh, I don't mind about Nora," he said. "I was only going on the date because I felt obliged to."

Dean quirked an eyebrow. "Obliged to?"

"It's what people do, right?" Cas said. He looked down at the brace and felt at it tentatively. "Like we were talking about before: it's what people do. They go on dates..." (Dean was already nodding) "... with the opposite sex." (Dean's nodding slowed.) "So I felt that I should do it. To learn how to fit in, I suppose. But it isn't really what I want." (Dean's nodding stopped.) "So it's okay about Nora. Also, Nora's my boss, and there's some things I'm trying to hide from her anyway, and besides I liked her baby. It wasn't bad, the babysitting. It wasn't bad at all. I could talk to the baby. There aren't usually any people that I can talk to. Her name is Tanya. I told you that, right? Tanya. I tried singing to her. I've never sung much, but I've been listening to a lot of music on the radio in the store, and, the songs are interesting, actually. I'd like to learn more about it—"

Cas chattered on. Actually he was being *way* more talkative than usual, but Dean barely noticed, for he was still hung up on a couple of those previous sentences. At last Dean put a hand up.

Cas paused and looked up at him, his eyes tracking over Dean's face.

"Wait," said Dean. "What do you mean, it isn't what you want?"

Too late, Dean noticed the way Cas's head was wobbling slightly, and how the pupils of his eyes were dilated much more than usual. Too late Dean remembered that the doctor had said, not ten minutes ago, *These pain medications may hit him pretty hard. Don't be surprised if he says some odd things. And don't hold it against him later.*
"Cas, wait a sec," Dean said. "I think maybe you're a little out of it—"

"I meant, you're the one I would want, if I had a choice," said Cas. "Because I love you. You know that, right? You figured it out? I assumed that's why you sent me away."

Dean felt his jaw actually drop open.

It seemed that all Dean could do, for a long, long moment, was blink, and stare.

At last Dean forced out a chuckle. It couldn't be true. It couldn't be. Cas couldn't... love Dean, he couldn't possibly. Because... because Cas was straight. And so was Dean. Cas was just stoned, was all.

"Those, uh," Dean said, "Those pain meds really are kicking in, huh?"

Cas frowned, glancing down at the floor in thought. "Yes..." he said slowly. "Yes, I think they are, but, Dean, it's the truth, I do love you."

"Yeah... you're... probably loving everybody right around now, huh?" Dean said, deciding to play along.

"That's not what I meant," Cas complained. Now he looked irritated. "I meant, I'm in love with you. With you."

"Yeah, uh..." said Dean. "S-so... uh."

Dean couldn't think of anything to say. It was completely out of left field. It was so disorienting that Dean could think only one thing: I'm straight. So's he. ...Aren't... we?

An uncertainty seemed to take hold of Dean's mind.

A curiosity. A spark of something like... recognition. A recognition of something familiar, something that had long been there. Something that Cas had known all along, and that Dean had not allowed himself to know.

But it was too strange; it was too unexpected. The ground was tilting underfoot, and it seemed to Dean that he was losing his balance so much that he was about to fall.

Falling was a terrifying feeling.

As he scrambled to regain his balance, mentally, another thought sprang to Dean's mind:

There's no way an angel could love me.

Not if they really knew me.

"Cas, look, you don't know what you're saying," said Dean. "You had a really rough night. Your next date'll go much better, I bet you anything. You'll be on your feet before you know it, and things'll turn around. You'll find a great girl, just wait and see. You're doing awesome, actually, you've got a job and everything—"

"You think I'm doing horrible," Cas said calmly. "You don't respect me at all." While Dean floundered about how to respond to that, Cas said, "Dean... to be honest, I don't know what to do about it. I didn't realize what it was until recently. I don't know what to do. I don't want to scare you."
I don't want to lose your friendship."

... and now he'd gone into that pathetic-puppy look, a wide-eyed look of confusion and sorrow that was trained right on Dean like a laser. "It's so strong," Cas said. "I can't turn it off. I've tried, and I can't. I can't stop it. I know you don't feel the same and I didn't used to mind—I mean, back when I was an angel I didn't used to mind, because I could control the pain; but now it hurts. It hurts. All the time. Every night."

Dean had gone totally mute.

Cas went on, "I'm used to that, I can take it, but, Dean, what should I do? I can't tell you, because I don't want to scare you. So, I'm not going to tell you. I decided that already. But I'm afraid I already did scare you. That's why you kicked me out, right? You could tell? You don't want me around? I can keep out of your way, Dean, I can keep out of the way, I won't ever bother you, I really just want you to be happy, you deserve so much better —"

Mere seconds later Cas was in tears, still babbling, "I just want you to be happy, so I'll never tell you, never—" while Dean was still staring at him in panicked confusion.

I'm straight. I know I'm straight. Cas is straight too. I know he is. What the hell is this?

It can't be real.

Cas is just mixed up.

Then he heard the nurse's crisp footsteps outside. She paused outside the curtain to warn them, calling out, "I'm coming in again, okay? Ready to face the world again?" And instantly another problem leapt to mind: Cas was not ready to face the world. Not like this. Cas was living in a small town. A small town where everybody probably knew each other, and where he was an outsider. A small, conservative town, in a small, conservative state, in an area of the country were guys got killed for being gay. Strung up on fenceposts and left to die.

It had happened not that far away, not that long ago.

"You gotta keep quiet," Dean whispered to Cas."You can't talk about that stuff at all. Don't talk about it."

"But, Dean, I only want—"

The nurse was pulling the curtain aside. "Shut up!" Dean hissed.

He really hadn't meant it to come out so rough, and was kicking himself about it almost immediately. But at least Cas shut up. Just as the nurse stepped into the room.

Cas was completely mute for the rest of the arm-brace fitting, staring at the floor the whole time, while Dean fidgeted in a near-agony in the corner. But before the brace fitting was even done, Cas had started to get pretty bleary-eyed from the meds. Dean and the nurse managed to steer him out toward the Impala; Cas was swamped with sleepiness halfway there and they barely got him into the car. Cas was drifting off to sleep in the passenger seat before Dean had even got Cas's door closed.

"I could change vessels," Cas muttered, as Dean got stiffly into the driver's seat, fumbling with the keys. "Could switch," said Cas, slouching against the door. "I'm not male, Dean. I'm not... one thing, like you are. I thought... maybe I could... change vessels.... But... I like this one. And... Jimmy gave it to me. And... you wouldn't... be interested... anyway."

Dean sat staring at the steering wheel, trying to frame some sort of response. (Yes? no? forget about...
it? .... shut up? ... yes?)
(yes?)

Dean drew a breath and turned toward him... and heard a soft little snore.

Cas was asleep.

It was three in the morning.

Dean managed to get his jacket wedged under Cas's head, to serve as a pillow.

Then Dean spent the next three hours sitting there in the Impala's driver's seat, in the hospital parking lot, watching Cas sleep.

*That was just the pain meds,* Dean thought, over and over.

*There's no way that was real.*

*That was the pain meds. He's just mixed up. He was stoned out of his mind. And he's new to being human anyway. He's... wrong.*

*He's wrong. He's wrong about what he's feeling. He's mixed up. He's not used to being human. He doesn't know what human emotions feel like. He's mistaking brotherly affection for love. Angels go on and on about that "brother" stuff and they've spent eons with their "family," and Cas has latched onto Sam and me as a replacement, and now that he's human he's mistaking that for love. That's all it is. He's lonely and confused and mixed up. AND stoned.*

*That's all.*

He'll have forgotten all about it when he wakes up.

Sure enough, in the morning Cas had forgotten all about it.

Or, at least, he never mentioned it.

So neither did Dean.

---

Two weeks later Cas did something Dean never would have believed Cas would ever consider: Cas stole another angel's grace.

*He'll stop feeling human emotions now,* Dean thought, as soon as he heard. *Or he'll be able to control them, at least.*

In Dean's own mind, where a faint little tendril of some unnameable hope had been rising, like a fragile little flower growing out of the dust, Dean shut a mental door, and put the tiny little flower into the dark.

A few weeks after that, Dean accepted the Mark.
In theory it was to fight Abaddon. In reality...

Well, it was a fucked-up and illogical move in many ways, wasn't it? Arrogant, even, to think he could handle something like the actual Mark of actual Cain himself. Truth was, there were probably other ways to tackle Abaddon; there were a lot of other things they could have tried. Dean never really allowed himself to think much about why he'd done it. But the fact was that when Cain offered the Mark, the very first thought that sprang to mind was, *This'll stop me feeling things.*

And it did. Certain things, anyway. Some of Dean's emotions began to mute, and others were amplified.

Rage was amplified.

Anger was amplified.

Revenge, fury, righteousness, pride... all of those were amplified. But certain other emotions were instantly muted: friendship, and fond feelings, and kindness, and... other things.

It was a relief.

As the months went by, the Mark strengthened further. And further. All the softer emotions, the gentle ones, withered away.

As for that fragile little flower that had been trying to grow? The Mark found it there in the dark, rolled right over it like a massive boulder, and crushed it into the dust. Soon Dean was no longer missing Cas's company at all... and no longer lying awake at night wondering if the "Shut up" had been the biggest mistake of his life.

Cas seemed to have truly forgotten all about it. He never mentioned it again. Not ever. Obviously it had all been just some kind of a stoned daydream. Probably Cas had forgotten all about it. He acted just the same.

Well, not *quite* the same....

For one thing, he never called Dean again.

---

**NOW**

Dean was still standing at the steps of the bunker stairwell, looking upwards, one foot on the first stair and one hand on the railing, when Sam appeared next to him.

"Eat," Sam said, sticking a piece of toast in Dean's hand.

"Oh, right," said Dean, now realizing that he'd wandered away from all the food Sam had made. (Which is what usually happened.) "Sorry. Forgot about breakfast." He took two bites of the toast and was instantly full. He looked around for somewhere to put down the rest of the toast.

"C'mon, Dean. It's one piece of toast," said Sam.

"I'm full," said Dean.
"Dean, you have to eat—"

"I ate. I'm full," said Dean. "Hey, Sam. I just realized something." He bent down to put the half-eaten piece of toast on the stairs. "I gotta go upstairs and make sure Cas's bed is ready. I can't believe I didn't think of it till now. What if he comes back and he's tired and he wants a nap?"

Sam frowned at him. "You've never been up there. Like, ever. Not when Cas was here."

"Yeah, I know," said Dean. "I know he probably... wouldn't want me there or... something, but..."

*Cas never called me again.*

*He gave up on me long ago.*

*Better for him, that way. Better that he moved on. It's better for him...*  

...*my...*  

...*friend...*  

"Dean?" Sam was tapping his shoulder lightly. Dean realized he had both hands over his face. He managed to stop chewing his cheek, and lowered his hands.

"Sorry, just tired," Dean said. "Anyway, I should get up there and change the sheets, maybe. I should bring up some clean sheets. I gotta make sure it's ready for him."

Still Dean hesitated, looking up.

"What's wrong?" said Sam, his voice soft.

Dean bit his lip. It was *impossible*, obviously, completely impossible, to tell Sam about *any* of this stuff. The most Dean could come up with was:

"What if he comes back and he's pissed at me for messing with his stuff?"

"He won't be pissed at you," said Sam.

Dean could only shake his head. Sam didn't know. Sam didn't know about any of it. Not about two years ago... and not about two weeks ago, either. Dean drummed his fingers on the stair-rail, looking up again. "Sam, I, uh... I... wasn't... that nice to him. I, uh... I messed up."

"It's okay, Dean. He'll forgive you. I swear it. Look, I'll come up there with you. I'll help you change the sheets, okay?"

Dean finally nodded. But he insisted that they both take a shower first, and change into clean clothes,
before he would allow Sam to lead the way up the stairs, carrying a set of clean, pressed twin sheets.

Sam padded upwards in his bare feet. Dean followed behind, also barefoot.

It was three flights up. *Not quite as high as his hill*, thought Dean.

*Funny how he ended up high, in both places.*

*Maybe he always liked to be up high? Do angels like to be up high?*

Another thing Dean had never asked him.

Soon they emerged into the top floor. Sam and Dean had always called it the "attic" but it felt almost more like a big dance hall; it was a huge space with a great vaulted ceiling. Down at floor level, a warren of file cabinets and stacks of furniture divided up the space into little trails. High, narrow-paneled windows on the sides let in a slanting afternoon light, little motes of dust drifting in the sunbeams.

There was no cot visible, and Dean was startled to realize he didn't even know where to go. Sam, fortunately, seem to know exactly where Cas had been camping out, and he led the way, zig-zagging through the maze of furniture to Cas's cot.

It turned out that Cas had set up a sort of a nest in the very farthest corner. Two of the tallest windows almost met here, at right angles to each other. The windows extended very far down on the walls, almost to floor level, and Cas had wedged the cot right up against both windows. An old wooden table had been dragged over too; half of it was covered with books and notes, and the entire other half was taken up by the guitar, which was resting in what looked like a carefully constructed nest of its own, a nest made of towels that cradled the guitar on all sides. There was a small bookcase, too, and a chair.

Dean felt very reluctant to disturb anything. Even just looking at it seemed like trespassing.

It seemed almost a sacred space.

Hesitantly he tiptoed closer.

The bookcase turned out to have Cas's tiny stock of personal possessions. There wasn't much. A couple pairs of jeans (*I picked those out*, Dean realized, looking at them. *It's all the ones I picked out. He kept all of them.*) A few shirts. A comb and toothbrush, a few other toiletries. A little black feather that Cas must have found somewhere.

*Not much stuff,* Dean thought, picking up the black feather and turning it over in his hands. *He hardly has any stuff.*

*He could've fit downstairs,* Dean found himself thinking.

*He could've fit in my room. We could've shared a room if*—
Dean turned away. By chewing his cheek discreetly he was able to keep Sam from noticing anything.

"I haven't been through his notes yet," Sam was saying. Sam was standing at the table, the clean sheets still tucked under one of his arms, his other hand riffling through a pad of paper on the table. The pad of paper was covered with Cas's handwriting. Strewn all around were stacks of books, more handwritten notes, and stacks of sketches and diagrams. Some of the books were open, as if Cas had been in the middle of reading them.

Sam sighed, sliding the papers around a little. He flipped a couple of the books over to read the titles. *Creation Myths from Around the World*, said one. *The Time Before Time: What Preceded The Big Bang?* said another.

Dean hung back, hands in his pockets.

Sam said, "We were trying to divide up the work. Divide up the reading. About the Darkness. I hadn't checked in with him in a few weeks, about what he'd found... I should go through these notes..." He skated a finger across Cas's pad of paper. "He really wanted to fix it, Dean, he was desperate to put it right..."

"Well," said Dean, "at least the Darkness seems to not be doing a whole hell of a lot. A tree vanishing here and there. It's not too bad."

"There was that mountain," Sam pointed out. "And the sunspots."

"We don't know that the sunspots are related. The mountain... I dunno." Dean glanced over at the bookcase again, his eyes drawn back to the stack of jeans.

In the last two weeks it had become rather difficult to care about the Darkness. Nothing really seemed that important anymore.

"Besides," Dean pointed out, "as soon as Cas comes back he can just pick up where he left off. We should probably leave everything right where it is. Not disturb anything."

Sam gave him a long look.

To evade Sam's gaze Dean started looking around the space again, and this time he took a close look at the guitar.

The guitar was dusty.

It had been only been a couple weeks, but already it was dusty.

Dean extracted it from its nest of towels, and began carefully wiping down the guitar with the edge of his own t-shirt.

"I better keep it tuned," Dean said. "I'll come back up later and tune it. Better keep it ready for him. He might want to play it as soon as he gets back."

Sam said nothing. He turned to the cot and began to change the sheets.
Dean let Sam do it by himself. It seemed like Dean shouldn't touch the cot.

It was too personal. Too intimate.

Cas had slept here. It was Cas's bed. It was where he'd lain at night. Alone.

*I turned that down,* thought Dean.

*I didn't deserve it anyway. I didn't then, and I still don't.*

So Dean didn't help much. Instead he hung back, wiping the guitar over and over, while he watched Sam change the sheets.

The cot was one of the bunker's classic old 1950s dorm beds. Army surplus, looked like. It had one of those narrow striped mattresses, with a plywood partition wedged underneath to keep it from sagging too badly through the rusty old springs of the frame. The bedding didn't look incredibly luxurious: just two plain gray wool blankets (probably also Army surplus) and a flat white pillow that looked all of an inch thick.

Dean watched Sam pull off the gray blankets, strip the bedding, change the pillowcase, and put the new sheets on. It only took a few minutes. Sam picked up the old sheets when he was done, and started to head toward the top of the stairs.

Dean didn't follow. Dean was still staring at the bed, holding the guitar.

"Dean? You coming down?" said Sam.

Dean didn't answer.

"I gotta clean the guitar," Dean said.

"You already cleaned it."

"It's still got dust under the strings," said Dean, glancing down at it. "I gotta work on the strings."

Sam looked at him a moment.

"You want to spend a little time up here?" Sam finally said. "You want to sit here a bit?"

Dean nodded.

"You want me to stay with you?"

Dean shook his head.

"Okay... uh... " Sam said. "Just don't... don't do anything... stupid. Okay? You promise?"

Dean knew what Sam was getting at. They'd never talked about it, but "doing something stupid" meant only one thing.

Not to mention, a lot of the bunker guns had been disappearing recently. Including Dean's very own ivory-handled pistol. Dean knew Sam had hid them, and he knew why.

He also had figured out *where* Sam had hid them. But there was no reason to let Sam know that.
Dean just nodded.

Sam gave him a long look, and finally he tiptoed away.

Dean approached the cot inch by inch, sidling closer only gradually. After about three minutes Dean had finally made it all the way to the edge of the cot. By now he was clutching the guitar to his chest like a shield.

He peered out the windows. All the trees outside were in full fall colors and Cas's windows looked directly out onto a sea of red and yellow and orange.

_He must've liked the view_, Dean thought.

He looked down at the cot. Was it ready for Cas? Dean should've helped change the sheets. Had Sam gotten everything shipshape? Was everything perfect? It needed to be perfect, for Cas.

_I better check it out to be sure it's comfortable enough for him_, Dean thought.

Very, very slowly, Dean sat down on the very edge of the bed, still holding the guitar close.

After a long moment of sitting there getting used to the idea, he swung his feet up, and, almost in slow motion, he lowered himself down, the guitar next to him.

The cot actually felt ok. Small, of course. Narrow. Could use a better pillow. But... it wasn't too bad.

Cas's feet would've hung off the cot a bit, but if he'd curled up he would've been fine.

It was a little cramped with the guitar right here. It would be too small for two people, of course.

It was a one-person bed.

_He's probably only ever slept in one-person beds_, thought Dean.

For a while Dean stared up at the ceiling. There was a design up there he'd never noticed; stars were painted on the ceiling. _Did Cas put those up there? Or were they already there?_ Dean didn't know. He turned his head, and found that he was looking across the guitar's neck straight out one of the windows at the trees. Orange and red fall leaves were right in his face. The bottom pane of one of the windows was levered open, and Dean felt a little breeze on his face.

The guitar strings vibrated a little in the breeze. Dean touched one of them, and brushed his finger over it. A single note rang faintly through the air.

_Did Cas ever look at the trees like this? While he was in bed?_ 

Of course he had.

_He must've liked it_, thought Dean. _He must've liked the trees, and having the window open, and having the breeze on his face. He set it up this way on purpose._

If Dean closed his eyes, he could almost imagine Castiel here right now. He could almost imagine Cas lying right here next to him, in fact, right where the guitar was now—
Dean scrambled to his feet.

Then it turned out he had messed up the blanket. He carried the guitar back to the table and set it carefully down right where it had been before, in its little nest of towels, and backed away from it, feeling almost that he didn't dare look at it. Then he smoothed out the blanket on the cot, and straightened the pillow. "I'll get out of your hair, Cas," he muttered. "I'll get out of here. Sorry. Sorry." He fled downstairs.

But he found later that he still had the little black feather in his pocket. Somehow he'd forgotten to put it back on the bookshelf.

The afternoon was often when Dean tried his summoning spells and prayers. Crossroads spells were different; those he usually did after midnight, after Sam was asleep, so that Dean could slip out and try those on his own. (Dean was ready to cut all kinds of deals if it would help Cas get back here quicker. Even the big one. No need for Sam to know about that, really.)

But summoning spells and prayers could be done at the bunker, in the afternoons. Dean usually began downstairs in the dungeon with the demon-summoning spells, so that he could use the devil's trap down there. Afterwards, when that didn't work (it never did; none of the demons seemed "summonable" right now, not even Crowley) he came up to the bunker's front stoop to try the angel-prayers out-of-doors. Maybe angels could hear him better outside?

None of the angels ever answered either.

The whole angel-prayer effort was probably a lost cause, of course, because it was possible that angels could only hear prayers these days (or answer them) if the prayer was sent right from that weird little playground sandbox. Dean had made a couple of day trips to the sandbox, actually, just in case.

It hadn't helped.

Today Dean ended up on the front stoop trying to think of another angel to pray to. Hannah was his most regular target. She had worked with Cas, right? She might be in touch with Cas; she might know why he was taking so long.

But Dean had already tried her a dozen times in the past few weeks. Including at the sandbox. No answer.

_Not many angels left_, thought Dean now, glancing up at the sky beyond the colorful tree leaves. _Wish I could think of more angels to try_. There really weren't that many angels he knew by name anymore.

_Seems like most all the ones I knew have died._

_And of course, after angels die, you never..._

...

...see...

...them...
"Dean? You okay?"

Dean snapped his head up. He'd been biting his cheek, of course, and he had to swallow a bit of blood. It was Sam, of course, standing right over Dean, once again with that perpetually worried look. He must have been hovering right inside the bunker doorway all along, watching Dean. This was starting to get ridiculous.

"You know, someday your face is gonna freeze like that," Dean told him. "You look like you've got a goddam wi-fi signal stamped on your forehead."

"Who you praying to?" asked Sam, ignoring his comment. "Anybody new?"

"Same old, same old," said Dean, shrugging. "Listen, Sam, you need to take a break. Quit hovering over me so much. I'm fine."

Sam gave him a sidelong look. "Look, dude, you were the one dripping blood all through the bunker just now. I only followed the bloody trail up here. You gotta stop slicing up your hand."

"My hand?" said Dean, glancing down at the bloody towel that he had wrapped around his hand. Oh yeah— he'd cut his palm again for the demon-summoning. Totally routine. "It's fine."

"Fine, sure," said Sam with a snort. "How many summoning spells have you tried by now? How many times have you sliced up your palm? C'mon, show it to me—"

"No way," said Dean, pulling his hand away, but Sam had caught the edge of the towel and he managed to whip it off.

Dean hid his hand behind his back.

"Dean, stop being such a baby," Sam said. He took a few steps around to Dean's front, leaned over and grabbed Dean's arm and pulled Dean's hand around to the front. Dean sighed. No point hiding it, really.

Dean opened his palm and they both looked down at it.

There was a little pause.

"Holy shit," said Sam.
Now that Dean was actually paying attention to his hand, it did appear to have a few more cuts on it than Dean had realized. Just twenty or so, really, but—

"How many summonings have you done?" Sam said, pinning Dean with a narrow glare. "I've only seen you do, like, six or so."

"You know what, Sam," said Dean, closing his hand again. "You're not my boss."

"No, but I'm your brother," said Sam. "I'm serious, man, what have you been up to?"

Dean sighed. "Might have been adding some blood to the crossroads spells. Thought it might help. They just won't answer—"

"Crossroads spells?" Sam said. Dean glanced up at him, half-expecting him to be angry, but instead Sam just looked even more exhausted than usual, if that was possible. Sam said, "You've been... what, have you been sneaking out to do crossroads spells? What, after I'm asleep or something?"

Damn, the kid had good guesses sometimes.

"It's not sneaking," protested Dean. "I'm a grown adult." He glanced at his hand again. "It looks way worse than it is, Sam,"

"That's not really reassuring at all, Dean, cause it looks awful," said Sam. "You are not slicing up your palm anymore."

"I will if I want," said Dean.

"Dean... you're tearing yourself apart." Now Sam was switching into that Heartfelt Brotherly Speech mode that he had, his voice going all soft and gentle and friggin' relentless. "I know you're hurting, I know it, but you can't keep doing this. I won't let you. No more spells, man."

Dean rose to his feet, and even got up on the first step of the stoop, to try to look Sam at least somewhat in the eye. "There is no fucking way you are going to stop me from finding Cas."

"HE'S JUST BEING A LITTLE SLOW!" Dean yelled. "Did I give up on YOU? When YOU were dead? NO! I DID NOT! And I'm not gonna give up on Cas! You walk away from him if you like, you can walk away from ME, but I am NOT GIVING UP ON CAS!"

Sam deflated right away. His eyes fell to the ground.

"I'm not... giving up," Sam whispered, shaking his head. "On Cas. Or on you. I swear. I swear. I'm not. I wouldn't... I wouldn't do that again, I wouldn't, I'm not... "

*Oh, right,* Dean realized. *Sam did give up on me once.*

*Something about hitting a dog...*

"I swear, Dean—" said Sam. The poor kid looked like he was about to cry.

"Okay," said Dean.

"I swear."
"It's okay. Drop it." Dean started to wrap the towel around his hand again.

Sam looked around at the ground, and glanced up at the sky, and rubbed his nose, and ran a hand through his hair. Dean fiddled with the towel, tucking the ends in a little, while Sam got himself organized. Finally Sam seemed to have settled himself enough to speak again.

"Hell, I don't know," Sam muttered, half to himself. "Maybe you're right. Maybe you're right. I don't know. I don't know." He paused a moment, and then said, his voice a little stronger, "Let me cut my palm instead."

Dean looked up from the towel. "What?"

"We'll do all the summoning spells you want," said Sam. "We'll do twenty-four a day if you want. I swear. But let me be the one to slice myself up for a change. Give your hand a chance to heal." He raised his eyes to Dean's. "We could... uh... alternate weeks or something?"

Sam's puppy eyes were just as bad as Cas's.

*They could have a Puppy-Off, Dean thought. A Best Puppy-Eyes competition. I really don't know who'd win.*

"Okay, Sam," Dean said. "Okay. We'll alternate weeks. But you don't start till tomorrow."

Sam went back inside soon after that. Dean occupied another hour trying the Unlikely Angels, as he thought of them. The Unlikely Angels were angels like Balthazar, and Gabriel, and Gadreel, and even Tessa. Sometimes Dean tried that chick who'd been so bitchy about them calling Cas too much, and the one who'd gone on about Cas being "lost" as soon as he'd laid a hand on Dean in Hell...

All the dead angels.

*Not dead, Dean corrected himself. Just... unlikely.*

Dean tried them all, running through the prayers in rapid succession.

None answered.

They never did.

Dean walked back into the bunker to find Sam sitting at the library, his shoulders slumped, staring at his phone.

"It's almost sunset," said Dean. "I thought I'd head up a little early today—"

"I just tried to call Cas," said Sam, still staring at his phone.

Dean's feet slowed. "What?"

"I forgot," Sam said. "I forgot. I got back in here and I just... I friggin' pulled my phone out to call Cas. I had him on speed-dial. All last year I used to call him whenever..." He gave a tiny shrug. "Whenever I was really worried about you."
Dean looked at him.

Sam said, still looking at his phone, "He always understood. Always helped me think of something to try. Always tried to help. Even if he was sick or something. This one time, he was about coughing his lungs out, and he still..." Sam fell silent, gazing at his phone. "He missed you, you know... He said so."

Sam lowered the phone. As he set it on the polished library table it made a little clunk in the stillness. Then Sam buried his face in his hands.

Dean said, "He's gonna be back. He really is."

"Yeah," said Sam, through his hands.

"He really is, Sam. We just gotta have faith."

*Faith.* Dean heard the word echo in the quiet. Sam didn't even move.

Dean offered, "You want to... uh... come up and give him some flowers or something?"

Sam finally glanced up at Dean. His eyes were red. He gave a long sigh.

"Sure," Sam said, getting heavily to his feet. "What the hell."

Sam stopped halfway across the meadow, looking around as if he were somewhat at a loss. Dean waited, and eventually Sam started collecting a few bedraggled wildflowers. There were some little white daisy types, and some yellow ones that Dean thought might be black-eyed susans.

Sam spent a minute or two gathering a little handful of them.

"Why're you so certain he likes flowers?" said Dean.

Sam shrugged. "I'm not, actually," he said, glancing down at the little fistful of daisies. "I could be wrong. But... well..." He glanced over at Dean. "Remember he told us once about his favorite area of Heaven? That Tuesday-afternoon of the autistic guy? And we were laughing later about how that was so Cas?"

"Cas isn't autistic," said Dean.

"I know, I just meant—"

"He's not human," said Dean. "He doesn't get humans because he *isn't* human. That's not autistic. There's a difference."

"I know, Dean," said Sam, with a little smile. "You know what I mean. Something about it was just, you know, kinda sweet. Anyway, later I asked him about it a little more, and, it turns out, that place was a flower garden. " Sam looked down at his little handful of flowers. "His favorite part of Heaven was a flower garden. So... I don't know, I got to thinking, maybe he just liked flowers?"

*Like he likes the bees,* Dean thought.
Sam was still staring at his bedraggled little clump of daisies. "Probably a dumb idea," he muttered. He raised his eyes to the hill. "Stupid idea."

Sam stood a long moment longer.

He tossed the daisies down by the side of the path. "Sorry," he said, turning back to Dean. "Didn't mean to slow you down."

Sam's eyes had that little bit of glitter to them again.

Dean walked over, bent down, and picked up all Sam's dropped daisies. One by one. Then he turned to continue the hike. Sam didn't say anything, but followed behind.

Dean added a few more flowers as they went up the hill. A broad flat white one, Queen Anne's lace or something, that was growing by the side of the trail. Another daisy or two. A puffy-looking blue thing he'd forgotten the name of.

At the top of the hill he handed them all back to Sam and waited while Sam put them by the crappy little wooden wings.

Poor Sam was wiping his face again.

Poor kid still just didn't really get it.

And all at once it came to Dean. All at once he knew why Cas hadn't come back yet. It was obvious; it was blindingly obvious, and Dean felt ashamed that he hadn't realized it earlier. And he knew what he needed to tell Cas in the prayer.

"Why don't you head on down," suggested Dean. "You don't have to wait through the whole prayer. You've seen it before."

Sam was shaking his head. "I gotta stay with you."

"I... I kinda got something I need to say to Cas in private," Dean said. Sam shot him a puzzled look.

"You can't watch me every second of the day," Dean pointed out. "You gotta relax a bit, Sam. You're driving yourself into the ground. Go on down, and I'll be down soon."

Sam glanced around the hill. His eyes finally returned to Dean. "I could go down the meadow and wait there," he said. "If... uh..."

"I promise I won't do anything stupid," Dean said.

Sam gave him a long, tired look.

"I promise, Sam," said Dean, thinking, Well, not tonight, at least.

Dean watched Sam trudge over the crest of the hill and down the trail.

He moved a few yards above Cas's grave. From here he could see over the top of the hill to the western horizon. There was a thin cloud cover this evening, and this time Dean could look right at
the sun as it sank gradually toward the west, a fat orange disk floating down through a dove-gray sky.

Dean waited till it turned a murky red, and till its lower end began to disappear.

"Cas..." Dean said then. "Castiel. Castiel."

A pause. Dean listened for wings, knowing now that he wouldn't hear them.

The air was still. There wasn't even a breath of breeze tonight.

"I've, um," said Dean. "I've realized something. Took me a while to figure it out. Sorry, I know I'm kind of slow sometimes."

The sun sank lower, a deep crimson now.

"I know now why you haven't come back," said Dean. "It's because... you... It's because you're..."

It was hard to say.

It was hard even to think.

"It's because you don't want to talk to me," said Dean in a rush. "You're pissed at me. Well, worse than that, I know. You don't want to see me at all. Ever again. That it? That's it, isn't it?"

The thought was very hard to bear, but Dean knew this had to be the reason why Cas hadn't come back. It had all fallen into place today. Realizing it had been two whole weeks, that there must be some real holdup... seeing Cas's little place up in the attic, as far away as Cas could possibly get from Dean... Cas didn't want to be around Dean at all. Not any more.

Not after what had happened. Two years ago, the whole last year actually... then the library fight... then two weeks ago. The terrifically horrible night in Ohio had just been the last straw. Cas had had enough.

Castiel was done with Dean Winchester.

"But, Cas," Dean went on. "There's something I think you don't know. Sam misses you too. Sam is really messed up, Cas. He doesn't even realize that you're still alive. I think he's, like, genuinely hurting, dude. Like, grieving over you. So... Cas, I realized I should make something clear: When you come back, you don't have to say hello to me. You don't even have to look at me. You could just come pick up your vessel and be on your way. But... could you at least say hi to Sam? Let him know you're okay. You don't have to talk to me at all, I swear. Sam's number's programmed into the cell phone too. You could just give him a call. Or text him, even, and Sam could come out and say hi, he could hand you your things, and then you could just get going... you don't have to see me."

A long pause.

"But I'm NOT kicking you out," Dean added. "That was... that has got to be one of my worst mistakes ever, actually. That's not what this is. I just want to be sure you know you don't have to deal with me. If you still want to stay here that'd be... it'd be awesome, it would. You could stay forever. In fact, you could stay and I could leave, if you'd rather have it that way. Whatever works for you. Okay?"

As Dean spoke, he found himself certain that he'd found the key. This was the solution; this was the reason for all the delay, and once he explained things to Cas, once he let Cas know that he didn't
have to talk to Dean at all but that poor Sam needed to see him, *Cas would come back*. Tonight, probably.

Dean felt especially worried about this prayer getting through. This was an important one. So he stayed by Cas's grave, even once the sun had entirely disappeared, and repeated the prayer over and over, into the night. *Cas, please come tell Sam you're okay. You don't have to see me at all.*

Late at night, back in the bunker, he kept repeating it. He had to get through to Cas. Poor Sam was stressing himself out needlessly. Cas just needed to get his butt down here and give Sam a call.

"C'mon, Cas," Dean said, over and over. He looked over at his bedside table, where he'd set the little black feather earlier. He'd meant to return it, he really had, but he'd gotten to feeling nervous about invading Cas's space again and had ended up leaving it down here. He reached out now and took the feather in his hands, turning it around and looking at it. A little black feather, four inches long. Whatever it had meant to Cas, whatever the reason Cas had kept it, it was all Dean had left of him now.


Dean fell asleep with the feather in his hand.

And he dreamed.

It was kind of a pointless dream. It didn't have much plot. Dean seemed to be on the hill again, hiking up toward the grave, but the top of the hill seemed to be receding endlessly out of view. It was a long, long, slog, a much longer hike than usual, and Dean gradually realized that everything had gotten much bigger than usual; the hill had turned into a mountain, the tree roots into gigantic gnarled obstacles. Even the clouds overhead had a strangely distant look, as if they were infinitely farther away (and infinitely larger) than he was used to. It seemed hard to get a sense of perspective.

It seemed he hiked upwards for hours. Days. Years.

Dean kept praying to Cas on the whole hike. *Please, Cas. Sam misses you. Please come back. You don't have to see me if you don't want.*

Eventually, as Dean was walking along muttering "Castiel?" over and over, he noticed a very small roundish white thing a little ways off the trail. It was moving a tiny little bit. The motion caught his eye. He stopped praying, and slowed to look at it.

It seemed to be a puffball of white fuzz. Dean took a few steps closer, and realized it was a baby bird.

It looked very young. Obviously too young to be out on its own like this. It couldn't even stand up. It was about the size of a newborn kitten, with puffy white down sticking out all over, and it had a big awkward-looking head with its eyes squinted half-shut against the daylight. It was making its awkward way very slowly across the ground. It couldn't even walk; instead it was pulling itself along with a pair of tiny, stumpy little wings that didn't even have feathers yet. It looked like it was having trouble even holding its head up.
He watched it for a moment, as it struggled its slow way through the grasses, zigzagging clumsily.

It happened to be coming toward Dean.

Dean left the trail and walked over to pick it up. It fit in the palm of his hand, looking barely formed, just a round ball of puffy down with a head on one end. The little bird seemed to relax when he picked it up; it gave an exhausted sigh and stopped struggling. Its head sagged down onto Dean's wrist, its little eyes closing.

"Aw, you're wiped out," said Dean, patting it gently. "Fell out of your nest, huh?" He glanced around at the trees and realized now that there were some little birds zipping around in the sky overhead.

He looked down again at the baby bird.

It was an awkward looking thing, all fluff and a big belly and funny-looking head. Dean tilted the bird a bit to try to get a better look at it, and it flipped one wing open without even opening its eyes (it must have felt off balance). Dean almost jumped in surprise—the wing had a whole array of colorful miniature feathers that were just starting to grow. They looked like pinpricks of color, almost magical against the puffy white down on the tiny little wings. Spots of bright shining gold, vivid blue, emerald green, hot pink; all the colors of the rainbow were there.

The bird folded its wing up again. Its eyes were still closed.

"What the hell kind of bird are you, anyway?" Dean said, looking it over. It had a pretty strong-looking beak, and the feathers that were starting to grow sure seemed to have quite a lot of colors. "A parrot?" guessed Dean. It seemed about right.

"Where's your momma parrot?" Dean asked, looking overhead. He realized now that the birds overhead were pretty colorful, too. All the colors of the rainbow. But none of the adult birds seemed to be taking an interest in the little baby, and even when Dean walked around for a while looking up at the trees, he didn't see a nest to put it back into.

Dean wasn't sure what to do. *How do you take care of a baby parrot? I don't even know what to feed it.*

But he felt he couldn't just leave it there. After a long moment's thought he decided to take it with him the rest of the way up the trail.

It was a long hike. Dean cradled the baby parrot in one hand as he walked, holding it against his shirt. (It slept the whole way.)

He finally got up to the top. Dean had been assuming that Cas's grave would be up here, and he'd been planning to start praying to Cas against once he got to the grave, but he soon realized he was on a different hill entirely. There was no maple tree here, and no grave. There was nothing at all; just a barren, flat, rocky plateau. But it had its own beauty, in a way. There was a great sweeping view out to the horizon in all directions. Low rolling hills (or were they gigantic mountains very far away?) stretched out all around, receding away in increasingly hazy rows that seemed to go on for infinity. The lighting was a little weird; there was no sun visible at all, and no moon, and yet everything seemed beautifully illuminated just the same, as if everything were glowing with its own internal light.

It was lovely, really.

It was peaceful. There were even the little birds zipping by nearby, and some white butterflies...
drifting around too, flapping their way here and there on the breeze.

Dean thought, *I'll wait for Cas here.*

*Cas would like this,* he thought. *Nice view.*

*Cas likes being up high—*

___

*Cas, hanging high on the cross...*  
*Blood dripping down.*

___

Dean didn't have to bite his cheek this time, for instead the baby parrot started struggling wildly in his hand. Dean snapped back to reality to realize the baby parrot had gotten very agitated; now it was lifting its little head up to blink at him, and flapping its tiny rainbow wings.

"Shh," Dean said. "It's okay. Sorry. Was I squeezing you? Sorry." He tried to soothe it as best he could, petting it on its downy little head, till at last it relaxed and fell back to sleep.

He felt a little bad. But at least the little thing had distracted him from those... thoughts.

Dean sat down, checking the baby parrot once more. It looked ok (it was still asleep), but after a little thought he put a few feet away. It was so little he was worried he might squish it accidentally if he had another one of those... thoughts.

But as soon as he set the baby parrot down, it woke immediately and scuffled back over to him.

He set it aside again.

It scuffled back to his knee.

"All right, all right," said Dean. "But I don't want to squish you. Also if your momma parrot shows back up I don't want her to be pissed off that I'm holding you." He thought a moment. "How about I make a nest."

Dean looked around, but there was nothing to make a nest with. There was only flat bare rock here — no grass, no moss, no twigs. The only sparks of life were the little white butterflies that were drifting here and there.

It was just a baby parrot, he knew. He looked down at it for a long moment. It was probably going to die anyway. Dean knew he didn't know how to take care of it. It was silly to get attached to it.

But after a moment more of watching the little thing shifting around on the cold stone, flipping out its rainbow wings every now and then as it tried to snuggle up closer to Dean's knee, Dean took pity on it. He shucked off his flannel shirt, wadded it up to make a rough nest shape, and put the baby parrot in the shirt.
The baby parrot seemed very comforted by the flannel shirt. It put its head down, tucked its stumpy wings in and nodded off almost immediately.

"Not very talkative, are you," said Dean. Still, it was nice to have some company. So Dean waited on the hill for Castiel, with the baby parrot curled up in his shirt by his side.

Everything seemed very peaceful now. Dean couldn't find the sun to see if it was sunrise or sunset, but he decided it would be a good time to pray.

He prayed to Castiel.

Dean waited a long time. He prayed to Castiel over and over.

He prayed, out loud, for hours.

The strange landscape glowed around him; the little birds soared overhead, and the tiny white butterflies fluttered around. A few of the butterflies began drifting closer, apparently attracted by Dean's voice. The butterflies seemed fairly incompetent at flying (they were mostly just veering around randomly), but some of them eventually ended up perching on the shirt by the baby parrot. Dean eyed them suspiciously, but they didn't seem to be causing any trouble.

So Dean kept praying.

But Cas never answered.

Cas never answered, and nothing happened at all.

Dean awoke the next morning utterly exhausted, feeling almost like he really had been hiking up a mountain all night. He sat up slowly, the little black feather at last falling from his hand as the truth sank in:

Cas had still not answered. He still hadn't come back.

Dean had prayed for hours last night. He'd even been praying all through his weird dream. But Cas still hadn't come back. Even when Dean had assured him that Cas didn't have to see Dean again; even when Dean had explained about how Sam was really feeling bad, Cas still hadn't come back.

And when Dean staggered up the hill again, shivering in the cold, the grave on the hill was undisturbed.


A/N -

So, I have long had a headcanon that something went wrong between Dean and Cas around the
middle of S9. They both made some rather out-of-character decisions right after that, it seemed to me, and their friendship cooled so dramatically. Through all of S10 they barely ever spoke to each other, Cas even switched to calling Sam instead of calling Dean, and Cas basically stopped hanging out with them except when he really had to. In reality I'm 99% certain these changes were done for rather depressing real-life reasons, which we will not discuss here; especially, after the Supreme Court news this week, I am loftily ignoring the probable real-life reasons and I prefer instead to consider it from a canon perspective of: well, why WOULD two close friends virtually cease speaking to each other, and stop hanging out? Why would that happen? Answer: something really awkward happened between them. The logical time for it have happened, the one time we know they were together for hours but were not shown onscreen, is, of course, the "Fanfiction Gap" of Heaven Can't Wait - the evening after the Rit Zien battle. ("it was night... and now it's day!") So the first part of this chapter is my take on all that: what if Cas confessed his feelings to Dean (without meaning to), Dean just plain freaked out, and things just got... awkward. Then that pushed Dean into the REALLY bad decision of taking the Mark of Cain... and after that, they had no chance. :(

And... the dreams have begun. There will be more. The baby parrot, btw, wasn't originally going to have "rainbow" wings - I added that in honor of this week's amazing developments, in the USA, for gay rights. :) What an incredible week! My mental image now, of the baby parrot's appearance, is based on this photo of a beautiful baby macaw.

I will say no more about the meaning of the dream. But feel free to speculate!

Hope you enjoyed this! If there were particular parts you liked, please let me know what they were.
Cas still hadn't come back. There was clearly only one thing to do next:

A nonstop twenty-four prayer vigil. That would do it!

Obviously Cas just hadn't heard Dean's prayers. Because if he had, obviously he would have come back. *(Obviously.)* Maybe Dean was just not praying hard enough, or not praying long enough, or praying at the wrong time. Maybe the sunrise-and-sunset timing wasn't working. Maybe Dean was just in the wrong time zone, even. Whatever the reason, Cas clearly hadn't heard him, and the next logical step was to try an around-the-clock, twenty-four hour, prayer vigil.

Maybe fasting might help, too? The old-time prayer books talked quite a lot about fasting and meditation, usually out in the desert somewhere or in the wilderness. The hills and fields of Kansas weren't quite "wilderness," and weren't quite desert either, but it seemed like it might be worth doing the whole thing outdoors.

So Dean stayed up on the hill.

Sunrise came and went, and Dean just kept right on praying. He didn't come down for breakfast, and he didn't come down for lunch. He prayed to Cas all morning long, and right past lunchtime, and on into the afternoon.

Of course Sam came up a few times and pleaded for Dean to come down and eat. Dean waved him off.

Sam kept trying. By early afternoon Sam's periodic interruptions, and also his increasing tendency to hover around the gravesite looking worried and awkward, were starting to get a little annoying. Dean finally had to interrupt his mumbled nonstop prayer to shake his head at Sam, who was (for the fourth time that day) trying to shove a sandwich into Dean's hands. "I'm fasting," Dean hissed, pushing the sandwich back at Sam. "Prayer vigil. Go away. Gotta fast."

"For how long?" Sam demanded.

Dean shrugged. "Long as it takes," he said. "Thought I'd start with twenty-four hours. See how that goes." He closed his eyes and went on with the prayer: "Cas? Castiel? You gotta come back down here. You don't have to talk to me. Cas, come on back. Cas, you gotta come home, Sam even made your bed for you. Cas, get down here..."

Sam did, at last, convince him to drink some water. This seemed like it was probably okay. For one thing, Dean was starting to lose his voice because of all the praying. Maybe drinking a bit of water, just to keep the prayers audible, would be allowed.

Sunset came and went. Dean kept praying.

Still no Cas.

Dean prayed on into the night. (Sam insisted on wrapping some blankets around Dean, and propping about sixteen water bottles and a bunch of saran-wrapped sandwiches by Dean's chair. Then he hunkered down under the maple tree in an old sleeping bag.)

By about midnight Dean started having trouble concentrating. He'd said the same things so many thousands of times now that the words were all starting to seem sing-song and nonsensical. To keep
himself alert, as the night wore on into the wee hours, he switched to talking about his first memories of Cas.

"Remember when we met in that barn, Cas? Damn, those wings of yours, that was a sight..."

"Remember when we went to that brothel? I'd never seen you so nervous ever, Cas! You could face down an archangel but not a girl with daddy issues! Ha. That was the best. Honestly that's still one of my favorite nights ever...."

"Remember how you used to snooze away in the back seat of our car?"

"Remember that liquor store? Remember that hangover you had? Heh..."

"Remember when me and Benny finally found you in Purgatory? By that lake? Jeez, Cas, you sure made me search. Two solid weeks. I don't know why you took off like that, dude, but man it was good to see you again."

One "remember-when" after another. There were a lot of memories, Dean picked only the good ones, of course. There was no "remember that fight in the library;" there was no "remember when I kicked you out."

There was certainly no "remember that warehouse in Ohio."

Only the good memories.

Dean prayed all day, and all night, and all the next morning.

Cas never answered.

Cas never came back.

Just after dawn the next morning, as Dean was checking the string and the pebbles one more time, Sam finally woke and crawled out of his sleeping bag.

Sam staggered to his feet and rubbed his hair. "Anything?" he said.

It was hard to confess to Sam that nothing had happened. Dean still hadn't figured out why it hadn't worked. He checked the string and the pebbles again. And again. He checked under the planks again, too.

He checked his watch. He'd kept the prayer going for a full twenty-six hours.

"Maybe I didn't do it right," Dean said. "I think I was losing my concentration." I phased out a bit at around three a.m., Dean knew. I might've nodded off for a sec. Maybe I broke the stream of the prayer.

Dean sat up on his heels, frowning down at the grave. "Maybe I should start over," he said. "Maybe I should go forty-eight. Starting all fresh, though. A new forty-eight. I think I messed up on this one."

Sam made his way over to Dean, walking stiffly in the morning chill. He touched Dean's shoulder.
"Come on down," said Sam.

"I should try forty-eight. And I should start over."

"At least rest up from this one first," suggested Sam. "Come on down. I'll make you some coffee."

Sam had a good idea there— it would be definitely be easier to go forty-eight hours if Dean started out fully rested. And fully fueled and fully hydrated. But once they got down to the bunker Dean found he couldn't drink the coffee. He couldn't even eat — even though he wasn't even trying to fast anymore, and hadn't eaten in over a day now, he still couldn't eat. His stomach seemed to have shut off, and he was still distracted by worrying about what had gone wrong. "I don't understand," he told Sam. "It should've worked. I don't understand. I don't understand why he's not answering."

Sam said nothing. When it became clear that Dean still wasn't going to eat, Sam made Dean drink a little more water, shoved some pj's in his hands and pushed him to the shower.

Dean showered automatically. He barely felt the water cascading over his skin; he barely noticed the tiled walls around him as he towed off and got the pj's on, fumbling with the buttons. It was hard to concentrate on anything other than figuring out what had gone wrong. Was it just that Dean had nodded off for a moment? Or had Cas not liked talking about old times?

Maybe Cas hadn't liked being reminded of those old memories? Of times with Dean?

Dean shuffled out of the bathroom, still lost in thought, to find Sam waiting outside.

"Did he not like the memories?" said Dean to Sam. "Is that why?" Sam took one of Dean's hands, put his other hand between Dean's shoulder blades and started steering Dean down the hall. Dean almost said, "What are you now, a guide dog?" but forgot the sentence before he'd even started it. Down the hall they went, and through a door and over to a bed, without Dean registering any of it; only when they stopped moving did Dean realize that he was again muttering, "Castiel? Castiel? Can you hear me? Cas? Can you hear me?"

Dean managed to stop the prayer. He raised his head and looked around, and realized he was in his own bedroom. Sam was shaking out the bedding on the bed; Dean glanced around, a little at a loss, and his eye was caught by the little black feather that was still sitting on the side table.

He picked it up and looked at it.

What had the feather meant to Cas? Was it just a crow feather he'd spotted somewhere and picked up as a souvenir? Had he liked being reminded of wings, and flight?

Or had it been a bitter reminder that he could not fly?

Or was it something else? Had he kept it for some other reason?

"What do you think this is?" Dean said to Sam, showing him the feather.

"It's a feather, Dean," said Sam. Dean realized he was now sitting on the edge of the bed, though he did not recall having sat down. Had Sam pushed him down?

"But what does it mean?" said Dean, still staring at the feather.
“I don’t know,” said Sam. “Lie down.”

“What does it mean?” Dean repeated, staring at the feather. “Why didn’t he answer? Where is he? What is this? What does it mean?”

“Just try to sleep, Dean,” said Sam. “Please? Sleep? Please.”

Now Dean was lying on his back, though, again, he did not recall having lain down. Sam took the feather away, and Dean grabbed for it, but Sam said, “I’ll keep it safe.”

“It’s okay if you have it,” Dean told him. “You’ll probably keep it safer.” He thought a moment and added, “You deserve it more, anyway.”

“Try to go to sleep,” Sam said. “Just try.” He flicked the light off. Though, he didn't seem to be leaving the room; instead Sam sat in a chair by Dean's side. It didn't really matter where Sam was, of course, or where Dean was, or what either of them did, or whether they were out on the hill or indoors in the bunker, or what time it was or even what day it was. Nothing really mattered at all.

Dean awoke hours later.

Sam was still in the room. He was now sitting on the floor, crouching against the wall next to a tiny night-light, trying to squint at a book. *Legends of Chaos and Dark*, said the spine of the book.

Dean glanced at the clock, and was horrified to see that it was already eight at night.

"Sam," said Dean, sitting up. "I forgot the sunset prayer. I missed the sunset prayer—"

"I went up there and did it for you," said Sam, looking up from the book.

Dean looked at him. "Seriously?"

Sam nodded. He raised one hand; it was wrapped in a bandage. "Tried Crowley, too. Did another summoning for you."

"And?"

Sam shook his head. "No dice."

"Sam... I... I realized something," said Dean.

Sam set the book down, a guarded expression on his face.

"I need the feather," Dean said. It had felt very unsettling to not have hold of the feather. "Cas's feather," he explained. "I realized I need it."

Sam seemed to deflate a little, as if he'd been expecting Dean to say something else entirely. He stared at the floor a moment, and then, with a quiet sigh, he got to his feet. He stuck a hand in his breast pocket, pulled out the little black feather, and handed it back to Dean.
Yet Dean now felt guilty holding it. *It's not my feather*, he knew. *It's Cas's. I gotta return it. He'll want it back.*

So once Sam had finally fallen asleep—oddly enough he fell asleep right there on Dean's floor, rather than going back to his own room—Dean covered him with a blanket and crept up the stairs alone, to the attic, the feather in his hand.

The moon was shining brightly through the bare branches outside. Dean was a little startled to realize that a lot of the leaves were gone now from the tree branches outside. That meant it was nearly October. *October*. The days had flown by. It had been weeks since Cas's....

Since Cas had left.

With the faint shafts of pale white light streaming in through the high windows, the attic seemed almost like a ghostly stage lit by a single spotlight. Dean made his way through the moonlit patches and the dark shadows in between, weaving around the clumps of furniture in the dark, till he got to Cas's spot in the corner. He stood a long moment looking at the moonlit bed, so quiet and still in the night.

It looked awfully inviting. *I could just lie down there for a bit*, thought Dean, for he still felt pretty tired. *Just for a few minutes.*

*Lie there and pretend Cas is nearby.*

Dean had to force himself to turn away. He strode over to the table, where there was a little lamp, and bent over to turn it on, thinking, *Just put the feather back and get out of here.*

*Click.* A pool of warm yellow light illuminated the whole table and the nearby bookcase. Dean was about to turn to the bookcase, to put the feather back, when the guitar caught his eye. It was still sitting in its towel-nest on the table.

*I never finished dusting it,* Dean thought.

Even in the faint glow of the lamp, Dean could see a few streaks of dust under the strings.

Dean tucked the feather in his breast-pocket (it seemed okay to hold onto it for a couple more minutes), sat down right next to the guitar and began wiping it down, all over, with one of the towels from the towel-nest. This time he tried his best to work a towel-corner into all the tricky parts under the strings. He worked with care, pulling the lamp closer for better light, hunkering over the guitar.

Now and then a note rang out when Dean brushed a string accidentally. It almost seemed the guitar was murmuring to him, humming little fragments of melody.

Almost as if he could hear Cas still playing it...

Dean strummed the strings lightly.

It was out of tune.

That wouldn't do at all. What if Cas wanted to play guitar as soon as he got back? The guitar should be kept in tune for him.

Dean tried, next, to tune it by ear, but soon realized he'd never really played guitar much—well,
okay, at all. Dean had always considered himself a music connoisseur, and had long had the impression that he knew all about guitar (certainly enough to have strong opinions about the best guitar solos of the classic-rock era). And he did have a vague idea of how to tune the thing—he'd been to enough shows, he'd seen players tuning on stage. You turn the little knobs, right? he thought. But now that he had the thing in his hands he realized he actually had no idea what to do exactly.

Maybe I can figure it out by ear? He started twiddling knobs, but soon the out-of-tune sound had gotten even worse. He must've turned some of the knobs the wrong way.

Dean started to panic. I'm messing up Cas's guitar, he thought. I'm the one who's supposed to know about music. How come I don't know how to tune a guitar? It should be easy! He finally remembered that Sam had set Cas up with some kind of tuning app. But what app? Dean didn't dare go down to Sam and wake him up just to confess that he'd messed up Cas's guitar (it seemed an unforgivable crime). So he set the guitar back in its nest temporarily and began to look around for Cas's guitar notes. Maybe there would be some hints there about how to tune the thing.

Most of Cas's notes turned out to be stuff about the Darkness—stacks of books with little notes stuck on certain pages, complex diagrams, and the long pad of paper Dean had spotted earlier, with page and pages of hand-scribbled notes.

Dean hesitated when he spotted the pad of paper. It was surreal to see Cas's handwriting so close. It looked so fresh, the pen-strokes still dark, the papers still just where he'd left them. It seemed he must have just written these notes a day ago; an hour ago. He'd been right here. He'd written these notes just moments ago.

Dean thought, I need to read all that, but found he could not force himself to read even a single sentence.

Because, reading Cas's notes meant Cas was not here to tell him the information in person.

Dean pushed the pad of paper away.

But then he spotted a different stack of pages. A neat little stack over on the other side of the table. Dean peered at it from across the guitar, and he made out block-printed words, along with some tiny little diagrams that seemed to consist of a few black dots set on a grid of six lines.

Six lines.... six guitar strings?

Dean pulled the stack of paper closer and started flipping through it, hoping to find a "How to tune your friend's damn fucking acoustic guitar" section. But as soon as he started looking at the individual sheets of paper, he realized he'd found Cas's songs.

Cas's songs.

Each page was a complete song that Cas had written out.

"Angel From Montgomery" was lying on top.

"Morning Has Broken" just underneath.

Then "Rocky Mountain High", then "Take Me Home, Country Road".

Song after song. Dozens of songs. Dean flipped the pages over one by one, reading the titles out loud.

There were several dozen songs, all folk classics, and all neatly written out. On each page Cas had printed all the lyrics, in careful block printing, with the chords printed neatly over each word. Dean glanced at Cry Me A River:

...Now you say you're lonely
You cried the long night through
Well, you can cry me a river, cry me a river
I cried a river over you

You drove me, nearly drove me, out of my head
While you never shed a tear....

"Fucking crappy song," Dean muttered. He flipped to another page. "Puff The Magic Dragon" had to be happier, right? It was a kids' song. Kids' songs were always happy. Dean started to read it:

...Dragons live forever but not so little boys
Painted wings and giant strings make way for other toys.
One sad night it happened, Jackie Paper came no more
And Puff that mighty dragon, he ceased his fearless roar.

His head was bent in sorrow, green scales fell like rain,
Puff no longer went to play along the cherry lane.
Without his life-long friend, Puff could not be brave,
So Puff that mighty dragon sadly slipped into his cave. ...

"Fucking folk songs," said Dean. "What did you do, Cas, pick out the saddest songs possible?"

He was about to flip past Puff The Magic Dragon and on to the next page, still hoping to find something about tuning, when a little handwritten notation at the bottom caught his eye:

Possible Dean would like this one?

Dean frowned, and fanned out the stack of songs a little. "Rocky Mountain High" jumped out at him, and he pulled it out from the stack. There down at the bottom was a similar note:

Would Dean like?

And written right underneath that was another note, added later in a different color of ink:

Dean doesn't like this one.

Dean stared at that for a long moment.

Slowly he began flipping through the other pages. Dean doesn't like, said a note at the bottom of "Morning Has Broken." Dean doesn't like, said another.

Song after song had little notes at the bottom:

Dean doesn't like.

Dean doesn't like.
D said no to this one.

D said "cheesy".

And then:

D listened at bottom of stairs. But didn't come up.

All the breath seemed to escape from Dean's lungs.

Cas had known Dean was down there? He'd known Dean had been standing at the bottom of the stairs? He'd known? He'd been paying attention to whether Dean was coming up?

And Cas had been taking notes on which songs Dean didn't like?

It came back to Dean then: the moment in the thrift store, when Cas had first been looking at the guitar. "I'd like to know why you —" he'd started to say. Then he'd corrected himself: "....why people like certain songs."

Was that the reason Cas had got the guitar? To see what songs Dean might like?

"I liked them, Cas," whispered Dean now. "Your songs. I liked them all. Even Rocky Mountain High. It kinda grew on me. I liked them a lot. It's not my style really, but..." I really liked hearing you sing. "... it was growing on me. I just... I just couldn't come up, cause..."

He paused.

He sat there a long moment longer.

Then he picked up "Rocky Mountain High" and looked at the first verse. Dean already knew it by heart, of course— he'd been singing it every day for weeks now— but now he saw the first verse printed in Cas's own handwriting:

He was born in the summer of his twenty-seventh year
Coming home to a place he'd never been before.
He left yesterday behind him, you might say he was born again.
You might say he found a key for every door.

Cas had carefully printed chords over certain words. The first chord was a D. Dean stared at the D.

D for Dean, he thought. D said no. D doesn't like it.

Dean flipped back through the chord charts, and finally found the page he'd been looking for originally, a page that explained how to tune the guitar. Or at least how to "tune it to itself" (which Dean realized was what he probably needed to do at this point, now that he'd mucked it all up). And underneath that he found a page that had a little picture of how to play a D chord.

Dean managed to tune the guitar. (Sort of. Good enough for now.) Then he began working on the D chord. And then an E-minor, and then an A, all of which were in Rocky Mountain High. His fingers seemed very clumsy, and it was surprisingly painful to press the strings all the way down (who knew that playing guitar was actually painful?). But he kept at it, trying to learn Cas's chords. For he knew, now, that these must have been the first chords Cas had learned, because Cas had started with this song.

Dean worked on it for a long time, till his left hand seemed on fire with pain. He stopped, hours later,
only when he realized that all his fingertips were bleeding. It wouldn't do to get blood on Cas's
guitar. He cleaned the strings carefully, wiping all the blood off.

And when Dean fell asleep, shortly afterwards, he was still seated at the table. With the guitar in
front of him, his head pillowed on edge of the towel-nest, and the little black feather still in his breast-
pocket.

Soon Dean was trudging up the strange mountain again, once again praying to Castiel.

It was another long, long hike. Dean spent most of the time chatting to Cas and explaining to him
(for the millionth time) that Cas really needed to get his feathery ass back now and that he didn't at all
have to talk to Dean when he came back. But after a long while of this he began to notice some
streaks of color go zipping by — birds, high up, darting around. A flash of crimson here, a blur of
green there.

At the sight, Dean remembered there ought to be a white ball of fluff somewhere too. A baby parrot,
right?

There ought to be a baby parrot.

All at once Dean was full of anticipation about seeing the baby parrot again. Maybe he could scritch
it on its fuzzy head again? Maybe it would fall asleep in his hand again, or snuggle up to his knee, or
flip open its little rainbow wings. Dean just had to find it! It had to be around here somewhere!

He strode along briskly, looking around, confident that the baby parrot would soon appear by the
side of the trail as it had before. But no baby parrot was in sight. Eventually Dean slowed, starting to
search both sides of the trail in earnest.

There was no baby parrot anywhere. No white ball of fluff. No rainbow wings. No motion.

No nothing.

Where was the baby parrot? Was it lost? Had it starved?

Or... had something found it? Eaten it, even?

Dean began to get worried. He slowed further, backtracking now and then to be sure he hadn't
missed anything. He even changed his nonstop prayer to Cas, switching from asking Cas to come
back, to a different sort of request.

"Cas, you gotta help me find my parrot," said Dean, glancing up to the sky, hoping Cas was hearing.
"I lost my parrot, Cas. Cas, you hearing me? There was this baby parrot I was taking care of, and I
can't find it. I really need your help on this, dude...." He prayed on.

Cas didn't answer.

A twist of fear began to knot at Dean's gut.

Anxious now, Dean could only continue his hike.

Years later, it seemed, he at last arrived on the top of the stone mountain. There was nothing here but
a flat expanse of gray stone, and....

... and a fluffy pile of white.

Dean sprinted over to the ball of white and then stumbled to a halt, perplexed. It wasn't the parrot, exactly, but something larger, a white thing a few feet across that looked almost like a white leafy shrub, except that all the leaves were fluttering strangely. The whole thing seemed to be flickering, glinting silver here and there when the light caught the leaves right.

"What the hell?" Dean muttered. "Cas, you seeing this?"

Then he caught a glimpse of his own flannel shirt peeking out at the bottom. All at once he realized that what he was looking at was a big clump of hundreds of the little white butterflies. A whole mound of them, standing on top of each other. The flickering movement, and the silver flashes, was really just their white wings opening and closing

And deep underneath was the baby parrot. Dean could just make out its outline now, barely visible under all the white butterflies.

It looked like it was in trouble. The butterflies were attacking it! It was totally covered up, and it wasn't moving at all.

"Get OFF him!" Dean shouted. He waved his arms at the butterflies and a cloud of them reluctantly lifted up. (A distant shrieking noise sounded in the distance; Dean didn't notice.) "Go on! Shoo! Shoo! Get off my parrot! Get lost, you damn little... butterflies!" Most of the butterflies had taken flight now, alarmed by Dean's arm-waving. Dean waved the last few off, and then got down to his knees by the little parrot. He'd been sure it must be smothered, or eaten up or something, but to his vast relief it turned out it was unharmed. In fact the baby parrot was stirring. It lifted its head. It was alive! And when Dean petted its fuzzy little head, it leaned its head into his hand.

The knot of desperate anxiety in his heart at last faded.

For a long moment he just petted the baby parrot. It stretched out a wing in apparent delight, and leaned even farther into his hand. It even let out a cute little baby-parrot-sized sigh. Dean felt his heart would burst, to see it so comfortable and relaxed.

For the very briefest of moments, all seemed right with the world.

But the butterflies were all still milling around overhead, veering to and fro in a big confused cloud of flickering white. Soon one of the butterflies came drifting back down, and it tried to land on the baby parrot again.

"Get lost," Dean growled, batting at it with one hand. It evaded his hand in a big drunken arc but came fluttering back a moment later.

"Didn't I tell you, get lost!" Dean said. "Find some other baby parrot to harass!" He grabbed at it—

— and Dean was instantly in a barn. The parrot was gone, the butterflies were gone, the whole mountain was gone, and Dean was in a barn.

A familiar barn.
Sparks showered down all around. There was a devil's-trap on the floor; sigils all around; none of them affected angels, of course. Castiel strode right through.

And there was Dean Winchester, once again. The Righteous Man himself. The Righteous Man wouldn't remember their first meeting, of course. In Hell. But Castiel remembered.

Castiel was met with a blade to the heart. It was of no import. The friend of the Righteous Man tried to attack as well; Castiel sent him to sleep.

Who are you? said the Righteous Man.

Castiel.

I mean, what are you? said the Righteous Man.

I'm an angel of the Lord.

The Righteous Man had no faith in this answer; that much was clear in his eyes. So Castiel spread his wings, and opened a window through the dimensions so that a tiny bit of Heavenly light could shine through. The split in the air caused a tremendous crash of thunder, of course, but enough Heavenly light streamed through so that the Righteous Man could see the shadows of Castiel's wings.

It was meant not just as proof, but as a gesture of goodwill. And, maybe... something else as well. Castiel realized, as he folded his wings back up, that he had wanted to impress the Righteous Man.

Dean found himself standing by the baby parrot, his hand open. The butterfly was wobbling away, apparently no worse for wear.

"What the fuck," muttered Dean. "What... the...."

Some kind of weird flashback? A flashback about Cas?

Had the flashback come from Cas, somehow? Some kind of a reverse-prayer?

"Cas?" he called, looking all around; but all he saw was the baby parrot and the white butterflies. And a couple of those colorful birds zipping past in the distance (they seemed to be circling closer).

"Cas?" Dean called again. "Cas? Was that a sign? Do you want me to take care of this parrot?"

There was no answer.

But soon another butterfly came wobbling unevenly toward Dean on the breeze. Hesitant now, Dean reached out one hand. This butterfly alit right on his forefinger—
Cas was crouching by the lake, washing his face. It had been a miracle he’d survived the molt at all. But at least he’d managed to keep Dean relatively safe, if just by staying away—

A motion caught his eye. Two figures approaching. Cas stood to look.

It was Dean. Impossibly, unbelievably, it was Dean.

The look on Dean's face—

Dean walked right up and folded his arms around Cas.

Cas did not dare make a move, for fear of betraying the tremendous surge of emotion.

... and Dean was back on the mountain, standing on a rocky stone plateau by a sleeping baby parrot, staring at a little white butterfly that was perched on his finger.

The butterfly gave a lazy flap and rose into the air.

"What is this," Dean said, his voice a little shaky. "What's going on... These are my memories. What is this?"

He tried it a few more times, touching one white butterfly after another. Several of them immediately evoked some other memory of Cas. Flashbacks, Dean decided.

But other butterflies didn't cause Castiel flashbacks at all. Several brought to mind confused images of color and light, or sensations of rushing through the air, or scenes of strange, almost uninterpretable battles. And others seemed to be pictures from all over the Earth — images of camels, volcanoes, fruit markets, whales floating in the ocean, birds, seas of lava, palm trees... all kinds of pictures of animals and landscapes and foreign lands. Almost like scenes from some elaborate National Geographic documentary.

These are just hallucinations, Dean realized. It's not just Cas flashbacks. It's all kinds of hallucinations. The butterflies must be reaching into Dean's mind somehow, plucking out random images and making hallucinations out of them.

"Hallucination butterflies," Dean said. "Butterflies that cause hallucinations. What the hell is this?"

Meanwhile the baby parrot was slowly getting covered with the white hallucination-butterflies again. And as the butterflies began to cover it up, the parrot again stopped moving and seemed even (to Dean's considerable alarm) to stop breathing. Dean rushed to try to brush off the hallucination-butterflies once more. To avoid contacting them this time, he stripped off his t-shirt, wrapped one hand in it, and tried brushing the butterflies off the parrot with his wrapped hand, crouching there shirtless. As he did this, there was again a shrieking noise in the distance — louder this time. Dean didn't notice, so intent was he on brushing all the butterflies off, but then there was a whoosh directly overhead, and a flash of color, and he felt a sharp tap right on the top of his head.

"Whoa!" Dean said, flinching back. He looked up. The birds had come a lot closer. They were circling high overhead. Two of them, actually.
One of them let out another of those ear-splitting shrieks. Apparently that was the sound of a pissed-off parent parrot, for next it swooped right at him, quick as an arrow. It came so fast that Dean couldn't get a clear view of the thing; all he saw was a flare of brilliant crimson wings... and claws.

Surprisingly big claws.

In fact the whole thing was surprisingly big. At least the size of an eagle.

It was gigantic, actually. Dean couldn't help cringing at the sight of those shining claws. He had to fling himself back, squeezing his eyes shut and covering his head with his t-shirt-wrapped hand, just to avoid the claws. Fortunately it only managed to bat his head harmlessly as it zoomed by. But a second later, as Dean scrambled to his feet, the other one swooped at him. This one was a little smaller, with an impressively colorful spread of wings (a gaudy combination of pink, green and yellow). Again Dean caught a glimpse of razor-sharp silver claws. Fortunately it, too, only managed to whap Dean on the head— maybe because Dean was now scrambling on all fours trying to get away from it.

"I'm just trying to help it!" Dean called to them, thinking they were the parent birds.

In answer one of them actually snarled at him on the next pass, and Dean was startled to see an array of teeth this time. And... a new color. This bird had a silvery-grey body, with jet-black wings and tail.

There were three of them. There weren't just two.

"You're not its parents!" Dean said. "There's three of you! You're not even — you're not even parrots — parrots don't have teeth! Oof—" He had to dodge again, this time with a hard roll on the ground.

They kept zooming, one after the other, alternating passes in what was clearly a coordinated attack. First the crimson bird would swoop at him (this one was biggest), then the gaudy one (this was the smallest), then the black-and-silver one. And despite Dean's best efforts to fend them off and dodge their blows, they were forcing him back.

Step by step, he was driven away from the baby parrot.

Once he was driven back about fifty feet, the attack-eagles (as he was thinking of them now) all peeled away and went back to circling around the entire mountaintop as if nothing had happened. They were incredibly fast flyers; it was hard to get a clear look at them at all, especially now that they were in level flight. All Dean had been able to pick out earlier was a confused impression of claws and teeth; now they seemed just blurs of color. But nevertheless Dean had the impression that something was a little off. For one thing, teeth didn't seem exactly normal, for birds. And... (he squinted at them, trying to pick out details in their arrow-fast flight) something about the legs seemed wrong.

"What are you, anyway?" Dean said. "Mutant attack eagles?" The only answer was another earsplitting scream.

"Mutant attack banshee eagles," muttered Dean. "Look, whatever you are, I am not at all convinced you have this little guy's best interests at heart. How do I know you're not just gonna eat him?"

Another bone-rattling scream.

Dean glanced back at the baby. It was getting totally covered with white butterflies again.
"Cas, they won't let me near the baby," he told Castiel, glancing up at the sky. "Cas, you hearing me? I'm not at all sure they're the same species. I don't know if they're trying to help it, or planning to eat it. It's getting smothered again, Cas, I'm worried. And Cas, they've got these teeth..."

He knew Cas would understand. Cas would listen, and Cas would understand, and Cas would give him some helpful advice.

For that's what Castiel always did.

But Cas didn't answer.

And though Dean tried several times to get back to the baby and brush the hallucination-butterflies off, the mutant attack banshee eagles kept driving him back, and the little fluffy baby was soon getting covered up again.

It was being suffocated.

It was too weak to free itself; it was too weak to fly away.

Slowly Dean realized that the baby parrot was completely helpless, and was trapped.

And Dean couldn't help.

Dean woke with a gasp of breath.

He was still face-down on the desk. He lifted his head slowly, blinking his eyes and wiping his mouth. His neck had gone terrifically stiff; it was hard even to sit up. He glanced around and realized it was the middle of the night. The moon had gone behind a cloud, and the attic room all around was quiet and dark.

It seemed difficult to recall the whole strange plot of the dream; some of the details were fading rapidly from his memory. But Dean did manage to remember some things: A baby parrot, with rainbow wings, that was trapped and helpless. Toothy frightening attackers, driving Dean back.

Dean knew he'd dreamed about the baby parrot before.

What were these parrot dreams?

Could they be real? Could the dreams possibly be... dreamwalking, maybe?

And at last something occurred to Dean, something that he knew he should have thought of immediately:

Could the baby parrot be Castiel?

But it seemed a stretch. "I'm pretty sure angels aren't parrots," Dean muttered to himself, staring down at the guitar.

Besides, angels were supposed to be much bigger. The size of the Chrysler building, right? That was a thousand feet high. Angels were supposed to be wavelengths of... intent, or something. Thousand-foot-high wavelengths.
Not little bitty parrots.

But what was with those memories of Cas? *Though the memories were coming from the hallucination-butterflies,* Dean remembered, *not the baby parrot.*

None of it really made sense.

It could have been just a dream.

It had probably just been a dream.

Still, though... the way it had scuffled over to him, in the first dream... the way it had snuggled into his hands. The way it had relaxed its little wings when Dean had scratched its head tonight...

*Not a very realistic dream,* thought Dean, for he was keenly aware that he'd never touched Cas with any such gentleness in real life. *The last time I touched him was more like—*

At once Dean's throat was closing up, his eyes stinging. He had to curl up and press his forehead into his hands.

His soft whisper of "I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry..." echoed through the darkness.

---

By dawn Dean was back at the top of the hill.

He'd had a new idea about what the dream meant.

In fact, Dean had a *whole new theory.* And he was going to ask Cas about it.

Sam was still asleep, so Dean had come up alone again. A light drizzle had started to fall, and the clouds were now so thick that Dean couldn't see the horizon at all. The whole grey sky was gradually lightening, but he knew that the exact moment of sunrise would not be clear. So as Dean stood in the drizzle (the chair was too wet to sit on), holding an umbrella in one hand, he looked up the local sunrise time on his phone, and then kept checking the time on his phone to know when to start praying.

At 6:17 a.m. sharp, when sunrise was due to happen, he started his prayer.

"Cas," Dean said slowly. "Castiel. Castiel. Castiel." (He'd taken to starting all his prayers with Cas's full name called three times. That was the intro. Then he got down to business.) "Okay, Cas, my first theory was that you were just being a little slow. Then the second theory was that maybe you weren't coming back because of me. Which, granted, might still be true. The third theory was that I wasn't praying for long enough. But... Cas. I've been having some weird dreams. And now I'm thinking it might be dreams about you." No need to mention that he'd been picturing Cas as a *baby parrot* with friggin' *rainbow wings.* That was a little embarrassing. "Um, anyway, in the dream there were..." *Other crazy-looking birds that kept hopping me on the head.* "...other... things trying to keep me away from you, and also you were getting kind of, um, buried up. So... I finally realized my subconscious might be trying to tell me something. Cas..." Dean looked up at the gray sky. "Cas, you're trapped somewhere, aren't you? Weakened and trapped? Maybe somebody's keeping my prayers from even reaching you? Maybe you still haven't even heard me..." Dean took a breath.
"Cas, are you trapped in Hell?"

This was Dean's new theory. It was Theory #4. He'd sat many more long hours at Cas's table, thinking it through. The dream had likely been just a weird whacked-out dream, he'd concluded, fueled by the exhaustion from the twenty-four vigil — and also probably influenced by his recitation, during that long prayer, of all the Castiel-related memories.

But, Dean had realized, maybe his subconscious was on to something: Cas might truly be helpless and trapped.

And where, of all the realms in existence, was Castiel most likely to be trapped?

In Hell, of course.

Dean was convinced he'd at last landed on the correct theory. I should've thought of this before, Dean knew. Crowley and Cas have been locking horns for years. And Crowley would've been absolutely furious at Cas after that complete fuck-up with Rowena. Not to mention that Cas mentioned he ended up attacking Crowley right after.

And, when you really thought about it, there was also a fairly good chance that God himself might be pissed at Cas.

Maybe God had even sent Cas to Hell on purpose. Judged him, and sent him to Hell.

You must be punished, Castiel... How many sins have you committed? Let's count them up, shall we?

Dean stalled for a long time there, gritting his teeth, both hands clamped now onto the umbrella shaft (later, he discovered he'd bent it). The mental image of Castiel in Hell, of Castiel suffering, was extremely vivid. And extremely specific. And extremely familiar.

And completely unbearable.

Eventually, with a little cheek-biting and some deep breaths, Dean was able to keep going. "Cas, I think you might be stuck in Hell. That would be why the angels haven't answered — they might not even know where you are. Or worse still, they DO know and... maybe they think you deserve it? Which you don't, just by the way, but they've been such dicks to you all along, and so maybe that's why they don't want to help. And this would be why Crowley hasn't answered, too, right? He doesn't want to confess what he's doing to you! That's it, isn't it? But... I just don't get how Crowley's managing to avoid the summoning-spell. I mean, I thought summoning spells compelled him to answer? But he probably has ways to ignore us when he really wants to, and suddenly it's totally making sense that he doesn't want to let me know where you are. He doesn't want to give you up."

"Cas," Dean finished, gazing out at the rain. "I'm gonna rescue you." One of his hands drifted up to the breast pocket of his flannel shirt, where the little black feather was still tucked away, safe and
sound. (Somehow Dean had once again neglected to put it back on the bookshelf.) Dean patted his pocket as he said, "Cas, I'm gonna rescue you from Hell. Like you did for me."

---

A/N - You might have noticed that Dean is avoiding a certain theory. A certain theory that is very obvious to Sam. That's the theory about how Cas might not ever come back at all; that the reason Cas isn't answering might be just that he is dead and gone.

But Dean cannot let that possibility into his mind, so he is trying every other theory he can think of.

As I mentioned before, I'm traveling this weekend and also have another trip next weekend (I'll be flying on Friday, in fact) so my writing time is restricted this week. But I've already got the next bit written, so I'll definitely have at least a short chapter to post from the airport on Friday. It may be very short but there'll definitely be something.

A note about the music: I like the idea of Cas gravitating to folk music as his main genre. Folk, as a genre, is the closest of all modern genres to the original human music - the songs that every culture has sung around campfires since time immemorial. So he's heard stuff like that before, and I think it would make sense to him. Modern folk music has evolved a little away from its original ethnic-music roots (I'll spare you the ethnomusicology, but trust me on that) but it's still got those elements of storytelling, universal themes, sing-along types of melodic structure, and general non-modernness. So I think it would all feel familiar enough to him that he could easily find something he liked in it. (Generally people are drawn to songs whose musical structure is 1 step away from what is most familiar to them. Only 1 step away, not 5 or 10.)

Cas's songs are drawn from a list of the 100 "most essential" folk songs (full list [here](#)). My headcanon here is that the Lebanon librarian pointed him to that list, and then he picked from the list not only the John Denver songs (because of Denver "falling") but also all songs involving natural phenomena, flying, magical creatures and... certain emotions. I figured Cas's eyes would be drawn to "Man of Constant Sorrow", for example, and that he would find some comfort in singing sad songs and not just happy songs.

Hope you liked this chapter! And if there was a scene or an image or an idea that you particularly liked, please let me know. :)
"I'm gonna rescue you, Cas," became Dean's new refrain.

Soon every prayer was a litany of: "I'm gonna rescue you. Hang in there. You just hang in there, hear me? You hold on. I'm coming for you. I'm gonna rescue you."

But he tabled the plans for the forty-eight hour prayer vigil. It was no longer an issue of trying to get Cas to hear him, after all; instead, top priority was clearly to find out exactly where Cas was (where in Hell, that is). And exactly how to get to him.

And that meant tracking down Crowley.

And that meant research. To figure out how to get Crowley to answer.

So research was what Dean did. All the next day he was hunkered down in the library, and the day after that, and the day after that. Hour after hour he spent at the big wooden table, books spread out all around, reading through volume after volume about demons and Hell, looking for any information about summonings—and specifically, about potential ways to increase a given summoning spell's power or compel a demon to attend.

Sam helped, of course. Though Dean kept waiting for him to crack some joke about how Dean used to hate research.

But Sam never said a word about it.

Dean did break up the research periodically to shoot short prayers to Cas. His idea now, with the prayers, was really just to try to comfort Cas, and maybe distract him a little bit from whatever hellish torment he was suffering. The thought that Cas might be suffering was really quite intensely disturbing, so Dean increased his prayers from his original two-a-day (sunrise and sunset) to the classic medieval-monastery schedule of seven prayers a day: Vigils before dawn, Lauds at sunrise, Terce at nine o'clock, Sext at noon, None at three o'clock, Vespers at sunset, and last of all Compline, late at night.

He could only hope that Cas found Dean's prayers at all comforting.

The Compline prayer always felt the most private. Almost intimate. Night after night Dean lay in bed alone, whispering Castiel's name in the dark and telling him, "Hang on. I'm gonna rescue you."

Dean always held onto the feather during the Compline prayer, hoping somehow that it might help. Though when Compline was over, Dean always set the feather on his nightstand. He hadn't slept with it in his hand for a while; it was starting to seem quite precious, and he was too worried it might get crushed, so he always put it on the nightstand.

And night after night, Dean went to sleep hoping for another parrot dream. But the baby parrot
stubbornly refused to show up in his dreams again. Dean had been holding on to a lingering hope that the parrot dreams might have been some strange form of dreamwalking, but soon that hope began to fade.

Yet even so he thought the dreams might somehow have had some bit of truth to them. There was something strangely compelling about that image of Cas as so decidedly nonhuman... and as so little, and helpless, and fragile.

Trapped somewhere.

And possibly under attack.

Dean continued searching for ways to comfort Cas with the seven-a-day prayers, and soon some of his prayers began turning into songs.

He'd been in the habit of humming some of Cas's songs anyway — it seemed to settle his mind — but now he was trying to learn to play them on guitar, too. Every day at noon, for his lunch break, Dean went up to Cas's corner in the attic and put in an hour's practice on the guitar. (The lunch break never seemed to involve much eating.) He included the entire hour as part of the noontime prayer, chatting to Cas the entire time while he practiced the chords. And every day at the end of the hour, Dean always tried to play at least one song in full for Castiel, picking out one sheet from Cas's stack of songs and trying to play it all the way through without stopping.

Dean couldn't play guitar well enough yet to really accompany any of the songs, of course. He was still only barely able to stumble through a few of the easiest chords, and it still took ages to rearrange his fingers just to get from one chord to the next. (It was a little disconcerting, actually, to realize that Castiel had learned these chords faster than Dean.) But he would sing a song the whole way through anyway, getting through most of it with just his voice and adding a strum now and then whenever he got to a chord he knew.

Dean was aware (mostly because Sam had been teasing him about it for years) that he tended to drift off key when he sang, and sure enough whenever a D chord finally rolled around, or one of the two other chords that he knew, it always turned out he was pretty far off key. He always had to pause for a long time, to get his fingers organized, and strum the chord, and find his singing note again, and then continue with the next verse.

It was a lurchy, slow way to sing a song. Slow and clumsy.

As with the prayers, Dean could only hope that Cas found the distraction welcome... and not just an annoyance.

Another Thursday soon rolled around. Thursdays always held a certain hope for Dean, because Cas was supposedly the "angel of Thursday." (Whatever that meant. Cas had actually never talked much
about this, but Dean and Sam had both noticed it in the lore.) Maybe Cas could hear prayers better
on Thursdays? Just in case, Dean decided to extend each of the seven daily prayers a little bit on this
particular Thursday. So near the end of the guitar-prayer-hour, Dean thought of adding an extra song
or two. Maybe he could even tackle a new one. He reached over the table to drag Cas's stack of
songs closer to him. The bottom page of the stack stuck on the surface of the table and the entire rest
of the stack slid off of it, leaving just that one page behind.

Dean picked it up. These days his eyes were always drawn first to whatever note Cas had put at the
bottom, so the first thing he saw was a small, tidy note in Cas's handwriting down at the bottom of
the page that read:

D: “really, Cas?”

Dean knew what the song it was just from that note. He glanced at the title:

_I'll Fly Away_

Yup. _That_ song. When Dean had first heard Cas plowing his way through it, it had seemed like
maybe a painful choice for an angel who couldn't fly. Which was why Dean had said, "Really,
Cas?"

He'd meant it kindly, actually. He'd meant, "Do you really need to be putting yourself through that?"
And, "Do you really _want_ to be putting yourself through that?" There'd been a whole layer of other
unspoken questions, too, deeper down. Things Dean had never gotten around to asking. Things like,
_Do you miss your wings? You never talk about it. Will they ever heal? Do you miss flying?_

Things like, _Do you miss Heaven? Do you like living here?_

Things like, _Are you okay?_

_Are you happy?_

_You want to talk a bit, maybe?_

But all Dean had actually said, out loud, was, "Really, Cas?"

Maybe Cas hadn't understood.

Dean gazed at the page for a long moment. Now he couldn't take his eyes off the note at the bottom.

D: "really, Cas?"

It occurred to Dean that maybe he could explain it all a little better to Cas, right now. Right now, via
a prayer. So he said, out loud, "Cas, I, uh...."

His voice echoed in the quiet attic. And died.

The words wouldn't come.

It took Dean a while to tear his eyes away from the "really, Cas?" note, but finally he managed to
take a look at the lyrics. He knew the melody already (from all the times he'd been listening to Cas
singing in the distance, while Dean was way down on the lower floor in his bedroom pretending to
be asleep). But he hadn't been able to make out the words. Turned out it was one of those old-timey
religious songs about going to Heaven. The kind of song that seemed happy enough at first, naïve
even, until you realized that slaves must have sung it to try to cheer themselves up. But Cas had
picked it out, and had written out the chords and had spent some time on it, so presumably he'd liked something about it.

There were only three chords. C — that was Dean's newest chord and he was finding it a bit tricky, but maybe this would be a good practice song for that. G — he could do a G pretty consistently by now. The third was a "D7", which caused Dean some momentary worry, but thank goodness there was another note from Cas scribbled in the margin: "Any 7 can be ignored. D7 = D + 7th note in scale, lovely but optional. Can use D."

So Dean could swap in a D for the D7. That was a relief. This ought to be do-able, Dean thought, so he lifted his head and announced, to the empty air, "Cas — Castiel, Castiel, Castiel, you still listening? Here's that flying song you liked. I'll see if I can get through it."

He got going, and at first it didn't go half bad. He only had to pause for about five seconds to rearrange his fingers for each C chord, and only messed up the rhythm a few times. He was even starting to hope that he might be getting a little better at keeping his singing on key. It was all going pretty well, and Dean started to feel a little cheered up as he pictured Cas listening, maybe even following along, and hopefully finding some comfort in the song. Until Dean got to the last couple verses:

Oh how glad and happy when we meet  
I'll fly away  
No more cold iron shackles on my feet  
I'll fly away

I'll fly away, oh glory  
I'll fly away, in the morning  
When I die hallelujah by and by  
I'll fly away

Dean managed to get through the "glad and happy when we meet" but his voice failed abruptly on the "when I die."

He managed to keep the chords going a little longer but could not do any more than whisper the words. He had to whisper his way through the last verse:

Just a few more weary days and then  
I'll fly away  
To a land where joys will never end  
I'll fly away

I'll fly away, oh glory  
I'll fly away, in the morning  
When I die hallelujah by and by  
I'll fly away

By the second "when I die," Dean couldn't even whisper the words.

But he kept his clumsy chords going, slow and painful, to the end of the last bar.

He had to struggle a little to control his breathing while he wiped the guitar carefully and set it in its towel-nest.

He's an angel, he's an angel, he's an angel, kept running through Dean's mind. He missed Heaven.
He missed flying. He missed his wings. He missed them like crazy, all along. He wanted to fly away, from here, from me probably, and couldn't. And now he's...

Moving very stiffly now, Dean shoved "I'll Fly Away" back to the very, very bottom of the stack of songs, pushed his chair away from the table and stood, saying, "Um, Cas, so, how about I'll sing that one for you later when you get back. Uh... hope that's okay. I, uh, I gotta work on that C more."

He touched the feather in his pocket. For a long moment he stood there, by the table, one finger stroking the edge of the feather, gazing over at Cas's little cot.

Oh how glad and happy when we meet...

Dean turned away from the cot so abruptly that he knocked his chair over. He fumbled it back upright and hurried away from Cas's corner, past the stacks of furniture and down the stairs.

It was time to try Crowley again anyway.

A half-hour later Dean was adding the last finishing touches on some new summoning-sigils on the dungeon walls, while Sam worked on a new devil's trap. By now they'd both been through endless books trying to find, or invent, a better way to summon Crowley — or any other demon, for that matter. Better sigils? A better devil's trap? New ways to conceal the devil's trap? Maybe a different summoning spell? Maybe a combination of summoning spells? Dean had tried every variation he could think of. He (and Sam) had contacted other hunters; they'd consulted psychics, and mediums, and even witches. They'd chased every lead they could think of.

Nothing had worked.

But they had to keep trying.

Can't give up, Dean thought, finishing the last sigil. Gotta have faith.

"This might do it, Sam," he said, trying to force some optimism into his voice. He stepped back for a look at the new sigils. "Ya think?"

"Sure, Dean," said Sam. He was painting the last lines of an unusually complex devil's trap on the floor, using a particular kind of paint that Dean had finally managed to special-order, a clear paint that turned invisible when dry. Sam added, "This trap's a good idea. Might work."

Sam was being very diplomatic these days. It was still crystal clear, to Dean anyway, that Sam didn't actually think any of this was going to work.

But at least Sam kept helping Dean with it all, just the same.

Once Sam finished the devil's trap, Dean hunkered over it with a hair dryer, concentrating on drying the clear paint as quickly as possible while Sam got the summoning ingredients ready. The drying took some time, with Dean crawling around the stone floor on his hands and knees with the hair dryer. "Sorry, it's taking a while," said Dean.

"S'okay," said Sam, readying the candles in the right places. "Take your time. Get it set up like you want."
Sam was being very diplomatic again.

Dean sighed, waving the hair dryer over the paint. *The truth is,* he thought, *everything's taking a while.* It was all taking much too long. It had been six weeks now, since Ohio; a terribly long time. And it had been ten days since Dean had realized Cas must be in Hell. Ten days of knowing that Cas might be suffering *months* of torture down there, with every day that passed up here. Ten days of wondering what exactly Crowley was doing to Cas. Was poor Cas on the rack, even now? Tormented by fire? Lashed by whips? Broken on a wheel?

Or could he even be... maybe... possibly... strung up on a cross?

Dean bit his lip.

*Keep working. Keep trying everything. Gotta have faith.*

But he had to pause a moment and press his hand to his forehead.

"You okay?" said Sam.

"Just sending out a little prayer," said Dean firmly, opening his eyes. "Feeling lucky today. It's a Thursday. This summoning might do it."

Sam gave him a very cautious look, but he said nothing. He just nodded. *Mr. Diplomat,* thought Dean, but he was grateful for Sam's silence.

Dean tested the now-invisible devil's trap with a finger, checking every line. Dry. Dry all the way around.

"Okay, I think we're ready," Dean said, clambering to his feet. "Let's see. Just to recap, we're trying a heptagram devil's trap this time instead of the pentagram, plus the extra sigils I found the other day on compulsion-to-obey, plus more protection sigils on the walls, all in UV-fluorescent paint. Test your lamp, Sam?"

Sam reached over to a black-light lamp that was propped near him. Dean had bought three black lights along with the UV-fluorescent paint. The idea was that with the black light off, the UV-fluorescent devil's trap would be invisible, but once the black light was flicked on, the whole devil's trap would pop into sight, glowing vividly.

Click. The glowing devil's trap sprang into view. "Nice," said Sam, clicking the light off again, and the devil's-trap vanished again.

"Second and third black-light lamps, check," said Dean, testing the other two lamps, which were both near him. "Extra bulbs, check. Shotguns loaded with salt, iron crowbars, demon blade, angel blades, check check check, all the usual." He turned to Sam. "Am I forgetting anything?"

Sam shook his head. He was kneeling on the floor now by the silver bowl, testing the edge of the silver knife. It was a "Sam week" again — a week when Sam was slicing up his palm, instead of Dean.

Sam set the knife to his scarred palm and glanced up at Dean. "Ready?"

"Yep," said Dean. "Okay, Cas, if you're listening... here goes nothin'."

"For the hundredth time," muttered Sam. Very quietly. Under his breath. But Dean heard.
"YOU CAN'T GIVE UP," said Dean sternly, spinning to face him. "You can't lose faith, Sam."

"I know," said Sam. "I know. Sorry."

"Cas needs us. You can't lose faith." It seemed important to drill this home.

"I know," said Sam, and then, more quietly, "I know." He looked up at Dean. "If it takes a thousand tries, I'm not giving up." With that, Sam cut his hand without a flinch, let his blood drip into the bowl, and chanted the the summoning-spell.

There had been absolutely no spark of success for any spell they'd tried in weeks, regardless of which brother did the spell. For weeks there'd been not a hint of thunder, not so much as a puff of wind, not a flicker of the candles — nothing. Dean was so used to the disappointment by now that almost before Sam had finished chanting the spell, Dean was already starting to say "Tomorrow we'll try the other version of the pentagram," when Crowley materialized.

One moment Crowley wasn't there and the next he was, smack in the middle of the invisible devil's trap, standing calmly with one hand tucked in his jacket pocket. It was an unusually quiet entrance for him; he was only accompanied by a wispy, quite half-hearted, thread of red smoke.

Dean and Sam stared at him, both so startled that they almost forgot what to do. Then both brothers scrambled for their respective lamp switches. Click, click, click, and the UV-fluorescent paint flared into view, the whole devil's trap glowing in eerie violet-white lines around Crowley's feet.

Crowley glanced down. "Yeah, yeah," he said. He seemed completely unsurprised. "I can see UV, you fools, I knew it was there. Look, I don't have much time. Whaddya want? Make it snappy." He glanced at his watch.

"Where the hell have you been?" said Sam, standing up from his position by the silver bowl. "Why haven't you been answering?"

Crowley rolled his eyes. "What do you care? Got stuck. Never mind where. I just got free late last night. What do you want? I'm serious, I really don't have much time."

"Okay, okay," Sam said, spreading his hands. "We just got one question—"

Dean broke in with an angry "Where's Cas, and what the hell are you doing with him?"

Crowley blinked. "What? Castiel?" He glanced back and forth between them. "Why would I know? What, has something happened to Castiel?"

Sam looked at Dean, obviously thinking Dean was going to take the lead.

But all Dean seemed able to do was stare at the floor.

After a slightly awkward pause, Sam said, "He's dead. Um... six weeks ago."

"What?" Crowley said. He looked genuinely shocked. "How? I mean, not that he didn't have it coming to him, of course, but, hadn't he recovered from my delightful mother's spell? Not that I was in all that great shape after that little event, mind you, but I gathered Castiel had recovered reasonably well. Did he have some kind of relapse?" He trailed off as he took in Dean's expression. "Oh," Crowley said. "Something else happened, then? What was it?" He narrowed his eyes, studying Dean. "Did you—"

"He'll be back," snapped Dean. "It's just taking a while. I think he's stuck someplace. Like, just for
"example, stuck in Hell."

Crowley raised his eyebrows and gave a little laugh. "Well, isn't that a delightful thought! He certainly deserves some punishment, I'll agree there—" Crowley stopped, frowning at Dean again, who, at the word "punishment," had flinched and gritted his teeth.

Dean folded his arms again and stared at the floor. Stay on track, stay focused, stay focused, he chanted to himself. But once again, for a long, awful moment, all he could see before him was Cas on the cross... Cas hanging on the cross... Cas being punished.

Dean tried biting his cheek, but the usually reliable cheek-biting trick hadn't been working very well over the past week. Think of a song, Dean thought in desperation. One of Cas's songs. Keep it quiet.

He started humming "I'll Fly Away," as softly as he could.

Oh how glad and happy when we meet...

"What... is... wrong with you?" said Crowley, slowly, a puzzled frown coming over his face.

Sam took over with a sharp, "Answer his question. With the kind of summoning we just did, you have to answer our questions truthfully. You know that. Our first question is: Is Castiel in Hell?"

"No." said Crowley. "Nope. Uh-uh. Sorry to disappoint, but that's the tr—"

This couldn't be right. "TELL THE TRUTH!" roared Dean, abandoning "I'll Fly Away" abruptly to take one long step toward Crowley, almost to the edge of the devil's trap. Sam put a hand on his shoulder to hold him back; Dean barely felt it, barking at Crowley, "You gotta tell the truth when we summon you like this! That's the rules, so, WHERE'S CAS?"

Crowley's eyes actually flashed red for a moment. He snapped, "I must say, insane-Castiel was much more pleasant than insane-Dean. I have no bloody clue where that precious angel of yours has got to, you loony, and that's the honest truth." He glared at them both. "I don't know where he is, if he's anywhere at all, but I do know one thing for sure: He's certainly not in Hell, I promise you that. And Dean, I hate to point this out, but, even a babbling maniac like yourself should be able to realize by now that angels don't even have an afterlife. When they die, they're gone."

"It was just the VESSEL that died!" yelled Dean, nearly bellowing now. "JUST THE VESSEL! NOT CAS! CAS IS ALIVE! He's alive, I KNOW he is, he's even got rainbow wings, and, and, all these butterflies, he's alive and HE'S COMING BACK!"

Both Crowley and Sam were staring at him now.

"This is simply fascinating," remarked Crowley to Sam. "You know, Cain went a bit off the rails too, of course, after he lost the Mark, but nothing like this! If I had more time I'd stay and enjoy the spectacle, but, like I said, I don't have much time." He glanced at his watch again and added, "And, I can't believe I'm saying this, but I'm actually sorry to hear that Castiel is gone."

"Why's that?" Sam said.

Crowley looked up at Sam, and over at Dean (who was walking in a little circle now, running both hands through his hair, trying to get composed). Crowley sighed. "I really don't have time..." he muttered, almost to himself, but he pulled his right arm out of his pocket and held out his hand.

Or, rather, held out half a hand.
Half of Crowley's right hand was gone.

It was such a bizarre sight that it snapped Dean out of his pacing. Dean stopped, and Sam blinked, and they both stared at Crowley's hand. Or rather, at what was left of it.

The outer two fingers and part of Crowley's palm, and even part of the wrist, were completely gone. The hand looked like it had been sliced neatly in half. They could even see the flesh inside, the muscle and the bone, almost like a cross-section illustration from a medical textbook. Oddly, there was no blood.

"How'd that happen?" asked Dean. "Can't you just... regenerate that part, or whatever you normally do?"

"What's going on?" asked Sam.

Crowley looked, almost absently, at the awful wound. "Hell's being destroyed," he said.

Both brothers were silent a moment.

"What?" said Sam at last.

"Hell's being destroyed," Crowley repeated. "There are holes." He felt at the edges of the wound, wincing a little as he did so, and then he looked back up at Sam. "Big black holes. One showed up first at the outer perimeter, right at the Gate of Hell. From what I can gather, at first it looked just like a returning demon— typical black smoke streamer, you know, like when a poor innocent hardworking demon has been exorcised by some irritating hunter with delusions of grandeur, you know the type—" (Crowley shot a scowl at Dean.) "—so, the Gatekeeper opened the Gate for it, like usual. But then I guess the smoke streamer stopped and... well, the Gatekeeper and half the Gate are gone now so we don't really know exactly what happened next. But there's a huge multidimensional sphere sitting there now of... well, darkness. And other darkness-spheres started to bud off from it, and they're all just floating around now. Drifting around like huge balloons. Anything, or anybody, that gets in their paths just... ceases to exist."

Crowley paused and looked down at his maimed hand, turning it a little as if to get a clearer view.

"I went to check it out," he said, "and one of the spheres started coming my way, and the demon next to me fell in and he grabbed my hand.... He almost pulled me in." Crowley gave a little shrug, glancing up at both Sam and Dean. "I was lucky not to fall in entirely. Then more of the holes started budding off and I got stuck for a while on a little bit of intact reality that was still balanced between holes. Had to hop from one bit of reality to another. Been stuck for weeks. Hell of a time trying to keep from falling in. I heard all your summonses, by the way, but there was no way I could answer. Finally managed to jump to safety yesterday when the darkness-bubbles shifted a bit." He looked down at his awful wound again. "I can't seem to heal the hand. It's like this vessel's... sense of itself has been changed, if I can put it like that. Like it forgot it ever had fingers there. Like they were never there at all."

He fell silent, gazing at his bizarre injury. He seemed rather at a loss.

"Does it hurt?" said Sam said at last.

"Yes," said Crowley. He did not elaborate.

Then he looked at Dean.

There had been two main thoughts rattling around in Dean's mind while he listened to Crowley's
strange story. The first was: *I am so incredibly glad that Cas ISN'T in Hell. He's not being tortured. He's not on the cross.*

The second was: *If Cas isn't in Hell... then where IS he?*

But now, as Crowley looked at him, a third thought entered Dean's mind. And the third thought, for a change, wasn't about Cas at all. The third thought was simply:

*I've never seen Crowley look this frightened.*

Crowley, the King of Hell, was afraid.

Crowley glanced away. He pulled a handkerchief out of his breast pocket and began wrapping it around his hand. "I've got to go," he said. "I've got a serious situation down there. At least five of the darkness-bubbles are drifting around now. Picture worms eating their way through an apple; demons and doomed souls and the whole landscape of Hell just vanishing entirely. It's been chaos. The very Gate of Hell is collapsing, too. Shrinking down. I don't know if I can even keep it open. Not that we were getting that many souls anyway, these days, what with the Veil still being closed and Death being gone and all, but a few souls usually still found their way to us each day. But now...." He shook his head. "Most of the River Styx has drained away. Charon's ferry even got grounded last week, and we had to call out the Stygian Coast Guard."

"Hell has a Coast Guard?" said Sam.

Crowley nodded. "Of course. So we can save the doomed souls, in order to re-doom them properly. Anyway... if this keeps up... " He gave a small sigh, glancing back and forth between them, his expression pensive. "Listen, boys. Normally I'd be enjoying our little pas-de-deux here, our little dance of threats and alliances and plotting. Exchanging some shouts and swears, making my eyes go red, watching you quake in your boots and so on. It's usually such a pleasure, isn't it? But.... The Apocalypse never threatened Hell at all, you understand; only Earth. This, though..."

Crowley didn't bother finishing his sentence.

He glanced down one last time at his ruined hand and carefully maneuvered it back into his jacket pocket, wincing as he did so. "To answer your previous question, Sam, which I am obliged to do: Yes, I'm genuinely sorry Castiel is gone. Because, as much as I loathe every little fiber of his annoying being, I suspect he's also just about the only angel who could've helped. He's the only angel who saw that spell unfold, remember. And to be perfectly honest he's also the only angel in recent memory who ever showed a spark of creativity. I'd been thinking of tracking him down, actually." He gave another sigh and added, "I've got to say, I really don't know what God was thinking. Making the entire fabric of Creation contingent on the survival of one little curse-tattoo on one guy? A tattoo that my mother could remove? Bit of poor planning on God's part if you ask m—"

"But where's Cas?" said Dean.

Crowley gave Dean a hard look. "All I know is that Castiel really isn't in Hell. I've just been through every corner of Hell assessing the damage, and he's truly not there. Well... except..." Crowley frowned, as if struck by a thought. "Unless he was in one of the areas that just got gobbled up? If that's the case he's definitely gone for good, and, well, sorry for your loss and all, but it's all going to be pretty pointless if all the rest of us die too—"

Dean interrupted again with, "But where IS he?" The Hell theory had been wrong, clearly. Time for a new theory. Dean went on, "He's... he's... he's got to be stuck somewhere, but he's not in Hell. So... he's stuck somewhere else. Purgatory or Heaven, probably. But how do I figure out which?"
Crowley shrugged. "I told you: I don't know. Ask someone else."

"Who?" Dean said. "Nobody else will answer. Nobody! Who do I ask?" Sam shot him a warning glance, and Dean realized he was sliding into begging—begging from Crowley. But he found he didn't care.

Crowley gave him a thoughtful look, his eyes tracking from Dean's face down to his feet and back up. "Well," he muttered, almost to himself, "we may all actually need that damn angel. If he even still exists at all, which I very much doubt." He cleared his throat, and said, his voice a bit louder, "You need to understand that he's most likely gone. I've never heard of an angel coming back. Never. But... I suppose you could try the god of the crossroads."

There was a little pause.

"The what?" said Sam.

"The god of the crossroads?" said Dean. "I thought you... aren't you the crossroads demon? Aren't you the one in charge of all the crossroads?"

Crowley laughed. "Oh, no. I just lease them from the owner. From the god of the crossroads, that is. He leases crossroads rights to demons, and sometimes to other gods, too. Tricky fellow, I've got to say; that's how we all learned about being so careful with wording and contracts."

"But why would he know where Cas is?" said Sam.

"Crossroads," said Crowley leaning forward and raising his eyebrows, giving Sam a significant look.

Sam made a "I don't know what you're talking about" shrug, and Crowley rolled his eyes.

"Crossroads connect places!" said Crowley, waving his uninjured hand around in emphasis. "Didn't you ever get the memo? Crossroads connect the realms of Creation! That's why you sorry lot can contact Hell, from Earth, at a crossroads, didn't you ever realize that? Anyway, he's the one who connected all the realms together and made roads between them. Including the places where those roads cross. Which means he can travel to any realm of Creation. So if Cas is around somewhere, if Cas is anywhere, he'll know where."

"So what's his name?" said Dean.

Suddenly Crowley looked a little uncertain. "Ah..." he said, stroking his chin. "Been a while since I spoke to him, actually... I think he goes by Anthony now?"

"The pagan god of crossroads is called Anthony?" said Sam.

"Tony the crossroads god?" added Dean. "You're joking, right?"

"Well, that's just his current name," said Crowley. "He's had thousands of names through the years, you understand. He's an old pagan god, one of the oldest. Very Stone Age, antlers and beads and all that. He was supposedly second on the scene after God himself — he saw all the realms being built, which is why he was able to connect them all up. Though... maybe I should warn you, if he takes a dislike to you he'll just obliterate you, so you'd better—"

Crowley stopped in mid-sentence. His eyes went a little unfocused; he suddenly seemed to be listening to something that only he could hear.
"Shit," Crowley said. "I've gotta go. Now. Please, Sam, I've got to get back down there—"

Another pause.

"What is it?" asked Dean.

"The — the circles are collapsing," said Crowley. His face had even gone a little pale.

"What do you mean?" said Sam.

Crowley drew a somewhat shaky breath, refocusing on Sam and Dean. "You know about the Seven Circles of Hell? The infrastructure of the whole place?"

They both nodded.

"They're collapsing," said Crowley. "The seventh just folded. The sixth is buckling. Please let me go."

Sam and Dean glanced at each other. Sam gave Dean a little nod, and Dean knew what the nod meant: *Crowley seems like he's actually telling the truth, for once.*

Dean nodded back, Sam clicked off his black light, and Dean clicked off the other two. The glowing devil's-trap faded from view, and Crowley disappeared instantly, with another tiny, woeful-looking puff of red smoke.

Dean led the way back up to the library at almost a run, his mind buzzing with everything they'd learned.

"This is good," he said as he got to the top of the stairs. He spun to face Sam. "This is good. This is *really* good. Cas isn't in Hell. This is awesome! He's not in Hell! He's not being tortured!" It seemed a huge burden had lifted from Dean's shoulders. "Cas, Cas, you hear me?" he called up toward the ceiling. "You're not in Hell! Isn't that great news?"

"He probably knows that, Dean," said Sam, with a faint smile, coming up the last steps behind Dean. "I'll bet you don't have to tell him."

"But where is he, is the question now," Dean said, hurrying toward the library. "Could be Purgatory, could be Heaven. I suppose he could even be stuck in the Veil, huh? Since he died human? I doubt he's in Oz or fairyland or whatever Charlie's place was but we could consider that too. But the thing is, we've got a lead! This old crossroads dude! We just have to find him and ask him."

"But what about Hell being destroyed?" said Sam. "Should we try to help Crowley?"

Dean turned to look at him again. "Do we really want to save Hell from being destroyed?"

"There's the trees, too," said Sam. "Here on Earth, I mean. And that mountain. I'm feeling like things might be ramping up."

Dean considered that. "Possible. But so far the worst damage seems to be in Hell, which I'm... actually not too bothered about. I know Crowley's all freaked out, but, it could be a good thing. A really good thing, even. Look, let's just figure out where Cas is, and get him back here, then we can..."
talk it all over with Cas and see what he thinks. I'll go get us some sandwiches; you fire up the laptop and start looking up this Anthony guy."

Sam eyed Dean for a moment. He shook his head with a little smile.

"What?"

"First time you've showed any interest in eating for a while," Sam said, sitting down by his laptop and flipping it open.

"Cas ain't in Hell, dude," Dean said, with a big smile. He clapped Sam on the shoulder. "Wherever Cas is, he ain't in Hell. Best I've felt in ages."

When Dean came back to the library fifteen minutes later with two sandwiches on a plate, Sam was frowning at his laptop.

"Find anything?" said Dean, pulling up a chair. He set the plate down and grabbed one sandwich.

"NO," Sam said, slumping back in his chair with a sigh. "There is no such thing as Anthony the crossroads god! There's Saint Anthony, of course, but that's totally different and there's nothing about crossroads and he's not a god. And there's about a hundred old pagan crossroads gods. Look at this list!" Sam swung the laptop toward Dean. It was on a Wikipedia page called "Liminal Deities."

"Huh," said Dean, skimming the text as he chewed down a bite of sandwich. "Liminal deities... gods of thresholds, gates and doorways..."

"And crossroads, it turns out, and look how many there are!" said Sam, waving his hands at the screen, which seemed to have an extremely long list of names. "Dozens of different crossroads gods just from China alone! Every damn town seems to have one! And look at all these others... Janus from the Romans, Hermes from the Greeks... Hecate, Jangseung, Munshin, Elegua... And nothing about antlers and beads or any Stone Age guy. I don't even know where to get started. And, also, Dean, something else is going on."

"Check out the news," he said, angling the screen toward Dean again and pointing to a news article from a Florida paper. "There's more stuff going on with the Darkness. Here on Earth, I mean. More earthquakes and sinkholes, and look at this: this morning a lake totally drained away in Florida. Just disappeared underground. Sucked down a bunch of trees with it. An entire lake. So... you know what..." Sam drew a breath. "I'm wondering if maybe the same thing that's happening to Hell might be happening to Earth; it's just we haven't noticed much because it's mostly inside the Earth."

"What... you mean... Darkness spheres rolling around?" said Dean. "Those black-hole things Crowley was describing?"

Sam nodded. He clicked on a video of the Florida lake disappearing, and they watched the video for a minute. Entire trees were sucked down, and even a couple of fishing boats, as the whole lake whirled down into a gigantic whirlpool and drained away entirely.

The video was pretty dramatic. Dean set his sandwich down half-eaten; his brief burst of appetite seemed to have ended as fast as it had appeared.

Dean said, "You're thinking... spheres of nothingness tunneling their way along underground?"
Everything collapsing into the tunnels they leave behind?” He added, slowly, "Worms through an apple."

Sam nodded. "That's exactly what I'm thinking. That would explain the earthquakes and sinkholes. The other trees disappearing, at the surface, and the mountain, would be what happened if one of the spheres started rolling around on the surface, right?" Then he said, "You know what, I'll just check the science news real quick and see if—" But as he clicked his way back to the front page of the newspaper, he stopped right there, saying, "Whoa."

Sam hadn't even had to go to the science section; the science headlines were right there on the front page. Top center. In a huge font, so large that Dean didn't even have to lean close to read them:

---

**NASA: PLUTO "VANISHES FROM VIEW"**

*Comet Strike Theorized*

*Pluto's Sad Fate: Demoted From Planethood, Now Gone For Good?*

*Strange Year For Astronomy: Saturn's Rings "Distorted", Historic High in Sunspots,*

*Jupiter's Great Red Spot Shrinking — "No Connection" Say Astronomers*

---

"I think the astronomers are in for a surprise," muttered Dean.

Sam said, his voice a little strained, "Uh. I just thought of something."

Dean looked at him, and Sam said, "If the reason the demons weren't answering, all this time, was because Hell's being eaten up, then maybe the angels aren't answering because..."

He stopped.

Dean finished his sentence. "... because Heaven's being eaten up too."

Sam nodded.

They looked at each other.

Sam reached out and clicked on a NASA video link in the Pluto article. A grainy video began to play: there was little Pluto, slowly sailing through space, a tiny dot of light in the darkness. And all at once it vanished.

It just winked out. As if a giant dark hand had simply reached out and pinched it to nothing.

It was gone as if it had never existed at all.
"Maybe this is bigger than we've been thinking," said Sam softly.

The video began to loop. The brothers sat in silence, watching Pluto disappearing over and over again.

*Maybe it's MUCH bigger that we've been thinking, thought Dean. Heaven, Hell, the Earth, the Sun, the planets... All the way out to Pluto.*

*Maybe farther.*

*That's pretty damn big.*

Maybe it was going to put everybody at risk. Even the friends whose souls they'd thought were safe up in Heaven. Jo and Ellen were up there. Ash was up there. Jimmy Novak was up there.

Bobby was up there.

Dad... and hopefully Mom too.

Not to mention the last few friends they had down here on Earth. Claire. Jody.

And Sam.

And even Cas, too. Wherever he was. He was in danger too. Everybody was.

"Dean..." said Sam slowly. "If Heaven's under attack... and Hell... and the planets...." His mind was obviously following the same track.

"This is my fault," said Dean.

Sam turned to him. "No, Dean, you didn't—"

"I drove you both into it," said Dean, cutting him off. "I drove you into doing that spell. I dragged you both down with me. It's my fault, and I'm gonna fix it. I'll find Cas, and he'll know what to do. You said it yourself, Cas knows some things about it, he was here at the beginning, and he can help. Even Crowley said Cas could help."

"Dean..." Sam said slowly. He shifted in his seat to face Dean directly. "This is major. This is really big. We've got to face facts." He drew a breath. "I know you don't want to hear it, I know we've been dancing around this, but Cas really may not be coming back. Dean... he's... he's dead. He's gone. We gotta deal with this without him."

Sam stopped, watching Dean. He seemed to be holding his breath, waiting for Dean's reaction.

And Dean waited too.

Dean's eyes slid to the Pluto video. Again Pluto sailed through space; again it disappeared. And it seemed then that Dean was almost viewing himself from outside; as if he, and not Pluto, was that little speck of light that was soaring helplessly through space to his doom. He saw his trajectory all at once, everything that had happened and everything he'd become, and he saw where he was now: all the obsessive treks up the hill, all the prayers, all the sleepless nights, the blinding guilt, the riveting obsession... he saw it all, in that moment. And he saw it for what it really was:

Grief over the worst loss he had ever suffered. A grief so intense it had taken over all his heart, and all his mind.
But was it just grief, though?

For under it all was that bizarre image of the baby parrot sleeping on the stone mountain.

And that was... real. Somehow, illogically, Dean was absolutely certain it was real. That baby parrot was the key to everything. Cas was alive. It wasn't just wishful thinking; it was true.

But a Heroes-style "Save the baby parrot, save the world!" wasn't going to sound at all rational to Sam, was it?

Dean decided not to mention the baby parrot. (Sam had seemed wigged out enough by the mention of the rainbow wings earlier.) But he had to convince Sam somehow, so he plunged into the truth they’d both been circling around for weeks, and he turned to Sam and said, "I know you think I'm crazy."

Sam flinched and drew a quick breath. He started to shake his head, but Dean set a hand on his arm and said, "It's okay. I kind of am crazy right now. I do know that. I know I've pretty much... lost it. And I know it's been rough on you, and I'm sorry, I really am. But I am right about this. Cas is out there. He is alive. I swear he's out there, Sam, I feel it, Sam, I know it, I know it here." Dean slapped his own chest, twice, trying to convey how absolutely rock-solid certain he felt. "I cannot explain this to you, but you have got to trust me on this. Cas is alive, and I will find him and I will put this right. I know I can find him. Not just because I want him back, but because he really is out there. And we friggin' need him, Sam, we seriously need him on this. And... he needs us, too."

That hadn't really sounded all that convincing, had it?

Yet... for once Sam didn't have that skeptical look.

For once Sam didn't look as if he was only going along with it out of desperation and worry. He was really listening this time, studying Dean's face, his eyes dark and thoughtful.

"Okay," Sam said finally, with a slow nod. "Okay, Dean."

"You don't believe me," said Dean.

"Not really," Sam agreed. "But to be honest it's probably our best shot, so I'll go with it."

It was such a relief to have it out in the open that Dean could only laugh. "Guess that's the best I'm gonna get."

Sam actually smiled at him. It was sort of a sad smile, but at least it was a smile.

"So..." said Sam, "what do we do?"

Dean reached over to Sam's laptop. He clicked back to the Wikipedia page of the all the crossroads gods, and he said, "We start by finding Pagan Tony."

\[A/N - No baby parrot this chapter, sorry. (But some other plot development instead.)\]
Is Dean right? Is Cas really out there? Are all the realms of Creation really being gobbled up? Only time (and more chapters) will tell.

BTW... Jupiter's Great Red Spot actually is shrinking. Yipes.

Plane's boarding - I'll have to do the last proofread later. Thank you for reading! Please let me know if there was a part that you liked!
A/N - If any of you just got a reply to a comment you posted ages ago, I'm trying to catch up on all my comments! I fell way behind - it tends to happen when I read comments on my phone (since it's really difficult to reply to comments on the phone - replies can't be sent through email and instead the phone has to fire up a web browser, and then it gets super clumsy) and then the comments are no longer tagged as "unread" when I get back to my laptop. Anyway I realized I need to make super clear that I READ AND LOVE EVERY COMMENT YOU SEND IN! And that it helps me so much in giving me the kick to write the next chapter. I usually post on Friday, and I sit down and read all your comments on Saturday before starting work on the next chapter. Every comment is like a lovingly decorated little sugar cookie, and it really keeps me going. :) So, thanks so much for all your comments.

This chapter starts off with another flashback. This flashback is timed rather vaguely in the second half of S10 when Dean has been carrying the Mark for an entire year. Don't worry too much about precisely when it falls, though, since S10's episode timing is actually very vague (it's rarely clear how much time passed between episodes and it's increasingly unclear what month or even what season it is). So it's just a fuzzy "second half of S10". As usual, the flashback has several "scenelets" and is not over till you hit the "Now."

---

**THEN**

After a full year bearing the Mark of Cain, Dean knew he was losing control.

He'd thought that the month of being an actual demon would be the worst of it. He'd thought that after being "un-demoned," carrying the Mark would be bearable.

He'd been wrong.

The influence of the Mark had taken some time to grow, but he knew now that it had definitely grown. He could feel it there, snaking through his innermost self like a slender dark thread. It had gradually extended its reach, sometimes spreading so gently he'd barely even noticed, but always working its way further into him. It had been subtle, slow... and relentless. Till it seemed there was a thread of rottenness twining through all his thoughts, all his memories, and all his dreams.

It felt as if his soul was being disassembled, piece by piece.

And it felt as if his heart was being suffocated. And that, of course, was exactly what he had hoped for, wasn't it? But Dean had been unprepared for just how unmoored he would come to feel as it happened, how loose and lost and adrift, as all his gentler feelings and all his affections were slowly crushed to dust. (And that fragile flower in the dark... had it been entirely destroyed?)

Dean could feel it happening. He fought against it with all his might, and yet he could not stop it.

As the months wore on, he began to wake in the night, drenched in sweat, panicky from nightmares...
in which he seemed to be not just drowning but actually *dissolving* in an ocean of viscous black oil. The dreams unfolded almost in slow motion, the dark fluid closing slowly over him. Sometimes Dean was pulled under, his mouth filling with oil when he tried to scream; sometimes he managed to stay afloat near the surface, paddling desperately, only to watch in helpless terror as his very hands melted away.

Sometimes he was swept away from a nearby shore by a relentless current. No matter how hard he swam, the current bore him easily away, till at last his strength gave out and he was carried off to an infinite dark sea. Huge shapes moved near him in the night, gliding through the viscous fluid, brushing past his legs. Dean screamed for help, in those dreams, screaming toward the people on the ever-receding shore. (Was that Sam, there, in the distance? Was that Cas?) But they never heard, and he knew it was hopeless.

The dreams always ended with Dean thrashing back to wakefulness in a near-panic, clinging tightly to his pillow. Even once he was awake he felt sometimes as if he were still swimming with all his strength against that steady current, desperately fighting that unstoppable tide of rage and fury that seemed to be washing him away.

All he could do when he woke was lie there clutching at the pillow, his heart hammering, a foreboding sense of doom washing through him.

There came a night when Dean broke. He whispered, out loud into the night, "Castiel? Cas, I need your help—"

Dean bit the sentence off and buried his face in the pillow, his eyes squeezed shut.

Cas couldn't help him. Dean had to get through this on his own.

Dean pressed his face to the pillow, trying to breathe.

And why would Cas even want to help?

At that thought, the strange sad scene at the Idaho hospital rose in Dean's memory. Odd he should think of it now; it had been more than a year ago, back when Cas had still been human, before Dean had even accepted the Mark. So much had happened since that the memory seemed very remote. In fact it was sometimes hard to remember that Cas had ever been human at all. That night at the hospital hadn't mattered in the end, really, had it? Just a brief five-minute conversation in a hospital, a conversation that Cas had never mentioned and most likely didn't even remember.

It hadn't mattered at all.

Yet nonetheless their friendship had changed. Something had cooled between them, Dean knew. And not just because of the Mark, either. Cas himself had just... drifted away. Off he'd gone, on a strange journey of his own, putting together armies of angels, roaming around in that old Continental on some long, ill-defined road trip.

Cas had even taken to calling Sam's cell, whenever he called to check in, instead of calling Dean's. (Dean had never mentioned it. But he noticed.)

Sure, Cas had given up that army of his rather than kill Dean, when Hannah had demanded the choice. But clearly that had been just because Cas didn't want to be a killer. Obviously it hadn't been about Dean specifically.

Sure, Cas had managed to hold Dean back when Dean had been about to kill Sam, right at the end of that indescribably terrible demon-time. But clearly that had been just to save Sam's life, right? It
hadn't been about Dean specifically.

Sure, they'd had a few other interactions now and then. Few and far between. Cas had called Dean for help with Claire, for example. But that had really been about helping Claire, right? It hadn't been about Dean specifically. Cas must have been desperate, actually, to call. (Odd, though, that Cas should have called Dean at that moment, rather than Sam, who he'd been calling for everything else...)

Dean gave a sigh, his face still buried in the pillow. It seemed he could almost hear Claire's voice again, saying to Dean, as she looked over at Cas: "Will you keep an eye on him? He's been through enough."

"Sorry, Claire," muttered Dean now, into the pillow.

And he thought, *Sorry, Cas. Sorry. I'm sorry. I really am.*

But he didn't say it out loud.

And Cas didn't answer Dean's brief, aborted prayer.

Another night came; another awful dream, drowning in the ocean of black oil, dissolving away into nothing, eaten alive. This time Dean was dragged under, even as he was desperately trying to swim. The oil surrounded him, heavy and thick, clinging to his legs and pulling him down. Dean struggled with all his strength, but the oil closed over his head, and all around was black — *black* — Dean fought for air, desperate—

Then there was a ring of warmth around his ribs. A band of blue light had wrapped around him. The choking sensation was gone at once, and Dean found himself soaring up out of the ocean of oil, clean and whole. He was floating up through the sky. He was alive.

For a while he drifted through the air, in the dream, conscious only of a sense of respite and relief. The terrible black ocean was still there beneath him, and Dean knew it would claim him again soon, but for now the fragile ring of light seemed to be keeping him aloft. There was an odd (but comforting) sensation of something soft wrapped around him, too, as if he were enfolded in an invisible feather-blanket.

Dean awoke.

For once he wasn't panting in panic, or flailing at the bedcovers; instead he was drawing in air in slow, long, deep breaths, somewhat astonished to find that he could breathe so easily. He was on his side, curled around his pillow like usual, but something was different: The gentle pressure around his ribs was still there, and there was still that faint, ineffable sensation of being wrapped in softness. There was also a warmth against his back.

Puzzled, Dean shifted one arm. His hand brushed a coat sleeve.

The pieces came together slowly. There was an arm wrapped around Dean's side. There was another arm under Dean's head. There was someone lying up against his back, with both arms wrapped around him. And the "someone" was wearing a long-sleeved coat.
It was Cas, of course. Dean didn't have to turn on the light to check. It was Cas, because it had to be Cas. Cas had somehow arrived at the bunker and had found his way to Dean's room in the middle of the night, and now he was curled up behind Dean, on Dean's bed, fully clothed, embracing him. Holding Dean in that care-bear hug again, both arms looped around him, his hands clasped just in front of Dean's heart. Dean could feel the ring of protection that Cas had somehow wrapped him in — and could also feel how the Mark was already raging against it.

It was only a temporary respite, Dean knew. But it was a respite.

He felt Cas's slow breaths against his neck. Cas must be awake. Cas still had only a borrowed grace (Cas was on his second borrowed grace now, actually), but as far as Dean had been able to gather, Cas still did not need to sleep. He must be awake.

Yet Cas said nothing.

_He probably thinks I'm still asleep_, thought Dean. _I should tell him I'm awake. I should thank him and tell him I'm okay and tell him to go._

_Also, I should probably explain to him that this is kind of crossing a line. I should probably tell him not to do this again._

But Dean lay quiet, letting Cas's calming embrace envelop him.

Every couple minutes or so, Dean thought again, _I should tell him to go._

But Dean never spoke, and Cas never stirred.

At long last Dean fell asleep, exhausted. He slept more soundly than he had in months. He did not dream.

Dean woke long past dawn. It was strange to feel so well-rested; Dean hadn't felt this alert in a long time.

His hand drifted down and landed on Cas's. Cas was still here.

Cas felt his touch and at once he disengaged, unclasping his hands and sliding his hand delicately out from under Dean's, while simultaneously extracting his other arm out from under Dean's neck. Dean turned to look at him, craning his head around with a "we can't do this again" speech ready, but the words died on his lips as he watched Cas push himself upright and stand up from the bed. He watched Cas shake out his arm and smooth out the wrinkles in his coat. Cas looked tired— which shouldn't be possible for an angel, should it? But he looked tired. And solemn. And rather sad.

Their eyes met for a split second.

_He can't actually still feel anything for me.... can he?_ thought Dean.

Cas blinked and looked away, running a hand through his mussed hair. "Forgive me," he said, his voice even hoarser than usual. "You needed rest." He flicked another glance at Dean, and now it seemed a mask had come over Cas's face; he looked perfectly calm now, and rather remote. Dean could no longer read anything in his eyes.
"May I return?" said Castiel. It seemed an oddly formal request.

Before Dean could think what to say, Cas added, with the air of a diplomat negotiating a treaty, "Only for this. To still your nightmares. Nothing more. It may protect your soul a little longer."

_Come back every night_, Dean wanted to say. _I need you every night_. But the Mark was stirring in him now that Cas's embrace was gone, and Dean could not speak.

But at least Dean managed to nod.

Cas gave him a brief nod in response, turned on his heel and left the room.

It was another ten minutes before Dean got brave enough to venture out of his bedroom. He tiptoed down the hallway, trying to brace himself for running into Cas in the kitchen or the library. A possibility rose in Dean's mind that maybe he could offer Cas some coffee; maybe even try to talk a little.

The kitchen was empty. The library was empty. Dean walked to the garage to find the Impala standing alone in the front garage bay, the space next to it as deserted as always. He walked outside and looked around; the driveway was empty too.

Cas was already gone.

When Sam woke half an hour later, he didn't even realize Cas had visited. Dean didn't tell him.

Castiel returned occasionally after that. Always in the middle of the night. Always when Dean was at his lowest, when he felt the Mark gnawing at him so acidly that he feared he wouldn't last the night. Somehow Castiel knew which nights these were — Dean was never sure if Sam called him (or if Sam knew at all), or if Cas had some other way of sensing when Dean was particularly close to the edge. Dean never felt him arrive. But later Dean would come half-awake in the night to feel Cas's arms around him once more, and Cas's warm breath on his neck.

Dean would lie in the dark thinking odd thoughts, with Cas's arms warm around him.

Nothing else ever happened. Cas always stayed fully clothed, outside the covers.

_Only for this. To still your nightmares. Nothing more_, he'd said.

He was true to his word, and in the early morning hours Cas always rose and left. Usually he was gone before Dean even awoke fully.

On one of the last visits, Dean awoke in the middle of the night to the now-familiar sensation of that soft enfolding sense of protection. Cas was here. Cas's arms were around him. Dean lay awake a while, feeling the whisper-soft touch of Cas's breath on the back of his neck. Cas had gone into a state that Dean had started thinking of as "as near to sleep as Castiel gets" — he had become very still, and his breathing had slowed to such a slow, stately pace that it reminded Dean almost of a meditation, something like the turning of the moon. A sort of breathing that was so slow it must have been just a habit for him, not something that he really needed to do.

"I'm scared," Dean whispered, without even meaning to. It just came out, very quiet, Dean barely
mouthing the words. "I'm really scared, Cas."

Cas was motionless. He said nothing.

_Ah well_, thought Dean. _Maybe he sleeps after all. He didn't hear. Just as well._

But then Cas said quietly, very close to Dean's ear, "I know."

A pause, and Cas added, "You're not alone."

Dean felt a very soft touch on his neck. Some sort of little nuzzle. Maybe it should have felt like "crossing a line," but it didn't. Instead it felt very relaxing, and it sent Dean to sleep.

Again Cas was gone by dawn.

The next week Charlie died, and a few days later came the fight in the library, and after that Dean knew he would never again feel the quiet embrace in the night. Nor that relaxing little nuzzle on his neck; and who knew what that might have meant, anyway?

It probably hadn't meant anything.

---

_Now_

In a weird way it was actually kind of nice to hear that the Darkness actually _was_ gobbling up Creation. "Nice" only in that it gave Dean something else to think about. It almost felt like he'd gotten his feet back under him — like he'd been skidding down an icy mountain toward a cliff, and had at last managed to grab onto something. Or like he'd been in freefall and a small parachute had opened.

Just a small parachute. He was still falling, he knew. Just not quite as fast.

The news about the Darkness also made finding Castiel even _more_ important than before. Dean was aware he'd been searching for Cas mostly for personal reasons (Cas _had_ to be out there, Dean _had_ to find him, _had_ to apologize, _had_ to beg Cas's forgiveness, _had_ to win him back somehow...). But now they truly needed Cas's help, as well.

The whole world needed Cas's help, actually. The whole world, and the other realms too.

So in between the research Dean kept up the seven-a-day prayer schedule, updating Cas every day about any new developments about the Darkness.

"Few more clues came in yesterday, Cas," Dean began, a few mornings later, at the dawn Lauds prayer on the hill, as he filled his mug of coffee from a thermos.

Actually he had two mugs; as the October weather had gotten colder he'd taken to bringing up a thermos of hot coffee and two mugs, every day. He filled the second mug too, set the thermos on the folding chair and turned to look out at the rising sun, holding a full coffee mug in each hand. One mug was for Dean and the other for Cas. Dean knew now that Cas would not ever be waiting for him at the grave (because Cas was stuck somewhere, of course), but it had seemed rude to drink his morning coffee without offering Cas any, and this had seemed the best solution. (Dean usually ended
up pouring the second mug of coffee onto the grave. Which, granted, might just be a waste— Cas might not be able to sense it from wherever he was—but somehow it felt like something to offer.)

Dean took a sip from his own mug, simultaneously pouring a bit of coffee from the second mug onto the grave. He went on, "I think we definitely have some Darkness-spheres here on Earth. So, as of last night's news, we got a few little tsunamis now, which Sam is thinking might mean some water disappeared at the bottom of the ocean. Also a couple mines collapsed, and also an oil rig in the Arctic Ocean was sucked right down into the ocean all of a sudden, and the water level in the Black Sea is dropping. So... Sam and I are getting kind of worried."

Dean took another sip, and poured a little more coffee on the grave. "Still no word from the angels," he went on, "and Crowley's got his hands full, so he can't help either. We're trying anything we can think of, but..." Dean sighed. "What we can think of isn't much, to be honest. Sam and I are gonna head back to that angel playground-sandbox for another try at Hannah there, and we've been talking to other hunters too, but..." He bit his lip, squinting at the rising sun. "Shit, Cas, nobody knows what to do. We've been telling other hunters what we know about the Darkness... kind of left our role in it a little vague to be perfectly honest, but, anyway, a bunch of people are on it now, and everybody's trying all kinds of random spells and contacting miscellaneous spirits and all. Who knows, maybe something will work, but... Cas, if you got any ideas you really need to get your butt down here. I know you're stuck somewhere, obviously, but we could really use some advice. Sam and me, we're half focusing on those liminal-gods to try and find you, and half doing general Darkness research. I'm just hoping we'll find this Anthony dude pretty soon and convince him to tell us where you are." Dean finally took another sip of coffee, and gave Cas some more too.

"More soon, okay? I'll talk to you again at lunchtime for the Sext prayer. Yeah, I know I'm sexting you every day, ha ha ha, you know what I mean." This had become a running joke. Dean knew it was a bad pun, but it cheered Dean up to think of Cas (wherever Cas was) maybe smiling a little bit about the stupid joke.

"Okay, buddy," Dean finished. "Signing off. Here's the rest of your coffee." Dean poured the rest of Cas's coffee on the grave, slugged down the last of his own, and headed down the hill.

He arrived back in the bunker to find Sam hard at work on his laptop. Turned out Sam had started sending Cas his own morning prayers, but he no longer came up every morning with Dean to the hill, often electing to get an early start on the research instead. This morning, Dean knew Sam had been planning to keep hacking away at the long slog through the "Liminal Deities" list on Wikipedia, one tedious name at a time.

For days now they'd been tackling each name in turn. Dean had gotten almost all the way through the long list of Asian liminal gods, while Sam had been working through the pagan gods of the other continents. Both of them had been looking up the names in the bunker's references books, searching for any hint of a potentially ancient god, or one who could connect realms, or any connection with the name "Anthony."

So far, nothing.

"How're the liminals coming?" Dean called to Sam from the kitchen, as he rinsed out the two mugs. "You finish the Roman ones yet?"

"Mostly..." said Sam. He sounded a little depressed. "No dice. Got through Janus, Mercury, Portunes. Nothing about any of them being really old, nothing about the name Anthony, and none of the mediums I called up last night thought they were the right match. Also, Dean..." Sam hesitated. "There's more news from NASA this morning. You should come look."
That didn't sound good. "What, have we lost another planet?" Dean said, setting the mugs in the dishrack. He walked into the library, wiping his hands on a dishtowel, to find Sam staring at Google News on his laptop again.

"No," said Sam, "Or, not yet, I guess. But it turns out a whole bunch of asteroids had vanished from the asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter. Apparently NASA doesn't always track them every day so they hadn't realized so many were missing. And also, check this out." Sam turned the laptop toward Dean. Dean took a look:

NASA: SUN GOES "BLANK"

NO SUNSPOTS ON SUN AT ALL — FIRST TIME EVER
SOLAR ACTIVITY WANING

"Well, what the hell does that mean?" said Dean, peering at the news article. "Weren't there a ton of sunspots recently?"

"Yeah. They all just disappeared. No sunspots at all now."

"Maybe that's good?"

Sam shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine. Except... that bit at the end is kinda worrying."

Dean squinted at the "SOLAR ACTIVITY WANING" headline. "Um," said Dean, "The sun's solar activity... correct me if I'm wrong, but that keeps Earth alive, doesn't it?"

"Yep," said Sam. "Basically that's all that keeps the Earth from being an uninhabitable iceball like Pluto is." He grimaced and added, "Like Pluto was, I mean." He slapped the laptop closed and said, a forced brightness in his voice, "But solar activity's only down by a fraction of a percent. A fraction of a fraction, really. It might be nothing, even; it wobbles up and down a bit normally... it might be just coincidence... " He trailed off.

"Well," said Dean after a few moments, "Why don't... uh... why don't you keep going on the liminal-gods, I guess... and... " He thought for a moment, and said, slowly, "I think I'll take a look at Cas's notes."

Sam turned to give him a rather piercing look. Sam had actually been through some of Cas's notes already, but Dean had so far steadfastly refused to look at any of them. Actually Dean had been spending a lot more time up there — he'd gotten into the habit of spending every lunch hour up at Cas's little attic space, doing his guitar practice — but he only ever looked at the pages of lyrics. (He still hadn't gotten around to returning the little black feather, too. He kept it in his breast pocket every day, and put on his bedside table every night, but never seemed to remember to leave it up there. It had started to seem like it might be okay to hold onto it for a little while.)

But maybe it was time. If the very Sun was being affected, even just maybe being affected, Dean knew it was time to pull out all the stops. Which they were kind of doing anyway, actually, but... even the last little possibilities had to be tackled.

"I can, uh..." said Dean, feeling a little awkward. Though he was still not able to think about it too much, he knew he'd been acting a little... off. Maybe more than a little. And that Sam had been
worried about it.

Dean cleared his throat. "I can take a look at his notes." He tacked on an awkward shrug.

Sam studied him a moment longer. At last Sam nodded. Somewhat to Dean's relief Sam didn't launch into a big pep talk or anything, but merely said, "I already flipped through his first couple notebooks, remember. The ones that are stacked in the middle of the table. But I haven't done the most recent one — that pad of paper that was still open. I was gonna read through it this afternoon, but if you want to..."

"I'll do it," said Dean. "No problem."

"There's probably nothing in there," said Sam, now sounding a little morose. "There was nothing much in the others, just notes about how crappy all the Men Of Letters' books are. I think he'd have told me himself if he'd found anything firm."

"Gotta have faith, Sam," said Dean. It was his standard reply these days.

So, after a little more liminal-gods work and an abbreviated breakfast (an entire piece of toast for once), Dean headed up to Cas's attic room. It felt odder than he'd expected to be walking up there for any purpose other than guitar practice. Usually Dean only came up here at Sext, the noontime prayer, and only then to work his way through Cas's songs (He hadn't touched "I'll Fly Away" again, but had been working diligently on several of the other songs, and had made pretty good headway on "Rocky Mountain High," "Man of Constant Sorrow," and even "Puff The Magic Dragon.") But it wasn't Sext yet; it was only mid-morning, the sun still low, broad beams of sunlight slanting in through the eastern windows. It looked a little different than usual. Dean paused at the top of the stairs to cast a narrow-eyed look at the bands of sunlight; were they fainter than before? Did the sun look any different?

Actually it looked just the same as ever.

Maybe he and Sam were worrying about nothing? Maybe the sun "going blank" thing was just a coincidence?

And when has anything in our lives ever turned out to be "just coincidence"? thought Dean. He heaved a sigh, turned away, and made his way to Cas's little corner.

He patted the guitar (it felt like a greeting), running one finger over the strings briefly to check that it was still in tune. It sounded okay. Dean looked over at the end of the table with all the books, one hand still on the guitar.

It was weirdly hard to shake the feeling that reading Cas's notes implied a possibility that Cas might not be back to tell Dean his thoughts in person.

"C'mon, Dean," he muttered to himself at last. "Get to work. Get to work."

He patted the feather in his pocket for reassurance, and finally took the two steps over to the other end of the table, where he picked up Cas's most recent pad of paper.

Checking his watch, he realized it was almost time for the Terce prayer already — the "three hours
past dawn" prayer. After a little thought, Dean kicked off his shoes, went over to Cas's cot, and, a bit
gingerly, he sat down on it. Dean waited a moment, adjusting to the idea, and then carefully swung
his feet up and lay down, as he had once before.

He lay right where Cas had lain, and propped his head up on Cas's pillow. Then he closed his eyes
to concentrate, holding the pad of paper tightly in his hands, and said:

"Castiel, Castiel, Castiel. This is Dean, praying to you. Cas..." Dean opened his eyes to look at the
pad of paper. "I'm looking at the rest of your notes today. I'm lying on your cot actually... hope you
don't mind. I'm... I guess I'm trying to get in your head a bit." Dean took a breath. "Look, truth is, it's
a little weird to just read your notes instead of having you here to just tell me stuff. Help me out here,
huh? If you've got any hints, help me figure them out, okay? Could really use your help here, buddy.
Wherever you are."

Dean paused a moment, glancing around. Listening.

He never could help listening for that possible sound of wings.

Of course it never came.

Dean realized he was holding his breath. He shook his head, annoyed at himself, for he knew
perfectly well that Cas was stuck somewhere. If Cas could've flown in, he would have done so
weeks ago. Cas was obviously stuck somewhere. Purgatory or Heaven, obviously.

"Okay, buddy," said Dean at last. "I know you can't get here right now. So I'll just go ahead and
read it. But you better explain all the details, later, okay? Next time we see each other, you can take
me through it yourself, okay?"

Dean shuffled around to get a little more upright, folding the pillow up behind his head, and he
began to read.

Cas had taken quite a lot of notes. Most of them turned out to be summaries of the books Cas had
been reading, with little scribbles about other books to track down or notable ideas worth following
up on. Here and there there were more fully written-out sentences, almost like little journal entries.
Dean flipped through a large set of pages at the beginning that summarized no less than fifteen huge
books Cas had been through recently — the books that were still stacked on the table, Dean realized.
Cas had tersely dismissed most of them. ("Complete rubbish." "The hierarchy of angels is completely
incorrect. Where do humans get these ideas?") A rare few had been praised ("Surprisingly good
summary of early Heavenly history") but seemed not to have had anything useful. And then Dean
flipped a page and read:

*Mark of Cain was too easy to remove.*

*Mark of Cain was too weak.*

It was one of Cas's longer entries, the journal-like kind. Dean sat up on the cot, wedging the pillow
behind his back and bringing his knees up, so that he could prop the notebook on his knees and
study the entry more closely.
Mark of Cain was too easy to remove.

Mark of Cain was too weak.

Too easy to remove: Removable by a witch?? Seems ridiculous. The lock that holds Creation together, that holds the Darkness at bay, should have been built to be able to withstand far more than a witch. Even the strongest of the natural witches are far less powerful than archangels. I felt Rowena's strongest wrath, and I have felt the archangels' wrath as well, and Rowena is simply no match for them. Heavenly lore says the lock should have been able to withstand even an archangel. Remember: Lucifer himself could not remove it — could only transfer it. Lucifer tore me apart to the subatomic level with a snap of a finger, yet he could not remove the Mark? While Rowena was able to remove the Mark with a simple spell that only made me temporarily ill? Something is wrong here.

Mark of Cain was also TOO WEAK. Did not make Dean as evil as it should have. Was not acting fast enough. Dean is strong, but he is only a man; the Mark should have been able to corrupt him much faster. I should not have been able to mantle him, in his dreams, as I did; I am only a seraph, not an archangel, and a weakened seraph at that. This was the First Curse from Dawn of Creation. Should have been stronger. Should have overpowered me easily; should have pulled me into the black ocean as well. Should have made him much worse, much faster.

Even when Dean was a demon, somehow he was not a truly evil demon. A demon bearing the actual Mark of Cain should have raged over the Earth; he should have had humanity quaking in fear all across the globe. Yet somehow he corralled its influence to minor aspects of his life, for the better part of a year.

Dean read this section twice over, and raised his eyes to stare at the trees outside of Cas's window. He barely saw the leafless branches, as he thought back.

That bizarre time as a demon... it was very hard to think about even now; the memories had a hallucinatory quality to them. But Dean did remember much of it. There had been an intoxicating fizz of power, yes; an addictive lack of remorse or conscience, yes, that too. He'd known, even then, that he could have run roughshod over the entire continent, corrupting souls left and right. He'd felt the taste of that power, and its faint hum of possibility. But what he had actually done was...

"Karaoke," Dean murmured to himself, still staring out at the trees.

Bad karaoke.

Oh, and, he'd hurt a girl's feelings. He'd slept around and been a bit rude and made a girl feel a little bad.

He'd horsed around with Crowley. They'd gotten drunk. There'd been that time with the triplets. They'd played foosball.

"Foosball," Dean muttered. "Foosball and karaoke."

Something that had long nagged at Dean came clear: I was an asshole, but I wasn't evil.
Why didn't it turn me evil faster?

I was made far more evil by that hellish spider-thing, in a single hour, than I ever was by the Mark of Cain in an entire year.

"You're right, Cas," Dean muttered. "You're right."

At last he turned back to Cas's notes:

---

**Conclusion:** Mark of Cain must have weakened over time. Weakened dramatically.

Should not have been so easily breakable. Dangerous to entrust all of Creation to a single removable curse that would weaken so much over time. Why was such an important role entrusted to a weak lock? One that would erode to the point where a mere witch could remove it?

This was a poor method of holding the Darkness back. [Cas had underlined this.]

Did God **want** the Mark removed? ["Want" had been underlined heavily.]

**Theory:** The Mark was just a stopgap. A temporary measure. Never was intended to last this long.

What happened?

I do have one idea.

I may be misled here by own memories, as faulty as they are. I have not bothered Sam with this as I do not fully trust my own memories of the deep past and have been unable to find any corroboration in any of these texts. (After Naomi I do not trust myself) The truth is that my memories of the dawn of Creation are a little fuzzy. But this is what I seem to recall: (1) When word spread that Lucifer had been given the Mark, the angels all thought it was just for a short while. A month at most. I recall one of my brothers telling me that Lucifer himself had said it was "only for a little while." (2) There also was a rumor that Lucifer said specifically that God had gone to look at the Crown of Heaven, and that God told Lucifer that He would return shortly and would then **remove** the Mark from Lucifer. I do not recall who told me this story.

Both these tales, or rumors rather, are not much to hang a theory on. Furthermore I have never discussed this with any other angel. We have long been most strongly discouraged from discussing anything Lucifer said. In the garrison we were always trained to consider everything Lucifer said (even faint memories of mere rumors of things Lucifer **might** have said) as inherently lie and falsehood.

But I cannot help thinking now... what if there is some grain of truth to these old half-remembered tales?

What if Lucifer told the truth?

Did anybody ever see God again after that? The exact date of His disappearance has long been unclear. Could **that** possibly have been the last time He was seen? When he went to gaze upon the Crown?

What if Lucifer was never intended to carry the Mark for so long?
What if the Mark was originally intended to be only a temporary stopgap measure?

What if God was planning to build a better lock? A permanent lock? A stronger one? What if he gave Lucifer a temporary lock (the Mark) and told him to hold it for a week, while God planned and built a better one, and went to view the Crown of Heaven for inspiration?

What happened when God went to the Crown of Heaven?

Did something go wrong?

There followed a strange set of diagrams: neat grids of intersecting lines with little nests of circles here and there, and arrows drawn between the circles. Cas had written at the bottom, "I am drawing here on information from the Leviathans, but again I fear my memory may be faulty. Also I believe many of these gates are closed."

Dean puzzled over the diagrams for a while, and turned to the next page, only to find:

I should travel to the Crown of Heaven and investigate for myself.

I feel so keenly that I must put this right.

It is dangerous — perhaps impossible — to view the Crown firsthand. But if my memory is at all accurate about these old tales, perhaps a journey to the Crown could pierce this mystery about the history of the Mark, such as why it weakened so much, and perhaps reveal some clue about a better lock for the Darkness.

It must be me who does the journey. This is my fault, and it is my responsibility.

I will prepare for the journey, and I will leave on my own.

Maybe I can do one more hunt with Sam and Dean first. Just as a farewell. But I'll take my own vehicle, and after that last hunt is completed, I'll tell them of my plans and I'll go.

This may be completely pointless, but I have found no better option. Time grows short. I must at least make the attempt.

Dean was sitting bolt upright on Cas's little cot by now, bent over the notebook.

"Cas, that was why you brought your own car?" he murmured, tracing his fingers over the writing on the page. Cas had insisted on driving his own car to Ohio. (Later, Sam had arranged with an Ohio hunter friend to put the Continental in safe storage. They had still not retrieved it; Dean had been
waiting for Cas's return, planning to go with Cas to pick it up.)

Dean said, slowly, "Was... was Ohio that last hunt? Cas..."

For a moment Dean felt himself falter; as if the parachute were ripping, the free fall accelerating... the black ocean below threatening to overwhelm him once more. With an effort he fought it back, gritting his teeth.

He opened his eyes to find himself curled on his side on the cot, clutching Cas's notebook in one hand... and Cas's pillow in the other. And the memory that brought on, of waking to find himself clutching a pillow, and of what Cas had sometimes done then, was altogether too painful.

*He called it "mantling"* Dean remembered, his face pressed now to Cas's pillow. It seemed he could almost catch a faint whiff of Cas's scent, even now, a scent he had not even been aware he knew. It was rather like the scent of the little feather, actually... ever so faint, barely perceptible... something like a mix of wind and rain, and wildflowers and sunlight...

He breathed it in, burying his nose in the pillow.

*Cas called it "mantling,"* Dean thought again. There'd been a reference to "mantling" in the notes. *He was "mantling" me in my dreams... whatever that means. And he thought he wouldn't even be to help me... he thought he'd be pulled into the nightmares too. But he tried anyway.*

Dean found himself groping for the little feather in his pocket, and the moment his fingers touched it, out of nowhere he thought of the baby parrot. Its soft fuzzy little head, the way its little eyes had closed in sleepiness. The way it had stretched out its stubby little rainbow wings...

He had not dreamed of the baby parrot in weeks now.

Dean scrambled to his feet, straightened out the pillow and left the cot.


Cas didn't answer, of course. Dean paced around for several more minutes, walking restlessly from the window to the guitar and back again in a big circle, his arms folded tightly over his chest. Eventually he managed to sit. This time he selected the chair that was next to the guitar — the chair where he'd been doing most of his guitar practice. This seemed the safest place, and there he sat to read a little more of Cas's notes. He kept one hand on the pad of paper as he read. (His other hand drifted repeatedly to touch the guitar, now and then stroking one finger over the guitar's scarred finish, and occasionally moving to touch the edge of the little feather in his breastpocket. Dean was not fully aware that he was doing this.)

Dean read for several more minutes, but the next ten pages of notes had no more clues. It became clear, though, that Cas had continued pondering the idea of "traveling to the Crown of Heaven." There were continued comments about it all through the next ten pages, and several more of the odd little diagrams.

Perhaps it was just another doomed attempt to track down God.

Maybe Cas had just been on a wild goose chase.

Or maybe he'd been onto something?
The noontime prayer — the "Sext-ing" prayer — had to be cut short, Dean offering a rushed apology to Cas. "I'll sing you a song later, Cas," he said, as he hurried downstairs. "I gotta show this to Sam. This stuff about the Crown. Interesting stuff, Cas."

He strode into the library, only to find Sam looking up at him with a beaming smile.

"Dean!" Sam called, his face bright with excitement. "I got it!"

Dean slowed. "What?"

Sam slapped his hand on the table in triumph. "Last friggin' liminal god on the ENTIRE friggin' list, if you can believe it! Very last name! Elegua. Listen to this—" (he quoted from a reference book he'd been poring over) "Here it is: Elegua is the orisha of crossroads and—"

"The what?"

"Orishas. Pagan African gods," explained Sam. He started over with, "I found a whole book about them. It says here, 'Elegua is the orisha of crossroads and connections between realms. He is the oldest of the orishas, one of the few who was never human, and he was the first spirit to view Creation after God. Elegua is said to have witnessed the birth of Death.' And, Dean, check this out: 'Recently syncretized with Saint Anthony.'"

Dean hustled around to Sam's side of the table, Cas's pad of paper still clutched in his hand. "What's syncretized?" he asked.

"It seems to be sort of a blending together of an old god with a modern saint," said Sam. "Sounds like a lot of the old pagan gods took on the names of Catholic saints recently. Easy way to acquire a new bunch of converts. Basically it means, Elegua just kinda took over the Anthony name recently in order to get a bunch of Saint Anthony fans on his side."

Dean stared at the "Elegua" entry. They'd found it. They'd found the liminal god who could tell them where Cas was! The oldest liminal god of all! Deciphering Cas's Crown of Heaven diagrams would be a hell of a lot easier if they could find Cas himself.

"So where's this Elegua from?" Dean said eagerly, pulling up a chair. "How do we talk to him?"

Sam grimaced. "Well, that's the catch. This guy's major league, Dean. It may not be that simple."

"Wait, isn't he just a pagan god?" said Dean. "What's the big deal? We've dealt with pagan gods before. Yeah, they're full of themselves, kinda dicks really, but—"

"A pagan African god, Dean," said Sam, giving Dean a stern look. "You know, African, Africa like where humans began. Crowley wasn't kidding when he said Stone Age — this is dawn-of-time stuff. Seriously old-school. Elegua's one of a bunch of gods from WAY back, when we were all just running around with bows and arrows and loincloths." Sam leaned back in his chair and said, "You know how a ton of cultures have a different pagan god for each natural force? Goddess of the ocean, god of fire, goddess of fertility, all that kind of thing?"

"Yeah, but that's standard polytheistic stuff," said Dean. "Didn't the Greeks do that, like Persephone and Poseidon and all that? The Romans, too?"

"Yeah. The Greeks, the Romans, the Norse, all of them. Point is, Elegua and his bros were apparently the originals. Way before the Roman gods, way before the Greek and Norse gods. These
books here—" (Sam tapped the stack of books at his side) "—are pretty much saying these were the first gods humanity ever worshipped. I mean, the big God was around, of course, but humanity hadn't found out about him yet, and these orisha guys were very next on the scene. Elegua was the first of the whole bunch of them. The more I read the more it seems like the first three beings in existence were God, Elegua and Death, in that order. And, Dean..." Sam sighed. "Death was not all that easy to deal with. And we've never seen hide or hair of God. So Elegua is probably going to be difficult."

"Well, come on, at least we can try. We can at least ask, right? How do we contact him?"

Sam pursed his lips and let out a big puff of air. "That's tricky too. The original orishas are only really still worshipped today in Africa, and a bit in South America and the Caribbean. And... the problem with that is..."

"... it's outside the US," said Dean, slumping in his chair.

It had been a problem for a while now. Ever since they'd tangled with the FBI, they couldn't travel easily anywhere outside the USA.

Sam nodded. "Having our names on the FBI no-fly list definitely has its disadvantages sometimes. I mean, I'm pretty good with Photoshop and Kinko's, but forging a federal passport that'll pass those airport scanners is a whole different deal."

Dean ran a hand over Cas's handwriting on the pad of paper. "We gotta find a way to contact this Elegua, Sam," said Dean, sitting up on his chair. "Because we gotta find Cas, and, something else —" Dean held up the pad of paper. "Cas had a whole theory going. He hadn't told you yet because he wasn't sure about it, but... I think he might've been on to something. He's got some good points about the Mark of Cain. That it shouldn't have been breakable by a witch, that Lucifer couldn't break it. That it shouldn't have been that weak. He thinks it must've weakened over time."

Sam thought about that, and slowly he nodded. "That... almost... makes sense," He said. "Actually, I've been wondering about how Rowena got so strong."

"Well, long story short, Cas had some old angel lore that he wasn't too sure about, but he was starting to really focus on it and I think he might've been on to something. So..." Dean paused, thinking. "First things first here. First, we find someone who can contact orishas. Then we talk to Elegua. Then Elegua helps us find Cas. Then we get Cas back." Dean paused here a moment, a little disoriented at how easy it sounded. How close they seemed to reaching his long-standing, desperate goal at last: Get Cas back. It sounded feasible. It sounded possible. It was going to happen. "And then," Dean went on, encouraged, "Cas tells us where the Crown of Heaven is, and we all go look at it together and figure out what went wrong with the Mark of Cain."

"Wait," said Sam. "What the hell is the Crown of Heaven?"

Dean flipped past the pages in Cas's notebook. It fell open to a page of the mysterious little diagrams, and Dean said, "I have no friggin' clue."
A/N - Plot plot plot! Ooo!

A few things:

Elegua and the other orishas are real. (I mean, there's real lore about them.) They are ancient West African gods. They are best known in the USA from their connection to Caribbean santeria-style religions that were brought to the New World via the West African slave trade. This includes some relations like "Papa Legba" (a variant of Elegua) that are involved in Deep-South-style hoodoo-influenced religions. (Which is actually why Supernatural's first foray into crossroads-god mythology involved a trip to the Deep South, to Mississippi specifically, for the episode "Crossroads Blues.")

My knowledge of the orishas comes from the Brazilian candomble religion, though, and the mythology I'm using here - Elegua as a "non human" orisha, second on the scene after God, witnessing the birth of Death, etc. - is all Brazilian style. I was once involved in that world and though I do not worship orishas myself, I have friends who do and I am trying here to be deeply, deeply respectful of the orishas. So even though this has only been a passing mention, I need to state clearly that I have the greatest respect for the orishas and their followers. Any errors are my own.

Elegua is indeed syncretized with Saint Anthony. Some of you were wondering why I chose "Anthony"... well, that's really the modern name of the oldest known crossroads god! Yes, syncretization is a thing: clever, huh? Elegua is also sometimes syncretized with Saint Michael but I decided to leave that connection alone because of other connotations of the name "Michael" for Supernatural fans... you know what I mean. :)

And... the Sun has indeed gone weirdly "blank" recently. It had a big peak of sunspots a few years back and then this spring went strangely "blank", its face as smooth as it has ever been, accompanied by a tiny, but measurable, drop in solar activity. The whole sunspot cycle has been really weird the last few years. Also Jupiter's Red Spot, as I mentioned before, has really been shrinking. Basically I've taken all astronomical oddities that are really happening and have folded them into this fic. (Though I'll confess I totally forgot the Pluto probe was going to be sending back new pictures the very week I destroyed Pluto in this fic! That was kind of amazing. It makes Pluto's destruction in the fic even more poignant....)

So now Dean and Sam "just" have to find Elegua. Easy, huh? What they don't know yet is that it is by no means easy to get an orisha to talk. Will they be able to find Elegua, and to convince him to search for Cas? And why hasn't Dean heard from the baby parrot? And what is happening to the Sun? And is Dean really sane again now or is he going to fall apart all over again? Stay tuned! More next week.

If you want to inspire my work on the next chapter please send me feedback on this one! I really love to hear what worked and what your favorite parts were - it helps so much. It helps me want to spend my weekend writing, and helps me shape the next part. Thank you all so much!

edit: Whoops, I published a Broken chapter to Into The Fire accidentally today (Sat)... ha ha ha. Sorry if I confused anybody with Cas suddenly being alive with a broken wing, lol! Picked the wrong fic on my drop-down menu (Broken and Into The Fire are right next to each other) Thanks to those who wrote in about the error - I have moved the Broken chapter where it belongs (and now you know why I'm extra frantic about writing time - trying to update ITF Fridays and Broken Saturdays is running me ragged!) Wish me luck and please tune in next Friday for the real chapter 9! :)
A/N - I'm under intense pressure to finish 2 science manuscripts this weekend and I also just got invited to go do some seabird work next Friday on a remote island. Yipes, suddenly I'm scrambling to get everything done! Ms #1 is coming along ok, but ms #2 is freaking me out. It's not a big deal or anything, just my job and career on the line y'know, soooooo, upshot, I didn't get as much fanfic writing time as usual this week. Just one scene, actually. But it's a fairly meaty scene and a solid 5500 words. Hope you enjoy it!

"So I'm picturing a crown that God actually wore," Sam said the next day, in a mid-morning break from their research. "Like, the crown he wears while he sits upon his Heavenly throne."

"Maybe it's like his halo," offered Dean. "God's halo, right? That he wears like a crown? Maybe he could take it off and put it aside when he wanted a break."

"Stick it in his closet, you mean?" said Sam, with a little smile. "Hang it on a coat hook?"

"Maybe? On a crown-hook?" said Dean, grinning back at him. Sam laughed.

It was odd to hear Sam laugh. It was odd, too, to smile back at him. Smiles still felt strange on Dean's face, as if his skin had to creak into an unfamiliar configuration. He still couldn't shake a feeling that smiling wasn't part of the normal day. Almost as if he might have to apply for a license-to-smile somewhere, or that he might be breaking a rule. A new rule, a commandment almost, that had come into force after Ohio: *Thou shalt not smile.*

*Thou shalt not be happy, ever again.*

Dean didn't realize that he'd stopped smiling, and was now staring vacantly down at the table, till he heard Sam clear his throat. He glanced back up to find that Sam's smile had disappeared too.

Dean rubbed a hand over his eyes to try to reboot his face, and tried to remember what they'd been talking about. The Crown, right. He said, "Maybe the Crown is wherever Heaven keeps its most valuable stuff. In a vault or an armory or something. Like, wherever they keep the crown jewels, and things like those weapons Cas was looking for that time, remember? Precious artifacts."

Sam blinked. "Whoa," he said. "Artifacts.... You just reminded me of something." He levered himself up out of his chair, took a couple long strides to the next library table and began searching through several precariously high stacks of books that were piled up at the far end of the table.

"What are those, anyway?" said Dean. "Where'd they come from?" New stacks of books had been appearing over the last couple days.

"Been working through Cas's books," said Sam, as he scanned the book titles. "Found a bunch more books about myths and mythical creatures yesterday, when I was looking for orisha books. Cas had a whole box of 'em behind that bookcase of his. Must've been library books he was still cataloging. I just piled them all here." He was bent over the tallest stack of books now, his head twisted almost
completely sideways as he tried to read the titles. He zeroed in on a certain title and tried to yank a book out from the bottom of the stack and the whole pile toppled over, evading Sam's last-second attempt to save them. Books skidded all over the table, but Sam straightened up in triumph with a worn old volume in his hands.

"The Encyclopedia Of Mythological Artifacts And Obscure Items!" Sam said, hefting it in his hand. It was a fat, leather-bound book that looked at least a century old, if not two. "Worth a look, huh?"

And once again, there was that rare flash of a smile on Sam's face. Perhaps a more uncertain smile this time, perhaps a little lopsided. But at least this time Dean managed to return the smile without straining himself too much.

They both got back to their work. Sam curled up in one of the leather armchairs with the Encyclopedia Of Mythological Artifacts And Obscure Items on his knee, paging through it quietly, while Dean continued working his way through a list of phone calls to local mediums, psychics and priests who might, conceivably, be able to contact Elegua.

Half an hour later Dean set his phone down and crossed another name off his list. "Lots of Papa Legba leads," he reported to Sam, "but it's not quite the right name, is it? These orishas, Sam, it's complicated, they've all got multiple names and I think we need to make sure that—"

"Whoa," said Sam, who apparently wasn't listening at all. "Found something. Listen to this." He cleared his throat and read out loud:

"Heaven's Crown, Crown of Heaven — Myths of the Crown of Heaven are very few and very confusing. A few faint scraps of stories date to ancient Thrace and the Black Sea coast, likely predating even the Epic of Gilgamesh. The Crown of Heaven is said to have incalculable power. The Thracian tales say that on occasion it can bathe all of Heaven in a beauteous flare of beatific radiance, along with a dazzling wind that can reach even the lowly Earth and can even extend to Hell and the farthest realms of Creation. Its location, however, is unknown. It is said to be so radiant that none but God can view it directly. Treasure-seekers beware: One scrap of pre-Babylonian parchment hints that The Crown can annihilate a human soul in an instant, with no hope of afterlife; furthermore it asserts that no human has viewed the Crown and returned. A second scrap mentions that the Crown is guarded by formidable warriors who were molded by God specifically for the purpose."

"Oh, that's delightful," said Dean. "Let's just head right on up to Heaven and take a look at it. Maybe we can bring a picnic."

Sam sighed. "I guess this isn't going to be easy. Well, you keep working on the Elegua names, and I'll—"

There was a rapping on the door. The front door, up by the spiral staircase.

Sam and Dean looked at each other.

Nobody ever came to the bunker. Nobody ever knocked on the front door. Friends like Charlie and Cas had always just walked in. And enemies, of course, didn't tend to knock.

Sam and Dean both slid into hunter mode with long-practiced ease. Sam set his book down silently
and rose to his feet, while Dean slid out of his chair and reached over to the shelf where Sam had stashed their guns (Sam had a habit of keeping guard of Dean's ivory-handled pistol, these days). Dean grabbed his own pistol, handed Sam his, tucked an angel-blade in his belt for good measure, and together they tiptoed to the maproom to peer up at the spiral staircase.

The knocking came again. Along with a muffled voice calling, "Hello?"

"At least they're not blasting in the doors," whispered Sam.

"Wards might be keeping 'em out," muttered Dean back.

They inched up to the top stair landing, where was a little spyhole set in the wall. Sam peered through it and whispered, "Two people. Man and woman." He squinted at the tiny peephole, his forehead creased with puzzlement. "Woman looks a bit familiar, but I can't get a clear view. They just look human, but...can't tell."

Dean gestured for Sam to slink to the other side of the door, and then he called, his voice as gruff as he could make it, "Who is it? What do you want?"

"Dean, open the door," called a voice. A female voice.

A slightly familiar female voice.

"I'm looking for Castiel," the voice added.

Dean and Sam exchanged a glance and then, with a nod to Sam, Dean swung the door open, pistol already aimed. Sam swung around with his gun up too. And there, right in the line of fire of both weapons, was...

Hannah.

Hannah, in her original vessel. Glossy dark brown hair, sleeked-down bangs, perfectly applied lipstick, ivory skin and all; it was Hannah. She still had one hand raised, about to knock again. Dean and Sam had both pistols aimed right at her, and for a moment they just stared.

There was a man with her. An unfamiliar man. He flinched at the sight of the guns and clutched at Hannah's arm, even trying, briefly, to shield her. But she turned her head to give him a quiet smile, as if to say that she didn't need his help.

The man flushed. He let go of her arm as if it were red-hot, and took a jerky step away from her.

"It's all right," Hannah said to the man. She turned to Dean and said, "Where's Castiel?"

Dean and Sam stared at her.

"I need to talk to Castiel," she said, and she pushed right between them, brushing nonchalantly past the pistol barrels to step onto the wrought-iron stair landing. She leaned over the railing, looking down at the maproom, and called "Castiel? Castiel? I need to talk to you. Castiel!"

A moment later she was trotting down the stairs, looking around curiously. The nervous-looking man squeezed past Sam and Dean with an apologetic glance and hurried after her.

"Why, do come on in," said Dean, closing the door behind them. "So nice of you to drop by. After my ten thousand prayers."

"Hannah?" said Sam. Both brothers holstered their weapons and headed down the stairs after her.
"Didn't you... weren't you, like, leading Heaven or something?"

Dean called after her, "I thought Cas said you weren't going to take vessels again! That didn't last long, huh?"

Hannah didn't answer either of them. She was walking right through the library now, peering into all the corners. The worried-looking man was still trailing after her from a few feet away, looking somewhat like a lost puppy.

Dean moved a little closer and looked at the man, whose attention seemed riveted on Hannah. The man's expression was an odd mixture of fear, awe, and... concern.

Something clicked.

"She your wife?" Dean said, on a guess.

The man glanced at Dean and nodded. "I'm Joe," he said. He gestured at Hannah, who was now walking to the other end of the library, still looking around. "That's my wife... Caroline. I mean... she's in there somewhere. I think."

Hannah had reached the very end of the library, where the old telescope stood. She called "Castiel!" a few more times, looking down both hallways and glancing occasionally back to the library, as if expecting Cas to materialize in one of the leather chairs. At last she turned to Dean and said, "Where's Castiel?"

"He's not here," said Dean.

"Where is he? I must speak with him."

"Weren't you done with vessels?" said Sam. "First the sandbox guard, and now this?"

She gave a little sigh. "Circumstances forced my hand. The sandbox guard... well, there was no other way to talk to Castiel. That was the only vessel I've taken since... well, until..."

She paused, with a brief glance at Joe.

"Until snatching poor Caroline back?" said Dean. "Forcing her to help you again? And dragging her husband around too?"

"I did not force her," said Hannah—though she seemed to be having a little trouble meeting Dean's eyes. "Yes, I had to break my vow. As I said, circumstances have forced my hand. But I did not force her. When I explained to Caroline the nature of the problem, she was willing to allow me one more visit." She took a few hesitant steps toward Joe; he just stared back at her, his mouth tight, till she stopped advancing.

She swallowed and turned toward Dean, facing him now from the other side of the table. "I promised my vessel, and her husband, that this would take only a day and that I would release her unharmed. I intend to keep that promise. I asked for their help because I must find Castiel, Dean. There's a terrible threat facing Heaven—"

"Let me guess," interrupted Dean. "Heaven's getting eaten up by big ol' multidimensional bowling balls of blackness that are rolling around obliterating everything. Knocking angels over right and left like ten-pins. Gobbling them up like a giant Pac-Man of Darkness. Am I right?"

Hannah blinked.
"I don't know what a... pack... man is," she said. "But I gather you've noticed similar problems on Earth too? So— Yes. Spheres of Darkness." She shook her head, adding, in a rather soft voice, "Thousands of personal-heavens have been obliterated. Snuffed completely out of existence, like so many soap-bubbles being popped. We managed to evacuate many refugee souls, but I'm afraid quite a few were lost."

A chill stole into Dean's heart. Near him he saw Sam straighten slightly, and knew the same thought must have occurred to him. Dean said, the words coming stiffly to his lips, "Not... Bobby? Or... our... dad?"

"Our mom?" said Sam, his voice tight too. "Our friends?"

Hannah gave them a brief smile. "None that you know have been harmed. In fact all of them volunteered to take in refugees. The Darkness-spheres were ranging widely, but Heaven is vast, and so far they've only affected a small percentage of the personal heavens. This week we've finally managed to corral the spheres together in a small inner area, but..." She sighed. "They keep budding. They are building up pressure. Soon we won't be able to contain them, and they'll start spreading again." She glanced around again. "I was hoping Castiel would be willing to help. Where is he?"

There was a brittle pause.

"Have you... uh," said Dean. "Have you heard any of my prayers?"

"I've been very busy," she said. "I had to divert all prayers to a reception system temporarily."

"Wait... you.. " said Dean, frowning. "You were sending me to, what, angel voicemail?"

Hannah looked a little embarrassed. "Sorry. Things have been quite chaotic. Look, what do you mean Castiel's gone? Where did he go? I've been trying to reach him for weeks."

Dean had never yet been able to say the words (the awful words). Not to Sam. Not to Crowley. And apparently he couldn't say them to Hannah either.

An empty silence stretched out.

Sam finally broke the silence with a blunt, "He died."

Hannah and Joe both turned to stare at him.

"What?" said Hannah. She looked appalled.

"Just his vessel, Sam," hissed Dean under his breath.

Sam added, "Well, his, uh, his vessel died, at least. We were... Actually we were kind of hoping you could tell us where he is. Where angels go when they die."

"He died?" said Hannah. "Castiel died?" Her eyes dropped to the floor, and she stood silent a moment.

"Just his vessel," repeated Dean, but Hannah wasn't even listening. She murmured, almost to herself, "Somehow I thought... I thought he of all angels would not die. He never dies...."

Then she raised her eyes to Dean and demanded, "How did he die?"

Again Dean stalled. His mouth opened; nothing came out.
Again Sam rescued him. "It happened about six weeks ago," said Sam, taking a smooth half-step in front of Dean, shielding him partly from Hannah's view. Sam went on, "He, uh, his human vessel got... got killed. Um... stabbed. Looked like the actual cause of death was blood loss. We, uh... we buried his vessel up on that hill right outside, across the field." Sam made a vague gesture with his arm, waving his hand up toward the unseen hill outside the bunker. "We were hoping he might be... resurrected? Dean's been praying to you every day to see if you knew where he was. We were hoping you could tell us what happens to... angels... when..."

Sam paused; Hannah seemed to be crumpling right before their eyes. Her shoulders fell, she had dropped her gaze to the floor again, and she suddenly looked completely exhausted. Joe actually grabbed a chair and stuck it under her, and she slumped down into it, put one elbow on the table and leaned her head into her hand, as if the effort of holding her vessel upright had become too much.

"We were wondering," repeated Sam, sounding very uncertain now, "if you could tell us... what happens to angels... when... they... die?"

Slowly Hannah raised her eyes to Sam's, her head still leaning on her hand. She looked at Sam, and then she looked right at Dean.

She held Dean's eyes.

Dean stared back at her, riveted by the expression on her face. *She's grieving*, he knew. The sorrow and the shock were clear in her face. He felt his heart clench, as if it were turning to ice within him.

*She's grieving. And that means that she thinks...*

*That mean that angels don't...*

"We actually don't know," said Hannah abruptly, glancing down at the table and its clutter of books. "We don't know what happens when angels die."

Dean let out a gasp of air, suddenly feeling so wobbly that he had to put one hand on the back of another chair. (Sam put a quiet hand on his shoulder for a moment.)

Hannah traced one hand over a nearby book, flipping idly through its pages, and said, "The assumption has always been that we angels have no afterlife, but the real truth is that none of us know. It used to be very rare for angels to die, you see, so it's not like there have been many cases. Most angel deaths have occurred only in the past five years, and... well. All we know is that we don't see them in Heaven again." She gave a tired shrug. "We just don't know. Dogma has been that we simply... end. But, to be frank, I no longer believe in all the old dogma as I once did."

"So... uh..." Sam began. "If it helps, we, uh... we think Cas died human." He darted a very brief glance over at Dean.

Dean realized, at that moment, something he'd never really grasped till now: *Sam still didn't know what happened.*

Somehow Dean had never gotten around to telling him.

Sam still didn't know.

But, thank goodness, Sam didn't press for details. He only gave Dean that one brief glance, and then looked back at Hannah and said, "We think Cas died without his grace. Would that affect what happened to him after?"
"Oh," said Hannah, blinking at him. "Hmm. Well. I wonder..."

She lifted one hand to her mouth and began to chew at the edge of a thumbnail. The gesture seemed touchingly human.

She was quiet for an unnervingly long time. At last she stopped worrying at her thumbnail, lowered her hand and said, slowly, "There's not much precedent. If he died as a human... He could actually be in the Veil, I suppose?" (Dean drew a slightly ragged breath, starting to feel a little better. Cas might be in the Veil!) After another long pause she added, thoughtfully, "I wonder if he could be in Heaven after all?"

Cas might be in the Veil! Cas might be in Heaven!

"What do you mean you 'wonder?'" said Dean, "Don't you know who's in Heaven? Don't you keep track of these things?"

Hannah gave him a very tired look. "It's been such chaos. Ever since the Veil was closed, and now with the death of Death too, the record-keeping has completely broken down. The reapers haven't been turning in any of their paperwork anymore. Some even went rogue. They're all just acting independently, shuttling souls here and there randomly, however the whim takes them. When they're even able to get souls out of the Veil at all, which isn't often. We've completely lost track of which souls ended up where. I wonder..." She thought a moment. "It's conceivable that a reaper could have taken him..."

"Wait — I thought angels don't have souls?" asked Sam.

"That's correct," Hannah said, nodding. "We don't have a reservoir of power stored in a soul the way you do. We store power in the grace instead, and, as you know, a grace can be removed. But — we do have selves. An essence, a spirit; a consciousness. That is, even if the grace is removed, an angel is still himself. So...." She thought a moment. "If an angel dies as a human, would a reaper take the angel's essence to Heaven? Put it in a personal-Heaven without telling anyone?" She stared down at the table, once again tracing her fingers idly over one of the books, and let out a slow breath. "To be honest I don't know," she said at last, looking up. "This is an unprecedented situation... an angel dying as a human when Death is gone and the Veil is closed?" She shook her head. "I really don't know. It would be wonderful if he has survived, but... I fear for him, I truly do."

Joe spoke up for the first time in a while. He asked Hannah, "Why did you want to find him specifically? Can't you find some other angel?"

Hannah sighed. She stood up, sleeking her hair down with one hand and brushing her bangs out of her eyes with the other, clearly trying to compose herself. "Castiel was... different," she said at last. "He's always been unusual. He has a creativity, and an independence, that was not the norm. I once thought it a flaw, but came to see it as a gift. He tended to come up with different ideas than any other angel would. He might not have been able to help, I suppose, but I did hope to consult with him."

"Cas did have an idea," said Dean. He reached out to Cas's pad of paper, which was still sitting on the table by Dean's notes. Dean flipped it open to one of the diagrams and skidded it across the table at Hannah. "He was thinking of traveling to the Crown of Heaven. Drew these diagrams about it. He had this idea God might have gone to look at it, way back when God was first dealing with the Darkness. Do you know where the Crown of Heaven is?"

Hannah frowned down at the complex little sketches. "Whatever could he have meant by that? That's... odd. Very odd. Nobody can view the Crown. Only God can view the Crown. Well, God
and the guardians." She picked up the pad of paper for a closer look.

"Guardians?" said Sam. "What, the 'formidable warriors'?"

She nodded, still studying the diagrams. "They are more powerful than the angels. We angels cannot go anywhere near there without being torn to pieces. Even the archangels stay away. We've always been advised to stay at a safe distance from the Crown."

"How far is a 'safe distance'?" asked Dean.

"Oh, a few million miles is the usual rule of thumb," said Hannah, still frowning at Cas's diagram. "I don't know what this is. What is this from—" She squinted at Cas's note at the bottom. "Leviathans? This is information from the Leviathans? I don't know what this is. I'm sorry. I don't know what he was thinking." She handed the pad of paper back across the table to Dean. Dean took it reluctantly; he'd been hoping, he now realized, that Hannah would know what the diagrams meant. But she seemed to have no idea what they were.

And then Dean realized that Hannah was staring at his shirt.

She leaned over the table and reached out a hand. She seemed to be reaching straight to Dean's heart, and Dean automatically started to flinch back. But she said, "Please. May I?" And something in her eyes— soft and sad— made him pause.

Dean stood still and allowed Hannah to extend a hand right to his chest. But she did not touch him at all. She only reached to the breast pocket of his flannel shirt, where the edge of the little black feather was sticking out, and, very gently, she drew the feather out of Dean's pocket.

That's mine, thought Dean, a rush of possessiveness sweeping through him. That's mine!

But of course, it wasn't. It was Cas's.

She laid the feather in the palm of one hand, and stroked it with one finger.

Then she looked up at Dean. "Castiel gave this to you? I... I thought as much. I'm so sorry—"

"Actually, no," said Dean. It's not mine. It's not mine at all. It's Cas's. "I found it sitting on his bookshelf. I don't know where he got it."

"Oh," she said, blinking. "I thought he might have... Oh. Well. Hm." She thought a moment. "I wonder why he had it there... Normally he wouldn't have left it out in the open like that. That's odd...."

Sam finally asked, "What is it? A crow feather?"

"Oh, no." A small smile flitted over her face. "No. Not a crow. This is Castiel's own feather."

Dean's eyes widened. Sam's eyebrows almost climbed up off his face. Even Joe looked startled. They all stared at the feather in Hannah's hand.

Cas's own feather? Cas's feather? From Cas's wings?

"But it's so small," objected Dean. Cas's wings (or, at least, their shadows) had been huge. This little feather was only four inches long.

"It is from his wing," Hannah said firmly. "Not all the feathers are large." She gave it another delicate stroke with one finger. "Normally I would ask to take this," she said, looking down at it. "It
should not fall into the wrong hands. An angel feather can have power. And it... it means
something.” She lifted her head and looked at Dean, holding his eyes for a long moment, and said,
"But I rather think that he might like it if you had it."

She handed the feather back, and Dean took it slowly, amazed to realize he'd had a feather from
Cas's actual wing in his pocket all this time. Just a slender little black feather; it seemed
incongruously small and fragile.

"Keep it safe," Hannah said. "And keep it with you."

They all looked at the feather in silence.

Finally Dean tucked it away in his pocket again.

Hannah said, "If he is truly lost, I grieve for him. I will admit I have had second thoughts about
banishing him. I have come to realize that we angels are not always tolerant of the few of us who
show any differences. And Castiel was undoubtedly... different, as I said. But he was always true of
heart. He always tried to do the right thing. He cared deeply for you both, you know." Her eyes
flicked between Sam and Dean as she said this, but then lingered on Dean as she repeated, "He cared
very deeply. He proved that to me, you may remember."

_Cas, you just gave up an entire army for one guy...._

"At the time," said Hannah, breaking into Dean's thoughts. "I thought his affection for humanity was
his greatest flaw. But I've come to believe it was his greatest gift."

She paused, and said, "If Castiel is not here, I must go. I have little time. We in Heaven will have to
solve this on our own." She turned to Joe and said, "Thank you. I know this has been difficult."

"Will any of this even help?" said Joe.

"I don't know," she said. "But at least we tried." With that, she turned her face up to the ceiling, and
a long streamer of white light flew out of her mouth.

The streamer of light was startlingly bright in the dim library, and they all had to shield their eyes. It
circled once over their heads, casting bands of bright shadows around the old oak bookshelves and
the wooden tables and the stacks of books. At last it soared away through the maproom, up the stairs,
and slid neatly under the crack at the bottom of the front door.

It was gone.

And Hannah— or, rather, Caroline, now — collapsed into her husband's arms.

"Caroline? Caroline?" Joe said, grabbing her tightly. "Sweetie, you okay?"

"Y-yes," Caroline said to him. "I'm— I'm okay." But she was gasping for breath, and so shaky on
her feet that it looked like she was about to collapse. Joe wrapped his arms tight around her and she
held on to him with both arms, saying, "Oh, Joe—"

They clung together.
"You guys all right?" said Sam. "Caroline, you want to sit down?"

"I'm okay, I'm okay," Caroline insisted.

"Caroline, I'm so sorry," Joe murmured to her. "We shouldn't have said yes."

"No, no, no, it was the right thing to do; she really did need our help," said Caroline. She was still trembling, but already looked a little steadier. She turned toward Dean and Sam, still hanging on to Joe by one arm, and said, "What she told you was true—I could see it in her mind. Heaven really is in trouble. Everything's in trouble. She's really worried. And she was really upset about Castiel, too—I could feel it. And, Dean, something else—" Caroline took a deep breath, still trying to steady herself, and said, "There were a couple things in her mind about the Crown of Heaven. Some things she wasn't telling you."

"She was hiding something?" said Dean, frowning.

"I think it was more like, she didn't want to discourage you," said Caroline. "It seemed like she was kind of hoping you'd follow up that lead. Even though she also thought it was totally impossible, too. But what she didn't tell you was..." She hesitated. "If you die there, your soul will be annihilated. The Crown... incinerates it or something. No afterlife."

"We knew that," said Sam.

"Easy peasy," said Dean. "Soul destruction. We knew all about that."

"Oh... okay, then," said Caroline, uncertainly. "Well, also, um, she was thinking one other thing too. It's..." Caroline frowned. "It's hard to translate from her thoughts. I think English doesn't really have the right words. But it was something like: 'They'll never get past the celestial dragons.' But I guess you probably know all about that too?"

There was a little pause.

"Celestial... dragons?" repeated Sam, his eyebrows raised.

"Yeah, so, we didn't know that part, actually," said Dean.

"I might have the wording wrong," said Caroline, looking a little worried.

Caroline looked truly exhausted (so did Joe, actually), and the two of them excused themselves just a few minutes later to start their long drive back home. Sam and Dean offered housing for the night, of course, but clearly all the two wanted was to head off together. The brothers saw them outside to their car and watched them drive off.

Joe drove. Caroline had her head nestled on his shoulder as they disappeared down the long driveway and took the turn onto the main road. Toward home, presumably.

"I'd say 'God bless 'em,'" commented Sam, as they watched the car disappear, "if I didn't think that might do more harm than good."

"Elvis left the building a million years ago, Sam," said Dean. "The bastard doesn't give a damn about them. Or about us. Or about anything."
Though he did resurrect Cas a few times, apparently.

There's that, at least.

They headed back inside, both brothers thoughtful.

"That was actually all really good news," Dean said as they shut the door and headed back downstairs. "Hannah actually said Cas might be in Heaven! Or in the Veil. It's great news, really. And she said they have an essence or spirit or whatever. I knew it! I knew Cas had something like that! So, as soon as we find Elegua we can definitely track him down."

"Yeah," said Sam, as they headed back inside. "That part actually wasn't as bad as I thought it would be. But... the bit about celestial dragons sounds a little bad. 'They'll never get past the celestial dragons?' Seriously, Dean—"

"We might not get past the celestial dragons alone," said Dean. "But we won't be alone. We'll have Cas." They were walking through the library as he said this, and he glanced down at a book that was lying open on the table, and he froze.

It was open to a lovely, intricate, hand-painted illustration of... wings.

Dean recalled, now, that this was the book that Hannah had been idly flipping through earlier. Perhaps not so idly after all?

For the illustration was of angel wings. Dean was certain. He couldn't have said why, but he was certain.

He touched the feather in his pocket. Sam had stopped by his side and was watching him. "That's one of the books that was in Cas's box," said Sam. "It was way down at the bottom. I recognize the shape. Hadn't looked at it yet, though."

Dean leaned a little closer to read the figure legend that was neatly printed below the wing illustration. It said:

*Color Plate 8B. Angel Wing With Newly Molted Feathers (In Mortal Form, On Human Vessel) - Dorsal and Ventral Surfaces Illustrated*

Dean closed the book and looked at the cover. It read:

*The Physiology of Angels*

*With Notes on Behavior*

*and*

*Additional Observations*

*by*

*Knut Schmidt-Nielsen*
I'll have a chapter ready for next week but might miss my Friday posting deadline depending on when I get back from the seabird island. If there's nothing posted Friday, check again Sat & Sun. Thank you! Please let me know if you liked this!
The Gift Of A Feather

A/U - Got back from the island! I have now held a Leach's storm-petrel baby, which turns out to be a silky-soft gray fuzzball that looks like this. Such a tiny fragile innocent little ball of life! Made me miss the baby parrot all over again.

I'm dead-tired (boat-tired and hiking-tired, which turns out to be the most thoroughly tired kind of tired) sunburned and worn out, but am determined to get at least 1 scene posted tonight. I think I got to a scene and a half. Here you go:

Dean couldn't resist looking through the book right then and there. He rifled through a fistful of rough-edged pages, letting them flick past in clumps. Chapter headings flitted past... Chapter 3: Dimensions, Wavelengths and the Etheric Plane... Chapter 4: Vessels and Possession... Chapter 5: Grace and Power....

"A whole book on angels?" Dean said. "How the hell did we not know we had this?"

"I've never catalogued the whole library," said Sam, who'd squeezed a little closer to Dean's side now to get a closer look. "Cas must've found it pretty early on when we were trying to sort out all the books after... well, you know. And he had it way down at the bottom of that box." Sam's voice went a little soft as he added, "Almost like he'd stuffed it out of view, now that I think about it."

Dean kept flipping through the book as Sam offered commentary: "Jeez, look at that, a whole chapter on vessels... I... you know, I'd like to read that. Huh, senses and communication, we should read that one. Hey, wow, look at the pictures!"

They'd reached an impressive set of color plates in the middle of the book — full-page, hand-painted illustrations on thick cream-colored paper, each separated from the next with a translucent sheet of rice paper. Dean paused on the illustration that Hannah had been looking at, a picture of an entire wing, spread out dramatically.

He leafed delicately past that illustration. The book was old and the pages felt brittle; he was careful to turn the illustration pages as gently as he could. The very next picture was an illustration of a single feather. One perfect feather in isolation.

It looked familiar.

Dean took Cas's feather out of his pocket and put it down on the page, sliding it next to the illustration.

They were different colors — Cas's feather was a glossy shining black, and the one in the illustration was white. But other than the color, the two feathers could have been twins. They were exactly the same size and shape: four inches long, slightly curved, elegantly pointed, with the shaft a little offset to one side.

"That's the same kind of feather," Sam observed.
"Whoa," Sam said, almost hanging over Dean's shoulder now, "An... 'alula-feather'? What's that mean? 'See text for details,' hey, let me just—" Sam moved a hand out to the book.

"I'll check it out," said Dean, suddenly finding that he very much wanted to "see text for details," but in private. Definitely in private. He grabbed the feather with one hand and clapped the book shut with the other. "I'll, uh, I'll check this out... tonight. Might have something about where angels go when their vessel dies, too, you know, so..."

Dean stopped, glancing down at the book.

It was a biology book. About angels.

Which meant it might indeed have something about what happens when angels die.

It might, even, have something... discouraging. Something bad.

Dean swallowed, wedging the book under his arm as he tucked the feather back into his pocket. Cas's alula-feather. It's Cas's alula-feather. It has special significance. "Okay, so, um... let's...." Now he couldn't stop patting the feather, just to be sure it was safe in his pocket. Dean tore his hand away from it. And a second later he realized he was now patting the damn book.

Get back on track, Dean. Focus. Dean grabbed at Cas's pad of paper, mostly just to give his stupid hand something else to do. "We need to focus on, uh...." he began, looking at Cas's peculiar diagrams again. "We should focus on what all this weird crap means. Look at this all. Lines, arrows, circles... Do you think it's, like, a glyph or something? A glyph, or a sigil, or a tattoo, or maybe it's Enochian, or—" Dean became aware he was babbling a little, but couldn't seem to stop. What if the book says that angels can't come back after they die? What if the book says...

Dean gazed at Cas's diagram. "Maybe it's for a spell or an incantation or something. Wish he'd left something else for us. Or talked to us about it, say. Or—"

"His car!" Sam said, out of the blue. He actually snatched the pad of paper out of Dean's hands, and repeated, "Dean, Cas's car!"

"What?" said Dean, looking up at him.

"We should check his car!"

Dean stared at him. And then he realized what Sam was thinking.

Cas had driven his own car to Ohio. It had been left by the warehouse during that... terrible night. A few days later (after... the terrible night), Sam had arranged with a Cleveland-based hunter friend to get the car somewhere safe. The hunter friend, some kid by the name of Jason, had arranged for it to
towed to a local garage in Sandusky, if memory served. There’d been a garage right along the lakeshore, not far from the warehouses. Cas’s car was still there.

*Along with whatever Cas had stashed inside the car, Dean realized now.*

Sam said, almost tripping over his own words, "You told me the other day that he was thinking of leaving soon, chasing after that Crown thing, and that's why he took his own car to Ohio, right? I just remembered, Dean, he had some stuff in his trunk! When we checked into the motel, the day... uh... the day before... " *The day before the terrible night.* "Um, anyway, when we checked into the motel, he didn't bring everything in. He had some rolled-up papers and stuff in his trunk. Actually I started bringing 'em all in and he told me to put 'em back. They must still be in his trunk. So... what if it was stuff for his... journey? Stuff for whatever he was planning to do? "

"What, like, a handy-dandy set of directions?" said Dean. "Maybe a helpful cheatsheet on how to steal the Crown of Heaven from celestial dragons?"

"Maybe! I mean, I dunno. But at least there might be some clue. Worth a shot, huh?"

It was definitely worth a shot. It was a great idea, actually. But Dean was silent, thinking.

Sandusky, Ohio.

*The lakeshore...*

*The warehouse.*

They'd have to go back to Sandusky.

"Dean?" Sam said. He looked a little hesitant now. "If you... uh... if you don't want to go to Ohio..."

"It's a pretty long drive," said Dean blankly.

*The warehouse. The lakeshore in the night.*

...Don't hurt him...

*Don't hurt him.*

Sam cleared his throat. "Hey, uh, maybe Jason could drive the car partway and meet us," he suggested. He'd just switched to his super-soft voice, his gotta-humor-Dean voice, but Dean wasn't about to point that out.

Sam added, fiddling a little with the edge of Cas's pad of paper, "We could buy Jason a meal, y'know, pay him for his trouble. Buy him a bus ticket back."

Dean nodded. "Yeah. Yeah. That'd be good. That'd be good 'cause..." He cast around for a logical-sounding excuse for not going back to Sandusky. "It'd save us some time. And..." Now his eye lit on his own set of notes — the list of names that he'd been working on earlier. The list of people who might know how to reach Elegua. "Also," Dean announced, picking up the list and scanning it rapidly, "I wanted to talk to.... uh... to..." Aha — there was a "Chicago" entry near the bottom of the list:

*Marcos de Santos, alabe (priest?), Chicago IL, 873-555-3326.*

Chicago was sort of in between Kansas and Ohio, right?
"Also I wanted to talk to this guy in Chicago," said Dean, showing the name to Sam. "Jason could drive Cas's car to Chicago, see, and meet us in Chicago, and meanwhile we could talk to this guy who's in Chicago, um... " (Dean had already forgotten the name; he had to tilt the pad of paper a bit to steal a glance at the name again.) "... Marcos. Marcos. Brazilian dude, I think. Missouri said he's some kind of orisha priest and might be able to help. Marcos lives in Chicago, did I mention that? Wouldn't that save us some time, if we met in Chicago?"

"Sure, Dean," said Sam, after only the briefest hesitation. "Yeah. Sure, it'd save us some time. Chicago. Sure." Now he'd gone into an even gentler version of the Sam Super-Soft Voice. "Sure. So... you called him? This Marcos?"

"Well, no," Dean had to confess. He hadn't gotten that far down the list yet. "But I was about to."

---

Sam suggested that he place both phone calls — one to the Marcos guy in Chicago, and the other to Jason in Ohio about the car. Dean, still feeling oddly rattled, agreed, and soon he headed up the hill for the usual sunset prayer.

He left the book in his room. Plenty of time to read the book...

Later. He'd read it later.

The hike up the hill was lovely. Now that it was late October it was often quite chilly for the sunset prayers, but it was beautiful, too; many of the trees on the hill had hung onto the last of the fall colors, and drifts of colorful leaves were all over the path. It was turning into a beautiful sunset, also, the sky almost out-doing the trees for sheer color, with dramatic bands of orange, red and purple stretching across the horizon.

Dean usually used the ten minutes of hiking time to get into a more focused state of mind, ready to talk to Cas. But tonight, after Hannah's visit, and with that strange book sitting in his bedroom ready to be read, and now with the imminent arrival of Cas's car in the near future as well, Dean found his thoughts drifting to odd places. Old places. Even once he was on top of the hill by the grave, he still felt a little scattered. He tried to settle himself by tidying up the grave a bit, brushing all the fallen leaves off the rain-soaked earth, checked the end of the string (it had gotten so mud-stained over the recent weeks that it was hard to even find it now) and once again inspecting the backpack.

Ohio. Somehow he hadn't thought about Ohio as much lately as he used to.

Ohio.

Sandusky.

The warehouse.

Dean realized he had lapsed from thinking about it. He'd been going entire hours without thinking about it, sometimes as much as half a day. He ought to have been thinking about it more.

It ought to always be on his mind. Always.

Finally, once he'd gotten every speck of leaf and twig off of Cas's grave, at last Dean managed to turn his mind to the prayer. There was a lot to tell Cas, actually; lots to bring him up to speed on. Yet
somehow the prayer soon turned into a series of questions. Unanswered questions, of course.

"Hey, um, Castiel Castiel Castiel, okay, you online yet?" Dean began. "Uh, hey, Cas... so... Hannah came to visit. Turns out she hadn't heard a damn one of my prayers, can you believe it? So... look, Cas, Hannah thought you might be in Heaven or in the Veil... uh... are you?"

No answer, of course. Dean even waited a few moments, but the only sound was the faint twittering of some sparrows in the nearby shrubs.

"Well... we were thinking of following up your idea about the Crown of Heaven. So there are supposed to be these guardians or something guarding it, Cas... um... do you know anything about that? About the 'guardians'?"

A faint puff of wind rustled the dried grasses around the grave. Did that mean something? Was it a sign? Would Cas answer soon?

No... no answer.

"Um, right, I know you're not gonna answer, cause you never do, heh, but... apparently Hannah was thinking something about dragons too? But we've dealt with dragons before, right? Toss 'em some gold and they get distracted, right? That'll work, huh?"

Dean found himself staring vacantly at the last red leaves on the maple tree, thinking somehow, impossibly, that this time Cas would surely answer some of his questions.

But the hill was quiet.

"So... anyway, we're gonna try and pick up your car, and I'm working on a lead about Elegua. Sam's calling a guy in Chicago tonight... Also... Cas..."

At last Dean pulled the feather out of his pocket.

He looked at it for a long moment in silence.

"Hannah said this was your feather," Dean said at last. And as he said this, it came clear in his mind, all at once, that he had somehow known this all along. He'd known it was Cas's feather. He'd known when he'd first seen it; he'd known it when he first touched it.

He'd known that it was something precious. Something he needed to guard; something he wanted to hold, and to keep with him.

He'd known it was a part of something... beloved.

Dean tried, twice, to say something more, and he failed; twice he drew a breath, his mouth opened, and nothing came out. The words simply wouldn't come. So instead he said, "I found this book with a picture that matches it. The picture sort of hinted that a feather like this might... mean something?"

No answer.

Dean sighed. "Sorry, Cas," he muttered. "Guess I'm a little distracted today." Wherever Cas was, obviously he couldn't answer. This whole prayer was turning into kind of a mess. No more questions, thought Dean. Then, the very moment he had he decided not to ask any more questions, he heard himself ask "Should I put it back?" He had to roll his eyes at himself, and he said, "Dammit, Cas, sorry, I can't seem to stop asking these stupid questions. I really wish you would answer, just once. I wish you could answer. I mean, is it really your feather? Do you..."
Do you not want me touching it? For this was the question Dean really wanted to ask, of course.

"Should I put it back?" Dean said again. He looked up at the sky.

All around was silent now; the breeze had died, the grasses had stopped rustling, and even the little sparrows had gone quiet for the night. The last light was starting to fade now, the sky overhead darkening to deep indigo, one last stripe of deep orange stretching low on the western horizon. A lone speck of bright light shone above it in the sky. Some planet, Dean thought. Venus or Mars or something.

Wonder how long it'll last.

"I should probably put your feather back, Cas, huh?" Dean murmured at last.

Just before the Compline prayer, Dean was sitting on the side of his bed, gazing once again at the little black feather in his hand. Somehow he hadn't gotten around to putting it back on Cas's bookshelf yet.

Alula-feathers have special significance; see text for details.

"All right, Cas," he muttered, setting the feather down on the bedside table and picking up the book that was sitting next to him on the bed. He glanced at the cover: The Physiology of Angels. "See text for details. Well, I got the text right here, so let's find the goddamn details."

It took some searching. Dean started with the chapter on "Wings, Feathers and Flight," which sounded like it might be a good place to start. But there turned out to be a lot more to wings, feathers and flight than Dean had ever realized. It was slow going, but, fortunately, also rather interesting. Apparently wings were as finely designed for flight as... well, as a certain sleek black car was designed for the road. Both were elegant constructions, beautifully engineered for their respective jobs. Dean found himself engrossed, turning the pages slowly, studying every detail as if it were an automotive technical manual.

There were a lot of weird little details about angel wings that Cas had never mentioned. For example, it turned out that apparently angel wings automatically scaled from the vast size of their "true form" to match the size of their human vessel. The angel didn't have to think about this — it just happened automatically. "Handy," muttered Dean.

Turned out angel feathers were fireproof — even fireproof against holy-fire, it seemed. ("Extra handy," said Dean.) Turned out the longest flight feathers could soak up Heavenly power straight from the "ether," recharging the angel's power nearly constantly. ("Whatever 'ether' is," muttered Dean. "You never filled me in on any of this, Cas....") Turned out new feathers had to be grown every year in a "molt," replacing the old ones; some eighty-eight long flight feathers in all, along with countless little "coverts" as well. ("Sounds like a hassle, Cas.") Molt was another thing Cas had never really gotten around to mentioning..

In fact, Cas had never mentioned any of these details. And it was starting to seem like all this wing stuff was a pretty big deal for angels. Cas had never talked to Dean about it at all.

Though, to be fair, Dean had never asked, had he?
Dean gave a sigh. And then he turned a page and came to the "alula" section.

"Alula," it turned out, was just a fancy word for "winglet" — a bitty little tiny wing attached to the biggest joint of the main wing, almost like a feathered finger.

When not in use the alula lies flat against the main wing and is not apparent to the casual observer, but it can be held out somewhat separate from the main wing when needed.

The lesser angels, such as cherubs, all have one alula per wing. In this regard the cherubs are like modern birds, which also retain one alula per wing. The higher-ranked angels, however, have two alulas (sc. "alulae") per wing. The author of this text was not able to examine an archangel wing, but was fortunate to be able to closely examine the wings of a seraph. All seraphs have two alulas per wing, and in seraphs the second alula is significantly longer than the first, with an additional phalange (i.e. it is more like a finger than a thumb). This longer alula is markedly more flexible and dextrous than the shorter one. Prehistoric fossil birds also have two alulas per wing; both are clearly visible in specimens of Archeopteryx, for example. We can theorize that a "wing with two alulas" was, perhaps, the original wing design preferred by God in ancient times, both for angels and for birds. Apparently, for some reason, this design was simplified later, such that modern birds and the more recent classes of angels ended up with only a single alula.

The difference in alula number between seraphs and cherubs is reflected in ancient lore, viz. seraphs having "six wings," and cherubs having "four wings." The "six wings" of seraph lore, are, of course, a reference to the two main wings plus their double alulas; similarly the "four wings" of cherub lore are the two main wings plus their single alula. Folklore and legend further state that seraphs "only use two of their wings for flight," in reality a reference to the simple fact that only two of their six "wings" are truly full-size flight surfaces.

In living birds the alula's sole function is reduction of turbulence. Angel alulas also have a second function: they serve as something like feathered fingers. Though the alulas are quite short relative to the span of the wing, angels do have a degree of dexterity with the alulas, and are even able to hold small objects with them. Seraphs in particular typically experience finer and more precise sensation with the alulas than with their human vessels' hands. For this reason they occasionally will touch objects with their alulas so as to gain a better sense of the object's shape and texture. This may occur, for example, when mantling an object.

Here Dean had to stop.

"Mantling," he muttered. Cas had mentioned something about mantling.

Cas had mentioned something about mantling Dean, actually. When he'd had his arms around Dean, in those dark nights; when Dean had felt that oddly comforting sensation of being enfolded by.... something. Something he had more sensed than felt; something large, something soft.

After a moment's thought Dean flipped to the Glossary. Soon he found the relevant entry:

Mantle — (v.) To shield a precious object with the wings, so as to keep it safe from harm.
Dean gazed at the phrase "precious object" for quite a while.

It was several long moments before he remembered to turn back to the main text.

In sum, alulas give an angel considerable dexterity and sensitivity with the wing, as well as fine control during complex flight maneuvers in turbulent air. It should be no surprise that the alulas have come to be regarded as symbolic of an angel's abilities and powers, and even of its truest self. This is especially true of seraphs, for which the longest alula-feather has special significance. (See Chapter 11 for further information.)

"See text for more friggin’ information," grumbled Dean, flipping to Chapter 11. Chapter 11 had the slightly alarming title of "Behavior and the Expression of Emotion." Dean paused here, re-reading the chapter title a few times, for the phrase "expression of emotion" somehow brought to mind a whole slew of images.

Such as... a certain blue-eyed vessel staring woefully at Dean from a hospital exam table.

Or... a bloody face, gazing up from the library floor... a hand clutching weakly at Dean's arm. A hoarse voice whispering, "Dean... Please...."

... a hand on Dean's cheek.

... my friend...

Dean gritted his teeth and said, out loud, "Okay, check this out, Cas. Chapter 11. Behavior and the expression of emotion. Got a bunch of sections here... 11.1, The True Voice; 11.2, Wing Posture and Feather-Fluffing; 11.3, Selection of a Molt-Companion; 11.4, The Gift of a Feather... oh."

11.4 - The Gift Of A Feather

The longest alula-feather of a seraph carries additional meaning. This feather is a unique size and shape (see Color Plate 9), typically four inches long with an asymmetrical vane, and it is a token of a seraph's self-identity. As such, it has power in certain acts of magic; it can even transfer life-force. Rarely, it may be presented to the elder races to confirm that the feather-owner is in fact a seraph.

Even more rarely, it may be offered to a companion. The gift of the longest alula-feather has a double meaning. Firstly, it signifies a traditional offer of mutual trust and support during molt (see previous section). But, secondly, it has a further connotation that the angel is offering his entire self. It is an act of deep affection and it is a rare gesture, one that an angel may do only once or twice in a lifetime, if at all.
And now Dean remembered what Hannah had said, earlier that day, when she'd found Cas's alula-feather in Dean's pocket.

"Castiel gave this to you? I... I thought as much. I'm so sorry—"

And then, after Dean had corrected her, she'd gotten that puzzled look on her face... and she'd said, "I thought he might have..."

But no.

Of course Cas would not have given Dean this feather.

Of course Cas would not do that. Of course not, of course not, of course not, and Dean did not deserve to have it, and he didn't deserve to even be holding it, and he shouldn't even be touching it. He shouldn't even be in the same room with it.

He'd stolen it, and he needed to put it back.

Dean didn't even finish the chapter. The Compline prayer, that night, consisted of Dean tiptoeing up the stairs in the darkness to the star-lit attic, the feather cradled on a handkerchief in his hand (it now seemed it might be rude to touch it directly), creeping through the dark room to put it back on the bookshelf, and murmuring the whole time, "I'm sorry, Cas. I'm putting it back. I'm sorry....."

... and then, two minutes later, picking it back up again, wrapping it tenderly in the same handkerchief and carrying it right back downstairs again, still muttering, "I'm sorry, Cas."

"Cas, I guess I'm not really sure what to do here," Dean confessed at last. He was back in his room now, sitting on his bed with both arms wrapped tightly around his ribcage, looking over at the little feather that was now sitting safely on his bedside table, nestled now in the handkerchief. "Guess I just want to keep an eye on it?" said Dean. "Is that okay? Hannah said to keep it close. Seemed like she thought I ought to protect it, maybe? She said you normally wouldn't leave it out in the open, either. So...." Dean sighed. "I just... I really want to be sure it's safe, okay, Cas? But I won't touch it, I promise. I'll just guard it, okay? Maybe I'll just keep it tucked in the book, how about that?"

But when he reached for the book to set the feather safely between its pages, of course the very next section caught his eye:

---

Abandonment of an alula-feather

Alula-feathers, if not given to companions, are typically burned in a ritual fire or saved for certain magical acts. It is exceedingly rare for a seraph to voluntarily abandon his own alula-feather, i.e. leaving it visible and unprotected. Such an act would indicate that the seraph believes the feather unworthy of care, which would further imply that he believes himself unworthy of care. This apparently is a rare occurrence since most angels appear unaware it has ever occurred at all, but a few tales indicate that alula-feather abandonment does happen on occasion. In only two cases could the author discern any of the relevant circumstances; in both such cases, the angel in question was setting out on a hazardous journey, one that he did not expect to survive. Both seraphs left the alula-feather within the dwelling or home of an especially close friend. In one case it seemed clear that the seraph had been planning to ask this friend to be his molt-companion. Thus the abandoned feather seems to be something of a token of farewell. It is tempting to ascribe a deeper meaning as well, perhaps something like "I would have liked to have been your companion, but such was not our fate." But this is merely speculation.
It was a very long time before Dean fell asleep.

He lay dry-eyed for hours, curled on his side, staring vacantly into the dark, holding Cas's alula-feather in his hand. He never even got around to changing his clothes for bed; he just curled up on his bed in his jeans and t-shirt.

When at last he drifted to an uneasy, miserable sleep, he was still clutching Cas's feather tightly in his hand.

He dreamed. In fact he dreamed of the mountain. But it was not like the other dreams; in this dream a violent blizzard was howling, a gale-force sandstorm that seemed to be lashing the entire mountain from base to top. Great loops and skeins of sand were blowing high into the sky overhead, forming a shimmering haze that seemed almost like vast eerie banners stretching and rippling through the sky. Dean fought his way through the wind and sand to the top of the mountain, but he could not find the baby parrot at all. He looked and looked, stumbling through the gale, squinting against the wind, searching all through the wind-scoured mountaintop.

But the baby parrot was nowhere to be seen.

The wind died at last, the strange banners overhead fading away. Dean kept looking, but after hours more of searching all he had found were two bright-colored feathers wedged against some rocks, one feather of gold and the other blue. Just two scattered feathers, torn loose and scattered wide, but Dean knew, in his gut, that they belonged to the baby parrot.

Had it been torn apart by the wind? Or perhaps by some terrible predator?

Might it have just lost these two feathers, and survived?

Dean searched and searched.

Eventually he found a scattering of more of the rainbow feathers. Emerald, scarlet, turquoise... all torn loose.

And he found a few dead butterflies, crushed against the rocks, their little white wings crumpled and useless.

He found only one other feather, this one a much longer one that was jet-black. It was several feet long, clearly from some other kind of bird entirely. The conclusion seemed unmistakable: Something had attacked the baby parrot. Attacked it, killed it, and torn it apart.

And Dean hadn't been here to protect it.

Dean woke with his face wet with tears.

*It was just a dream. Just a stupid dream,* he told himself over and over.

The next morning, when they set off for Chicago, Sam had to take the first driving shift while Dean slept, exhausted from the strange dream of the mountain. The feather stayed safe in Dean's breastpocket for the whole ride, buttoned safely away; Dean knew, now, that he would never go anywhere, ever again, without Castiel's alula-feather.
Dean never mentioned the dream. Sam started giving him worried glances, but Dean kept quiet.

They swapped driving shifts in the late afternoon. Dean was driving as they finally pulled into the city in early evening.

"Those Chicago monster families have all been cleared out, right?" said Dean, trying to think of something neutral to talk about as he maneuvered his way through the traffic.

"Yep," said Sam, looking up from the orisha book he'd been studying for the last hour. "I told Jason about it, last year, remember, and he rounded up a bunch of other hunters to help out that kid. I guess they had a busy couple months but finally got rid of the last of them. Chicago's supposedly been clean since then. Oh—" Sam peered ahead at a green exit sign that was approaching rapidly. "This is it. Right lane, this exit. Okay now, take a right at the bottom of the ramp..." Sam began reading directions from his phone. Directions to Marcos's place.

Dean took the exit, and took the next right. At a red light he glanced over at Sam and said, "So just to recap what we need to find out from Marcos, the big question obviously is, where's Cas. Right?" Sam nodded, and Dean added, "We'll also ask about the Crown if we get a chance, but the big thing is, where's Cas." The baby-parrot dreams hadn't meant anything. Cas was clearly all right. Somewhere. They just had to find out where. Dean went on, "So, Crowley says Cas isn't in Hell. Hannah says he might be in Heaven or in the Veil. Also he might be in Purgatory. We gotta not forget about places like Oz and fairyland and whatever, those weird other places Charlie always seemed to end up in. So I thought, we probably need to ask Elegua to search everywhere. Definitely Heaven and Hell and Earth and Purgatory, and the Veil... but ideally all the weird Charlie-type places too. And tonight's definitely the night, right? We're just jumping right into it?"

"Yeah, Marcos is on board," said Sam. "Said he could 'get the guys together,' whatever that means. He said something about prepping a whole ceremony. He seemed amazingly willing to help out, actually." Sam glanced back down at the orisha book that was still opened out on his knees. "I kinda got the impression the orishas are getting skittish too. Marcos seemed to know all about the Darkness already and he seemed to be thinking, sort of, if these Winchester guys have got a lead, let's get a move on."

"And he definitely said he can talk to Elegua, right?"

"Well... he said he'd ask Elegua. But one thing I've picked up from this book—" Sam tapped the open book—"... orishas seem to be picky about who they talk to."

"Great," said Dean, with a sigh, as he pulled onto Marcos's street. "A seance with picky pagan gods. This'll be loads of fun."

Sam soon spotted the right house number. He stuffed his orisha book under the car seat, and they got out of the Impala, walked up the front path of a squat little two-story house, and knocked at the door.

Marcos turned out to be a tall, lanky guy with coffee-colored skin and a liquid Brazilian accent. He was dressed entirely in white. He ushered them into a spacious living room that had gleaming hardwood floors, a cheerful little fire blazing in the hearth, and almost no furniture at all— just a
wide, empty space with a few cheap white plastic chairs scattered around.

Two of the white chairs were sitting side-by-side in the very center of the room, empty, facing the hearth. Over by the far wall were three men sitting on more of the white plastic chairs. Each man was dressed all in white, and each was leaning his elbows or resting his hands casually on a waist-high wooden drum. The drums looked something like skinny congas that had been laced with an elaborate arrangement of ropes and wooden pegs. All three drums — like the men, and like Marcos — had been swathed in white fabric.

The three men were drinking beers from a large cooler; they waved briefly at Marcos, nodded at Sam and Dean, and went on chatting in low tones to each other in some mellifluous language — Brazilian Portuguese, presumably.

"Are those guys part of the ceremony?" Sam whispered to Marcos.

Marcos grinned. "Yes. They're the drummers. Here, put these on." He handed them each a white shirt.

"You have drummers at a seance?" asked Dean, as he and Sam changed their shirts rapidly.

"It's not a seance... not exactly," said Marcos. "The drummers will call the orishas by playing the rhythm that each orisha likes. Each orisha has certain drum rhythms that he or she likes, you see. And certain dance moves. Certain colors... which is why you don't want to wear the wrong color accidentally. Also they each have a certain day of the week that they like. Certain foods. Certain..."

"We get the picture," said Dean. "So the drummers drum, and you're the priest who calls the orishas, or something?"

Marcos chuckled. "I'm not a priest. Not exactly. All I can do, really, is facilitate. Dance for them, maybe, if they wish. Maybe they answer, maybe they don't. Maybe they take to you, maybe they don't. Maybe one rides you, maybe they—"

"Rides us?" said Sam.

Marcos gave a little huff of a laugh. He didn't explain further, but said, "Sit," waving one arm expansively toward the two white chairs in the center of the room.

They sat. Marcos opened a little carved box that was on the fireplace mantel, and began picking through it, pulling out a selection of dried herbs. "Orishas aren't saints," he said, as he sorted the herbs, setting a row of them out on the mantel. "They aren't do-gooders. They're... rough around the edges. They can be selfish. Demanding."

"Dicks, you mean?" said Dean. "Sounds familiar."

Sam shot Dean a warning glance, and said to Marcos, "They sound like a strange sort of gods to worship."

Marcos glanced over at him. "They're not gods....well... not..."

"Not exactly?" said Dean.

Marcos grinned at him. "Not exactly, yes. And we don't worship them because they're good. We worship them because... because we have to. Because they have claimed us, because they're powerful. And because they can help. They affect our lives whether we like it or not. I will tell you something... I never expected to be an alabe." He pronounced it ah-lah-BEH. "Yet one of them laid
claim to me, and... " He shrugged. "It's a long story. But here I am."

Sam and Dean glanced at each other. It sounded unnervingly like the way certain archangels, and
certain demons too, had stormed into their lives.

"An accidental alabe," said Dean, "I can understand that. Anyway, we're hoping to speak with
Elegua."

"So your brother told me," said Marcos. He grabbed another white plastic chair from the wall and
carried it over to them, plunking it down a few feet away. He settled himself in it, facing them, and
said, "I've already asked the orishas how to stop the Darkness. Months ago I started asking them.
They say they do not know. And I must tell you something, they seem disturbed by it. I would go so
far as to say worried... and I have never known the orishas to be worried by anything. So hopefully
you have some different sort of question for Elegua, something he might actually be able to help
with." Marcos leaned forward a little, setting the palms of his hands on his knees, and said, "If I may
ask, what is your question for Elegua?"

Dean took a breath. "We're looking for a friend of ours who might be able to help," he said. "We
think he's trapped in one of the other realms. Like Heaven or Purgatory, or the Veil maybe. Um... he
was... an angel. Or he used to be."

Marcos raised an eyebrow. "A fallen angel? A lost angel?"

*A dead angel*, thought Dean.

Sam said, "Something like that."

"So you seek something lost," said Marcos.

Sam nodded, saying, "Basically, yes. A lost angel. We were hoping Elegua could tell us where he
is."

"We were hoping maybe you could summon him?" said Dean.

"We don't 'summon' them," said Marcos. "Not..."

"... exactly," finished Dean and Sam together.

Marcos smiled, and explained, "You can call an orisha all you like, but each orisha usually will only
talk to certain people that he, or she, feels an affinity with. Typically one certain orisha will lay claim
to you, and only that one orisha, ever after, will really listen to you, or intercede for you. And some
people never can get the orishas to talk to them at all. Now, you two..." Marcos's eyes tracked up and
down Dean, and then over to Sam. "To be perfectly frank, I don't see much of Elegua in either of
you. He's ancient. Craggy. He's got an element of the trickster... he's cautious with his words... he
can be deceitful. He's not malicious, but..." He regarded them both a moment in silence. "I do not
know if Elegua will speak with you. But if you're lucky, perhaps some other orisha may claim you
instead, and speak with him on your behalf. And..." He shrugged. "I may be wrong. I am often
wrong. Orishas are hard to predict."

Marcos stood and moved his chair to the side of the room. He walked back to the fireplace again,
picked up the handful of herbs he'd set aside on the mantel, and tossed them into the fire. The flames
flared up, with a flash of bright color. "Elegua often comes first of all," Marcos said, "and then goes
and summons other orishas. But he does not usually speak to me directly. I am rather glad he did not
claim me. I would not like to be ridden by Elegua. But, it is your choice. Now. Do you truly wish to
call him? If so, we will start."
He waited for their answer, turning back from the fireplace to watch them both. The smile was gone from his face. The herbs began to smoke; behind him, the drummers seemed to come to alertness, setting down their beers and picking up an assortment of thin wooden sticks.

Dean nodded. "If he needs to ride someone... he can ride me."

"Dean—" Sam began.

Dean cut him off, saying to him, "We gotta find Cas, Sam. We really do." He turned back to Marcos. "Go for it. Call this Elegua."

Marcos nodded to the drummers. One of them whapped the top of his drum a few times, and suddenly all three were drumming. It was a bizarrely complex racket of high-pitched *whaps* and trills and occasional deep booms, not at all what Dean had been expecting. It sounded a bit like Cuban salsa sped up ten times too fast, he thought. Or a bit like an orchestra made of jackhammers. Or a bit like a colony of woodpeckers.

Or a bit like some distant, unknowable creature calling in the distance.

Dean was expecting some sort of directions or further explanation, but Marcos said nothing else. He just stood there looking at the drummers, and the drummers just kept on drumming. Two of them were going at it almost like robots, whapping the tops of their tall wooden drums with the flat long sides of the thin sticks, in a virtually unceasing trill, the sticks moving so fast they seemed just blurs in the air. The third drummer was doing something more complex, adding erratic bursts of deep low tones.

"When are we going to call him?" said Sam.

"We already are," said Marcos, watching the drummers.

And Marcos began to dance.

It was an odd dance. It started very small, so small that at first it just looked like he was flinching a little bit, a little like a child who really wanted to tap his feet to a tune but whose mother had told him not to. Then he began to move, in an uneven pattern that took him a few steps to the left, a few steps to the right, a few steps to the left again, on and on. It was a tight, contained dance, every move precise. There were no big arm movements and none of the flailing-type moves that Dean had been expecting. In fact it didn't look at all as dopey and hippie-ish like Dean had somehow been imagining. Instead it looked more like a martial art than anything else, the movements efficient and balanced, complete with precise little hand-chopping motions and neat, controlled foot movements.

Dean watched for a while. The jackhammer drumming was, somehow, making him sleepy. The deeper-pitched pounding sounds seemed, somehow, to be getting closer.

Something was coming closer.

All at once Dean was running through a huge tangled forest, Sam running right beside him. It was night. Around them were vast dark trees, and overhead thousands and thousands of stars were glittering, cold and fierce. And all around in the shadows were dark moving shapes, but all Dean could do was run.
A/N -

Next: The orishas.

And what of the baby parrot? What happened to it? Stay tuned.

If you liked this please drop me a line and let me know what you liked!

PS - those who've read my other fics already know that modern birds really do have one alula per wing, and ancient birds had two per wing. Originally I came up with the idea of seraphs having 2 alulas per wing, from an idea I had that seraphs, being ancient creatures, would have more in common with prehistoric birds than with modern birds. (Also I was looking for ways to give seraphs some "strange biology" - some details to their wings that would feel a little alien and unearthly). Later I found that this idea (seraphs having 2 alulas) matches up perfectly with the seraph "six wings" lore. From there I developed a little theory that the more powerful angels would have 2 alulas per wing and the lesser angels (like cherubs) would have a single alula per wing. Only when researching THIS fic did I also discover that there is actually lore that cherubs have "four wings"! Which fits! I also hadn't known till this week that the real-life lore further states that seraphs only use one pair of their "wings" for flying. IT ALL FITS!

PPS - "Mantling" is a real thing too. It's something birds of prey do to shield things they deem as precious (which for real-life birds usually means their food, or occasionally their babies). Those who've read Flight may remember Castiel mantling Sam & Dean in that fic too at one point, to try to protect them from gunfire. I didn't use the word "mantling" then, but that's what he was instinctively doing.
The Orishas

A/U - I know a lot of you were doing gishwhes this week! I wish I could have done it with you. I have never been able to do it because of work... a few months ago I even sent in a donation to gishwhes to cover 10 registration scholarships so that even if I couldn't go, hopefully some other people could go instead.

Then as it turned out something else happened which was MUCH LESS FUN than gishwhes, which was, on July 30 I suddenly had this excruciating and bizarre headache that felt like someone was stabbing me with an icepick right through the base of my skull every ten seconds. So... this went on till late on Aug 7 (= nine days and nights of nonstop pain. Not that I was counting or anything). I ended up in a couple of urgent-care clinics in different cities, eventually had to drive 4h back to my home city, then on Thurs I got sent off for an emergency late-night MRI, etc. etc. lot of drama. I will know more on Monday (after another 4h drive back to the doc for the MRI results) - but whatever it is, apparently it isn't extremely urgent and I feel now like it is all going to be ok. I finally am on a lovely assortment of 3 different pain meds, plus muscle relaxants and a nifty anticonvulsant, and I got the pain under control last night for the first time since it started. Last night I slept through the night for the first time in 9 nights. Sleep is WONDERFUL. :)

The MRI was an hour long. It's pretty claustrophobic doing an hour-long head-and-neck MRI. They shove you right in there like a hot dog in a bun, you're pretty much trapped, and it's UNBELIEVABLY LOUD, like sixteen rifles going off on all sides. I had to not move at all and keep my breathing very "small" to keep my neck still. Anyway, two things. First: I kept thinking, "But I have to finish my fic!" - lol. Second thing: The image I kept returning to in the MRI, to calm down, for that whole hour, was that of Castiel mantling me w/his wings and flying me away from it all. Kind of silly but, hey, it worked. I recommend it if you ever have an hour-long head-and-neck MRI and need to keep yourself calm.

Anyway due to all that I couldn't post the next chapter on Friday like usual, even though it actually was already written. I couldn't work on my laptop at all. I didn't really get back to feeling semi-normal till today and I am still a little slowed down, and still have a bunch of doctor's visits scheduled this week & next week that will take some time. Also I lost a lot of work to sick days and now have to put in some extra work.... sigh. I am really trying to keep the fic going but chapters may get shorter and/or erratic till all this gets sorted out. Sorry.

We now return to our originally planned fic chapter.

And now... back to Sam and Dean. Who, last we saw, were running through a forest in the dark.

The drumming seemed thunderous, echoing all around them in the night. Sam and Dean sped through the forest, brushing past bushes, dodging low branches, racing past the enormous trees. The tree trunks seemed impossibly huge, some ten feet wide and wider. They sped through streams and rivers and past thick underbrush. Isolated sights and sounds leapt into sharp relief here and there: A paw print in the river mud. A big muscular yellow cat, slinking away. A low rumbling sound, almost blending in with the drumming, but the rumble was coming from a great dark thing meters tall that was just ahead. Elephant, Dean thought, *that's an elephant.* He got a clearer view as he sprinted up to its side. It turned its massive head and watched him.

It was shaggy.
No, that was a mammoth, actually, he realized, but he and Sam were already past it and the most important thing was to keep running. The drums commanded him to run, so Dean ran. Till his lungs were bursting, his heart was pounding.

Till at last he thought, Why am I running?

"Sam, why are we running?" he gasped to Sam. "Let's stop." They both straggled to a halt. Sam turned to look at him, panting.

"Did you see the saber-tooth cat?" gasped Sam.

"No, I just saw the mammoth," said Dean, leaning over to catch his breath.

"Mastodon," said Sam, between pants of breath. "That was a mastodon."

"You are..." said Dean, still gasping, "such a nerd. I really can't believe you sometimes."

"Why the hell were we running?" asked Sam.

Because I was riding you, said a voice. Because I wanted you to run, and you did. Because you are my beasts of burden.

Dean snapped his eyes open and discovered he was actually still sitting on the white plastic chair. He'd been on the white plastic chair the whole time.

Although... he was also, somehow, in the dark tangled forest. Sam and Dean were sitting side-by-side on the two white plastic chairs, but the chairs were now in the middle of an empty, starlit grassy clearing, millions of stars bright as diamonds overhead. The massive trees swayed around them, rustling in a warm wind.

Look at me, said the voice.

A man with jet black skin appeared in front of them, about ten paces away.

He was formidably muscled, his skin gleaming faintly in the starlight. He wore what looked like a very long loincloth, a stiff rectangular black panel that hung down to his knees, edged in red and decorated with complex patterns of blood-red beads. It was knotted around his waist with a blood-red sash.

In one hand he held a hooked wooden stick.

The wooden stick drew Dean's eye; there seemed to be something amazing about it, something powerful and menacing. It seemed difficult to judge its size, or even to see it clearly. It's older than the First Blade, Dean knew at once. He'd held the First Blade, of course; he'd experienced its pull, its eerie aura of power and antiquity. But one look at the hooked wooden stick and Dean knew, with absolute certainty, That's even older.

You bother me, the man said. The upper half of the man's face seemed all in shadow — Dean could not read his expression at all — but it became clear that he was not moving his mouth as he spoke. Rather, the voice seemed to be materializing inside Dean's head.

Why are you bothering me? the man said. You are not mine. You are nothing of mine.

"Elegua?" Dean managed to say. He added, "Sir?" It seemed worth a try.

Who are you to speak my name?
Sam cleared his throat and said, his voice remarkably steady, "We, um, humbly request your assistance. Um, we're seeking a friend of ours. He's an angel—"

_An aaan-gelllll_, hissed Elegua. _One of the lesser beings. They live in boxes. They squeeze down into human form; they make themselves smaller than they are. They follow lists of orders... they shackle themselves to the commands of one long gone. They are merely slaves! There was only one of them that was ever worth anything to me, and one of his own brethren killed him! What do I care of angels?_

"This one might be able to help," said Dean. "Creation's being eaten up. You must have noticed. The black things, the big spheres? They're destroying everything —"

Elegua raised his hooked stick. It was a sharp gesture, an unmistakable threat, and Dean fell silent.

_It was YOU that did this_, Elegua said. _You and your brother both. We do know that much. It was you who have defiled Creation and splintered all my lovely roads between the realms. It was I who knit the realms together, I who built the roads, and YOU, YOU are the one who ruined it all. And you dare to ask MY help?_

He raised the hooked wooden stick again, and the trees seemed to draw apart. At once Dean realized his sense of perspective had been entirely wrong. Elegua was not a man-sized being standing ten paces away, no, not at all; he was something much vaster, infinitely huge, a creature the size of mountains. He was a thousand miles tall, and the hooked wooden stick was a scythe a thousand miles long, a scythe far older than that of Death himself, and it was swinging toward him—

_Wait, brother_, said another voice. _It was not truly their fault. The lock was due to fail; they were only pawns. Let me look at them._

All at once Elegua was back to normal size: a man dressed in red-and-black, holding a wooden stick, in a dark forest. He lowered his hooked wooden stick and stepped back.

Dean tried not to gasp in relief too obviously, but he did draw a somewhat unsteady breath. He had to consciously try to relax his hands — somehow they'd clenched up into fists.

"Dean," hissed Sam. Dean risked a brief glance over at him and Sam gave a quick nod to the side. Dean peered past him, into the dark, and now he saw what Sam must have already noticed: There was a whole crowd of dark forms shifting around in the trees. It was impossible to make out any clear sense of shape; it seemed just shadows upon shadows, slinking over each other in the dark. But here and there there was a pair of eyes gleaming. And, faintly, there were sounds, too, blending into the soft sounds of the forest: a susurration of a river, a rush of an ocean wave. A clink of metal... a swish of straw.

"I think it's the other orishas," Dean whispered. Sam mouthed the words "No shit."

Then right before Dean's eyes a man materialized from the murky darkness just beyond Sam. Patches of light, dark and color seemed to fly together and... there he was, a person, stepping forward. This man also had dark skin, and had the leanly muscled look of a runner. He wore a short blue-and-yellow robe that was swathed around him, tied at the shoulders and waist like some sort of short, tunic-length toga. In one hand he held both a bow and an arrow; the other hand held something that looked like a floppy clump of straw.

The bow and arrow both seemed to have that same strange aura of Elegua's hooked wooden stick: something tremendous, something ancient. Even the floppy clump of straw somehow seemed menacing.
"Let me guess," said Dean, trying to keep his voice from wavering. "That's the First Bow?"

Yes, said the man.

"And the First Arrow, huh?" said Dean, tacking on a weak laugh. "And the First Clump of Straw?"

*It is the tail of a bull.*

This brought on a probably-unwise giggle. "Oh, right," said Dean, trying to bite back the laughter. "The First Tail? Of the First Bull?"

Yes.

"And what's it for?" Dean rambled on, unable to stop talking. "Spreads the bullshit?"

Sam elbowed him hard in the ribs, whispering, "Dean—"

*It is a totem of the first animal I stalked and killed. The first animal to know man as a thing to be feared, the first to know man as a predator.* The man made a small motion with the bull's-tail, swishing it in a little circle pointing at Dean, and at once Dean was shaking in terror. He knew he was going to die. He was going to die NOW, horribly, RIGHT NOW, he had to RUN—

The man strode up to Dean, and took a step closer, and a step closer. Dean was nearly in full-blown panic now, his whole body shaking, barely able to fight down a violently strong urge to leap from the chair and race away at full speed. His legs were actually twitching with the desire to run. He clamped onto his thighs with both hands and managed to stay seated.

*Good*, said the man. *Very good.* He was looming over Dean now, looking down at him from just a few inches away. You do not scare easily.

"The bull's tail spreads fear, Dean," hissed Sam. Oh, right. Sam had been reading that orisha book.

Yes, said the man. *Fear.*

The man was walking in a little half-circle around Dean's side now, inspecting him from all angles. The blue-and-yellow toga seemed dazzling from this close. It nearly brushed against Dean's shoulder. The bull's-tail brushed his other shoulder, very lightly, and Dean could not restrain a reflexive shiver that ran through his whole body.

"And here I thought Cas had personal-space issues," Dean managed to croak out. The man didn't even bother responding, but finished his inspection of Dean and moved to Sam. Dean saw Sam flinch, too, under the man's strangely unnerving gaze, though at least Sam didn't get brushed by that bizarrely terrifying bull's-tail.

Finally the man took a step away from them, and regarded them both in turn. He lowered the bull's-tail, and the sense of fear receded at once.

*You are mine,* said the man. *You are both mine. I claim you both.*

"Well... we're sorta our own, actually," said Dean, still breathing a little unevenly. He was finding that the reality of being "claimed" by one of these terrifying ancient beings was much more disturbing than he had been picturing. "We're not really up for claim."

To his surprise, the man grinned at this. *You are definitely my child,* he said to Dean. *You are wholeheartedly mine.* Glancing over at Sam, he added, *Your brother, though... he could have taken*
Then he said, to Sam, *You have something of the scholar in you. You have figured out my name. And my domain. What is my name?*

"Oshossi," said Sam. The name burst out of him as if he'd been waiting for permission to say it. "You're Oshossi, aren't you? I read about you. The blue-and-yellow. The bow and arrow, and the bull's tail. You're the orisha of the hunt."

*The hunt, yes, and what else?*

Sam hesitated, and ventured, "And... hunters?"

The man inclined his head in a silent nod.

*I was the first hunter*, said Oshossi, almost casually. *You, both of you, are my natural children. And so I will help you.*

Sam hissed to Dean, in a rather theatrical stage whisper, "Dean, Oshossi can find things. He's good at tracking."

*Yes...* said Oshossi. *You seek something you have lost. You are brave, both of you, and you are hunters, both of you, and you are mine; and you seek something you have lost. Maybe I can help.*

Dean felt a spark of hope, and, glancing over at Sam, he saw something hopeful in Sam's eyes as well. Apparently they'd passed Oshossi's little test with the bull's-tail. Maybe this was all going to work out.

Dean cleared his throat and began, "Um. Yes. We're looking for a friend of ours. He—"

And Dean remembered something.

He had the feather.

It was a risk. It was a terrific risk. Dean felt tremendously protective about the feather. But... hadn't the book said something about... the feather could be presented to the "elder races?" To confirm the feather-owner's identity?

"Can you... can you track an angel from... from one of his feathers?" said Dean. He heard Sam give a hiss of surprise by his side, but Dean had already extracted the feather from his pocket. He unwrapped the handkerchief and held it up, careful to keep a solid hold on it, and said, "This was his. He was an angel, and—"

The feather was instantly gone from Dean's hand. Dean had only been planning to show it, not to hand it over, but Oshossi was holding it now. The feather seemed to have simply teleported over to him. Oshossi was holding it in the same hand that held the First Bull's Tail, and he was inspecting it closely.

"I can't lose that," said Dean, his throat tight. "Just, uh, by the way, I need it back." A stray bit of text from the angel book drifted through his mind: *I would have liked to have been your companion, but such was not our fate.* "I, uh, I definitely need that back—"

*Cassiel*, said Oshossi, holding the feather up. It glittered in the starlight. *This belongs to Cassiel.*

"Uh..." Dean said. "His name's Castiel, actually—"
Cassiel was his older name, said Oshossi. The archangel Cassiel. He was renamed. What do you wish to know of Cassiel?

"Castiel," corrected Dean again, quite confused now. "His name's Castiel. And he's not an archangel."

Oshossi shrugged. Not anymore. He once was one of the seven archangels.

Sam said, slowly, "There were... four archangels."

There were once seven. He does not remember. But we do.

Dean and Sam looked at each other, wide-eyed.

Seven archangels?

Cas? An archangel?

"That can't be... right..." said Dean, but even as he was thinking it through, Sam muttered, at Dean's side, "What Hannah said." Dean glanced at him and Sam whispered, "He's always been different."

Sam's words seemed to echo in Dean's head.

Cas had always been different.

Sam was right.

Sam whispered, "Balthazar used to call him 'Cassie,' remember? Gabriel too."

And, oddly the only thought that came to mind about that was that Dean had once been pretty serious about a girl named Cassie. Pretty damn in love, to put it bluntly. Guess I got a weakness for Cassies, thought Dean, and with that thought he had confused himself so thoroughly that he could not seem to think at all.

While Dean floundered for a response, Sam spoke up. "We... uh... we need to find the, um, the angel that feather belongs to. The angel we know as Castiel. He might be able to help us figure out how to deal with the Darkness. Something about the Crown of Heaven? Do you know what that is? Or where it is?"

The Crown is destruction, said Oshossi.

"Yes, but if we just knew where it—"

The Crown tears apart, said Oshossi. He started to turn aside. We cannot visit the Crown. The Crown tears apart. The tapestry unravels. The knot is undone. The Crown is destruction.

"Yeah, okay," said Dean. "Destruction, got it." He took a breath. "Look, if you could just help us find where Cas is, uh, our friend, the owner of the feather there, that would be a huge help. So, like... is there any way you can tell us if he's in Heaven or Hell or in Purgatory, or the Veil? I mean, where he is exactly?"

At that Elegua spoke, a hissing susurration of a voice in the background. Oshossi turned to him with a calming gesture, and then looked back at Sam and Dean

Elegua asks, you wish us to search within four different realms? Oshossi was frowning. It seemed this wasn't a usual request.
"And Oz and fairyland?" added Dean hastily. "All those other weird places?"

*The lesser realms as well?*

"Yeah, the... lesser realms, if that's what they're called," said Dean, nodding. "Uh... Please? Sir? Sirs?"

"We'd be very grateful," said Sam. "Sirs."

Oshossi turned to look at Elegua. This time they seemed to confer silently, in some sort of orisha-telepathy that seemed to involve stalking around each other and occasionally raising the hooked wooden stick and the First Bull's Tail.

After a long bout of mutual staring-and-gesturing, Elegua at last nodded, and Oshossi turned back to Sam and Dean.

*Elegua grants your request,* said Oshossi. To Dean's great relief, the feather abruptly appeared back on Dean's lap. Dean scooped it up instantly, clutching it close to his heart.

Oshossi added, *My brother Elegua is not generally fond of the angels. But we do remember Cassiel. He is elder than some of us, and he was gentle with us when we were new. Ogun and I remember.*

And now another orisha, Ogun presumably, glided silently out of the trees. This orisha was dressed all in green-and-black, holding a machete in one hand and a knife in the other.

*We remember him,* said Ogun, nodding. *We will search for him.*

"Well, at least *that* can't be the first of its kind," muttered Dean to Sam, nodding toward Ogun's knife. "'Cause we've both seen the First Blade."

*The blade you carried was not the first blade of all time,* said Ogun, *merely the first used to murder a brother. A jawbone makes quite a poor blade in any case. I carry the first obsidian blade in my belt; it is superior.* He glanced down at the machete, and added, with a hint of a smile, *Later I changed to iron.*

"He's the orisha of tools," hissed Sam. "Of tool-making."

*I am,* confirmed Ogun, adding, *And therefore my realm is the realm of humanity: the mortal Earth. So I will search Earth for you, and the Veil too, which rests upon the Earth.*

Oshossi nodded, and added, *My brother Ogun will search across Earth and within the Veil. I will search within Purgatory and Hell and the farther realms. Our brother Elegua agrees to search within Heaven, and he will also search within the lesser realms. Elegua also grants access to all his roads that connect the borders of every realm, so that we three may search for the archangel Cassiel in every place that we can. The other orishas will help where they may.*

The massive trees stirred. There was a murmuring in the shadows, and this time tiny glimpses came into view. First just flashes of small things (a mirror; a tiny green plant; a patch of blue water; a spark of flame). And then entire figures: A young woman dressed in gold, gazing into the mirror. An older woman, dressed all in blue and white, a vast ocean wave raising behind her. A man holding a double-headed ax in each hand, flames dancing around his feet. A strangely terrifying figure entirely covered with straw, all the strands of straw trembling in an unseen wind. One by one they appeared, dozens of them standing all around the clearing.

The great trees became translucent, turning into silvery ghosts of trees, and through the faint trees there were now roads heading in all directions. Dozens and dozens of roads, twining their way
toward infinite horizons... and all intersecting with each other right there where Sam and Dean were sitting.

There were three sudden streaks of bright color, three blurs that flew in different directions to the horizon. One was blue-and-yellow, one was red-and-black, and one was green-and-black. Oshossi, Elegua and Ogun; they had all flown away, faster than the eye could follow. One by one the other orishas disappeared as well, darting into the distance.

Dean blinked. The trees were back. The clearing was deserted. Only the giant looming trees still seemed to be keeping them company, and a few animals blinking in the dark.

Sam and Dean looked at each other.

"Holy shit," whispered Dean to Sam. They both looked around. They could still hear the drumming, and they were still seated on the ludicrous little white plastic chairs, yet all around them was a vast, dark wilderness, devoid of movement now.

Sam whispered, "What do you want to bet we're sitting on the original crossroads? Like, the First Crossroads?"

"Not taking that bet," whispered Dean back. "Pretty sure this is the First Damn Everything. I'm certain that was the First Wooden Stick. We're probably sitting on the First White Plastic Chairs."

Sam gave a weak laugh.

And then they waited.

The drumming went on a long time.

There was a blur of color. Oshossi and Elegua and Ogun were all back in an instant, standing in a tableau facing the brothers. Elegua took two steps forward, brandishing his hooked wooden stick, and he said:

_The archangel Cassiel, or Castiel as he became known in later days, is not within the borders of Hell. Neither is he within, nor upon, the River Styx. He is not inside Purgatory. Neither does he inhabit the Veil. He does not dwell upon the Earth. He is not within the borders of Heaven. My other brothers and sisters report he is not within the lesser realms._

And there he stopped. He stood a moment in silence, and then took two steps back, joining Oshossi and Ogun.

Oshossi nodded in agreement. He added, _We did not find your friend._

_We searched and did not find him_, said Ogun.

Then the three orishas stood there in total silence, Oshossi and Elegua and Ogun side by side, still as statues, looking at Sam and Dean. Their faces seemed unreadable in the shadows. The quiet murmurings in the shadows were back; the other orishas must have returned as well.

Dean blinked. "Oh," he said. He paused, unsure what to say.

This had to be wrong.

There had to be some mistake.

They must have messed up. Or overlooked something.
"Well," said Dean, "How thorough was this search? I mean, how much of all of those places did you actually look in? Did you just, like, buzz through, or did you really look everywhere?"

Oshossi frowned. *We searched within all the realms, as we agreed. We searched everywhere we could.*

"Well, you must've missed something," said Dean.

Oshossi's arrow was now pointed at Dean's heart.

There had been no apparent motion; Oshossi simply was in a new position now, without having moved. And in the new position, the bow was drawn and the arrow was pointed at Dean's heart, a black obsidian arrow-head shining in the dark. And, just as had happened with Elegua before, suddenly Oshossi seemed to be an immense giant, a being the size of a galaxy. The arrow seemed a galactic spear that spanned the universe... pointing directly at Dean's heart.

*You doubt me?* said Oshossi. *My own child doubts me?*

"No! No," said Dean. "Not at all. No, no doubt at all. Just was, uh, thinking out loud."

"No, sir," said Sam, and the arrow shifted briefly to Sam's heart. Sam added hastily, "Apologies, really, sir, we really aren't doubting you, Oshossi, sir, we just, um, we just... we haven't done this before."

"We aren't doubting you at all," said Dean. "Um, thank you very much. Thanks very much. We really appreciate you searching... uh... all those places for us."

In the next moment Oshossi was again standing relaxed, the bow loose, the arrow pointed at the ground, again without having actually moved. *I forgive you your impudence and your pride.* He flashed a smile. *A little pride can be a good thing, in a hunter.*

Then he was gone; and Elegua and Ogun were gone too, and the forest, and all the strange presences in the shadows. Sam and Dean found themselves blinking in the light of the fire in Marcos's living room, still seated on the absurd white plastic chairs. Marcos was still dancing in front of them, the three drummers were still drumming, and Cas's black feather was in Dean's hand.

Marcos glanced over at them and did an odd circular motion with one hand. In the next breath the drummers all ended on exactly the same beat. The three drummers immediately began chatting again, as if nothing had happened at all. One of them reached into the cooler, and began popping open some new beers.

*What the hell was that?* said Dean shakily to Marcos. Marcos looked at them and said, *"Follow me."*

Marcos grabbed some of the beers, exchanged a brief word with the drummers. Then he led Sam and Dean outside to the porch, had them change back into their own shirts, and handed them each a beer.

*"What did you see?"* Marcos asked.

Sam described the whole scene. Marcos made Sam slow down when he got to the part where the
"Orishas had appeared, and insisted that Sam describe the objects the orishas been carrying, and the colors of their clothes, and report precisely what they had each said.

"Bow and arrow? Are you sure?" Marcos said. "And the third one had a metal knife and a machete? You're certain?"

"Yes, I'm certain," Sam said. "That's Oshossi and Ogun, right? I read about them."

Marcos nodded, and asked, "Did they find your friend?"

"No," said Dean. "Oshossi and his two buddies said they'd searched all of Heaven and Hell and Purgatory and Earth and the Veil, and the 'lesser realms,' all in, maybe, two minutes. So excuse me if I'm a little bit skeptical but I was just wondering if they might have missed something?"

"They took... two minutes?" said Marcos, his eyes widening. "Do you mean that literally? It felt like two minutes?"

"Yeah," said Dean. "I was thinking, maybe ten minutes might have been more reasonable? To search all of Creation?"

Marcos sat down heavily on a little wooden stool. He took a swig of beer, and stared out into the night for a while.

"I'm sorry," he said eventually.

"Sorry for what?"

"I'm sorry to have to tell you this," Marcos turned to face them. "It appears likely that your friend is gone. If they did not find him in the places that they searched, then he is not there."

"No, I'm thinking it's much more likely that our dude in the toga missed something," said Dean.

"Your dude in the toga, as you call him," said Marcos, a little sharply, "is not only one of the greatest of the orishas, and the orisha of hunters, but also orisha of all lost things, AND he's the orisha of justice, too. Nobody can search for something like a hunter can, so he is the orisha to whom people turn when they are searching for something lost, or when they seek justice against all odds. His two closest friends are Elegua and Ogun. Between the three of them they are the best trinity of hunters in existence."

Marcos paused. Dean and Sam were both staring at him. Marcos took another swig of his beer and said, "For Oshossi to claim you as his own is a tremendous honor. I will hazard a guess that the two of you are accomplished hunters of some sort?"

After an uncertain pause, Sam and Dean both nodded.

Marcos said, "I thought as much. He would never have chosen you otherwise. And for Oshossi to team up with both Elegua and Ogun to assist in a search is... rare. And for them to take two entire minutes...." Marcos set his beer bottle down and clasped his hands in his lap. "Well. I have never heard of such a long time. Usually Oshossi finds things instantaneously, in less than a second. For it to take so long... with two other orishas searching... including Elegua, who really can open all the roads in Creation.... and with the other orishas helping? Well, I suspect they must have searched several times. They do not lie; they are very literal. They will have searched where they agreed to search, and they will have searched very thoroughly."

Marcos looked back and forth between them. His eyes rested on Dean's, and Marcos's expression
"Dean," Marcos said, holding Dean's gaze. "I am deeply sorry about your friend. I can see that you cared very—"

"Let's get out of here, Sam," said Dean, plunking his beer can down on the porch railing. He stood and started walking down the porch steps, calling over his shoulder, "We gotta get a move on."

He strode down the front walk to the Impala. Dean was aware he should probably be saying something civilized to Marcos, that there were social protocols to follow and that he should be saying something like "thank you" or at least "goodbye." But there was such a flood of rage and despair rolling through him that all he seemed able to do was walk down the little path, his mind blank, his feet taking him toward the car more-or-less on autopilot. *I ought to be cursing or something*, he thought distantly. *I ought to be weeping and cursing and crying. Or whatever people do. What do people do?*

He ought to be cursing the orishas. Oshossi, and Elegua, and Ogun. And God, and Cain, and the Darkness. And Crowley and Hannah too. And the sky and the trees for good measure. And every last creature in the whole fucked-up universe.

But Dean didn't curse. And he didn't weep or cry. Instead he simply walked to the car. It seemed almost an out-of-body experience, as if he were watching himself from outside, a voice in his head narrating the scene as if for a documentary: *There goes that useless loser Dean Winchester,* his inner voice said.

*There he goes, that hopeless puppet, that helpless pawn; there he goes, walking to the car, getting to the car. Watch him unlock the door. Watch him get inside and start her up. See how he revs the engine. As if anything he can do now can help fix the infinite damage he's already done.*

*As if anything he does matters anymore.*

Dean revved the engine again, and again, gnawing at the half-healed spot on the inside of his cheek, waiting for Sam to finish his goodbyes.

Sam watched Dean walking stiffly away toward the Impala. The way Dean was moving looked all wrong. He looked, actually, a little like he had in Sandusky. Sam knew he needed to run after Dean, but it would have been unforgivably rude to walk away without at least thanking Marcos.

Not to mention, clearly it wouldn't be good to piss off the orishas.

"I'm sorry," Sam said, turning back to Marcos. "I apologize on my behalf of my brother. He's just... he's upset. Thank you for all your help."

Fortunately Marcos didn't seem mad. "Your brother is in tremendous pain," he said, watching Dean yank the Impala's door open.

Marcos turned to Sam with an inquiring look. Sam could only nod.

"And so are you," said Marcos.
Sam could suddenly barely speak. "Look... is what you said really true? Is Cas really..." He took a breath and managed to say, "Is Cas gone?"

Marcos gave a heavy sigh. "If he were findable, they would have found him. The orishas can move almost everywhere in Creation. I am sorry. I am very sorry." But then a rather puzzled expression crossed his face. "I do have one other message for you that I should pass on. While you were talking to Elegua and Oshossi and Ogun, my own orisha spoke to me."

"Your own orisha?"

"The one who claimed me years ago," said Marcos, a soft smile creasing his face. "Shango. He is orisha of fire, and he said to me one thing. He said..." He paused, the smile fading. "He said, they must go into the fire."

Sam waited, hoping there would be something more to the cryptic statement.

"That's all," said Marcos, reading Sam's expression. "Into the fire. That's all he said. I knew he was referring to the two of you."

"But what did he mean?" Sam said. From the street came the unmistakable noise of the Impala engine starting up.

"I don't know," confessed Marcos. "Shango is orisha of fire, after all, and he does tend to view everything in terms of fire sometimes. It might have meant..." He hesitated. "I rather think it might have referred to the pain that you both are clearly going through. Or... it might have referred to something else. I don't really know. I apologize; he can be cryptic." He added, with a sigh, "They can all be rather cryptic, as you saw. They don't mean to be, you know. It's mostly that we don't understand their language very well. They try to fit their thoughts into our heads, and it isn't always a good fit."

From the street the Impala revved loudly, its grumbling roar echoing down the street. That was Dean's signal for, I wanna go, NOW, Sammy; get your butt in the car.

"I've got to go," said Sam. "Listen, thank you, really, thanks." Another roar from the car. Sam stood and shook Marcos's hand, and added "Hey, could you, um, thank Oshossi for us? Or, you know, give him some gifts or whatever's appropriate? The books I was reading said it's important to give gifts. I don't want to piss him off. Or any of them, obviously. Could you thank him for us?"

Marcos nodded. He said, "Oshossi is very fond of sweet potato fries. I'll take care of it." Sam thanked him one more time and ran off the porch.

Sam had barely gotten into his seat before Dean was already slamming the Impala into gear. The Impala lurched forward before Sam even had the door closed; he barely snatched his feet off the ground in time.

Sam got his seatbelt on and then sat in uncomfortable silence as Dean charged the Impala through the nighttime traffic, running a few yellow lights a little recklessly and then wheeling sharply onto route 290, westbound.

He'd headed them back toward Kansas.
"Dean, we gotta go east," Sam reminded him.

"Tell Jason to meet us in Kansas," said Dean. "Call him and tell him."

"He's already expecting—"

"Call and fucking tell him to bring the fucking car to fucking Kansas," snapped Dean, his voice like ice. "I'll pay whatever he wants. I'll give him a thousand bucks cash. I gotta get back to Cas's...."

Dean stopped short, and didn't finish the sentence.

_Cas's grave_, thought Sam.

The Impala roared westward, the two brothers silent now. Sam spent the first few minutes just trying to decide whether to say anything, or whether to risk asking Dean any questions.

_Dammit, dammit, dammit_, thought Sam, leaning his head against the window. The reality of what they'd just learned had begun to sink in, and Sam's eyes began to sting.

Cas was gone.

Sam had been right all along, and Dean had been wrong. Cas was truly gone.

_Why did I let him even have any hope?_ thought Sam, pinching the bridge of his nose, trying to press away the incipient headache that was already forming. _Why did I let ME have any hope? I should've talked sense into him. I should've..._

But Dean had been so terribly fragile. And lately he'd been doing so much better! He'd been pulling himself together. He'd been sleeping again. He'd even been eating again. He'd still been wrecked about it all, obviously, but he'd been getting at least within shouting distance of his old self.

And now this.

_It was always dependent on being able to find Cas_, Sam thought. _And this was our best shot at finding him._

"Maybe Oshossi missed something?" ventured Sam at last, with a glance over at Dean. "Maybe the orishas don't really know as much as Marcos thinks they do." But that seemed unconvincing, even to Sam. The memory of that vast, ancient forest in the night was suddenly in his mind again. A shiver ran up Sam's spine; those three unfathomably ancient pagan gods had actually been standing right there before them, in that primeval forest (mastodons! saber-tooth cats!). Wearing those ancient-as-hell clothes (loincloths! actual beaded loincloths!). Holding those bizarre old archaic tools from the very dawn of time.... Oshossi, the pagan Stone Age god of _hunters_, had actually _claimed_ Sam and Dean, adopted them as his very own. Oshossi had even known Castiel... he'd recognized the feather immediately... he'd even known stuff about Cas that Sam and Dean had never dreamed of. (An _archangel_? One of _seven_? Sam had definitely not been expecting _that_ little bit of trivia.)

It was almost too much to take in. (Archangel??)

But Sam knew, in his gut, that it had all been real. As real as it gets.

The road straightened out. They were getting well out of Chicago now, the traffic thinning out; it was nearly midnight.

_We gotta talk about it_, Sam thought. _We gotta. I gotta know._
"Dean," Sam began, "We have to accept that Cas might be—"

"Don't," said Dean, in a very flat voice. "Don't. Don't say anything. Just don't."

"Dean—"

"He's got to still be somewhere," said Dean. "He's got to be. They must've missed something."

Sam fell silent. The car drove on.

---

Sam eventually called Jason, who turned out to be perfectly happy to bring Cas's car all the way to Kansas, in return for a peek at the bunker ("Always wanted to see that place! It's legendary!") It was a little hard to respond to his enthusiasm, but Sam tried to act grateful.

After another half hour of echoing silence, Sam finally reached over and turned the radio on. They were way out in rural Illinois now, and all he could pick up out here was country stations. They drove on for another hour, listening to one cookie-cutter pop-country hit after another. And then, past midnight, as they were nearing Des Moines, Sam flipped the dial and landed on a familiar scrap of melody:

Coming home... to a place he'd never been before...

He left yesterday behind him... you might say he was born again...

Sam flinched when he recognized it. “Rocky Mountain High,” by John Denver. Sam was already starting to reach toward the radio to change the station when he saw a flicker of motion out of the corner of his eye. Something batted his hand out of the way, hard, and then a tremendous noise nearly shattered his eardrums.

Dean had pulled his pearl-handled .45 out from the back of his belt, and had blasted the radio to smithereens.

Sam flattened himself against the door, gasping. Dean just kept driving, looking perfectly calm. His left hand was still on the wheel, steering the Impala smoothly along the highway; his right hand held the smoking pistol, now aimed up at the roof. Last Sam had known, the .45 had been in the glove compartment; Dean must've gotten it out when Sam had been talking to Marcos.

The radio was destroyed.

The Impala purred along. Apparently the bullet hadn't hit anything critical in the engine. Whether by luck or by careful aim, Sam didn't know.

Sam was still pressed against the door, thinking fast. What was Dean's next move going to be? The three best options were clearly: A, just talk Dean down; B, grab the gun out of Dean's hand; C, grab the steering wheel and the gun, simultaneously. Sam was gearing himself up to tackle C when Dean clicked the safety on and set the .45 down on the seat between them. He even angled it carefully so
that the barrel was facing safely forward.

Sam snatched up the pistol the second Dean's hand lifted off it. He ejected the magazine and checked the chamber. Yup, there was a live round in the chamber, ready to go. Sam cleared the chamber; it was a routine move he'd done thousands of times when cleaning their weapons, and he was amazed to find that his hands were shaking. He took a deep breath, putting the magazine and the stray bullet in his left jacket pocket. The pistol, once the barrel had cooled off a little, went into his right jacket pocket — the side farthest from Dean.

It took another minute for it to sink in: Dean had shot the Impala. Dean had damaged the Impala. He'd destroyed the radio. Sam eyed the wreckage out of the corner of his eye. The tape player was toast, too.

There would be no more music.

Sam swallowed and said, keeping his voice as level as he could, "Do you have any more guns on you right now?"

"Nope," said Dean coolly.

"Any other weapons?"

"No."

Another long minute went by. The dark Iowa fields glided past, the stubbly brown October fields faintly visible in the occasional streetlights.

"Don't worry, Sammy," said Dean. "I wouldn't do anything while you're in the car."

"Dean," began Sam. "Please—"

"Sammy," interrupted Dean, almost gently, "I cannot talk about this. I really can't. But I will get you back to Kansas. I promise."

---

A/N - I know this is a grim place to leave it. I will try my best to get the next chapter written.

A few other points:

- My apologies to any orisha followers out there who may notice I've gotten some things wrong. I've been as true to the orishas I can given the restrictions of the fic plot. Ogun, btw, was not going to be part of the scene, but in real-life lore of Brazilian candomble, Ogun often accompanies Oshossi and Elegua when they search for things, and it didn't seem right to leave him out. The forest scene and sensation of running are based on what some of my friends have told me they've experienced. But some other things have been slightly altered for the fic or have been changed a little to parallel the God/angels mythology of Supernatural. Any errors or changes are my own but once again I will say I have nothing but respect for the orishas. I should also acknowledge the other orishas who appeared briefly: Oshun, the woman in gold with the mirror, is the orisha of freshwater, rivers & lakes; Yemanja, the one dressed in blue and white, is orisha of the sea and is a mother figure;
Shango, the one with flames at his feet, is the orisha of the sun, fire, and thunder; and Omolu, who was covered all in straw with his face hidden, is orisha of disease, health, life & death. Numerous other important orishas were not depicted due to lack of space. (PS - in Brazilian Portuguese all of these names are written with an "x" in place of "sh", e.g. Xango, Oxossi, Oxum.)

- In real-life lore, "Castiel" is indeed considered to be a synonym of "Cassiel", with Cassiel being the more commonly used name. And "Cassiel," in turn, does indeed turn up on some old lists of seven (not four!) archangels. For a long time I was sure the canon show was going to use this fascinating bit of lore and reveal at some point that Castiel is really an archangel, and that that's why both Gabriel and Balthazar call Castiel "Cassie." I thought it even seemed pretty clear, in the canon show, that Castiel is in some way quite different from other angels. (He clearly is treated by God in an unusual way, what with all the resurrections. He is treated differently, too, by the other angels, who often seem to flip back and forth between worshipping him and fearing him. And we learned, at one point, that Naomi altered not only his recent memories, but also some of his memories from Old Testament times. Who knows how far back that memory-altering might go?) Anyway I ended up developing a headcanon that there was some sort of mysterious, major Heavenly crisis back in the long-ago past that most angels either won't talk about or have had wiped from their minds, a crisis that perhaps involved not only the fall of Lucifer but the death or "brainwashing" of 3 former archangels who ever since have thought they are regular angels... never remembering what they really are.

Thank you for reading! If there was something that you liked, please drop me a line to let me know what it was.

I'll get the next chapter up whenever I can...
Finding Dean

A/N - Ahh, thank you all so much for all your kind thoughts! The good news is: they ruled out everything scary. The iffy news is: they still have no friggin clue what is wrong with me! So they're just bombing me with painkillers while we wait for various test results. I'm much more functional now during the day, but still very short on sleep and unfortunately not able to spend much time on my laptop (apparently, looking down at laptop compresses cranial nerves...) so I haven't been able to reply to comments like usual. But I appreciated all of your comments SO MUCH and hope to catch up with replies this weekend. It means the world to have your support... I was feeling really, really low last week (as you will probably detect from the tone of this chapter) and you guys really made me feel better.

Due to all that I could only get 1/2 of my planned chapter ready for you tonight. I will warn you right now, this is the emotional nadir of the whole fic. So I am actually trying to just blast through it as quick as possible but there's still a limit on how much I can work per day, so I'm trying to get the 2nd half ready for Sunday or Monday. Check in again Sun & Mon to see if there's another update.

Serious warning: Suicidal talk coming up. Please tread carefully if such things disturb you.

Can't do a stakeout on your own past twenty-four hours, was what Dad had always said. Can't watch someone all on your own. For a short time, sure, but not forever. You'll fall asleep at some point. You'll miss something.

Sam tried anyway, of course — tried staking out Dean, in other words. He knew it was damn near hopeless, but he tried. He managed to stay awake for most of the drive, even convincing Dean at one point to let Sam take a driving shift.

Sam had been doing the whole watching-Dean thing for months now, of course. It was always easier when they were both in the Impala; Sam felt pretty sure Dean had meant what he said, about not doing anything "while you're in the car, Sammy."

Which meant that as soon as they pulled into the bunker, just before noon the next day, Sam's worrying instantly ratcheted upward. What was Dean going to try? When? Where? How could Sam prevent it? Could Sam possibly manage to keep an eye on him at all times?

Dean, for his part, said nothing at all as he pulled the Impala into the garage. He didn't head up the hill, and he didn't do any of his usual prayers to Cas. (Which seemed rather ominous, actually.) Instead he strode off toward the shower and just a few minutes later tottered out, clad now in a t-shirt and boxers, and collapsed onto his bed. He didn't even bother shutting his door, and seemed to fall asleep instantly, sprawled on his stomach, head twisted to one side.

I have to watch him, Sam was still thinking. Gotta keep an eye on him. Even though Dean was asleep it still seemed like a bad idea to leave him alone. So Sam leaned against Dean's doorway for a while, watching him sleep.

There was something in one of Dean's hands. Sam peered at it in the dark. Dean's bedroom was only
faintly lit by a shaft of light from the hallway, and Sam had to take a few cautious steps forward before he saw what it was: Cas's little black feather, of course. Dean had it clutched in his hand again. He'd barely let go of the thing for the entire journey to Ohio; it had been either in Dean's pocket or in Dean's hand for the whole time. Even in his sleep, now, Dean was still holding tightly onto it.

*Pretty sure I know what that means,* thought Sam, backing up to the doorway with a quiet sigh and leaning against the doorframe again. For one thing, Sam had read some of "The Physiology Of Angels" on the drive back.

For another thing... well. It had been kind of obvious all along, really, hadn't it?

All along it had been pretty clear. Even back in those early days when Cas had seemed so fascinated with Dean, studying his every move with that intent, steely-eyed stare. And Dean's reaction; he'd always seemed oddly unsettled by Cas's presence. Flicking those uncertain looks back at Cas, eyeing him up and down.

At first Sam had thought it was just, well, the whole angel thing. Dean was probably acting a little unsettled because Castiel was a friggin' "soldier of God," after all. A real live angel. Later, though, once Sam and Dean had both gotten used to that... those looks had continued.

And there'd been those strange comments from other angels. *That angel in the dirty trenchcoat who's in love with you.... He was your boyfriend first... The moment he laid a hand on you, he was lost.*

For a long time Sam hadn't been sure if it was just on Cas's side or also on Dean's. But there had been a moment, after Cas had disappeared into that lake, when Sam had been watching Dean handle that bloodied trenchcoat, rolling it up in his hands... Of course, they'd all been crushed to see Cas killed (apparently killed, anyway), but Dean, especially, had seemed nearly crippled by it. Sam's memories of that time were none too clear, but he did remember that look on Dean's face.

And every time they'd changed cars after that, Dean had grabbed not only that bag of ammo but also *the coat*, that worn-out bloody coat, always patting it awkwardly and then stuffing it into the trunk of whatever car they'd just stolen. Even though they'd been trying to travel light, Dean had never left that coat behind.

It had been pretty clear what it all meant.

Sam had never been sure whether Cas and Dean had ever talked about it (not likely, given those two) or ever done anything (possible, actually, Sam thought). Once upon a time he'd considered needling Dean about it, teasing him a little, really just to try to figure out where things stood. But something had held him back. Somehow it hadn't seemed like a teasing matter.

Not then, and certainly not now.

Sam gave another quiet sigh, still leaning against the doorway, as he wondered for the hundredth time what had really happened on that night in Ohio. For it was clear, that this wasn't just grief about losing Cas. That was bad enough, of course, but there was something worse going on too.

It seemed like Dean felt guilty.

Seemed like Dean felt that Cas's death was all his fault.

For some reason.

Dean stirred in his sleep, muttering something. It sounded like, "Parrot? Where are you... parrot?"
Sam frowned; Dean had mentioned something, a couple times now, about a "parrot" he'd been
dreaming about. Who knew what *that* was about. Whatever it was, it didn't look like a restful dream;
Dean's mumbles sounded strained and worried, and his hands and feet were twitching a little. As if
he were dreaming of walking, of running around... maybe searching for something.

*How long is he even gonna stay asleep?* Sam wondered. *What's he gonna do when he wakes up?*

Sam could hide the Impala key, he could hide some of the guns, but....

But they'd driven through the night, and Sam was desperately exhausted too. It was getting hard
even to hold his head up; he felt fuzzy-headed with fatigue. *Can't do a stakeout on your own past
twenty-four hours*, he thought again.

He'd already known this, of course.

The problem was that you eventually had to fall asleep.

The problem was that you just couldn't keep your guard up forever. Not by yourself.

Sam pulled the ivory-handled pistol out of his jacket pocket and looked down at it.

There seemed hardly any point to even trying to hide the pistol. There were a hundred other weapons
all around the bunker. If Dean didn't use this pistol, he'd just use another one. If Sam hid them all,
Dean could just buy go buy one; he could even buy a shotgun right in Lebanon's little hardware
store, if he wanted. If Sam hid the Impala key, to keep Dean from taking off, Dean could always
hotwire the Impala. Or take another car. Hell, he could do it even quicker than that; he could just use
a noose or a belt. There were plenty of trees outside, convenient trees with convenient branches that
a rope could easily be hung from. There were high windows that a person could jump out of. There
were a million ways to do it, and Sam couldn't prevent them all.

*I wanted to end it once*, Sam remembered. A couple years back, after the trials.... *I wanted to let it all
end, and never come back. And Dean wouldn't let me.*

*Dean made me stay alive just so he didn't have to be alone. And I was pissed.*

*I was more than pissed. I was furious at him, for keeping me alive.* (That hadn't been the only thing
Sam had been furious about, of course, but it had been a big one.)

*He wouldn't let me make my own choice.*

*Am I just doing the same thing now? Am I just being selfish?*

But the image of the long, empty road ahead was chilling. Sam tried to picture it: No Dean... No Cas.
No brother, no friend. The empty bunker; the empty Impala, just Sam in the driver's seat, the
passenger seat empty. Nobody at his back, nobody to call when shit went south. And meanwhile the
world slowly collapsing all around, and all the other realms too.

The whole goddam solar system collapsing, by the looks of it.

Maybe the angels and demons would find a way to fix everything? But more likely they wouldn't...
seemed like it would be left to Sam to try to find the mysterious Crown all by himself, or go "into the
fire" (whatever the hell that meant) to try to fix the disaster they'd unleashed on the world.

Sam stared at the pistol dully for a few minutes more, trying to come up with a plan, or at least with
some kind of decision. What was the right thing to do? For Dean? For Sam? For poor Cas? For the
whole world? But it was too much to think through, and Sam was too tired, his head too fuzzy. Finally he turned and made his way to his own room, hoping Dean could just get through one afternoon nap without Sam hovering over him.

It seemed right to at least go through the motions, though, so Sam hid the pistol as best he could, tucking it under a false panel he’d installed in his bottom dresser drawer a couple years ago and that he was pretty sure Dean didn’t know about. The ammo and Impala key he wedged under the mattress. Then he set his phone alarm to go off in an hour, hoping this would ensure he woke up before Dean did.

That done, fatigue seemed to crash down on him. Sam kicked off his shoes and collapsed onto his bed with all his clothes still on. A one-hour nap; that was all he’d need, right? Just a one-hour nap, and then Sam could go on watch again.

The last thing he thought, before he fell into a heavy sleep, was:

*I just wish this would all end. I'm so friggin' exhausted.*

Sam blinked awake. Some sort of noise had woken him... some faintly distant, slightly familiar noise. He gazed up at the ceiling for a moment, still half-asleep, before he realized he felt far too rested for that to have been just a one-hour nap.

Sure enough, when he scrambled upright and grabbed his phone he discovered it was six hours later. It was seven at night already. He’d somehow slept for six whole hours! Had he slept through the alarm?

No — the phone had been put on mute. Sam stared at it, clicking the mute button off and on a couple times, thinking, *I know it wasn't on mute when I went to bed. I'm certain.*

Dean had been here. Dean had muted Sam's phone alarm.

Sam felt under the mattress. The ammo was gone.

And the Impala key.

A quick check of the dresser revealed that Dean had found, and taken, the ivory-handled pistol too.

*What was the sound that woke me up?* Sam thought, and his blood seemed to chill in his veins.

Sam stood by the dresser for a few more moments, actually thinking *Well, that's that then,* almost in a numb fog, before he managed to make himself leave the room and walk down the hall to Dean’s room.

He knew what he'd find. But when he at last slowly pushed Dean's bedroom door open, croaking "Dean?" in a suddenly hoarse voice, the room was empty.

No body, no blood.

*Maybe he did it outside?*

*He's up on the hill. He would have gone up the hill to do it.* Sam felt certain. Dean had gone up the
hill, to Cas's grave, to do it.

Sam got his jacket on, his hands stiff and clumsy. It seemed strangely difficult to decide whether he should be running in a panic, or simply plodding up there fatalistically. It occurred to him, then, that he could just go back to his own room, and lie back down on the bed, and curl up and go back to sleep. If I don't look, then I don't find a body; if I don't find a body, then I don't know; if I don't know, then it hasn't really happened.

C'mon, Sammy, he heard in his head, in Dean's voice. It was some long-ago memory of his older brother's voice, in some long-gone motel. Probably decades ago now. C'mon, Sammy, gotta get up and face the world, Dean had told him, shaking him awake from a tired sleep on a creaky mattress. Can't hide forever.

Sam finally managed to stumble out the front door and onto the little path through the field. It was very dark, and Sam had forgotten his flashlight, so he had to navigate his way up the hill by the faint light of his phone. And now Sam wanted to run, run at top speed, but it was far too dark, and he kept tripping.

But when at last he got up to the top of the hill, after far too many stumbles and falls over roots and rocks on the trail, Dean wasn't there.

Sam looked around, panting, mouth dry, as he scanned around with the weak phone light. Cas's grave was undisturbed. Nobody was there. The little folding chair was empty. A thin frost on the ground was undisturbed, all the fallen leaves edged with little lines of frozen rime. Sam spent a few more minutes peering around at every lump on the ground. (He jumped in alarm at one point at a suspicious-looking lump on the ground, his heart thumping, but it turned out it was only the ever-present backpack. The one that had the snacks and clothes and phone for Cas.) He even checked the nearby trees for any possible hanging figures.

Dean wasn't there.

Sam stood there for a minute or two at the foot of Castiel's grave. There was a quarter-moon rising, and Sam could just make out the little wing-carving that Dean had mounted at the head of the grave.

"Cas," Sam finally said. "Castiel. If there is the slightest chance that you are still out there anywhere.... we really fucking need you."

It was a stupid thing to say. It didn't even deserve an answer.

There was no answer. Sam turned and trudged back down the hill to the bunker.

Sam's next guess was that Dean had taken the Impala and driven somewhere far away to do it. But the Impala was still in the garage. Though Dean seemed to have moved it; Sam was pretty sure it had been in the right garage bay before, and now it was in the left bay. Maybe Dean had taken it out and then changed his mind and brought it back?

There was a fourth option, of course; a fourth place Dean might have gone. If not his own bedroom, or Cas's grave on the hill, or the Impala, then....

Soon Sam was walking up the back staircase that went up to the top floor. He kept his eyes on the
stairs all the way up, watching his feet. One stair after another went by, and Sam thought the whole time, *would I have heard a shot if it were up at the top of the bunker?*

*What kind of sound was it that woke me?*

The door at the top was open.

Sam stepped into the attic. Dark, moonlit. Quiet.

"Dean?" he called.

There was no answer. Sam flicked on his cell phone again to provide a little light, and made his way over to Cas's little corner. By this point Sam was so ready for the worst that he jumped in surprise when his little light showed a glimpse of a figure sitting *upright* on Cas's bed — Dean — it was Dean— Sam moved closer and the phone light flickered faintly on Dean's face, and Dean's eyes were open, he was alive, he was sitting on the bed, and he was fine.

Dean wasn't even holding the gun or anything. Nothing so dramatic. He was just holding the guitar — and *now* Sam realized that the "faintly familiar" sound that had woken him up had probably just been the distant strumming of the guitar. Dean wasn't playing it now, though; he was holding it vertically, the base of the guitar resting on the floor between his feet, the neck balanced loosely in one hand. Dean was staring down at the guitar, his head bowed. He'd opened the window, and a cold breeze was blowing through the room.

Sam was abruptly so near to collapse that he had to grab a chair at the table and slump down into it, burying his face in his hands. "Fuck, Dean," he began, when he could breathe again. Though then he realized there wasn't much concrete to complain about. What could Sam say, really? "You took your own gun back?" "You turned off my phone alarm to let me sleep?" "I thought you'd gone up to Cas's grave and killed yourself?"

All Sam could come up with was an admittedly lame-sounding, "I didn't know where you were. I thought you... uh."

Dean didn't say anything.

Finally Sam said, "You took your gun."

Dean gave a tiny shrug. Sam could almost read his face in the dark: *It's my gun, Sammy.*

"And the car key," Sam added.

Dean shifted his feet a little. "Went to get bulbs," he said.

Sam blinked. "What?"

"Bulbs," said Dean. "Got two hundred."

"Light... bulbs?" said Sam, bewildered.

"Daffodil bulbs," said Dean. "Crocuses." He shrugged again, tilting the guitar slightly with one hand and gazing down at the moonlight reflecting off its face. "Dumb idea," he added.

*Flowers,* thought Sam. *Dean got flowers.*

"You... uh... you gonna plant them or something?" Sam guessed. "On the hill?"
Dean didn't respond at all.

After a rather long silence Sam said, "Mind if I turn the light on?" Dean was silent, so Sam reached across the table to Cas's little desklamp and flicked it on. Dean squinted in the sudden light, but still didn't say anything, still staring down at the guitar.

Sam had no idea what to do. He looked at Dean for a while. Eventually he walked over and sat down next to Dean on Cas's little cot.

"You gonna give Cas some flowers?" Sam ventured at last.

Dean said, staring at his feet now, "Cas is gone." His voice was soft, but steady.

Sam swallowed. "Yeah."

There was a long pause. Sam had to resist the urge to talk. He waited in silence, hoping Dean would say something more.

"Cas isn't coming back," Dean said at last. "Is he." It wasn't really a question.

Sam took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. "I don't know. But... I don't think so."

Another long pause.

Dean shifted position a little. He lifted the guitar up a little, hooking one foot on top of the other, and setting the base of the guitar on his feet. He raised his head to look across the darkened attic.

"I was so sure he would come back," said Dean, staring out across the room at nothing.

"I know," said Sam softly.

"I had another dream," said Dean. "This afternoon. Another parrot dream. The parrot's really gone. I looked for ages but there was just another big black feather. And some scratches and scorch marks on the rocks, like there'd been a big fight or something. The parrot's gone."

Sam still had no idea what that was about, so he stayed quiet.

"I wasn't crazy, was I?" said Dean, in that same soft, steady voice. "To think he might come back? I mean... he did come back several times. It wasn't nuts to think he'd be coming back, was it?"

"It wasn't nuts," agreed Sam. "It's pretty much uncharted territory, right? Seems like nobody really knew for sure."

"I killed him, Sam," said Dean, his voice still perfectly steady, his face smooth.

Sam looked over at him. "What?"

"I killed him," said Dean, still staring across the attic. "I killed Cas."

Sam shook his head, saying, "It wasn't your fault, Dean. Just because you couldn't save him from the spider doesn't mean it was your fault."

"No, I killed him."

"The spider thing killed him, Dean," said Sam gently.
"The spider thing was already dead," said Dean, gazing into the darkness. "It stayed dead. We burned it down to ash. But it had bitten me. I didn't realize it had bit me till later. Cas knew what was happening. That's why he was so worried earlier, you know... I think somehow he... he sensed what was about to happen. The spider thing bit me... It didn't take effect till after you were gone. Cas tried to get away, but I was blocking the door." Dean stopped there, but the implication was clear, and Sam felt his heart sink through the ground.

Sam kept silent by Dean's side, hardly daring to breathe. Dean continued, "Cas tried to explain, he tried to tell me, it was an agent of Darkness all along. The spider. The bite makes you into the worst version of yourself.... it makes you a destroyer... it makes you destroy whatever's nearby..."

He stopped again.

Dean bit his lip. He drew the guitar up into his lap and put both arms around it, hugging onto the guitar body tightly, the neck of the instrument extending up over his shoulders. He whispered, "I killed him, Sammy, it was me. It was me. I killed him. I couldn't tell you."

Sam drew a long breath. I should have known, he thought. The other people who had died in Sandusky... there'd always been some poor tormented survivor, always one survivor, always either going insane or committing suicide. It had never been clear to Sam what exactly the survivors had been through. He'd been hoping, all along, that the survivors had simply witnessed the spider killing their loved ones.

But there had always been another possibility, hadn't there?

"Dean, it wasn't your fault. It wasn't you," said Sam, turning slightly toward Dean now. He found himself setting one hand on Dean's shoulder. "It wasn't your fault. It was the spider's fault. The Darkness. And Cas would have known that. He knew it wasn't you."

"It was me," said Dean. His eyes had gone a little glazed now, unfocused, as he stared, unseeing, across the attic. "It was the me I was in Hell. The me I was when I was with Alistair. Sammy, I..." Dean took a big breath and said, in a rush, "I, I, I, tortured him, Sammy." He closed his eyes and tucked his chin down against the guitar, pressing the side of his head to the guitar neck. His next phrases were whispered so softly that Sam had to lean closer to hear. "He was begging me to stop," whispered Dean. "I shot him in the leg. I bled his grace away. I made him mortal. Then I put him up on a cross.... I .... crucified him. He was crying, Sammy, he was crying... and.... he was screaming, it hurt him so much, I hurt him so bad.... I still hear it all the time, I hear his screams, I hear him begging me to stop... and... I.... I couldn't even remember his name, I thought I was back in Hell, I thought he was a sinner I was supposed to punish. I thought it was my job... I just kept hurting him.... I cut him all up, I hit him..."

Sam couldn't say anything. Oh, god, no, was all he thought. No, not like that. Poor Cas.... Poor Dean. I should've guessed. I should've known.

But it was clearer than ever that it hadn't been Dean's fault. Though Dean would never be able to see that, of course.

Dean seemed to be almost shrinking as he curled down around the guitar, now mumbling, "I hurt him" and "It was me" into the guitar neck. Tears were running slowly down his face now.

The horror of the scene Dean was describing was only made more awful by the sight of Dean shrinking down around the guitar in this way, his shoulders hunched as if he were trying to curl up into a little ball. I've never seen him like this, thought Sam. Not even when Bobby had died, not even when Dad had died. Not even when Dean had confessed to what he'd done in Hell, all those years
ago. This was no single-tear-rolling-down-the-cheek, it was no minute-of-manly-weeping; Dean seemed to be actually crumbling. Sam still had one hand on Dean's shoulder, and soon he felt that Dean had started trembling, his shoulders shaking. This was so alarming and so un-Dean-like that Sam automatically put the other arm around him too, twisting sideways to fold Dean into a rather awkward hug that included not just Dean but also the guitar.

This was beyond chick-flick stuff, of course, but Dean didn't even seem to notice.

Dean quit trying to talk and just sat there breathing in long shudders, a steady trickle of tears running slowly down his face, clinging to Cas's guitar the whole time.

Dean muttered, a little later, "I can't take this, Sammy. I can't take this. I can't, I really can't. I can't take this any more."

Sam let go and pulled back a little to look at him. "We'll find a way through it."

"I don't want to find a way through it. If he's really gone... then I do not deserve to go on living either, and I don't want to, Sammy."

Here we go, thought Sam. It was almost a relief to at last have it out in the open. "I know," he said. "That's why I hid your gun."

"You suck at hiding things, by the way," said Dean. "I've always known you had that false panel there." Sam gave a faint laugh, but the smile faded from his face as Dean said, "I would have shot myself months ago."

Dean raised his head off the guitar at last, his eyes red. He seemed somewhat able to talk again, and he said, "I would've done it months ago, but I'm such a chickenshit, Sammy, I don't want to end up in Hell again and I know I will. And if I end up there I'll end up being a torturer again. And..." His face began to crumple again. "What if Cas is there too? What if the Oshossi guy was wrong, what if Cas is in Hell and he ends up being tortured by me again? What if they make me torture him?"

Sam stared at him. This was a horrifying idea.

"Because that's exactly the kind of thing they just love to do. Crowley and everybody in Hell. They would be just, all over that in a heartbeat. They would definitely make me do that to Cas, they would. Even if Cas isn't there they'll make me think he is, they'll make me think it's him, they'll make me torture him again, and I can't go there, I can't do that, I can't become that again—"

"Please, just, shh, no," was all Sam could come up with.

"I must have tried to kill myself at least thirty times by now," Dean went on. He wiped his eyes roughly. "Every time I'm up on the hill I think about it. Sam, I never really got before why people would do that. But now I get it. The fucking pain just will NOT fucking stop and it is never going to get better. This bullshit about time heals all wounds, it is fucking bullshit. But each time I think, if I go through with this, I will FOR SURE be back in Hell immediately and I will be torturing Cas to death all over again. And then I'll just end up a demon again, and I'll torture even more people.... I cannot go on living with this, Sammy, I can't, but I can't die either! I can't live like this but I don't dare die...." Dean gave a hoarse sigh and tucked his chin down on the guitar's shoulder once more, staring at the floor again. He said, slowly, "So I don't know what to do."

What do I even say? thought Sam.

"Dean," said Sam at last, "He knew it wasn't your fault. He knew. He knew all along. Even if he was hurting, he knew it wasn't your fault. He must have."
"Yeah, he said that," said Dean.

"What?"

"He said he forgave me. Near the end."

"Dean, really? He said that? Then—"

"It doesn't seem to make it any better," said Dean. He sighed, and wiped his face slowly with one hand.

"I know this has been rough on you," said Dean. He flicked a brief glance over at Sam. "You lost your friend too. He was your closest friend, right? He was the guy you'd call when you needed help?" He eyed Sam up and down for a moment, focusing on him as if for the first time. "You miss him," Dean said. "You miss him too. Don't you."

Sam nodded, suddenly choked up. For it was true.

"You guys had each other's backs, didn't you," Dean went on, turning his attention back to the guitar. "This last year. Cause I was such a fucking asshole. I left you both alone. I'm sorry. So that was the other reason I didn't do it yet — I didn't want to abandon you all over again and didn't want you to have to deal with my fucking body, because I know what that's like, and jeez, you already had to do that, what, twice, right?"

More than that, actually, thought Sam, remembering the Mystery Spot months. But he just nodded.

"I really, really hurt him, I hurt him so bad, Sammy. And he... he... " Dean drew a heavy sigh. "He always tried to take care of me. He always tried. I treated him like such shit and he still... he still... " The next words seemed to take something out of him. "... He still cared. I don't know why. I don't know why he couldn't see that I'm not worth that."

"Of course he cared, Dean, he cared a ton—"

"No, I mean, he.... he was..." Dean's voice was getting very soft again. "He said he... I thought he just didn't know any better... I thought he wasn't used to being human? But he was... he was in.... in... he felt... he said once.... "

Sam began to get a bad feeling about where this was going. "You don't have to talk about this—" he began, but Dean couldn't seem to stop.

"He loved me," said Dean, waving one hand aimlessly in the air. "He said so. Last year."

Shit, thought Sam. This just kept getting worse.

"And I threw it in his face," said Dean. "I didn't believe him. I didn't believe him. An angel told me he loved me and I fucking kicked him in the teeth."

Sam wasn't sure whether Dean meant that metaphorically or literally, but it hardly seemed to matter anymore. "Dean—" he began.

Dean wasn't hearing him anymore. He just kept talking: "I fucking kicked him in the teeth. I kicked him in the teeth when he hadn't done a damn thing wrong and you should've seen the look on his face, Sam, my god, could I possibly have handled it any worse? I was just... scared... I don't know why... and... he backed way the hell off and I took that stupid fucking Mark just to stop feeling anything, it wasn't about Abaddon at all, I took it because of Cas, and then I beat the crap out of him..."
in the library, you didn't know about that, did you, I nearly fucking killed him, I beat him bloody just cause he was still trying to help me, but that fucker, he just, he just kept... he never would fucking give up on me!" Dean drew a long ragged breath. "And then, then, then, he was going to try and fix all the mistakes I've made, it's my fault you guys did that spell, it was 'cause I took the Mark, so, I've destroyed the whole world and he was still going to try and fix it. And then I tortured him, and I killed him. And even at the end he was still calling me his friend, can you believe it? After everything... after all that... I tortured him, and I killed him."

Dean kept rambling on. He was starting to repeat himself, muttering "I tortured him and I killed him...I tortured him and I killed him."

At last Sam said, "Dean, c'mon, stand up, you gotta go back to bed," standing and tugging gently at Dean's arm. Somewhat to Sam's surprise, Dean staggered up to his feet, still clutching Cas's guitar to his chest with both hands.

"I laughed at his music," said Dean. "He was still trying to find songs I'd like." He looked bewildered at the thought.

"C'mon," said Sam, tugging him toward the stairs. "C'mon downstairs."

"He was going to give me his feather," said Dean, shuffling along next to Sam. "I know he was.... In the library, Sam, it turned out, he was planning to stick by me for centuries, with the Mark... he said he was afraid he was gonna have to watch me murder the world... He'd been thinking about it Sam, he'd thought it all through, how he was gonna stick by my side for, like, centuries..."

After weeks of wishing Dean would start talking, now Sam found himself wishing Dean would go quiet again. Dean almost seemed to have gone into a trance now and couldn't seem to stop talking, stuttering out a long rambling series of incoherent comments, as Sam coaxed Dean down the stairs, keeping one arm firmly on Dean's upper arm in case he stumbled.

"At first I couldn't figure out if he would have gone to Heaven?" said Dean, shuffling down the stairs one step at a time, "But if that Oshossi guy really is the god of lost things... But could he have missed some place? Is there some other place? Did we miss anything?"

"I don't know," said Sam. "Here, step down—"

"Heaven, Hell, Purgatory, the Veil, Earth... Should we have asked more about Oz? Did Elegua say something I missed?"

"I don't know," said Sam, who'd actually been wondering the same thing. "C'mon—"

"I thought so many times about using the shotgun but didn't want you to have to clean up, Sammy.... Sam, he kept begging me to stop, I dream about it every night, I see it every night, I hear him all the time... I was having these parrot dreams, this little tiny parrot, it was so helpless, with these little wings, and I thought that might be him, but now the parrot's gone. I wondered if, with Heaven closed, if Cas just sort of bounced off the closed doors? Bounced and went somewhere else? I know angels don't have a soul but they do have an essence or whatever, so, where the hell does it go?"

They'd reached the first floor landing. "Where does an angel's essence go?" repeated Dean. "What about the grace bits? Where does it all go?"

"I don't know," said Sam, guiding him down the hall.

"It's got to go somewhere. It can't just vanish. Where does it go?"
"Nobody knows," Sam said. They'd gotten to the kitchen. "C'mon Dean, just drink these down." He dug around in the cupboard where they kept some medical stuff, and handed Dean a couple of pills.

"What're these?"

Sam was too tired to lie. "Sleeping pills."

"Okay," said Dean. He took the pills, but didn't take the glass of water Sam was also holding out; instead he grabbed a bottle of whiskey from the kitchen counter nearby, twisted the cap off with his teeth and chugged the pills down, along with nearly a third of the whiskey bottle, before Sam managed to pull the bottle out of his hands.

The guitar became problematic. Dean wouldn't let go of it. Finally he grudgingly allowed Sam to take it off his hands just long enough for Dean to use the bathroom. Sam tried to get the guitar out of sight while Dean was in there, but Dean demanded it back instantly the second he got back out.

"Where's Cas's guitar?"

"I put it away, Dean, you really need to go back to bed."

"Gimme the guitar."

Sam gave him the guitar back and managed to get him into bed. Then Sam sat with him, sitting up on the edge of his bed. Dean had finally curled up with his arms wrapped around the damn guitar. He still had his flannel shirt on, and Cas's feather was still in his shirtpocket. Now he was getting woozy, his voice slurring, and Sam recognized the beginnings of a drunken weepy phase. "Sam, I never told him..." muttered Dean. "I never told him... I never told him. I'm never going to be able to tell him. I never told him, he never knew, Sam, I can't tell him now, he'll never know, I can't ever tell him."

Sam knew what this must be about, too.

"He knew, Dean," he tried to assure Dean. "He knew how you felt."

"He didn't," Dean mumbled. He let go of the guitar with one hand and patted the feather in his pocket. "He aban'ded his, his feather.... he left it out in th' open.... jus' left it there. That means... that means, he thought he's not worth... anything... it means... means he gave up."

He was at last falling asleep, his eyes sliding closed as he kept muttering, "I never told him. I never told him...."

At last he drifted off, his breathing still uneven, one hand still on the guitar and the other on the feather in his pocket. Sam waited till Dean was definitely asleep and then crept off to get some blankets. One went over Dean. With the others Sam set up a little bed for himself on the floor in Dean's room. Sam also tried to pull the guitar away one more time, worried now that the guitar would probably fall off the bed if Dean thrashed around in his sleep. The possibility of Dean waking up to find Cas's guitar broken on the floor was unthinkable, so Sam tried to gently work Dean's hand off it and slide the guitar slowly free. But Dean's arm just tightened down and then his other arm wrapped around it too; he wouldn't let the guitar go. Finally Sam went and got another pile of blankets and put them all around the sides of the bed, so that if the guitar fell off, hopefully it would just fall into the pile of blankets and wouldn't be damaged.

Sam woke early the next morning to find Dean still had the guitar tight in his arms. It hadn't fallen off the bed after all. Sam needn't have worried, for Cas's guitar was safe as could be. Safe and warm and protected, Dean's arms wrapped securely around it.
A/N - Yeah, like I said... the emotional nadir.

Please hang in there, Dean's going through the very darkest part right now but hang in there with him, please.

Up next: Daffodils. And Cas's car arrives... with a clue.

Check in Sun or Mon to see if I managed to get anything more done.
Dean awoke late the next morning, still wrapped around the guitar, to find Sam shaking his shoulder. "Uh," said Dean. His head was throbbing with the familiar pain of a hangover. It also turned out the guitar made a poor sleeping companion; he could feel the imprint of the strings on his cheek, and one leg had gone numb from where it had been curled around the edge of the guitar body.

Dean unwrapped his stiff fingers from the guitar neck, peering up at Sam. "What?" he grunted. "What time's it?"

"Eleven," said Sam. "Didn't want to wake you, but..." Sam's eyes flickered to the guitar, and Dean saw, for a moment, the exhaustion and pain in Sam's face.

_Ah, little brother. I'm sorry. About everything._

Sam looked back at Dean's face. "Jason just texted," he said. "He's ten minutes away. With the car."

Dean looked at him for a moment. Cas's car. Right.

He levered himself upward with a groan and lurched to his feet, still holding the guitar. A third of a bottle of whiskey, plus sleeping pills, wasn't really a good combination; as well as the nausea and headache, Dean also felt as if he were staggering through a thick fog.

First things first, though: Take care of the guitar. And the feather.

He drew the little feather out of the pocket of his rumpled shirt and set it on the bedside table (he'd pick the feather back up after his shower) and then he stared at it blankly for a moment before he could even remember what his next step was. Oh, right; the guitar. Dean wobbled his way over to the corner of the bedroom with the guitar, dragging a blanket behind him, Sam watching uncertainly from the doorway. Dean bent over, his head throbbing painfully, to make a little blanket-nest for the guitar, much like Cas's towel-nest upstairs. _Gotta get a real case for it_, Dean thought as he straightened up. _Gotta keep it safe. Gotta make sure the guitar is safe._ Not "because Cas would want it soon," anymore, but because....

Just because.

"There better be coffee," Dean told Sam, who was still hovering awkwardly in the doorway.

Sam nodded and said, "It's a few hours old, though. I'll make some more."

Dean gave him a tired nod. Time for a shower; time to start a new day, somehow.

Dean shuffled to his dresser to try to find some clean clothes. And a towel, maybe.
After a moment he realized Sam was still hovering in the doorway. Dean glanced at him, and Sam said, a little uncertain, "Should I... uh... make the two cups like usual... and put it in the thermos? I mean..." Sam hesitated. "You gonna go up the hill?"

Dean shook his head, looking away. Eleven o'clock; it was long past Vigils, long past Lauds, long past Terce. Dean had already missed nearly half the daily prayers.

But, of course, it really didn't matter anymore.

*Just put one foot in front of the other, thought Dean. I got up. That was step one.*

*Step two. Shower.  He glanced over at the feather again, and then shuffled past Sam toward the bathroom.*

Sam gave him a soft clap on the shoulder as Dean went past, but didn't say anything.

*What's there to say, anyway? thought Dean. I've wrecked my own life, I've probably wrecked Sam's, I friggin ENDED Cas's. And destroyed the whole damn world, apparently. What's there to say....*

There was nothing to say. There was nothing that could be said. But Dean stopped in the hallway anyway, and looked back at Sam, who was walking away now, head down, back toward the kitchen — presumably to make a fresh pot of coffee for Dean. Sam's head was bowed, his shoulders slumped.

*What's there to say, except... Sorry, Sam. Sorry you've had to waste all this time trying to take care of me. I'm not worth it, you know. You should've given up ages ago.*

*But he just won't give up.*

"Hey, Sam," called Dean.

Sam stopped and turned only halfway around, looking over his shoulder at Dean. His expression was guarded.

"You make a pretty good big brother, you know," said Dean.

Sam gave a faint laugh, the corner of his mouth twitching up briefly — almost a smile, but not quite. It was something, at least. Sam's eyes lingered on Dean's face for a moment. Dean blinked at what he saw there, and then Sam turned away and headed off to the kitchen. Dean could still see the tiredness in Sam's long, slow stride, in his shuffling gait. Even when he'd been a little kid Dean had been able to read Sam's mood from the way he walked.... and, right now, Sam's mood was not good. Dean watched him go, thinking.

*Cas is gone.*

*And I'm good as gone.*

*But Sam... Sam's still here. And I'm dragging Sam down with me.*

*I ruined everything for Cas. I can't do the same for Sam too. Maybe I can at least save Sam. Give him back his life, at least.*

*Cut him free.*
Dean was slugging back a mugful of hot coffee, still trying to fight his way through the sleeping-pill fog to at least a half-alert state, when a distant car horn blared from outside. Dean and Sam glanced at each other. Dean set his mug down, and without a word they left the kitchen and headed through the library, through the map-room, and up the curving iron staircase to the front door.

Dean blinked in the bright sunlight. It was late October now, and it was chilly outside. Chilly with bursts of wind, the sunlight shining through scudding clouds. And there in the sunlight was Cas's gold Continental.

The sight of it made Dean's breath catch in his throat. He knew perfectly well that Cas wasn't there, that the figure in the driver's seat would not be Castiel, but still... to see that gold car in front of the bunker like this, dusty from the road, a figure dimly visible in the driver's seat... a thousand memories leapt to mind. Cas pulling up to the bunker, Cas pulling away, Dean driving in the Continental with him, meeting up with Cas somewhere, looking for that gold car....

Dean always used to tease him about the car, of course.

*I teased him about EVERYTHING,* Dean thought suddenly. *I teased him about every single thing.*

*What the hell was wrong with me?*

The driver stepped out; sure enough, not Castiel at all, but some fresh-faced kid that Sam had met somewhere. Some skinny yahoo who looked barely out of grade school, not a wrinkle on his smooth face, a douche-tastic spiked haircut and a scruffy excuse for a two-day beard on his face. The kid started talking with Sam. Dean took a step closer to the car, reaching out one hand and resting it on the hood. The car was dusty from its road trip, and Dean drew a line in the dust with one finger, the bright gold color shining through.

He drew another line, parallel to the first; and drew a few other lines to connect them.

Soon the lines he was drawing had formed a feather shape.

"Uh... I said, hope you don't mind I take a peek around?"

The kid was talking to him. Jason. He was standing a couple feet away with a friendly smile, one hand in his pocket, one hand held out for a handshake. Dean wiped the feather away with a quick brush of his hand, looking him over. The kid looked practically just out of puberty.

"They letting high schoolers be hunters these days?" Dean said.

Jason's smile faded slightly. "I'm twenty-six," he said. "And, nice to meet you, too."

Twenty-six. Shades of Cole... Just another naive pup. Just a munchkin. Hell, even Sam was well into his thirties now.

Jason's hand had begun to sag a little. Sam was scowling at Dean from over Jason's shoulder, making weird gestures, and Dean finally remembered he was supposed to shake Jason's hand back. "Sorry, I'm a little distracted," he managed to say, grabbing Jason's hand in a quick shake. "Nice to meet you."

A look of near-relief came over Jason's face, the smile brightening again. "I've always heard about how you Winchesters had this place," he said, looking up at the bunker. "You guys are famous, you know. Back when I started, everyone was talking about, the Winchesters found one of the old
hideouts."

Dean and Sam eyed each other in surprise; back when I started? It'd been that long since they found the bunker?

And word had got out?

"People've found a few others, you know," Jason went on, leaning one hand on the Continental's hood as he looked up at the bunker. (Dean had to fight down an impulse to slap him off of the car.) "People started looking for more of them once word got out that the one you'd found here was for real. And turns out there's others. There's one in Nova Scotia that's started up again, though it was mostly emptied out when they found it. My sister and I found one last year near Seattle, too, but it was mostly wrecked, just ashes."

"Your sister?" said Sam.

"I hunt with her," Jason said. His face tightened a little, and he added, "Usually. She hunts with me usually." Now he was drumming his fingers on the car hood. He cleared his throat and added, "She's... laid up right now. Just a broken foot though, nothing too bad." But the lines of tension were clear on his face.

Younger sister, Dean thought at once. It's a younger sister.

"She back with your folks then?" said Sam.

Jason paused a moment. "Folks are gone," he said, with artificial casualness. "Got taken by demons. Remember that year when there were demons all over suddenly? Back then." He rubbed one hand over his mouth. "Anyway she's got this theory there might be another bunker up in the North Woods somewhere, somewhere up around Minnesota. She thinks they were laid out geographically, like, not random. She thinks they're placed about every thousand miles. Also, we just heard there's one in Peru and one near Prague."

Dean said, "Where'd you hear all this?"

Jason shrugged. "Around. You know. The, um... " He glanced sidewards at Dean. "The, uh, newer... uh, the recent... there's a bunch of hunters that have been working on it."

Dean could almost see him bending over backwards to avoid saying "younger" hunters. The younger hunters have been working on it, was what Jason meant.

I look old to him, Dean realized. From Jason's perspective, Dean (and maybe even Sam) must look like one of those weathered old hunters who used to show up at the Roadhouse, back in the day. The quiet ones who would drink in the back, parked in a booth alone, their faces lined and haggard. Bitter and alone. The old, tired, worn-out hunters.

The ones on their last legs. The ones who usually disappeared a year or so later. Did you hear about old So-and-So, was the news that would go around later. He finally bit it.... Got too slow. Lost it in the end to a regular ol' vengeful spirit.

Or: He quit the life, got to drinking...

Or: He lost his partner. Never was quite the same.

Too bad about old So-and-so, everybody would say. They'd raise a glass to the memory. Then, a few minutes later, the conversation always moved on. The old hunters faded away, and new ones
took over. That was just the way it was.

Dean caught Sam's eye, and knew his thoughts were following a similar track.

Jason was looking up at the building again. He said, "There's been talk about trying to put the network back together again. The Men of Letters network. There's this guy in Texas who thinks he might have found a way to corral those blackness-balls, but he says everybody's gonna need to pitch in around the planet, apparently. Get coordinated, like we used to be. So... we're gonna try, at least. We gotta try, right?"

Sam and Dean looked at each other again. Hunters getting organized? Trying to keep the Darkness at bay?

*They probably don't even know it was us that unleashed it,* thought Dean.

Jason turned back to them and said, "Anyway, I know you guys live here and I don't want to pry, but I'd love to get a peek inside if you're both cool with that. And..." He slapped the car gently. "Glad I could bring this puppy back to you. Hey, um..." He began to look a little uncertain again, stuffing both hands in his pockets. "Hope you don't mind if I mention... I kinda picked up that it belonged to some friend of yours. Right? Friend who didn't make it? I saw all the blood. At that warehouse. Kinda put the clues together. I'd been following those same cases."

There was a little silence.

"Just wanted to say, sorry," said Jason.

Dean could only stare at the car.

Sam finally said, "Thanks."

Jason cleared his throat. "He must've liked a smooth ride, huh?" He patted the car. "Your friend? Liked that flying feeling?"

"What?" said Dean.

"Well, you know, an old Continental like this, you don't see those around all that much. Doesn't have a ton of power, but this was always the luxury car to beat all luxury cars, back in the '70s, wasn't it?" Jason shot Dean a grin. "Hell, the James Bond villains used 'em. James Bond himself, too! This was the Goldfinger car, remember? Anyway I been in it a long time now and it's like driving a big plush bed. Might need a bit of a tune-up, but it's smooth, easy to be in... like I said, not a lot of power but it's sorta like, well, like flying. You're just gliding along. You barely even know you're in a car. Not bad to sleep in, either. Uh... hope you don't mind. I spent last night in it."

"That's... okay," said Sam.

Dean, meanwhile, was staring at the car, remembering Cas's quiet, "I like it."

*Because it felt like flying?*

So it didn't have a ton of power. So what?

*Maybe power wasn't what Cas really wanted,* thought Dean.

Jason cleared his throat. "Hey, also, there was some stuff in the trunk. I left it all there like you asked, Sam. I didn't pry, I promise. I keep my word about stuff like that. And, um, also, sorry but I had to
hotwire it. I didn't have the key."

"Yeah, the key got lost—" Sam began.

"I got the key," said Dean.

Sam blinked at him. "You do?"

"It's in my room," said Dean. "I got the key and his phone." Everything that had been in Cas's pockets, that night. Dean had cleaned and organized it all, and had put Cas's car key and Cas's phone in his room for safekeeping.

He'd even cleaned the terrible angel-blade and demon-blade. The angel-blade had belonged to Cas, after all; and it was buried with Cas, even now.

The demon-blade had been a more difficult decision. It was too valuable a weapon to discard, but Dean couldn't bear to handle it anymore. He'd eventually put it back in the Impala's trunk, hoping Sam might notice it there and might take to carrying it. Sam, of course, had never even known how it had been used that night.

Sam started to take Jason around on a bunker tour. Dean followed them inside. Almost immediately Jason went into raptures about the map-room. "A tracking table! Holy shit! It's totally intact!" he exclaimed, leaning over it. "Does it still work? It looks like — look, it still has power — holy shit, this is amazing—" Soon he was crawling around the table, studying some connections at its base, and a few moments after that he caught sight of the library shelving in the next room, and the telescope beyond that. The telescope that had always been parked against the far wall, unused and dusty.

"You still have the library?" he said, obviously astonished. "You've still got all the books? And a dimensional scope? Are you kidding me? Does the scope work?" He left the "tracking table" and made a beeline through the library toward the telescope at the back wall. Soon he was fiddling with the knobs on the side and peering through it. "Fuck, it works," he was muttering a second later. "Look, it even goes two steps either direction, not just one! You guys must have learned so much from this, huh? Becca's gonna love this. She's gonna glue herself to it for a month. I mean," he glanced up from the scope at Dean and Sam. "If she, uh... if she gets to see it, someday, I mean. Becca. My sister."

Dean and Sam glanced at each other yet again.

"Uh... we haven't used it much," said Sam.

"Seriously? You're kidding me," said Jason, staring through the scope and twiddling more knobs.

"Never even looked through that," muttered Sam in Dean's ear.

Dean nodded, and whispered back, "Never even occurred to me to wonder why there was a telescope down here in a basement."

_New generation coming up_, thought Dean, watching Jason extract himself from the "dimensional scope" and start nosing through the library books, making interested sounds as he scanned the titles.
Maybe I'm just one of the old guys now? thought Dean. Maybe I'm not even needed any more... Maybe I'm just in the way. Keeping all this stuff to myself? Hoarding it, even?

Maybe...

Maybe I'm not one of the good guys anymore.

Jason's puppy-like enthusiasm was a little overwhelming. Dean soon left Sam to finish giving Jason the tour, and headed back outside to deal with Cas's car.

He settled himself gingerly on the yellow leather seats, breathing in the familiar scent. The scent was part leather, part classic car... maybe a hint of mildew from a few months in storage (that would clear out soon enough)... a distinct smell of Cheetos (courtesy of Jason, Dean suspected)... and a faint other scent, too.

Hard to detect, hard to define. The faintest scent of an old tan coat... of the aftershave Dean had loaned to Cas when he'd first been learning how to shave... of a certain shampoo that Dean had given to Cas too...

And the faintest smell of feathers. Barely detectable. Almost gone.

Dean leaned his head on the steering wheel, trying to breathe it in, his eyes stinging.

After a minute, he swallowed and got to work. First he had to spend ten minutes fixing up the ignition wiring that Jason had hot-wired, re-attaching the wires where they were supposed to go and wrapping them carefully in electrical tape, so that Dean could use Cas's key to start the thing up properly. The engine caught with a grumpy sound, and Dean steered it inside the garage next to the Impala, wincing at the rough sound of the engine. Yeah, it needed a tune-up. And a wash, and a polish.

When Dean stepped out of the car he had to look away for a moment, caught by surprise at the sight of the Continental and Impala sitting together side-by-side. Surely, it seemed Cas must be here somewhere... Somewhere in the bunker. Somewhere nearby. The Continental was only parked next to the Impala like this when Cas was around.

Is this EVER going to stop? Dean wondered, gritting his teeth. Is EVERY damn thing going to keep hurting like this?

He shook his head, scowling at the cars. Time to get to work. There was a lot to do. The Continental needed a wash and a polish and a tune-up. And the Impala needed the dash repaired.... and the radio fixed.

A minute later he was in the Impala, checking out the damage to the radio and the dashboard. "Sorry, Baby," he whispered, fingerling the frayed wire ends of the busted radio. "Sorry 'bout that. I been a little crazy, I know. But I'll fix you up. All-new wiring..."

All-new wiring, he thought, and then it occurred to him: Perfect time to add a line-in jack.

A line-in, of course, allowed the driver to plug in an mp3 player. Sam had installed one once, years ago. Back when Sam had had to get by on his own without Dean. Back when Dean had been dead,
and Sam had been hunting all on his own. Apparently Sam had needed some way to play his crappy music, when he'd been all alone.

The second Dean had got back he'd ripped the thing out.

Dean traced his fingers over the busted radio. *Might be time to add that back in,* he thought.

Dean eventually returned to the Continental, steeling himself this time for a search for any possessions of Cas's. There was nothing much in the glove compartment or the back seat. In the trunk, though, Dean found a bag of extra clothes that had sat in here mildewing for who knows how long.

Those jeans Dean had got him at the thrift store... Some old t-shirts Dean had loaned him once...

*I'm not going to carry all this around like I did with the trenchcoat,* Dean thought. *I'm not. I'm not.* But he patted the feather in his pocket, unconsciously, even as he stuffed the clothes out of sight in a corner of the trunk.

Behind the bag of laundry was a long thick roll of poster paper. Dean pulled it out carefully and tried to unroll it.

It turned out to be a lot of separate pieces of paper, big sheets of poster paper, all rolled up together. It was too big to get a clear look at here in the Continental's trunk, but Dean managed to get a peek at the edges of the sheets. Each was covered with more of Cas's strange diagrams, like the one on his pad of paper — charts of mysterious little symbols connected by lines and arrows. He tried to open the whole thing up to flip through the separate pages, but each one wanted to roll up again as soon as he let go of it, and soon a few had wriggled their way free and bounced to the ground. Dean managed at last to get one big page spread out, and he squinted at it in puzzlement.

The page was big, about three feet by two feet. It had a large central diagram consisting of a rough oval shape with several dozen mysterious little symbols scattered across it, all connected with a complex network of lines and arrows. The main diagram had been drawn carefully in pen; there were little penciled notes scribbled in next to each of the little symbols, and there was some sort of glyph written at the top.

Dean ached to see Cas's very own handwriting, so much so that it took him several moments to realize he couldn't actually read any of the notes. He puzzled over them for a moment longer before he realized they must all be in Enochian.

He muttered out loud, "Cas, I can't figure this out. Couldn't you have written these notes in English like your others?"

He gritted his teeth a second later. He'd meant to stop talking to Cas. He really had.

He drew a long, slow breath. "Old habits die hard, buddy," he whispered quietly, rolling up all the poster-sheets together.

"Find anything?" said Sam, interrupting his thoughts. Dean flinched at the sudden noise, and turned to find Sam walking up the stairs that led to the bunker, Jason right on his heels.
"Maybe," said Dean, holding up the fat roll of posters. "Can't make head or tail of it, though."

"Well, Jason's about done," said Sam. He glanced over his shoulder at Jason. "You all set, dude? I can give you a ride to the bus station."

Jason had already started to veer toward the vintage cars and motorbikes in the back, and he turned back a little reluctantly. "Yeah. Guess I can't stare at all your stuff forever. Thanks for the look-see, and, yeah, the bus station'd be good."

Sam held out an envelope to him. Dean knew it contained three hundred bucks that he'd gotten yesterday—the biggest cash advance he'd been able to get from one of his last useable credit cards. "For your trouble," Sam said. "Gas money, bus fare, and something for your time."

Jason shook his head, sticking his hands in his pockets. "Pleasure just to get a peek at the place. Never thought I'd get a look. People said you two don't let strangers in."

Dean and Sam glanced at each other. Sam said, "Yeah, I... I guess we kind of keep to ourselves."

"Take it anyway," said Dean, nodding toward the envelope.

"I don't need—" Jason started to say.


Jason looked at him.

"Take it," said Dean.

Jason nodded slowly and took the envelope, tucking it in his jacket. "Thanks," he said. "And. Look." He hesitated a moment, glancing around at the array of vintage cars again. "I know you guys always work alone. Everyone always says that, about you two: Don't go near the Winchesters, unless you wanna get fucked up, everyone says. But, look, if you ever..." He drew a breath, as if gathering up his courage. "If you ever feeling like... you know. Joining up? Letting a few others in? Not saying now, but, if you ever did, you could give me a ring. I wouldn't mind if..." He hesitated again, glancing back and forth from Sam to Dean, and at last blurted out, "Wouldn't mind if Becca had a safe place, to be honest. Somewhere to just hunker down and heal up, now and then. She's in this crappy motel right now, with the broken foot, and she's on crutches for a few weeks, and... Well. You know."

Sam glanced at Dean, an eyebrow raised. You know. They did know.

But Jason had it right; they'd always worked alone.

Don't go near the Winchesters, unless you wanna get fucked up.

But, keeping the whole bunker to themselves? Was it even fair?

Was it right?

A place to "hunker down and heal up..."

"We'll keep it in mind," said Dean.

Sam and Jason soon headed off to the Lebanon bus stop, taking one of the other cars. As they were
about to leave, Sam gave Dean one of his trademark worried-and-exhausted looks. Dean knew what it meant, and said, "I'm gonna go shopping, Sammy. See ya in a few hours." Sam nodded, still obviously a little anxious, but he finally headed off with Jason.

And what Dean did was... go shopping. He went to Hastings and got the parts he'd need to fix the radio, for one thing. Oil, to give the Continental an oil change. And he got a few other things. Some wood... some supplies. A few other things too.

He didn't go up the hill at all that day. There seemed no point anymore.

---

Sam spent the whole afternoon and evening fussing over Cas's diagrams, even clearing some of the stacks of books off the library tables to spread out a few of the big sheets for closer study. Soon he was scribbling his own notes on a series of post-its, which he stuck all over the posters, trying to figure out some system in the various symbols and runes that Cas had used.

Dean, though, was still finding it almost unbearable to keep seeing Cas's careful handwriting on page after page. He kept thinking, over and over, of how Cas must have been working on these posters alone, working away up on the table in the attic, by himself. Without any help.

Trying to fix the world, on his own, without any help.

Dean also found himself continually biting his lip to keep from talking to Cas out loud, to ask what the diagrams were all about. The third time this happened, Dean stood from his chair abruptly and said, "Gonna go work on the cars."

Sam froze, hand pausing in mid-scribble on a post-it. He looked up at Dean sharply.

"Just gonna go work on the cars," Dean assured him. Well, and maybe a bit of woodshop work. No need to Sam to concern himself with details. "Gotta fix the radio," Dean added.

Sam gave him a searching look, but finally nodded. "You'll be okay?" he asked.

Dean shrugged. There wasn't really ever going to be an answer to that question.

Sam clearly knew that, for he let the question hang in the air unanswered, moving on with, "Never mind. Well... Don't go out without telling me, okay?"

Dean nodded. Sam gave a tiny sigh and added, "Hand me that Enochian dictionary on your way out, would you? I think a lot of these little symbols are Enochian."

Dean handed him the Enochian dictionary, and headed to the garage to get to work.

He worked all evening. On a lot of projects. He got the radio fixed, and the dash. And the tape player. He changed the Continental's oil, and washed both cars.

He added the line-in jack to the Impala.

Once again a whole day went by without a trip up the hill. Once again Dean sent himself to sleep with sleeping pills and whiskey. If there were any parrot dreams, the whiskey was drowning them out pretty well.
The next morning, as Dean made his creaky way through the kitchen, trying to wash away yet another hangover with yet another double dose of aspirin and coffee, Sam called to him from the library. "Dean!" Sam sounded much more awake than he should have been at this hour. "Dean, c'mere!"

Dean took a swig of coffee, hoping the headache would back off a little, as he shuffled into the library. He looked around, realizing, that the whole library seemed to have been taken over by the poster papers now. Sam was hunched over one of them, scribbling yet more notes on yet more post-its. He glanced up at Dean. He looked even more tired than usual, and had dark bags under his eyes, but he looked excited.

"You even get to sleep?" Dean asked.

"Made a breakthrough," Sam said, ignoring the question. "A bunch of breakthroughs, I think." He stood, stretched a knot out of his neck, and waved one arm expansively at the pages of paper, which were spread out everywhere, taking all over every inch of the library tables and even the map-table in the next room. "At first I thought it was sigils or something," Sam said. "Maybe a series of spells to do, in order, or a series of sigils to draw. But they're not spells. Or sigils." He paused and announced, lowering his voice dramatically, "They're maps."

"Maps? Maps of what?"

"Maps of realms!" said Sam. "Well... I think. I'm pretty sure this one's a map of Earth—" Sam pointed to one of the diagrams, and then pointed to three others, saying, "That one's Heaven. That's Hell. That's Purgatory."

Dean squinted at the diagrams.

They all had the same general format he'd noticed yesterday: a big piece of paper with a large oval shape sketched in, the oval sprinkled with several dozen tiny symbols, all connected with lines and arrows. Now that all the poster papers were spread out he saw that several of them had additional little mini-diagrams clustered around the edges, like extra border decorations.

"He's got them all labeled at the top, see?" said Sam. "Those marks at the top of each page are Enochian runes, and I finally translated four of them. These four. These four runes mean Earth, Heaven, Hell, Purgatory." Sam looked triumphant. "Also, I think the diagram in his little notebook was an early draft of the Earth one, by the way. I think he expanded it later and then started making the others. Earth, Heaven, Hell, Purgatory! Though..." Here Sam gestured, less confidently, at the other huge papers spread around on the nearby tables. "I don't know about all the others yet. I think it's a bunch of other realms I couldn't figure out the names of. The runes aren't phonetic; they're more like little pictographs, so I have no idea what those others are. Six other realms, though, I think."

"Six other realms?" said Dean, a little startled.

"Yep," said Sam, nodding, with his hands on his hips. "There's ten total and I figured out four. I guess the others must be Oz and fairyland and... who knows what else." He gestured around at the whole set of posters again. "But it's ten realms, all in all. He even numbered them one through ten. He made Heaven number one."

Dean actually managed to summon up a lopsided little grin at that; it was sweet, somehow, to realize
Cas had still been thinking that Heaven was the best realm. Realm number one!

"Of course he did," Dean said, shaking his head at the thought. "Of course Heaven's number one. And, let me guess, Hell's number ten?"

"Actually, no," said Sam, shaking his head with a puzzled chuckle. "Hell's number six. Heaven's number one, but Earth is number four, Purgatory's five and Hell's six."

Dean frowned. It wasn't too weird to think there were some realms between Earth and Heaven — Limbo, maybe? Some sort of almost-Heaven? But... what were seven, eight, nine and ten?

"What could possibly be worse than Hell?" Dean asked. But even as he said the words, a fragment of the conversation with the orishas came to mind. Something Oshossi had said. He'd said he would search "within Purgatory and Hell and the farther realms."

The farther realms, Oshossi had said.

Realms seven, eight, nine and ten?

Dean frowned down at the mysterious maps. "Oshossi mentioned 'farther' realms," he said. "Like, realms beyond Hell, maybe?"

Sam nodded. "I remembered that too. But who knows what they are."


Sam shook his head. "Not that I can tell. But I still haven't figured out a lot of these symbols. But... About the symbols. I think I know what they're marking."

Sam leaned over the mystifyingly vague "Earth" map again. It didn't really look at all like Earth - it had no continents marked, and no latitude or longitude lines. It just had an oval with a bunch of Cas's strange little symbols, some connected with lines or arrows. Each had a careful dot marking its exact position, and was labeled with a mystifying little rune-like symbol drawn precisely in black ink. And also a tiny notation in pencil.

"Always a symbol rune in ink, and a note in pencil, did you notice?" said Sam.

"Yeah, I saw that yesterday," said Dean, tracing his finger over some of the little symbols. One was a trident, one a set of teardrops, one a star.

"Yup," agreed Sam, pointing out a few more. "Trident, teardrops, circle with a dot, P-shape, this funny looking H, male sign, female sign... I started making a list but it's dozens of them. But, among them are the runes for Hell, Heaven and Purgatory. And, look at the penciled notes! There's only three of those, and I cracked them last night. Each penciled note is always one of three things: Enochian for "Open," Enochian for "Closed" or the Enochian version of a question mark. Cas wrote that next to every little symbol: Open, Closed, or question mark. Dean... I'm thinking it's gates."

"Gates," said Dean slowly, frowning down at the little symbols. "Right. He had that thing in his notes about 'gates' being opened or closed. Wait... are you thinking... Gates like the gate to Hell? Gates like... connection to other realms?"

Sam nodded vigorously. "Exactly. Gates that are open or closed."

"Cas said in his notes that most of them were closed," Dean said. "Closed gates isn't very helpful."
"Yeah, but, Dean... " Sam drew a breath. "I wondered if these might really be Elegua's roads."

Now that was a thought. Especially because...

"Elegua opened all the roads," said Dean.

Sam grinned at him. "Exactly. Oshossi said Elegua was going to open all the roads. Roads between the realms. And, Dean, I feel like the orishas were actually trying to help us. As best they could, I mean."

"Pretty damn unhelpful," Dean muttered.

"They tried," Sam pointed out. "They were trying to help us. Marcos told me later, they don't mean to be cryptic; they really were trying to help as best they could. And, Oshossi said Elegua opened the roads, but he never said that Elegua closed them again. So... what if Elegua left the roads open? For us to use?"

Sam paused a moment to let that sink in, and then added, "We ought to at least check. Also, Dean, there's something else. I never got a chance to tell you. Marcos said his own orisha spoke to him that night, an orisha named Shango. I looked him up— he's sort of a Zeus figure, like, king orisha, orisha of the fire and thunder and the sun and other stuff. Anyway Shango told him that we have to go 'into the fire'."

"Into the fire," Dean repeated, looking up at Sam.

"Yeah," Sam said.

"Well, that's cryptic as hell."

"Yeah," Sam agreed. "But, like Marcos said—"

"They don't mean to be cryptic," Dean finished with a sigh. "Right. But what the hell does 'into the fire' even mean?"

"Well... I don't know..." said Sam, but then his eye fell to the map of Earth, and he stared. "Oh..." he breathed, his attention caught by something. "Oh. I was looking at it wrong."

Dean shifted next to him, trying to see what he was starring at.

"The teardrops," said Sam, pointing to the little 'teardrops' symbol they'd both noticed earlier. Three little teardrops, clustered side-by-side. "It's not teardrops... it's..."

"Flames," said Dean. "It's flames. It's a fire. It's a gate to fire."

"A gate into the fire," said Sam. "Cas's notation here says it's closed, but..."

"But Elegua's opened the gate," finished Dean.

They stared at the little teardrop symbol for a while, but soon realized that even if it was potentially a "fire" symbol, right here on the strange map of Earth, they still couldn't figure out where, precisely, that location actually was. There were no latitude or longitude markings — no way match up the symbols on Cas's odd Earth-map to any actual location on the real Earth.

They both spent the next few minutes staring at the map. Dean slugged down the rest of his coffee, and went to make another pot, bringing some back for Sam.
The solution, when it came, was embarrassingly easy. Sam almost jumped in his seat, blurted out, "Oh, shit, I'm so tired, I should have seen this right away! This mark here —" He stabbed his finger on a certain symbol way over on the right of the map. "This is the Hell symbol. So this marks a Hell gate. Dean, we know where that is!"

Dean caught his meaning immediately. "The one in Wyoming?"

"Yep. That damn Hell's Gate. We know the coordinates and everything." Sam sighed. "But one gate isn't enough for us to figure out the scale of this map. We need another gate. I mean, we need another gate with a known location—"

Dean grabbed the map and pulled it over toward him, so fast he almost ripped it. "What's the symbol for Purgatory?" he said.

Sam glanced at him. "This one," said Sam, pointing at another symbol that was way over on the left. "That gate's in Maine," said Dean. "And I know exactly where. Cause I used it." It all came clear, and Dean said, "North America's split, at the edges of the map. The map's centered on the Middle East, I bet you anything. Centered on the Garden of Eden or something, I bet. C'mon—" He grabbed the Earth map and almost ran over to the map-table.

After an inordinate amount of arguing about scale, different kinds of map projections, the precise locations of the Maine gate to Purgatory and the Wyoming gate to Hell, and then a long series of latitude and longitude calculations, Sam finally managed to figure out the likely latitude and longitude of the "fire" gate marked on Cas's Earth map.

"The answer is—" said Sam, hunkered now over the calculator app on his phone, "Write this down — Latitude of the fire gate is, forty-one, twenty-four, thirty north." Dean scribbled the numbers on a post-it as Sam tapped out a few more calculations and said, "And, the longitude is one-twenty-two, eleven, forty west. More or less. It might be off a bit; I don't know how precise Cas's dots are."

"One-twenty-two degrees is pretty far west," Dean remarked, holding the post-it out to Sam. "West coast, probably."

"Yeah, west coast," said Sam, grabbing the post-it and swiveling to his computer, which was perched nearby on one of the side counters in the map-room. He started punching the numbers directly into Google as Dean watched over his shoulder. Sam said, "Forty-one north... Halfway up the coast or so. So it's probably northern California, you think?" They both had a pretty good feel for lat-long numbers after so many years criss-crossing the country.

It only took Sam a few moments to type it in: 41°24'30"N, 122°11'40"W. He hit Enter, and Google instantly showed them a map with a little red pin marking the location (one of Google's handiest features, Dean had always thought). They both squinted at it.

It seemed to be a dead-end road in the middle of a field of gray.

"Wilderness," Dean said. "Go to the big map. And zoom out." Sam nodded— he was already clicking over to Google Maps. He zoomed out a couple times and they both stared.

The red pin sat squarely atop Mount Shasta, California.

"Mount Shasta," said Sam, straightening up slowly. "Mount Shasta. That sorta makes sense."

"Aren't there some legends about that mountain?" said Dean.
Sam nodded slowly. "Ton of 'em. Local Indians said it's where..." He hesitated. "Where the spirit of the upper world came down to Earth. Where God came down to Earth, in other words."

They both looked at it a little longer. "Into the fire," said Dean. "Okay, then. Pack your bags, Sammy boy. We leave in the morning."

It had come together shockingly fast. Thank you, Cas, thought Dean, as they started preparing. Should've known you'd have plotted a path for us. Should've known you'd point the way.

Cas, though, had had the handicap of thinking most of the gates were closed; who knew what complex route he'd been planning. But if Elegua had indeed opened the gates, then Dean and Sam, it seemed, might have the luxury of hopping "into the fire" immediately, in one jump.

Not that going "into the fire" seemed all that safe a thing to do.

But it was the only lead they had.

They spent the rest of the morning trying to think out what to pack. Packing for an unknown trek of unknown duration through an unknown realm, for a trip that either could be a complete red herring or an instant death sentence, wasn't really that easy. In the end they defaulted to just what they usually brought on regular road trips: some food, some water, some weapons, and a change of clothes. The rest was in the lap of the gods.

Or the hands of Fate, perhaps.

Dean headed up the hill, at last, that day just after noon.

Sam came along. Dean had kind of thought to do this himself, but Sam, who was supposed to be off sorting their final selection of gear into two backpacks, had somehow realized what Dean was up to. He'd appeared out of nowhere just when Dean had been about to sneak out of the bunker and head across the meadow.

"I'm helping," Sam announced, in a don't-argue-with-me tone of voice. Dean took one look at the mulish look in his eyes and just nodded.

God knows he deserves it, thought Dean, turning to lead the way across the meadow. He deserves it more than I do.

So together the two of them lugged Dean's gardening tools, and the two hundred flower bulbs, up to the top of the hill. Sam carried the crocus bulbs, and some narrow little spades; Dean brought the sack of daffodil bulbs, and a pack containing a few other things. Among the "few other things" were some additional flower bulbs he had just a few of: hyacinths and tulips, in a brown paper sack.

They were both panting when they got up to the top, but they got right to work. Apart from a bit of initial discussions about where to plant the bulbs and how deep, they barely spoke.
Dig a hole, put three or four bulbs in it, orient them roots-down. Replace the earth, pat it down. Repeat. Repeat again. On and on. Two hundred and some bulbs took a while.

They worked in silence.

A smattering of daffodils went right over Cas's body. Crocuses at his feet. The tulips and hyacinths went around the grave marker, right at Cas's head. Dean had gotten those at the last second, on the spur of the moment, while standing in a long check-out line with the sacks of daffodil and crocus bulbs at the Home Depot in Nebraska. There'd been a little chart of "flower meanings" propped up near the cash register, one of those printouts from The Old Farmer's Almanac, and entries for tulips and hyacinths had caught Dean's eye. He'd left the line to grab a few, even though he then had to stand in line all over again.

The rest of the daffodils and crocuses, dozens and dozens of them, went all around the grave, all over the rest of the little hilltop clearing.

It didn't look like much right now, of course; just a bare hilltop covered in dead leaves. Also, the flower bulbs that they were planting turned out to be pretty unimpressive. Dean rolled one around in his hands, eyeing it; it seemed just a papery brown blob, cool and dry and inert. It seemed impossible that it could be alive, and just sleeping; it seemed impossible to believe that it would one day give rise to something beautiful.

Gotta have faith, Dean thought, setting it at the base of the hole he'd just dug. He put two other bulbs with it, orienting them all carefully with the root end down, and patted dirt down over them. Gotta have faith that they'll grow.

Not that I'll ever see them.

Once they were done, Dean pulled out one more thing from the bag he'd lugged up here. This was what he'd been working on it last night in the woodshop, after he'd finished with the cars.

"Better wings," he said briefly to Sam. Dean still felt a little bad that he hadn't had time to arrange a stone marker. (He had a fair number of skills under his belt, but DIY stone-carving wasn't one of them, and he hadn't had much time.) But he'd wanted to at least improve the wooden wings. He pulled the old gravemarker out and flung it aside, and then held the new one in his hands and studied it critically, Sam silent beside him.

"The wings are more symmetrical, huh?" he said to Sam.

"It's great," said Sam softly.

"I used that book," said Dean. "Patterned it after the illustrations. Tried to get the dimensions right and all." He drew a finger over the wooden carving lightly; he'd even tried to put in the right number of feathers per wing, this time. And the two alulas, on each wing.

He'd painted the wings black, too. "I don't know what color his feathers are," Dean said. He forced himself to correct the verb. "Were. I mean. Were."

Sam made no comment.

"But, the feather I have is black, anyway," said Dean.

The wings were attached to an upright piece that had a bit of room for a name under the wings. Just enough room for a few words. At the last second Dean had gotten unduly worried about what words to put there — even though he knew it really shouldn't matter in the least, somehow it did still matter.
"Castiel" or "Cassiel" was one major question, of course. And should there be something else? Maybe "Archangel?" Or should it "Seraph"? Or maybe "Soldier of God?" Or maybe something goopy and high-falutin' like "He gave everything for humanity?"

Dean had gotten nearly paralyzed with these decisions. In the end it just read:

CAS

...under two beautiful black wings stretching up toward the sky.

Dean dug a neat hole for it at the head of the grave, and anchored it firmly in the dirt.

They looked at it in silence. Sam finally cleared his throat. "We should probably head on down," he said. "We've got a long drive tomorrow. I still got some stuff to pack."

"Yeah," said Dean, turning away. "Sure. Let's go."

But Dean came back up at midnight. By himself.

He'd snuck out, after waiting till Sam had fallen asleep.

The moon was bright, and Dean didn't even need his flashlight. He walked up the path half by memory, half by moonlight. He was carrying a brand-new hard-shell guitar case in one hand — the last purchase he'd made on his shopping trip.

Once he got up to the grave, he settled himself on the folding chair, popped the case open and pulled out the guitar. He'd tuned it earlier that evening, but the strings had tightened in the frigid air and all the notes had gone sharp. Dean took a moment to tune it again. Then he said:

"Castiel, Castiel, Castiel."

He cleared his throat.

"Guess this is my last trip up here. Sam thinks we're taking off tomorrow morning, and I know he's thinking we'll probably never make it back. He's even made some weird plan to get the bunker key to Jason if we don't come back." Dean paused and cleared his throat. "Truth is I'm taking off tonight, on my own, in the Continental; he just doesn't know. Cause... it is pretty sure to be a one-way trip, you know? And, I still want Sam to have a chance here. You and me, we didn't have a chance, you know?... But Sam still has a chance."

He gave the guitar a light strum. "I'm gonna try to find the Crown," he said. He chuckled a little. "Fool's errand, I know. I'm heading to that gate on Mount Shasta. To go into the fire and try to find the damn Crown and see if I can figure out what to do about the Darkness. I know it's probably just a wild goose chase. But, I gotta try to put this right if I can. It was my fault. It wasn't you and Sam's fault, you know. It was my fault. And... thing is, Cas...." He paused. "If I do find the Crown, it's supposed to cause 'destruction,' right? That's what Oshossi said. If I die there, it's supposed to annihilate human souls, right? So... that's the other reason I don't want Sam to come along. And... if I succeed, great. If not... well... then I go poof. And, thing is, that sounds really good to me. Perfect solution, really." He took a breath. "No Heaven, which I know I wouldn't even go to, but even if I did, they'd probably make me see some fake version of you.... which would be, just, pretty horrible,
actually, to know it wasn't really you. And I would know, you know. And... much more likely... no Hell." He paused a moment, and said softly, "No Hell where I'd be torturing you again."

Dean was silent a long moment. He looked up at the moon. "No nothing. It sounds pretty good. Cause, honestly, Cas, if you just went poof... then I want to follow you. I want to go poof, too."

He touched the guitar lightly, settling his left hand around the neck. "But I thought I'd sing for you one more time. I know you're probably not hearing this... but..."

A soft strum.

"I know you've never heard any of this," Dean said slowly. "You haven't heard anything I've said, all along. None of these prayers. Have you."

Another soft strum.

"But, well. Just the same... Here's your songs. I still can't play all of them but here's the ones I know."

He played all the songs he could, stumbling through them as best he could.

"Morning Has Broken."

"Puff The Magic Dragon."

"Rocky Mountain High," of course.

"Cry Me A River."

"Where Have All The Flowers Gone."

"I'll Fly Away."

Every song he knew. It took almost an hour. It got colder, and Dean had to stop and re-tune several times, but he went through every song he could. By memory, the chord transitions and the lyrics all stored away in his head.

He found, quite soon, that when his throat choked up, which it started doing pretty frequently, he could always still keep strumming. Often he had to stop singing, but he could always keep strumming.

Eventually the last note of "I'll Fly Away," rang off into the silence.

Dean took a long breath, listening to a night wind sighing softly through the treetops.

"I like your songs, Cas," he said. "I always did."

He loosened the strings carefully — he knew the guitar wouldn't be played again for quite some time, if ever, and he'd read that it was important to loosen a guitar's strings partway if you were putting it in storage. So Dean loosened all the strings, and set the guitar gently in the brand-new case. Dean had invested in a good case, a sturdy hard-shell with a thick velvet lining and strong brass clasps, and he'd put all Cas's song sheets in the bottom. They fit pretty well there, under the guitar. There was also a little sack of silica desiccant, and a bag of little cedar chips with some protection runes on it, to keep the guitar dry and free from mildew.

It was a good case. The case was probably worth more than the guitar, actually. But it was worth it,
to keep the Cas's guitar safe, and his songs, through unknown years of storage down in the bunker's basement.

Dean flipped the clasps shut.

"Couple last things," he said, standing from the chair and hefting the case in one hand. "I got you a better gravemarker. A little better, at least. I tried to get the wings right this time. It's still not stone, but I realized, stone wears away too... everything wears away in the end, huh? So, it's just wood, but, it's got a polyurethane coating so I think it might last a couple years, anyway." Dean scuffed one foot over one of the patches of freshly turned earth. "And also, Sam and I planted some flowers. I was thinking, maybe Sam was right about you liking flowers? He said you liked flowers, earlier." Dean gave a little laugh. "I thought he was nuts but later I got to thinking... he knew you pretty well, didn't he? Maybe better than I did, to be honest. And I thought, maybe he's right? I mean, you liked those bees and all... so..." Dean shrugged his shoulders. "So I got you some flowers. They're just bulbs but they're supposed to grow in the spring. Hundred bulbs for thirty bucks. Seemed like a deal so I got a couple bags. Daffodils and crocuses. Sam and I just planted them all. Doesn't look like much now, but if you come back in the spring when they're blooming—

Dean's voice choked off suddenly. The word "blooming" seemed to clog in his throat.

He swallowed and took a couple breaths. "In the spring," he went on doggedly, "They're supposed to grow into daffodils and crocuses. And a couple of tulips and some damn thing called a hyacinth. I didn't know what kind of flowers you might like but the pictures on the bags were pretty, and I thought, I don't know, I thought you might like 'em."

Dean stared down at the roughened earth, thinking, Cas is never going to see the flowers.

Dean's voice degenerated further as he tried to keep talking. "The flowers'll be pretty, Cas, they'll be real pretty. The daffodils'll be yellow. The crocuses are suppose to be a mix, blue and yellow and white and purple. The tulips are red.... The daffodils and crocuses, I got them cause I could get so many, to be honest, but the tulips, and the hyacinths, I got a few of those on purpose, cause...

Dean stopped.

Tulip, red: Declaration of love.

Hyacinth: Constancy of love.

"Wish you could see 'em," Dean soldiered on. "If you could be here in the spring, you'd, you'd, you'd see... the flowers'll be pretty, they'll be all over, a whole bunch of 'em, so. Ah, shit." Dean pressed one hand to his forehead, trying to fight back the uneven hitches that were jolting his breath. His voice went about two pitches higher than usual as he swore a few more times. "Shit. Fuck, Cas. Dammit."

The flowers weren't the important part. The flowers didn't even matter.

"A fucking tulip bulb doesn't do a damn thing, does it," Dean whispered, gripping his forehead tightly now. "I'm so fucking sorry. I'm so fucking sorry. Cas, if I could turn back time I would. If I could undo everything... If I could just get you back, dammit, Cas... I would do anything. I'd have sold my soul. I swear, Cas, I'd have sold my soul again, and I tried to, I tried, I'd have sold my soul for you."

He dragged the back of his jacket sleeve roughly over his eyes. His arm slowed as he did this, and he stood there a moment with one forearm over his face, eyes buried in his sleeve, his other hand
clamped tightly onto the guitar case.

"I should've told you," Dean whispered, his face still hidden in his jacket sleeve. "I never did. Fuck, I shoulda told you, I shoulda told you, fuck, dammit, I'm so damn sorry, shoulda told you." He lowered his arm at last, staring down at the little black wings, nearly invisible in the night. "I shoulda told you I loved you. I shoulda told you; I shoulda done something about it, I was just such a fucking coward... I would give anything to have told you. I would give anything if I could tell you now, anything to just tell you that one thing, Cas: I did love you."

He touched the feather in his pocket and added, "I still do."

It was a long couple minutes before Dean moved again. At last he drew a long breath.

"All right, angel," he whispered. "I guess that's it for us, huh?"

He looked around one last time, at the little gravemarker and the dark hill. It was time to say goodbye, of course, and Dean had even intended to say exactly that — "Goodbye, Cas," — but now Dean found his old No goodbyes rule kicking in.

The words Goodbye, Cas simply wouldn't come.

Instead Dean found himself saying, "I still got your feather."

He raised one hand to his pocket to pat the feather again, and said, "And I'm gonna keep it. If you don't mind."

Dean turned and left.

He walked down the hill for the last time, leaving the little grave on the hill. He left behind the folding chair, the planks, the string, the backpack still neatly sealed away in its trash bag, and the new gravemarker and the old. He walked away from the quiet hill where two hundred sleeping daffodils and crocuses would someday bloom. Yellow and white and blue and purple, they would bloom, when springtime came. Purple hyacinth and red tulip, all of them, they would bloom. Dean pictured it in his mind, as he walked away. The flowers would all bloom, come spring; they'd bloom quietly, silently, opening their lovely colors to the world. They'd sway in the wind here on the hill; they'd drink up the soft rains, and they'd shine in the sun, up here under the wide sky. Castiel would never see them, and neither would Dean, but the flowers would bloom just the same.

A/N -

Up next: Into the fire, at last.

And where oh where did the parrot go? Please stay tuned.

Next chapter Fri or Sat. It might be short but there will at least be something.

As always, please drop me a note if you liked anything about this. These days especially, I love to hear from you. Sorry again for my lack of replies recently - I'm still having to limit laptop typing-time. But please know I read and cherish every comment.
A/N - Thank you so much for all your heartfelt comments last week! I am doing lots better today (had a bitty little surgery Tuesday that went well, and today was my first day off painkillers in three weeks!) and hope soon to be able to catch back up with the comment-replies. But in the meantime - I hope this doesn't sound totally sadistic, but, it was almost a relief to hear how saddened you all seemed to be last chapter! What I really mean is: it was a relief to share the burden. That scene has been trapped in my head for over a year now, and it was almost like I was stuck there with Dean till I could share it with you guys.

So, I was pushing hard to get through those last two terribly-sad chapters partly for you guys, but also in large part so that Dean and Sam (and me!) could start to move on. A lot of you have told me to stop driving myself so hard and rest up, and I think this week I will take your advice. I was just about to lock myself up in my room again for another 6 hrs of Friday-night fic writing to try to give you a longer chapter, but - I need a rest. So I will just give you the 2 scene-lets that are already done. This is a much shorter chapter than usual, but I hope you enjoy it!

It was one-thirty in the morning when Dean tiptoed through the bunker to the back storage rooms, looking for a safe spot for the guitar. He eventually found a pretty good spot, tucked on some back shelves in a section labeled "Artifacts of Unknown Meaning - Possibly Angelic - Keep For Future."

Seemed about right.

It was two by the time he got back up to the garage, tiptoeing the whole way. He eased one of the big garage bay doors open as gently as he could. Thankfully, it didn't squeak; Dean had oiled the hinges earlier. Sam's bedroom was pretty far away, deeply buried down in the bunker's dorm area, but it had seemed best to be on the safe side.

A shaft of moonlight slanted through the bay door once he got it fully open, and there stood the Impala and the Continental, glinting faintly in the moonlight side by side. Dean paused in the garage door entrance, eyeing them for a moment. The black car and gold car looked almost like two old friends, sitting there side by side like that.

Don't get sentimental, Dean told himself, walking between the cars toward the stack of gear that Sam had set out. But he couldn't help trailing one hand along the Impala as he walked, for it had occurred to him that this would be the last time he saw her.

Enough of that. No more goodbyes. Get your gear and get out.

He dug out his flashlight and flicked it over Sam's stack of stuff. Sam had it nicely organized: Two backpacks for whatever world waited beyond the "fire gate." Their usual two duffels as well, containing just the typical overnight stuff that they would have needed for the motel night on the way to California — pj's, shaving gear, a extra change of clothes. And the little cooler was there too, their road-trip cooler, ready to be stocked with beer at the first Gas-n-Sip they passed.

Dean checked the backpacks. Looked like Sam had already divided the supplies pretty evenly. Each pack held an allotment of food, water, and weapons, along with two changes of underwear, extra
socks and an extra shirt, as well as one of those fuzzy warm hiking-type jackets wedged in the bottom. In the side pockets each pack had some ammo (sealed in rain-tight ziploc bags), a pack of matches (ditto), a little med kit (beefed up with some not-strictly-legal meds), a compact fold-up rain poncho, a flask of holy water and even a compass and a fishing hook. (Dean felt a little doubtful that there would be any trout wherever the Crown of Heaven was, but... who knew?) Sam's pack also had a little bundle of chalk, herbs and other ingredients that could be used for certain common spells, along with a miniature silver bowl and a tiny notebook with some of the spells scribbled in it. Both packs had a full assortment of warding spells drawn all over the outside.

*Almost like the kid knows what he's doing,* thought Dean, gazing over the neatly bundled supplies.

It was the right thing to do to leave Sam behind, wasn't it? It was best for Sam, wasn't it?

*It's best. I know what's best,* Dean assured himself, shifting the spell items from Sam's pack to his own and zipping the packs back up. *I caused this whole mess, and I'll fix it. And then Sam can go live his life.*

Dean hefted his pack in one hand and his duffel with the other. He realized, with a pang, that he wouldn't need the familiar cooler, for he'd be making the whole drive in one long haul. One long grueling twenty-two-hour drive. There would be no leisurely beer stops; this drive had to be done in one shot.

And that, of course, was because Sam would try to chase after him.

But Sam would find soon enough that the Impala wouldn't start. Dean had disconnected the starter. He'd also taken the precaution of getting rid of the key. (He'd mailed it to Sam, actually, through U.S. mail. The key wouldn't turn back up at the bunker for at least a couple days.) He'd also hobbled all the other bunker vehicles in a variety of ways. None of that would slow Sam down forever, of course, but given that Dean would also have at least a six-hour head start anyway because of leaving in the middle of the night, Dean hoped to have a nice long lead by the time Sam finally got on the road. Enough of a lead to get the job done.

Dean had to beat Sam to the gate. He also had to *find* the gate, actually — Mount Shasta was big, and Dean wasn't at all sure he'd be able to figure out where exactly on the mountain it was before Sam caught up. On that front, Dean was also planning to call Marcos at daybreak, to ask him if the "Shango" character might have any more cryptic orisha hints. Shango had been the orisha who'd dropped the into-the-fire clue originally, of course, so he probably knew where the gate was, right?

Dean was also planning to ask Marcos if Elegua could be convinced to shut the fire gate after Dean went through. To keep Sam from coming through later. It seemed worth a shot.

So with any luck Dean would get there first, and find the gate first, and go through first, and the gate would close behind him.

And then...

Then Dean would go on to whatever awaited. The Crown of Heaven, hopefully; and maybe some clue about what to do about the Darkness.

And Sam could go live his life.

It took only a moment to slip the duffel and the backpack, quietly, into the Continental's trunk. He eased the trunk lid down; it shut with a smooth, quiet *click.* (Dean had oiled those hinges, too.) He patted his pockets last of all, doing one final check of a few small essential items: Phone, check.
Wallet, check. Car key, check.

Feather.... check.

And a little photo of Sam, too. It was tucked in his wallet.

Then Dean slipped into the Continental, put the car in neutral and rolled it carefully outside.

The garage door shut as quietly as it had opened. Dean didn't start the car right away, though. Sam could be annoyingly alert sometimes about strange sounds, and there was still an outside chance that he might hear the car rumble to life even from way down in his bedroom. So Dean's plan was to push the Continental pretty far down the driveway before he started it up.

It went pretty well; by walking along by the open driver's door, keeping one hand on the steering wheel and leaning hard against the car frame with his other hand, he was able to get it rolling slowly down the dirt driveway. He pushed it almost all the way to the main road before he felt it might be safe to start the engine.

There he paused, letting the car roll to a stop. He looked back toward the bunker as he stood by the car's open door, catching his breath. The bunker was barely visible from here, hidden by a thick clump of surrounding trees.

All at once Dean was choked up, barely able to even breathe. Wishing for nothing more than to run back to the bunker at top speed, pelt down the stairs, shake Sam awake and grab him in a tight hug.

Too many goodbyes. Too many farewells in one night.

*In for a penny, in for a pound,* he thought. *Might as well tell 'em both. What have I got to lose?*

*Already lost everything.*

*And neither of them'll hear anyway.*

So he whispered, out loud, "Love you, little brother."

Dean slipped inside the driver's seat, shut the door and started the car. The Continental leapt to life, its newly tuned-up motor purring smoothly.

Just as Dean was shifting into gear, Sam said, from the back seat where he'd apparently been lying down, "Love you too. But I really think we should take the Impala. Also we need to go back and get my pack."

For about the first three minutes Dean was absolutely convinced that he'd win the argument.

"You are not coming with me," said Dean, glaring toward the shadows in the back seat.

"I was sure you'd see me right away," said Sam, his head coming into view in the rearview mirror as he sat up. "I was waiting to see when you'd notice but you didn't even look in the back seat. What if I'd been a vamp or something? You're losing your edge."

"You are *not* coming with me," repeated Dean, scowling at him now in the mirror.
"Yes, I am," said Sam casually, stretching his shoulders — he must've been curled up pretty awkwardly in the footwell to wedge himself out of view like that. "But we really should take the Impala. 'Cause I was thinking, we should leave the Continental for Claire, don't you think?"

Claire. Shit. She doesn't even know.

Dean tried not to get derailed onto the unexpectedly disconcerting topic of Claire. He brought his voice down to his best Tough Guy growl and said, glaring even more sternly into the rearview mirror, "Sam, I'm doing this alone."

"Also we gotta pick up the beer cooler, as well as my pack," said Sam.

Sam just wasn't getting the message. Dean cut the engine, flipped on the Continental's little interior light and twisted partway around, one arm hooked over the seat so he could turn his scowl full-bore onto Sam, saying sternly, "You are gonna stay here. And I am gonna go through that damn fire gate, whatever the hell it is, alone."

Sam cocked his head in an eerily Cas-like gesture, a skeptical look on his face. "Shango told Marcos that 'they' should go into the fire," he pointed out. "As in, 'they' plural. Meaning, you and me. Not just you."

Dean looked at him. It was starting to become clear that Sam wasn't going to change his mind very easily.

How can I ditch him?

Maybe if I pretend to go back to the bunker? ...And then, once he's out of the car, I'll find some excuse to jump back in and just take off.

"Okay," said Dean, nodding. "That's a good point. All right. We'll go back to the bunker and—"

"And you'll still try to ditch me by jumping back into the car and zipping away the second I'm out of it," said Sam, outlining Dean's new plan with alarming accuracy. "And I'll follow. And by the way, I already reconnected the Impala's starter, and I've had a duplicate key for ages. So I'll have the faster car. Also, just so you know, I think I figured out where the gate probably is on Mount Shasta, or at least who can lead us to it. But I'm not telling you. You are not gonna get to that gate before me."

"Okay, you are not getting this," Dean burst out. He wriggled totally around, almost on his knees now so that he could lean on the seatback with both arms and face Sam head-on. "Sam. You are going to stay here and you are going to live a fucking life, is what you're going to do. You're still young, you're, what, you're only thirty-two, Sam—" Dean's voice started to climb in pitch, and he realized he was pleading now. "You still got so much time ahead of you! You could settle down, you could—"

"You really think I could fucking SETTLE DOWN?" Sam snapped, his veneer of calm suddenly shattering.

Dean blinked at him, startled into silence.

"You really think I could fucking SETTLE DOWN?" Sam snapped, his veneer of calm suddenly shattering.

Dean blinked at him, startled into silence.

Sam said, "My last, and best, friend is gone forever, my brother's gonna be gone forever too, you two were all I had left, I got nothing, Dean, I got nobody, and you think I'm just gonna settle down? What, like, so I could sit on a porch somewhere in a friggin' rocking chair, thinking about how this Darkness spider thing ripped the both of you to pieces, and I mean not just Cas, it wasn't just Cas, it ripped both of you to pieces, on my watch, while I was off getting fucking pizza?"
Dean stared at him. It took a moment to even remember what Sam was referring to: Sam had, in fact, been getting pizza.

On that terrible night when Cas had died, Dean had sent Sam off to get pizza.

Dean had been so obsessed by his own memories of that night that he'd actually never considered where Sam had been. Sam must have been waiting for Cas and Dean at the motel. He would've gotten a couple large pizzas; they would've been still in the boxes, and he'd have set the boxes on the little motel table and waited for them. He'd have had a couple six-packs of beer ready in the minifridge too. He'd have been sitting there waiting for them to walk in. Waiting for them to tell him the hunt had been wrapped up successfully. He'd probably even picked out a movie to watch together with them on the motel's little tv.

He must have waited for an hour at least. Flipping through tv shows, maybe starting a beer, maybe starting to wonder where they were, the pizzas slowly cooling the whole time.

And then he'd gotten Dean's desperate call.

Sam took an uneven breath. "I was getting pizza when it all went down. And I, I almost came back to the warehouse, Dean. I was thinking, they're taking a while, I should go check, Cas was worried, Dean seemed a little off, maybe I should go check on them... but I... I just... I was...." He gave a jerky laugh. "I was a little tired, to be honest. I wanted a beer... and the spider was dead, and it seemed like it was all over. And... you had Cas with you." Here Sam gave perhaps the saddest smile Dean had ever seen. "You had Cas with you. And you guys hadn't talked much in a while. So I thought maybe you and Cas were just...... talking or something? I wanted to give you guys some... " Sam faltered, and finally said, "Some time. Some time together."

Dean closed his eyes as it sank in: Sam wanted to give me and Cas some time together.

Well, we got some time together.

Sam went on, his voice wavering now, "And I've spent weeks, months now, thinking, fuck, holy fuck, if I had only gone back to check on you guys...."

Sam stopped and covered his mouth with one hand. He seemed to be holding his breath. He turned his head to stare out the window, his eyes glittering a little in the moonlight.

Dean said, very quietly, all the bluster gone, "If you'd come back I just would've gotten you too."

"You don't know that," whispered Sam, still staring out the window.

Dean felt pretty sure about it, actually, but didn't really feel like describing the horror of that night in any further detail. He just said, "Sam, this was not your fault. In any way."

"Well, it wasn't yours either," muttered Sam. He bit his lip, still looking outside.

Dean was realizing now that the argument had probably been lost from the beginning. Nonetheless he couldn't help saying, almost begging, "You can't throw your life away, Sam. Please."

"It's not just that," said Sam. He gave a long sigh and looked down at his knees, and finally looked up at Dean. Sam looked a little steadier now, and he said, as if beginning a speech that he'd been planning for a while, "The Darkness was unleashed 'cause of me." Dean started to object, but Sam held a hand up. "Let me finish," he said. "The Darkness was unleashed because of me. Cas did that spell because I was after him all damn year to do whatever it took to save you, and I found that book, and I was the one who got into bargaining with Rowena to do that spell. Though...I guess...." Sam
gave a tiny smile. "I think Cas would've tried to save you anyway, actually, but, I was the one who led him down that particular path, Dean, I was. And...you know... a woman even died just for me to get that damn book." He gave a sigh. "We seriously lost our way, Dean, you know? Remember when we used to try to save the world? And save other people? Instead of just trying to save each other?"

The question seemed to ring in the air.

Sam made a vague gesture up toward the sky, and said, "And now even Heaven's being eaten up, with I don't know how many souls in it... Hell's being eaten up, even the friggin' Sun's being eaten up. I know you think it was your fault, but Dean, we all had a part in this, Cas and me and you, and I definitely played my part. And you think I'm gonna just... shake that off? Walk away?" Sam shook his head. "I can't walk away from this. And you know what, Dean..." He took a breath, looking at Dean now with almost a warning look in his eyes. "It's my decision. Not yours."

He had a point.

Dean sat there a long moment in silence, looking at Sam over the Continental's seatback. Sam seemed to have come to a stopping point, at least temporarily, and was staring down at his knees again now.

Dean reached down over the seatback to tap him on one knee. Sam looked up.

Dean said, "If the lore's right, the Crown destroys human souls. If we die anywhere near it, we are gone for good." It seemed important to make sure they were both clear on that point.

"Well, you're okay with that, apparently," Sam pointed out.

Dean shrugged. It really didn't seem all that important any more, or even all that interesting, to consider his own potential death. "Yeah, but..."

"Dean," Sam said. He looked calmer now. "I was ready for that after the Trials. You know I was. I was ready for it through the whole Gadreel thing. I was ready to end. I'm... I'm friggin' tired, man. I'm so friggin' tired...." He shook his head, but then his gaze sharpened, and he leaned forward a little to lock eyes with Dean again. "But, the other thing is, Dean, this is important, and you know it. It's as important as the Apocalypse was. More important really, 'cause it's all the realms this time. This matters. Cas did his part — he did all the research, and he made the maps, and he figured out about the Crown. He pointed the way. He did his part, and I wanna do mine. You are gonna need backup, and I can help, and so I am coming with you, and if we die there then that's it, but we gotta try. We gotta give it our very best shot. So we are both going. End of story."

Sam held Dean's eyes.

"Dammit," muttered Dean, sagging back down in his seat.

For a moment the only sound was a soft night wind, whispering outside through the dried grasses at the edge of the road.

Sam added, "And we need the beer cooler."

"We do need the beer cooler," agreed Dean, with a sigh. He turned to face front again, and started up the engine. "Me in particular, I need the beer cooler, like, right now."

"And my gear."
"Yeah, yeah," said Dean. "I got the picture." He threw the Continental in reverse and craned his head around again to start backing up to the bunker. To get the beer cooler, Sam's gear... and the Impala.

A/N - That's all I got this week - short but sweet I hope!

There's some real sorrow in here, too, of course - Sam really has been beaten down pretty hard by everything that's happened, poor guy. (Not to mention all the preceding years of trauma that he has never had a chance to resolve...) But I hope it's also good to know that whatever Sam and Dean will face next, they will face it together.

Next Friday: The last road trip, and the search for the gate.

Please let me know if there was anything in particular that you liked! And thanks again for all your kind and supportive thoughts. It means a ton.

PS I just discovered some of you have been sending me messages on twitter and tumblr. So just so you know, I am barely functional on either of those platforms - I was sorta resisting a lot of social media (in a doomed attempt to focus my limited free time on writing), which means, I only JUST discovered that tumblr even has a message feature, ha ha ha, and also I had literally never looked at my twitter app EVER before last week. Lo and behold all these messages! I only found them yesterday! I will reply as soon as I can. Sorry for the ridiculous delay.
A/N - I took your advice to not kill myself to get everything done for Friday. This week the results is that there will be two chapters this weekend instead of one: a shorter one tonight and a longer one tomorrow.

Dean's feet began dragging as they loaded all the gear into the Impala. Soon he was stifling a series of huge yawns. I didn't even do that much today, he thought. All he'd really done was plant some flowers, walk up a hill and then walk back down, push a car a few hundred feet...

Well. And try to say a couple good-byes.

It felt like he'd run a marathon. A dozen marathons.

It was getting hard to even keep his eyes open. "Hey, maybe we could catch a few hours sleep?" Dean suggested, biting back another yawn. "Before we head out?"

Sam gave a little huff of laughter. He was kneeling by the cooler, trying to bury their last couple of beers under a meager layer of ice cubes — all the ice the bunker's little freezer had had. "Not saying I don't trust you to not take off once I'm asleep," Sam said, as he clapped the cooler lid shut, "but... I'll tell you straight, I'm not letting you out of my sight till we're on the road." He looked up at Dean. "In the same car."

"Fair enough," Dean said with a sigh. "Dammit, though, I'm worn out." He took the cooler from Sam and hoisted it into the back seat with a grunt. "Maybe Jason was right... I'm getting old. Old and tired."

"If you're that tired, then give me that," said Sam, maneuvering Dean gently out of the way and grabbing the cooler back from where Dean had just put it. Dean watched him, a little befuddled, as Sam swung the cooler out of the back seat and moved it to the front passenger seat. "Let's set up for a real sleep shift," Sam said, looking back at Dean. "Like Dad used to do when we were little. Remember?"

Dean raised an eyebrow. Haven't thought about that in years.... Those sleepy late nights in the back of the Impala, when they'd been kids. Dad would have been the one driving, then, of course... little Sammy had usually been passed out across the front seat, with his head in Dad's lap (kiddie car seats hadn't really been a thing yet, in those days)... while Dean stretched out in the back.

"You gonna be Dad?" Dean said, a faint smile coming to his face.

"For one night anyway, sure," said Sam, giving him a little grin back. " Seems like you might need to lie down flat for once? I know you usually say you don't need to sleep, Mr. Drive-All-Night and all, but... humor me this time." Sam was rummaging around in the trunk now, and he soon pulled out the blanket that they always kept back there, along with a wadded-up sweatshirt and a black Led Zeppelin t-shirt from Dean's pack. Sam tossed all three things in the back seat and said, "I'll drive, you sleep. You haven't slept much recently, don't deny it, and we both gotta be rested when we get to Shasta. I'm coming along to help, remember? So, let me help."
Dean felt half-obliged to resist, or at least to crack some kind of joke. But the truth was that he was exhausted enough to just go with it. "All right, Nurse Moose," he said (the best he seemed able to come up with). Sam just rolled his eyes, and soon they were headed down the main road, Sam in front now while Dean settled into the back seat gratefully.

Dean tried to resist the urge to look behind him at the bunker. Don't look back, was the rule. Don't look back had always been the rule.

But then he thought, The hill. Cas's hill — and then he was looking back, twisting around in the seat, peering back through the Impala's window. He couldn't help it. He had to look. He had to look one last time—

The hill was just a quiet dark shape on the horizon. There was nothing that could be seen from here. Dean had been hoping that somehow at least the little white folding chair might catch the moonlight, maybe. But there was nothing but darkness.

"I'm glad we did the flowers," said Sam from the front. He was watching Dean in the mirror. "You..." He paused. "It was a good idea," Sam said at last. "They'll be pretty."

Nobody's gonna see them now, Dean thought. Nobody. Not even you.

But Dean said nothing. There was simply no way he could talk about what was buried up there. Any of it. Not now, and maybe not ever.

Don't look back, he ordered himself yet again, but he still couldn't take his eyes off that dark hill on the horizon. He watched it fade to invisibility into the black night, the shadowy outline blending into the dark sky, shrinking in the distance, until it was gone.

Dean finally had to turn back around.

Sam's eyes were still on him in the mirror. Dean evaded his gaze, looking only now at the black ribbon of the road ahead, as it rolled endlessly toward them in the Impala's headlights.

Not ten minutes later, Dean was again hit by a series of huge yawns. Sam's right, he realized. Gotta be fresh for Shasta. He said, "Catch ya later, Sam," and heard Sam's quiet, "Yep, sleep tight." Dean kicked off his boots, shook out the blanket and wriggled underneath it, wedging the folded-up sweatshirt under his head as a pillow.

They were going through town now, and Lebanon's streetlights began flicking past, one after the other. Dean folded up the black t-shirt and put it over his eyes as a blindfold to keep the worst of the light out. It was all a routine he remembered from those childhood trips — the blanket, the sweatshirt-pillow, the black t-shirt over the eyes. Though obviously he didn't fit as well lying down in the Impala's back seat as he had as a kid. (Which he knew already, of course, from many naps in the parked Impala). His legs seemed to constantly be falling off the seat, no matter what he tried, and he ended up a little twisted, his folded legs bumping into the front seat awkwardly and one arm flopping down onto the floor. Nonetheless the familiar feel began to wash over him... the dim flickering of the lights through the t-shirt, the roar of the engine, the rumble of the tires on the road. And the knowledge that someone he trusted was driving. Someone was with him... someone he trusted....
It almost seemed like time might have rolled backwards somehow. It was almost possible, it seemed, as Dean slid into a doze, to believe that none of the last three months had happened. That none of the last three decades had happened.

Maybe it was Dad driving in the front, even? Dad in the front, Sam curled up in the passenger seat, and Dean in the back.

Maybe that was Dad in the front even now....

Dad was, indeed, driving the car, a grown-up Sam asleep in the passenger seat next to him. Sam was slumped against the door looking totally relaxed (he was even snoring a little), but Dad looked worried. Dad kept glancing back at Dean in the mirror, now and then pointing ahead at the road. Dean began to wonder what Dad was so worried about, and sat up to get a look out. He frowned when he saw that the Impala was racing toward something red and patchy that seemed to be moving onto the road.

It was a fire. Some kind of wildfire approaching the road.

The fire grew hotter even as Dean watched, brightening to orange, and then to yellow. It was moving fast—the wind must have been whipping it—and to Dean's alarm, the fire soon leapt across the road.

"Whoa," Dean muttered, as he realized there was now a bright wall of fire stretching right across the road. They were going to drive right into it. And it looked damn hot.

"Dad—" Dean said, grabbing at Dad's shoulder. "Dad, I don't think we can get through that. Dad—"

Dad just pointed ahead again, but didn't touch the brakes. The Impala kept heading right toward the fire, which seemed to be developing multiple colors; deep crimson on the left side of the road, brighter red and orange in the middle, and yellow on the right, almost like a sort of rainbow. They came around a turn and got a better view of the landscape ahead, and Dean drew a breath in shock.

It wasn't just a small fire across the road. The entire landscape ahead was nothing but a sea of seething white-hot flame, blazing so brightly that Dean could feel the heat through the window even from here.

"Dad! STOP!" Dean yelled.

Dad braked to a halt just fifty feet away from the boundary of the fire. (Sam was still fast asleep.) Dad looked back at Dean in the mirror, a concerned look in his eyes, and he pointed at the fire.

"Yeah, Dad, I know, fire!" said Dean. "Obviously! Turn around! We gotta go back!" But when Dean twisted around to check the road back, through the rear window, he found the road behind had entirely disappeared, consumed in blackness. It seemed a black fog was rolling toward them, devouring the road as it went.

"Shit. We gotta go forward, Dad," Dean said. The phrase into the fire came into his mind. "Into the fire," said Dean. Dad looked at Dean sharply, nodded, and gunned the motor, but to Dean's surprise Dad then yanked the car around to the left, took it right off the road and down toward the crimson-red section of flame. The car bounced roughly as it ran over rough ground, and then it plunged into a
There was a terrifying moment of free-fall as the Impala dropped into blackness, followed by a terrific shock of icy water all around, and then Dean was struggling to breathe in blackness. *It's a river*, Dean realized. *A river*.

Everything disappeared.

A moment later Dean was standing on his own feet again, gasping. He straightened up and looked around. The fire was gone; the water was gone. The car and Sam were gone. And Dad was gone.

Instead Jo and Ellen were on either side of him, tugging at his sleeves.

He was in the Roadhouse.

Together Jo and Ellen pulled Dean toward the pool table, where Ash was drawing a bewilderingly complicated diagram on a huge piece of paper. It looked rather like one of Cas's maps. Ash held it up — it was completely incomprehensible — and then, with a magician's flourish (and an unmistakable air of pride), he unfolded it to reveal that it was actually five different maps that had all been cleverly folded up together. It all seemed even more incomprehensible when all spread out, all five sections completely covered with elaborate symbols and arrows. Dean squinted at the map, unable to make head or tail of it. "Hell with this," he muttered. "I really need a drink." He turned back toward the bar, but Ellen was suddenly in his way. She stopped him with one hand on his chest, rolling her eyes a little, and she shoved Dean down into a little elementary-school-sized desk and chair that had appeared out of nowhere. Dean sat there blinking in confusion, squished into the tiny chair like a third-grader, knees almost up to his chin, while Ash started over on a new blank piece of paper that Jo was holding up. Jo had to hold her hands high, for this piece of paper was enormous. But this time Ash drew what seemed to be the simplest conceivable map: a gigantic empty circle to show the Earth, and one tiny little symbol near the middle: the three-little-flames symbol that Dean remembered from Cas's map.

Nobody seemed able to talk (just as with Dad, now that Dean thought about it) but Ash now gave him a significant, and slightly exasperated, look, as if to say, *Is THIS simple enough for you to understand, knucklehead?* 

"Yeah, okay, that's the fire gate," said Dean. "Into the fire, yeah, yeah, I got that." Ash nodded vigorously and drew a second symbol, very close, just a scant half-inch to the northeast of the fire gate. The new symbol was little jagged-looking thing.

That was all the map was. One huge circle, containing only the fire symbol, and, right next to it, a picture of...

*Wait.*

The jagged thing was a crown.

"Oh," said Dean, straightening up in the third-grade-sized chair. "*Oh.* Is that—"

At that moment swirls of blackness began blotting out the details of the map. The crown disappeared first, then the fire symbol, and moment later the entire piece of paper had entirely disappeared, lost in a puff of dark smoke. Jo, who'd been holding the map, jumped back shaking her hands. Ash, Jo, and Ellen all looked at each other in dismay as a dark fog began closing in from the sides of the room.

Then that dream, too, swirled away in darkness.
Kevin's face crystallized out the darkness... along with shelves and shelves of books. "Oh, now it's the bunker," muttered Dean, looking around at the familiar library walls. "This is getting exhausting."

For some reason Kevin was trying to drag Dean over to the bunker's telescope. He seemed very excited about something, but he was still in ghost-form and got very frustrated when his ghost-hands couldn't spin the telescope's little knobs and dials. Bobby showed up a moment later, pouring a couple of glasses of whiskey and handing both to Dean. Then Ash burst through a previously-nonexistent door with a dramatic crash, now looking rather disheveled, bearing his original complicated diagram (it was slightly singed on the sides), and trailed once again by Jo and Ellen... and Charlie, now, too. Jo and Ellen seemed to be launching on some sort of interpretive dance that involved a lot of sideways hops, while Charlie seemed to be starting... a game of charades? Charlie was holding up a couple fingers and then putting them on her left arm. "Words?" said Dean uncertainly. "Or is that syllables?" He couldn't remember (was the fingers-on-the-arm gesture for the number of words, or the number of syllables?) and was getting further distracted by Bobby, who was still following Dean around and was tugging on Dean's sleeve now, still trying to give him the glasses of whiskey.

Once again it seemed everybody had something to try to convey to him, and once again nobody seemed able to talk. They all looked increasingly worried. And then it began to jumble together, the dark fog creeping in at the edges again, blotting out the walls and hiding everybody from view, one by one.

The dark fog swirled thicker.

When it cleared, Dean was walking through...

... the warehouse.

Of course.

It seemed incomparably vast now, an enormous soaring cathedral of a warehouse. The ceiling was so high overhead it seemed lost in mist, loops of dust motes floating high up into the air and never seeming to come back down. Down at floor level a sea of jumbled wooden pallets stretched off into the far distance.

Dean clambered over the wooden pallets for a while, dreading what he would find, for he knew now that for some reason he was seeing visions of almost everybody he'd lost. The pattern seemed clear....

And sure enough, at last there was Cas. Suspended from the cross.

The horror was at once as fresh and raw as ever. Dean's heart seemed to stop in his chest and he cried out, "CAS!" scrambling through the pallets and stumbling over to him. Cas was still alive, barely; Dean managed to get him down.

But there was nothing Dean could do next but hold Cas in his arms. He couldn't even call Sam; his phone was gone.

Dean was half-aware now that was "just" a dream, and that this terrible story had already happened in real life; it had all played out before, and in reality it was all over. Unfortunately, knowing that it was a dream didn't seem to make it seem any less real. Or any less horrific. He seemed helpless to do anything other than watch it play out all over again, as vivid and as horrible and as gutting as ever.

Cas was in terrible shape, covered with bruises and soaked in blood. He was completely limp in
Dean's arms at first, eyes closed, face ashen. Dean held him close, cradling his head with one hand, saying, "Cas? Cas? Can you hear me?"

Cas's eyes slowly flickered open.

A flicker of confusion ran across his face as he looked up at Dean; he glanced around at the warehouse and his gaze sharpened. A look of urgency came over his face as his eyes returned to Dean's, and Dean saw that he was struggling to speak.

"Please, don't try to move," Dean begged him, but Cas was focusing intently now on Dean's face now and was trying, desperately it seemed, to say something. But he was choking on blood, and couldn't get any words out. "Don't talk— don't try to move," Dean whispered, hugging him closer, stroking his bloody hair back from his face. "I'll get you to a hospital, you'll be okay— Cas, please, just hang on—"

But again, just as on the awful night in Ohio, Cas seemed determined to raise his left hand. Again Dean supported his elbow. Dean looked into his eyes, utterly helpless, as Cas touched him on the jaw, and as Dean felt Cas's hand brush his jaw he understood something:

Cas had been trying to heal him.

Back when it had originally happened, back when Cas had lain dying in Dean's arms, Cas had awoken, and had looked up, and he had seen Dean's pain. He had looked into Dean's eyes, and he had seen Dean's pain. And despite his own awful agony, Cas had instinctively tried to free Dean from pain. By doing the very motion that he had used so many times before: the healing touch on the side of Dean's face.

It wouldn't have worked, of course, for healing the body didn't heal the heart. But Cas had tried just the same.

At that moment the dream changed. As Dean felt Cas's fingers trace their way down his jawline, as he sat there transfixed by grief, he felt something new: something cool, something brushing his cheek. A flash of color caught his eye. He looked over, and saw tulips.

Red tulips.

Cas was holding a pair of red tulips in his left hand.

Cas blinked at the tulips. Again he looked almost puzzled, as if he had not realized what he was holding, but then a faint smile twitched at the corner of his mouth and he redoubled his efforts to hand the tulips to Dean, struggling to keep his arm lifted, trying to lift the tulips up even higher so that Dean could see them. Cas was trying to speak again— but he only managed to cough up another mouthful of blood. He looked up at Dean almost desperately. His whole body began to tremble in Dean's arms and Dean realized that Cas was on his very last reserves of strength.

Too late Dean realized there were only seconds left, mere seconds left with Castiel, to say whatever needed to be said. So Dean blurted out, "Cas, Cas, listen, I love you too—"

But it was already too late.

A flood of blood was spilling from Cas's mouth even as Dean spoke; the light was already fading from his eyes. Cas's hand fell limp to his chest, and the two red tulips tumbled down into the pool of blood.

*Tulips, red: Declaration of love.*
The Impala lurched heavily. Dean woke with a shuddering gasp to find he was curled around the sweatshirt and blanket, both of which were now wadded up tight in his arms. A tiny whimper escaped his mouth at the moment he realized that the blankets were not, in fact, Castiel; but fortunately the sound was covered up by the creaking of the Impala's shocks and a familiar ding, ding as they bumped their way over a traffic-counter strip. Bright lights swung into view overhead. The Impala had pulled into a gas station.

"Sorry, need to gas up already," Sam whispered over the seat. "Getting pretty low."

Dean remembered now that he had deliberately left the Impala pretty low on gas (back when he'd still been following his original plan of "Fifty Ways To Delay Your Brother"). He could have explained that to Sam, now, but it seemed easier to pretend he was still asleep. That way, he could keep his face buried in the sweatshirt a little longer; that way, Sam wouldn't realize he was awake; and that way, Sam wouldn't see he'd been crying.

*When's the goddamn closure gonna come?* thought Dean, trying to keep his breathing even. *What's the point of going through all the friggin' stages of grief if it still hurts just as bad in the end?*

As Sam gassed up the car, Dean finally managed to get himself back under control. He sat up and looked around, blinking in the gas station lights. He checked his watch; it was only an hour till sunrise. The peculiar dreams, as confusing and rushed as they'd seemed, had actually taken up most of the night.

Dean had only had a few hours of real sleep, but knew he was not going to get back to sleep now—not after that Cas dream. He soon forced a yawning Sam to the back, and Dean took over the driving.

It felt, if not good, at least better, to be back behind the wheel. It was good to have something to look at; something other than that vast warehouse, that is, and the infinite sea of jumbled wooden pallets... and a dying Castiel in his arms.

As Sam began to snore lightly in the back, Dean tried to focus on the view. They were cruising up the foothills of Wyoming now, toward the Rocky Mountains. It would be a spectacular drive; they were headed through big country on this drive. Clear across the Rockies, then through the great deserts of Utah and Nevada, over the high Sierras, and down into the vast Central Valley of California. And finally to the great dormant volcano that was Mount Shasta.

*One last grand tour,* thought Dean.

Soon he had to downshift the engine to a lower gear, as the road began to snake upward toward the high mountains. The Impala leapt forward, charging up toward the pass with ease, and Dean watched the early morning light touch the snow-topped Rocky Mountains ahead, tipping them with gold.

It was a lovely sight, actually.
Almost calming.

The awful warehouse dream didn't vanish from his mind, exactly (it never would, of course). But it shifted aside. At least for a moment.

And a moment, these days, seemed all Dean could hope for.

Pinks and yellows now were glinting on the mountaintops, the sky gradually lightening to a pale baby-blue. Then a shine of bright gold in the rearview mirror made Dean squint; the sun was rising.

*Cas can't hear me,* Dean had to remind himself. *No more sunrise prayers. That'd be pointless. Totally pointless.*

But, pointless or not, Dean found himself reaching for the feather in his pocket, gently touching the little feathertip, and whispering, "Hey, Cas. We're on our way to the Fire Gate. Beautiful morning here..."

A long pause.

"Wish you could see it," Dean whispered.

He gave the feather one last gentle little stroke, put both hands back on the wheel, and drove on, watching the golden light on the mountains as the sun rose.

______________________________

Sam woke with a grunt several hours later as they were coming into Utah at mid-morning. He sat up with a sudden scramble, peering around the windows.

"You okay?" said Dean.

"Yeah," said Sam, after a slightly worrisome pause. He scrubbed one hand over his face and ran his fingers through his hair. "Yeah, sure."

Dean frowned at him in the mirror. "Bad dream?" he guessed.

Another suspicious pause.

"Just the usual," said Sam. Though he seemed to be rubbing his eyes a bit more than necessary.

"What's the 'usual'?" said Dean.

Sam didn't answer for a moment.

Finally he said, "Jess. Haven't... uh. I haven't dreamed about her in a long time, actually."

Dean frowned.

There was an outside chance the dreams could possibly have meant something, maybe?

But, then again, nightmares of the people they had lost were all too common. Practically the norm, in fact. Especially since they both knew they were embarking on a trip that might well be the final good-bye to everything. To everything, and everyone, that they had ever known.
Yet Dean couldn't help thinking about Ash's strange dream-map. *I'll draw it out for Sam later today,* he thought. *Just in case.* He was still mulling over whether to grill Sam a little further about the Jess dream, or how much to describe his own dreams, when Sam changed the subject decisively with a brief, "I just slept funny, is all. Was kinda falling off the back seat here and so I dreamed Jess was pulling me back up, is all. What'd I miss?"

"Wyoming," said Dean.

"Damn," said Sam. "I like those mountains. I need some coffee, let's stop, huh?"

With that the topic was set aside. At least for now. But as Dean drank his coffee, all he was really thinking about was the strange images he'd seen last night. The multicolored fire stretching across the roadway... the strange map that Ash had drawn... so many of his lost friends clustered around...

And two red tulips, falling from Castiel's hand into a pool of blood.

___

*A/N - DREAMS! Oooo.*

*Tomorrow: A phone call, a word or two from Schmidt-Nielsen... and maybe one last dream.*

*If you liked anything about this, please drop me a comment!*
Dimensions and the Etheric Plane

A/N - The Schmidt-Nielsen chapter took longer than I thought (that Schmidt-Nielsen, once he gets going he won't shut up!) so this is now its own chapter. Readers who have read my other fics, apologies - many of you already know some of this Schmidt-Nielsen information but some readers don't. There's some new details though so hopefully it'll still be worth the read.

Basically this is a series of short road-trip chapters, rather than one big road-trip chapter, because it's been easier for me to put up one shorter chapter per day than to do all at once - still having to ration my computer time, sorry.

Which means - another chapter coming tomorrow!

Sam, apparently still in nursemaid mode, insisted on swapping driving shifts after the coffee break (he seemed unconvinced that Dean's four hours of sleep had been enough). As Dean got into the passenger seat Sam went rummaging around in the trunk again. When Sam got back in the driver's seat he was holding a stack of books, which he dumped into Dean's lap. "Reading for later," he explained. "Tuck 'em under the seat, could you?"

"You brought books?" Dean said. "What, you gonna fit these in your pack or something while we're trekking all over Heaven? These must weigh fifty pounds!"

Sam snorted as he put the Impala in gear and pulled out of the station. "Ten pounds at most. Anyway, I wasn't going to bring them in the pack. Just thought I might have a little more time to do some last-minute reading on the drive. I was actually thinking you could sleep, though — I just wanted 'em out so I could look at them later — but..." Sam glanced over at Dean, who was now looking at all the book covers.

An Introduction to Enochian. The Encyclopedia of Mythological Artifacts And Obscure Items. The Physiology of Angels. And several others.

Sam cleared his throat. "If you want to help with research, um... I was hoping to decode more of Cas's maps."

"What else can we learn from Cas's maps?" said Dean, looking up. "We already got the Mount Shasta location. And if that Ash-map was for real, he thought, we might even have a lead on the Crown too. "What else do you want to figure out?"

Sam frowned, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel. "Well, I dunno," he said at last, "But I know I'm missing a lot. I still don't know what six of the maps are, and also they all have those little mini-maps along the sides. One of them is entirely mini-maps — number 10, it's got dozens of little maps instead of one big one. And there's all those other symbols... Dozens of 'em." Sam shrugged. "Who knows. Still, we got at least a day of driving ahead, so, why not?"

Dean sighed, glancing down at the books. "Research? On our last road trip?"

"Well, it's not like the survival of the universe might depend on it or anything," said Sam.
"Yeah, yeah, okay," muttered Dean. He grabbed a book at random — well, not at random at all.

He grabbed the angel book, of course.

The Physiology of Angels turned out to have an index at the back. Dean tried to look up "Crown of Heaven" and found... exactly nothing.

"Fire Gate" had no entry, either. Nor did "realm" or "celestial dragon."

Neither did or "maps" or "orishas" or even the admittedly specific "Mount Shasta."

Maybe the book was too biology-oriented to be of any use? Maybe it was just going to be more about feathers?

Then it turned out that "Gate" did have an entry. The index directed him to Chapter 3, and Dean started reading.

Chapter 3. Dimensions, Wavelengths and the Etheric Plane

Imagine two-dimensional creatures that live out their lives within a flat world consisting of a single sheet of paper. Imagine further that this sheet of paper that they live in is but one of many sheets of paper, all bound together in a book. The two-dimensional creatures would be utterly blind to the fact that there are entire other worlds to either side — other sheets of paper, that is — that they cannot see, and that they are not aware of, but that are very close.

Now consider a being that has the ability to move from one sheet of paper to the next. From the perspective of those confined to a single sheet, this being would seem to appear and disappear when it moved from sheet to sheet. These appearances and disappearances might seem magical — miraculous, even. But really they would simply be the result of a quite small, even tiny, movement from one sheet to another.

Such is the relationship of men and angels. We men live in a single three-dimensional Earth, believing it to be the only reality, but in fact there are other three-dimensional realities, or other "planes," stacked on either side of us, each containing another version of Earth (or, more correctly, a multidimensional extension of Earth). The wings of angels have the unique ability to shift the angel from one such plane to an adjacent one. Angels can also use their wings to fly in the more conventional way, moving about through the air within one reality, from one realm to another through three-dimensional space. But they can, as well, do a particular maneuver, a maneuver controlled by the tertial-feathers (see ch. 6, Wings, Feathers and Flight) that will shift the angel between adjacent planes.

Thus we men see the angels seeming to appear and disappear. It seems miraculous (and perhaps so it is); but all that has really happened is that the angel made a single motion of the wings, one that moved the angel only a very short distance, but in a direction that we cannot sense.
How many such planes may exist is anyone's guess. Some planes are conducive to life and some are not. The Earthly plane is conducive to life, as is the plane directly adjacent to the Earth, known as the "etheric" or "angelic" plane. However, the etheric plane is less substantial than the Earthly plane. It has less matter, and therefore less gravity. It also has a filmy substance, known as "ether," that permeates all space there. Heavenly power streams continuously through the ether, from Heaven to Earth, and angels can absorb this power simply by spreading their wings into the ether and soaking up the power, which is absorbed by the tertial-feathers and is then stored in the grace. In other words, wings have multiple functions besides locomotion and one such function is absorption of Heavenly power to re-charge the grace (see ch. 5, Grace And Power).

In the other direction from the etheric plane is a dimension known as the "ghostly plane" (also "Veil"); this dimension, being farther from Heaven, has much less Heavenly power. Though angels can visit the ghostly plane, they typically choose not to simply because Heavenly power is more difficult to gather there. A temperature gradient extends across all three planes, with the ghostly plane generally being colder than Earth and the etheric plane warmer. (It is for this reason that presence of a ghost — a lost soul that can, at times, transition from the ghostly to the Earthly plane — brings with it a sensation of cold.)

Angels inhabiting a human vessel will almost always leave their wings in the etheric plane. That is, even if an envesseled angel appears in the Earthly plane in human form, and seems to have no wings, in fact the wings still exist and still are attached to the vessel (and to the angel). The wings are merely resting in the etheric plane, out of view to humans, but ready to be called into action when needed. The situation is rather as if a person who is standing with his back to a window held both arms back, extending them outside the window. People inside the room might not see the person's arms, and might even conclude he has no arms, but in fact the arms are still there, just out of view.

When an angel flies, the wings pull the vessel from the Earthly plane to the etheric one, and the angel seems to "disappear." (Using the above analogy, the person pulls himself out of the window.) The angel then can fly wherever it wishes. Angels choose to fly in the etheric plane rather than the Earthly one simply because flying is much easier in the etheric plane, due to the lower gravity and also the heightened availability of Heavenly power.

When the angel reaches its intended destination, the wings drop the vessel to the Earthly plane once again, and the angel seems to "reappear." These maneuvers are sometimes accompanied by a characteristic flapping sound, which at times is audible to humans standing in the adjacent Earthly plane.

At rare times an angel may reveal its wings, or more precisely the shadows of its wings, while in the Earthly plane. This requires another maneuver in which the wings part the very air as they unfold, in such a way as to form a large one-way "window" between the Earthly and etheric planes, a window that hangs in the air immediately behind the wings. The splitting of the air typically results in a characteristic sound of thunder. Light from the etheric plane then passes through the "window" to the Earthly plane, the light projecting wing-shadows on whatever surface may be behind the angel. This maneuver of carving open a "window" of such size requires considerable expenditure of power. Angels under a sudden influx of power (e.g. a degraced angel receving new grace) may enact this maneuver automatically as a way to discharge excess power safely.

Angels can also carve open this sort of interdimensional window at will, for example to reveal the wing-shadows deliberately, to a chosen human. However, such occasions are exceedingly rare. It is rare that an angel will want to expend such power unnecessarily, and rarer still that an angel should wish to impress a human in such a way. The number of living humans who have seen an angel's wing-shadows can probably be counted on one hand.
There are a few cases in which some of these interdimensional "wing-windows," once carved open by an angel, remain in place over years or even centuries, long after the angel has left the vicinity. This may particularly occur if the pagan god of thresholds and roadways takes an interest in the situation and chooses, for whatever reason of his own, to stabilize the wing-window and bring it under control, rather than letting it collapse instantly as it normally would. A few dozen of these stabilized wing-windows lie scattered across the Earth. Some have been elaborated so as to stretch to the other direction as well, to the ghostly plane. A few human cultures have discovered some of them; the stabilized wing-windows are typically known in various languages as portals, doors, tunnels or gates. But they are in fact the lasting mark of an angel who once spread his wings in that very spot.

"You good?" said Sam.

"Huh?" said Dean, discovering that he'd been staring out the window.

"You stopped reading. Find anything?"

Dean looked down at the book. "Well... Turns out gates are where an angel spread his wings once."

Sam glanced over. "Seriously? Like... every time they spread their wings?"

"No, just special times when they were doing that wing-shadow thing."

Dean paused, clearing his throat. "You know, like I told you Cas did that one time. In the barn. Back when I first met him."

Thankfully Sam didn't ask any follow-up questions about Cas's wings. He just nodded. Dean rubbed his nose, tried to gather his thoughts, and went on, "So, an angel unfolds his wings a certain way and it sounds like the feathers carve open a passageway between 'planes', dimensions I guess. Normally it just collapses right after, but sometimes someone, sounds like Elegua, decides to keep the passageway open and sorta strengthen it. The book calls them wing-windows but I think it's the gates Cas was talking about in his notebook."

"Huh," Sam said after a moment. "That's cool... though... not useful I guess, but definitely cool. So... I'm thinking all Cas's little symbols on his maps might mark those spots. And the different realms are different dimensions? A gate goes from one realm to another?"

Dean forgot to answer. He was staring out the window again. Thinking, again, of a certain pair of black wing-shadows that he had seen once, long ago.

And thinking of a certain whup-whuff sound that had once been so familiar... a sound he had not heard in a very long time.

"Dean?"

"Oh. Yeah. Sure." Then Dean found himself saying, "Cas still had his wings all along."

"What?"

"That flapping sound we used to hear... his wings were just next-door, he had them all along, and...."

Dean looked down at the book.
It is rare that an angel should wish to impress a human in such a way.

"Want me to take over research?" Sam suggested. "You wanna drive some more?" Dean could only nod, and Sam pulled over at the next exit to swap places again.

Dean left Sam to continue the research and tried to focus on the driving. Learning more about angels was turning out to be more unsettling, and more saddening, than he had really been prepared for.

He heaved a sigh as they got going. The engine was purring away smoothly, though, and as the Utah landscape rolled slowly past, Dean began to feel a little more settled. It occurred to him it would be a good idea to start working through all his cassette tapes as well, one after another. The music successfully distracted him from further thoughts of wing-shadows, and by the time they crossed the Nevada border he'd gotten all the way through AC/DC and Aerosmith, and had started on the Kansas tapes.

We're making decent time, Dean thought, checking his watch. They could potentially even get all the way to Mount Shasta if they really pushed it.

But Dean found himself almost reluctant to push it. For one thing he hadn't gotten through all the music yet. It was the last road trip, after all.

One last time through the music.... It won't be so bad if we take two days, will it?

For another he found he wanted to take in the landscape. It was a road he'd driven many times before, of course, and the fields and scrubby desert shrubs and long fencelines were familiar sights. But Dean found that today every field and fenceline, every stray sheep and every broken-down pickup, seemed, somehow, a rare and lovely sight. Humanity struggling to survive on the vast Earth... every little slanted fencepost under the vast Nevada sky seemed almost precious, something significant, and Dean found he wanted to drink it all in.

Last road trip, he kept thinking. Last time seeing the desert, probably.

"Hey, how about some lunch," said Sam, breaking into Dean's thoughts. Sam pointed to a Nevada exit sign coming up. It was advertising just generic "FOOD” and "FUEL,” as if all food and all fuel were interchangeable, but Sam said, "Let's stop. We need to gas up again. And we can stock up the cooler."

The tiny Nevada exit turned out to have a rinky-dink gas station with a little fast-food joint right next door. Dean finally managed to snap himself out of his morbid "Last rinkydink gas station!” thoughts enough to focus on getting some lunch. The brothers split the tasks, Dean trotting off to get some take-out food while Sam fueled the Impala and got ice (and more beer) for the cooler.

Fifteen minutes later Dean got back to the car, bearing a burger and fries for himself and some kind of tasteless-looking chicken wrap that had looked like Sam's kind of thing. He found Sam hunkered down in the Impala's passenger seat with his phone to his ear, deep in a conversation.

"He didn't say anything else?" Sam was saying as Dean swung into the driver's seat. "And you don't have any idea what it meant? Just, hunters will lead us? That was it?"

Dean listened as he got settled, opening the bag of food. Sam soon ended the call and tossed his
phone in the cassette-tape box. "Dammit," Sam muttered. "Why do they have to be so goddamn cryptic?"

"Let me guess, orishas?" Dean asked, unwrapping his burger with one hand while handing Sam the chicken wrap with the other. "Was that Marcos?"

"You got it," Sam said. He set the unopened chicken wrap on his knee and seemed to forget about it instantly, saying, "I was gonna ask him to ask Shango for tips and, guess what, Marcos was way ahead of me. Marcos called me! I had just called Jason about some bunker details, and I was planning to call Marcos next but then he called me first."

"Because?" said Dean, taking a bite of burger.

"Because, apparently the orishas have been all over him. They came to him in a dream last night or something, middle of the night. Apparently a whole bunch of 'em came trooping into his dream like an invasion, with messages, especially Shango and our guy Oshossi. Marcos says they kept busting into his dreams all night long, peppering him with those mystical comments over and over. Always about our trip."

Dean paused in mid-bite. Strange characters invading dreams... that sounded kind of familiar. He said, "So... something tells me he doesn't see that every day?"

"Yeah, Marcos seemed kinda freaked actually," said Sam. "Like the orishas are seriously worried... and are really trying to help." He glanced over at Dean and added, "It also makes me think we're on the right path."

Dean nodded. It did kind of have that feel to it. And that was a little reassuring, to be honest. He'd been a little worried all along that they might be on a total wild goose chase, but if the orishas were all over Marcos giving advice about this trip to the (still hypothetical) fire gate, maybe Sam and Dean were actually on the right path.

Which meant Cas had really been onto something with his whole Crown-of-Heaven idea. And his maps.

"So... I kinda had some odd dreams, too, actually," said Dean. Sam looked at him sharply, and Dean took a breath to start describing everything he remembered of the odd dreams. (Well, everything except certain details of the Cas dream.)

The Roadhouse-bunker dream took the most time to describe. Dean ended up sketching out Ash's little fire-and-crown map, as best he could remember it, on the back of the gas station receipt. Sam stared at it for a minute.

"It's interesting it was Ash," said Sam. "Cause, I can see you dreaming about Cas, and Dad. I can see those dreams just being, y'know, dreams. But Ash? You weren't that close to Ash. Why would you dream about him?"

Dean considered that; it was an interesting point.

Sam went on, "And, you know Ash. He kept finding ways to break the rules. Maybe he figured out a way to break into your dreams? And, remember, Dean, he'd figured out a lot of back doors, in Heaven. What if..." He tapped Dean's crude little map. "What if the Crown really is somewhere in Heaven, and Ash's figured out where, and he's trying to tell us to... well, to go a few miles northeast after we go through the fire gate, basically."

"Assuming our compasses even work there?" said Dean.
Sam sighed. "Yeah. There's that." He looked at Dean's tiny map a moment longer, and tucked it in his pocket. "Well, it's a lead, at least. Best we got, I guess."

"So... what'd the orishas say to Marcos?" asked Dean, finally taking another bite out of his burger. "What cryptic words of cryptic wisdom this time?"

"Oh yeah. It was mostly variations on 'two hunters will lead them,' apparently," said Sam. "Oshossi kept saying that. Plus I guess Shango kept intoning 'they must go into the fire' all over again and all the others kept nodding and Marcos got suitably freaked out. And, get this: There's a female orisha called Yansa whose specialty is fire and wind — I guess she shares the fire thing with Shango, like, she does little fires and he does big ones, or something — anyway, she was piping up with 'They must fly with the wind, or they will be devoured in flame.' And then they would all nod. How about that for good news."

"Oh, that's encouraging," said Dean, his appetite suddenly fading a little.

"Yeah. Super cheery, that Yansa," agreed Sam, finally starting to slowly unwrap his own meal. "So, anyway, Marcos thinks Oshossi is sending us another pair of hunters to help. I'm hoping that whoever they are, they know where the fire gate is. Speaking of maps — I was looking over the Shasta map, and—" Here Sam set the neglected chicken wrap down on his knee again, popped open the glove compartment and pulled out a huge, detailed map of northern California, which Sam had previously folded carefully to reveal just the Mount Shasta section. He said, studying the map, "I'm hoping they'll meet us at our teepee."

Dean paused in mid-bite, looking over at him. "You're hoping... what?"

"Oh, I never got a chance to tell you," said Sam. He held the map over so Dean could get a closer look. Mount Shasta was part of a National Forest that dominated the upper part of the map, and someone, Sam presumably, had covered the whole area with a lot of little penciled notes. Sam said, "I was checking out Mount Shasta mythology yesterday. All these little notes are stuff I found out about certain places. Mostly useless, but, this one—" Sam pointed to one particular spot where he'd drawn a big red star. "I think this might be important. There's these sacred hot springs here. There's a whole spiritual retreat place set up there. So I rented us a teepee for tomorrow night."

"You rented us a... teepee?" said Dean, narrowing his eyes. "Are you joking?"

"Nope. They have teepees for rent. At this retreat place. By the hot springs. You can rent a teepee and bathe in the hot springs and meditate." Sam folded up the map and stuck it back in the glove compartment. "There's a lot of legends about that particular spot, about pagan gods of heat and fire. And, of course, the hot springs are, y'know, hot. So I thought... maybe the heat is coming from the fire gate? I figured it'd be a good place to start."

"You rented us a teepee?" Dean repeated, still thinking he hadn't heard right.

"Don't worry," said Sam, grinning at him. "There's cots in it. It'll be fun!"

A few minutes later Dean had finally finished his burger (creepy orisha proclamations or not, he actually was pretty hungry). Sam was finally noodling his way slowly through his chicken wrap, dropping pieces of lettuce all over his lap in the process. Dean considered hitting the road again — he could certainly keep driving while Sam ate — but then he glanced over at Sam's phone, which
was still sitting in the cassette-tape box in between them. Sam had made some calls...

And there was a call Dean had to make, too.

"Be back in a sec," said Dean, swinging his door open. Sam looked up from his rapidly disintegrating chicken wrap, a touch of worry on his face. Dean assured him, "Just making a phone call." Sam nodded (though the worry did not quite leave his face), and Dean closed the door and walked over to a nearby tree to get a bit of privacy.

He took a breath, pulled his phone out of his jacket pocket, brought up the phone's contact list, and started flicking through the C's.

Where he instantly ran across Cas's name.

Somehow he'd forgotten that he would of course run across Cas's name if he started flipping through the C's.

Dean stared at the name. Cas, it said. Cas.

Dean had first entered it over six years ago. Shortly after he'd first seen those wing-shadows in the barn... Back when he'd first met that mysterious being, an angel, a creature he had never known existed.

Back when the mysterious angel had first forsworn Heaven on Dean's behalf. Rebelled, cast his vote for free will instead of fate... left everything behind, abandoned his training and his family... and lost his lifelong ability to communicate with his brethren.

And had needed a cell phone.

Dean had, of course, laughed at Cas, the first time Cas had tried to use a cell. Because apparently Dean always laughed at everything Cas ever did. (The thought brought a now-familiar pang of regret.)

Maybe I should delete the entry, Dean thought, his thumb running lightly over the name. "Cas."

That number's not useful anymore. It only hurts to look at. I should delete it.

But of course he knew he never would.

It occurred to him, then, that there were voicemails, too. There were at least three, he knew, from Cas, that he had never got around to deleting and that must still be on his phone. A strange mixture of panic and yearning gripped him at the thought of listening to that rumbly voice once again; a mix of both a desperate desire to hear Cas's voice again, and a sickening certainty that he would shatter completely if he did.

I'll leave the voicemails till later, he thought.

But what if the phone company deleted them? He should download them...

None of this would matter after he went through the gate.

I'll listen to them one last time tomorrow, Dean thought. At the teepee.

It was the best solution he seemed able to come up with. After another moment of paralysis that seemed to last a ridiculously long time, Dean finally managed to scroll past "Cas" to tap on the name just below: "Claire."
Her phone rang so many times that Dean started planning a message in his head, certain it was going to bounce to voicemail at any second, but finally she picked up.

"What's wrong this time?" she said, without any preamble. There was some background noise: people chattering in the background, bursts of laughter.

"Claire?" Dean said, a little taken by surprise that she had picked up at all.

"The very same," she said. "Hold on." Her voice went muffled as she called to someone else, "Guys! Keep it down! I can't hear!" More laughter in the background, and then Claire said into her phone again, her voice clearer, "So what's up? You never call unless something weird's going on. Not that I don't like to hear from you, but... I don't like to hear from you."

"So..." Dean began. "Uh."

Damn, how could he even start this? He paused a long moment, and then asked, "Where are you?"

"At home," she said.

"Home... you mean... Jody's?"

"Aren't you a bright one," she said. "Someone notify Mensa. Yeah, Jody's. We're trying to get Anne's room painted today but it's turning into kind of a mess."

"Anne?" said Dean stupidly.

"Alex," said Claire. "Anne. She went back to her old name. Well, a more grown-up version of her old name. Long story. Hey, is Castiel with you? I texted him a couple times last week about some stuff, and he never texted back. He usually does. Is his phone working? He didn't lose it again, did he?"

"Uh, Claire," said Dean. "Um." He cleared his throat.

Somehow he hadn't thought through how to break the news. What could he say, exactly? How could he say it? **So I happened to kill Cas a couple months back, finally thought I'd drop you a line. Buried your dad's body up on a hill, by the way.**

Dean stared down at his feet, scuffing one of his boot-heels through the dirt as he tried to think up some better way to phrase it all.

Claire had gone very quiet.

"I got bad news," Dean finally said. "Uh... it's about Cas."

The distant noises in the background disappeared abruptly; Claire must have gone into a room on her own.

"He'll come back though," she said. "Right?"

"Uh... what?" He hadn't even told her yet that Cas had died.
"He always comes back," she said. She sounded oddly calm. "He gets reassembled and comes back, right? He gets brought back? He told me."

"I don't think that's gonna happen this time," said Dean, his voice suddenly two shades hoarser. "I waited a couple months thinking that would happen, actually. But it didn't."

"Wait... what? When did this happen?"

"Uh... August."

"August?" She paused a moment and then said, almost in a whisper now, "And... he... and... nothing's happened?"


Another little pause. Then: "And you didn't tell me?"

"I thought he was coming back," said Dean, his voice almost cracking. "I thought he was coming back. I was so sure. I thought he was coming back. But..."

He let the sentence hang in the air unfinished.

There was a long pause. Dean could hear her breathing.

"I'm sorry," Dean said at last. It sounded pathetic.

"Didn't I... tell you..." said Claire slowly. At once Dean realized what she was going to say, and he shut his eyes. She continued, "... to keep... an eye on him?"

She didn't even sound accusing; she only sounded confused. As if the act of telling Dean to keep an eye on Cas should have kept Cas safe.

"I'm sorry," Dean repeated, in a whisper now. It was an utterly worthless thing to say. It was useless. But all he could do was repeat, yet again, "I'm sorry."

Now there was no noise on the other end of the line at all.

Dean finally said, "Claire, I'm so sorry, I know this must be—"

"It's not like he was my dad or anything," she interrupted, her voice suddenly crisp and tight.

Dean blinked. "Right, uh... but... He..."

"He wasn't my dad," she said. "It's not like he was family or anything. You didn't even have to call, you know."

"Yeah, but I thought you might want to know..."

"Why would I even care?" Now her voice sounded almost mechanical.

"Well, I thought... I thought you..." Dean pressed the heel of one hand to the bridge of his nose, trying to concentrate. "Sam and I thought you might want his car," he said. "The Continental? You know, the gold car? Uh... do you want it? It's at the bunker in Kansas, and, this guy Jason will have the key to get in, and—"
"Why the fuck would I want his car," she said, and then the line went dead.

She'd hung up.

Dean lowered his phone and stared at it a long moment. "Well, that went well," he muttered, shoving the phone back in his pocket.

At least Claire hadn't actually cared that much. It was a relief to know that, actually. Quite a relief. She'd already lost her dad long ago (her real dad, that is). And her mom, more recently... on her birthday, no less. It was actually a relief to know she wouldn't have to go through yet another grieving process.

Dean walked back to the car, feeling exhausted all over again. Sam was watching him as he walked up, that damn worried look still on his face. "Everything okay?" he asked as Dean got into the driver's seat.

"Yeah, sure," Dean said, slamming the door. "Everything's great. Peachy." He started the engine and pulled the Impala sharply back onto the road, tires squealing.

Dean managed to avoid any further conversation by popping another series of tapes into the tapedeck. Sam, wisely, didn't inquire any further about the phone call.

But a couple hours later, as they were cruising through a particularly empty section of Nevada desert listening to some old Creedence, Dean's cell rang. Dean was still driving, his phone in the cassette box now, so Sam scooped up the phone and glanced at the screen. He gave a little pleased-sounding noise and answered the call, saying, "Hey, Jody!"

"Shit," muttered Dean under his breath.

"It's Sam. I'm on Dean's phone," Sam went on, "Oh— wait, hey, slow down. What? Where?... When?" There was a long pause while Sam listened, and then he said, "Jody, hey, hold on a minute, okay? I gotta talk to Dean. Don't hang up."

Sam put the phone on mute and looked over at Dean. "Jody's trying to reach Cas," he said quietly. "Something's up with Claire, and she's trying to reach Cas to see if he can help. She says, um... She says Claire listens to him." Sam paused, still looking over at Dean. "Dean, uh, did you just call Claire? By any chance? Back at that stop?"

"What's up with Claire," Dean said in a flat voice, dreading the answer.

Sam sighed. "Jody says Claire went all weirdly quiet, a couple hours ago. Said she wasn't feeling well and went to her room. Jody went to check on her, and Claire was curled up on her bed holding that stuffed cat Cas gave her. Said she was sick and didn't want any lunch. So they had lunch without her, but then an hour later Jody went to check on her again and it turned out Claire was gone, like, totally gone. Snuck out the window, which by the way is on the second floor, shinnied down a tree or something and took off. Jody went looking for her and found her a few miles down the road trying to hitchhike away. Get this, the only thing she'd taken with her was that cat. Just the damn stuffed cat. She hadn't taken a single other thing."

"Jody got her?" Dean said, a lump in his throat.
"Yeah. And now apparently she's curled up in her bedroom crying and holding the cat, and she won't talk to anybody. The other girl, whatever name she's going by now, Anne or something, is in there with her but Claire won't tell anyone what happened. Dean... you called Claire, huh? Back when we stopped for lunch? You told her?"

"Yeah," said Dean. "But she didn't seem to even care then. Seemed fine..." All he could think to add was, "Funny."

Sam said, after a moment, "Right. Funny."

Sam was silent a moment longer. He finally took the phone off mute and raised the phone back to his ear.

"Jody," he said. "I think I know what's up with Claire. Listen... something... uh... something happened to Castiel. You never met him, did you?"

It was hard to listen to the conversation. Though by the end it seemed to be a lot of logistics, actually — discussion about the Continental and its key, and how to contact Jason about getting into the garage.

Sam hung up with a sigh. He stared out the window for a while. Dean said nothing.

Sam finally muttered, "Damn. Poor kid."

Dean said, "She doesn't even want the car, by the way. She said so."

Sam shook his head. "Right. She doesn't care, and she doesn't want his car, and I got a bridge to sell you."

Dean felt himself deflate even more. "Yeah. Right," he said. "I was just... Well. You know."

"What?"

"I was... hoping she didn't care," confessed Dean.

_Hoping for her sake._

_Hoping at least one person could escape from this mess in one piece._

Sam finally sighed again and said, "Well... at least she can get farther down the road with a car than with just a stuffed cat."

---

_A/N - Claire's not a huge part of this fic, but I did want to check in with her. And I firmly believe that as much as she pretends she doesn't care, about Cas or about anyone, as much as she comes across as an angry angsty teen, deep down she cares a lot. Poor kid..._

_As for the Schmidt-Nielsen chapter, again, apologies to those of you who already knew about all that stuff. I realized I hadn't yet laid out my angel-wing ideas in this fic, and some readers don't yet know all my crazy ideas. I know probably the canon show will contradict me at some point but I have spent an unnecessary amount of time pondering the mechanics involved in that wing-shadow thing that the angels do from time to time: where exactly the light is coming from that creates the shadows,_
where the wings must be and what exactly is happening. The second Cas said he was a
"multidimensional" being the pieces fell into place. So, there you go: wings carving one-way
windows into a next-door dimension. And such a window, if stabilized... become a gate, right? Heh.
I hope you like the idea! I'll admit here that way back in high school I read a bunch of physics books
on multidimensional space that made a deep impression on me, and to this day I love to think that
there are other dimensions right next to ours. It's not a new idea but I do love to think about
it. Credit here also to Philip Pullman's "subtle knife" idea in the brilliant His Dark Materials
(Golden Compass) series, as well as Zelazny's classic "Nine Princes in Amber" series and the much
more recent "Long Earth" series (Stephen Baxter, one of the best sf authors for physics ideas,
writing with the amazing Terry Pratchett, RIP).

More tomorrow! It's all written and beta'd - I'm just doing one last proof.

As always please let me know if there was a scene or idea in here that you liked!

PS - the teepee place on Mount Shasta is real. It's called Stewart Mineral Springs and yes, you can
rent a teepee. I mostly thought of it because I realized hot springs would be a good clue as to a
nearby "fire" gate, and that Sam would certainly pick up on that clue.
Partway through Nevada, Sam came to a sudden decision that they deserved one last nice dinner, and he proposed they stop at a good steakhouse in Reno that Dean had always been fond of. Dean was a little surprised — Reno was far short of their planned stopping point for the night in California — but the steakhouse had always been a favorite.

Well, Sam deserves one good last dinner, thought Dean, so he agreed. Once they got there, Dean ordered medium-rare steaks for both of them (despite the fact that his appetite hadn't totally bounced back yet — he still felt full from lunch — it seemed required to have a steak).

Though, Sam didn't seem very focused on his steak, despite having made such a point of stopping at this particular restaurant. He spent the first half of the dinner making obsessive little lists of the weird aspects of the dreams and all the orisha proclamations. Sam had latched onto an idea that the Darkness itself had been trying to interfere with the dreams (a thought that had also occurred to Dean). They talked about that for a while, reaching precisely zero conclusions, and then they got into a similarly unresolvable debate about whether Oshossi's "two hunters will lead them" phrase referred to two other hunters who would lead Sam and Dean, as Dean had originally thought, or whether Sam and Dean themselves were the two hunters who should lead... some other people, maybe.

"How can we lead anybody if we don't know where we're going?" pointed out Dean. "Or what the hell we're doing? Who would we even lead?"

Sam shrugged. "Don't know. But it's a possibility, don't you think?"

"None of this makes any sense," Dean sighed.

"Or we're not just seeing the sense in it yet," said Sam.

Then Sam spent all the rest of the dinner trying to decipher more of Cas's maps. It turned out he'd even brought the Enochian dictionary along in his bag, and he spent the entire rest of his meal flipping through the book and peering at his phone— he'd taken careful photos of every section of every map and had them all stored on his phone.

"Hey, steak? Remember?" said Dean at last, tapping his own fork on Sam's nearly-untouched steak. "Aren't you going to eat? You're the one who wanted to stop here."
Sam looked up just long enough to cut off one piece of steak and pop it into his mouth. "I'm enjoying it. Really," he said, already looking down again at the map-photos on his phone. "Great steak. Oh, hey!" he said. "I got something!"

"What?"

"Page 10's glyphs, at the top here, I think mean 'Lesser Realms.' Remember, that's the page that has all the mini-maps all over. Two slightly bigger mini-maps and then a whole bunch of others, all on the same page. They're 'Lesser Realms'."

"Oh... great," said Dean. "Okay..."

It didn't really seem like that much of a breakthrough.

Sam seemed unfazed, though, and got right back to work. Dean kept working his way dutifully through his steak, watching Sam paging through the Enochian dictionary, and started to feel a little guilty that he wasn't helping more with the research. And this time the actual entire universe might depend on it, he chastised himself.

But there didn't actually seem that much he could do. Sam kind of had it covered.

Dean also couldn't seem to shake a certain fatalistic sense that either it would all make sense in the end or it... just... wouldn't. He felt a bit like they were on a train hurtling toward some unknown destination. Where the train tracks might lead was anybody's guess.

Still, though, he tried to help in a minor way by at least nudging Sam now and then to eat. It wasn't till Sam flagged down a waitress and insisted that Dean order two slices of pie for dessert that Dean realized what he was really up to.

"You're trying to feed me up," Dean said, waving a fork at him accusingly. "You didn't even want any steak. You wanted to stop here so that I would eat."

Sam looked up from his phone and met Dean's eyes. He started to shake his head, but then gave a sigh and said, "Yep." He straightened up in his chair and waved one hand up and down at Dean. "Look at you. You haven't eaten right in weeks. Skin and bone practically. You've lost muscle, too. Not that one dinner will do that much, but, I thought you might need some fuel. We need to be ready for... You know. Whatever."

Dean looked at him. Maybe it was true that Dean had lost a little weight, but, what exactly was Sam worried about? Was he thinking they were going to go run a marathon? Hike for hundreds of miles toward the Crown? Jump straight into a Lord-of-the-Rings-style battle?

Or just do a typical hunt?

Or... all of the above?

Dean said, slowly, "We have no friggin' clue what we're up against, do we?"

Sam's shoulders fell a little. He set his phone down with a sigh. "No."

Dean looked at him for a long moment.

"Here's what we'll do," said Dean, leaning forward a little and jabbing the fork in the air toward Sam's steak. "I'll eat my pie if you eat your steak. And if you get another pie slice for yourself. Two can play this game, you know. And you know, if the survival of the universe might depend on me
eating some pie, I'll do my best. Deal?"

Sam gave him a tired smile. "Deal."

They even shook on it.

The dinner delayed them some, but by nine o'clock they were crossing into California. Dean took the Impala off the interstate and onto a much smaller road, state route 395. This road would take them northwest almost directly toward Mount Shasta, which was clear up at the very northern edge of huge California.

Route 395 started off by skirting the base of the Sierra Nevada mountain range, running right along some kind of ancient geological division between Nevada's sagebrush flats on the right and California's gigantic snowy Sierras on the left. They'd driven this road a few times before; Dean knew it would be quite a while before they finally got past the highest of the Sierras and crossed the lower mountain passes to the north.

They'd be driving till pretty late. Dean soon started yawning again. Sam glanced over, saying, "Hey, if you're tired, maybe see if you can get some sleep again? In the back? We could use a few more dream-hints. Maybe the orishas, or somebody, will come visit."

"And say some mysterious thing like 'They must turn cartwheels above the waterfall,' probably," said Dean. "Or 'they must dance the mambo through wind.' Spare me." Sam laughed, but after a little more thought Dean realized Sam might have a point. "Okay," Dean said, pulling off into a little vacant lot. "I'll bite. Though I admit I'm hoping the orishas just go to Marcos again. Seems like they're more inclined to go to him anyway. I'd take another Ash dream, though."

"Maybe he can draw you a little picture about the two-hunters thing," suggested Sam, as Dean got into the back.

"Yeah," said Dean. "I could use another 'Dream-Maps For Dummies' session, to be honest."

Sam laughed again and said "Nighty-night, then."

Dean got the blanket straightened out and wriggled underneath it, shoving the sweatshirt in place under his head and the dark t-shirt over his eyes.

But this evening Dean couldn't get settled. Two nights in a row sleeping in the car was always rough no matter if you were stretched out in back or not. And even if the universe was depending on it, it turned out not to be that easy to fall asleep on command.

Dean realized he was dreading a repeat of the warehouse dream, something he'd been hesitant to mention to Sam.

Every time he closed his eyes he seemed to see Cas again.

Hanging there on the cross.

Lying limp in Dean's arms....

Trying to hand him red tulips....
Dean couldn't sleep. After some restless shuffling around, he tried for a different position than last night and ended up lying on his back, legs folded, his knees leaning against the seatback. This meant that his right arm was twisted around a little weirdly, flopped across his body. His hand ended up first on his shoulder holster (where he doublechecked that his pistol was safely secured — it was). But a moment later his arm had somehow shifted so that his hand was resting on his breastpocket.

Where the feather was.

He stroked the end of the feather gently.

*Got your feather, Cas,* thought Dean, letting his hand rest on it. *Got your feather, and I'm gonna keep it.*

With that thought he felt a little calmer. The image of the cross at last faded from his mind, and instead Dean was able to focus his thoughts just on Cas's feather. Cas's feather, and Cas's wings.

*Picture Cas mantling me in his wings,* thought Dean. He thought of that soft sensation of protection, when Cas had been mantling him from the Mark's effects.

*Picture Cas's wings...*

The back-seat ambience finally began to lull him to sleep again, as it had last night. The soft feel of Cas's feather under his hand... the dim flickering of route 395's occasional streetlights through the dark t-shirt over his eyes... the roar of the engine, the rumble of the tires.

Again there was the dreamlike sense that time might have rolled backwards. Maybe it was years ago. Maybe Cas was still alive... they were just on their way to a regular hunt, Cas was still alive, and he'd fly in to join them when they got to wherever they were going. They'd hear that *whup-whuff* of his wings and there'd he be.

Cas would fly in any second now to join them. He'd fly in, and Dean would at last hear that soft *whup-whuff* that he had missed so dearly.... Cas would fly in...

*Whup-whuff.*

The Impala lurched a little. *We're at another gas station,* Dean thought, sleepily, only half-awake. Sam had brought the car to a halt under a set of bright lights by the pumps. *Very* bright lights this time; it seemed practically bright as daylight outside, the light piercing the black t-shirt that was over his eyes. Dean sighed, trying with one hand to fold the shirt into a double layer.

The engine was purring away; it seemed Sam hadn't cut the engine yet, for some reason. *We must be waiting in line for the pump,* Dean thought, still in only a half-awake doze. Though... the engine sounded a little weird. *I should've given the Impala a tune-up too, not just the Continental,* Dean thought as he listened, coming a little more awake. At an idle the Impala's growl shouldn't sound that erratic. The engine growl was waxing and waning a little weirdly. Not consistent at all. Dean frowned, trying to pin down what was wrong with the sound. Spark plugs? Was the timing off? Carburetor, maybe?

*Gotta check that out,* thought Dean. *Soon's I get some sleep. I'll look at it tomorrow.* But he couldn't get back to sleep; the gas station's lights were really quite annoying. It was practically bright as day.
"Can you get us out from under these lights, Sammy? I can't sleep," Dean called out, and as soon as Dean spoke the engine's erratic purr-like sound intensified. So much so that it almost sounded like the engine had somehow moved from the front of the car to somewhere closer, almost as if it were right outside the door. It sounded almost like the purr of some enormous cat.

And then came a completely unexpected sound — and a bad one. A rough, loud, sound of shrieking metal just inches from Dean's head.

A rush of adrenaline snapped Dean awake in an instant. Something was right outside. Something was trying to claw through the door, mere inches away.

Through long experience Dean resisted the urge to make any sudden motions till he knew the situation. Stay low, stay low, he thought, moving one hand stealthily under the blanket toward his holster. It might not have seen me yet.

"Sam?" he whispered, groping for the pistol.

Sam didn't answer.

And the pistol wasn't there.

His pistol was gone! And... his holster was gone, too, somehow.

The entire friggin' holster was gone! What the hell had happened?

"SAM!" hissed Dean, as loudly as he dared, and then a horrifically loud shriek from just a little ways away shattered the air. At once the engine-like purring sound switched gear to a rough, low growl that escalated in seconds to a nearly deafening lion-like roar; and then the shriek sounded again, this time from a different direction. Dean's heart nearly stopped in his chest at the sounds. The lion roar was bad enough (it actually made the entire car vibrate), but the shriek was something else again; it made his blood chill in his veins. The shriek was bad news and it seemed that every cell in Dean's body knew it: whatever it was, it was a predator, and Dean was the prey. And, it seemed that whatever was making all these sounds, whatever had tried to claw through the door, was now circling around the car as well, since the sounds kept coming from different directions. Dean cringed under the blanket, still trying to stay at least somewhat hidden while he groped desperately for some kind of weapon. The pistol was definitely gone... and his knives were gone too. The extra angel-blade he kept in his jacket, the hunting knife at his belt, the little blade strapped to his calf — they were all gone!

Moving as stealthily as he could, Dean reached one arm under the driver's seat, feeling around for the sawed-off shotgun that was always kept there.

The shotgun was gone too.

And, Dean realized now, Sam was gone. Sam wasn't just quiet; he had entirely disappeared.

The gas station's bright lights suddenly went dim. Had they failed? No — they were flickering oddly — something had blotted them out. The thing was circling the car. A tremendous rush of wind outside shook the Impala like a tornado, the whole car jouncing wildly on its shocks. Now a huge sandstorm seemed to be swirling around the car now, and the hair stood up on the back of Dean's neck. Something major was happening, and he knew he was in a very bad position.

Another deafening shriek shattered the air, instantly followed by another growling lion-like roar, this time so thunderously loud that Dean's very bones seemed to vibrate, his teeth almost rattling in his head. Dean finally shook the blanket off and tried to peer out (there seemed no point anymore in
trying to hide) but through the sandstorm he could only see glimpses of something dark and enormous whipping around the car. He caught one terrifying glimpse out the rear window of an absolutely massive silver talon that seemed at least three feet long, and then it was hidden from sight again in the storm. Dust and leaves battered the car's windows. Dean crouched in the back seat, on his knees now, heart thumping, waiting for the roof to be torn right off the car, ripped open like a tin can by that massive claw.

But the sounds receded. The sandstorm slowly wafted away; the dirt and leaves began to settle down, and then he saw that there were trees outside. Trees waving in the wind.

There was no gas station at all. There'd never been a gas station, and there'd never been any bright lights. The brightness was simply because it was daytime, impossibly. It should have been full dark now, but somehow it was daytime again. The Impala was parked in the middle of a grove of trees, and it was daytime, and nothing else was there. Just trees.

Dean sat up all the way up, blinking as he stared around.

"Sam?" said Dean, but he knew by now that Sam wasn't here at all. Whatever had brought him and the Impala here, it hadn't brought Sam.

He couldn't help checking once again for his weapons, but again could find none. It seemed quiet outside by now, so very cautiously he opened the left rear door and peered out.

All he saw were more trees. Everything looked completely peaceful.

Dean stepped out slowly and looked around. Ahead of the Impala stretched a trail; and behind the same trail continued. The Impala was somehow parked smack-dab in the middle of a hiking trail. Dean looked around further, blinking in the soft amber light (which seemed to be coming not from the sun — the sun wasn't visible — but, rather, emanating from all around, almost as if the very ground was glowing). At last Dean looked up, and he saw great loops of the sandstorm still trailing up into the sky like gigantic ribbons.

The sight looked familiar: high loops overhead, like some kind of weird aurora... I've seen that before, he thought.

And at last he understood.

He was on the mountain. The parrot-mountain.

The mountain from the dream.

"I'm dreaming," said Dean aloud. He was dreaming, and the dream-Impala was sitting square on the exact same dream-trail that Dean had already hiked up several times in previous dreams. In fact, he realized, studying his surroundings with more attention now, this was right where he'd first spotted the baby parrot, when it had been fumbling its way over to him.

"Sam?" Dean called again, though he was certain that Sam wasn't going to be here. The baby parrot wasn't going to be here either; it had disappeared long ago.

Though I'll look for it anyway, he knew. I gotta look. Just in case. The thought had a sort of dream-logic that seemed convincing: He was in a parrot-dream, and therefore he would search for the parrot. What else could he possibly do?

Dean shut the Impala's open door before heading off on the hike. He glanced at the door as he did so, did a double-take, and swore. He'd forgotten about that awful scraping sound, but sure enough
the left rear door had two nasty vertical scratches in it.

"Damn," muttered Dean. Not that it mattered (it was just a dream-version of the Impala) but it was a bummer anyway. Even a dream-Impala should be kept looking good, so Dean bent over to examine the scratches.

They were deep, two long vertical scratches over a foot long each. They gouged right through the paint and deeply into the metal. Whatever had done it had almost ripped right through the door. Dean bit his lip. Had that... talon done it? That enormous silver claw? It could have shredded him right apart if it had gone even a few inches farther in.

He looked around a little warily, but there was still no creature in sight.

Dean puzzled over it a little longer. He walked around the Impala, checking it all over, but it only had the two scratches on the left-side door; the rest of the car was untouched.

There seemed nothing else to do but resume the usual hopeless search for the long-lost baby parrot (which surely must have died already, weeks ago now). So Dean started his usual trudge up the trail.

Soon he realized that the trail had been altered.

It seemed the gigantic thing that had torn up the Impala's door had been along the rest of the trail too. Things had been moved, and things had been destroyed.

First he came to a flat area that he remembered had been a large grove of trees before. This time, though, almost the entire grove had been obliterated on both sides of the trail, apparently burned to the ground. It was just a field of blackened ash now... still smoking, in fact. The only surviving trees were two lonely looking saplings on the left side of the trail.

A few minutes after that, Dean came to a rather lovely meadow that had somehow acquired a couple of huge boulders that sat right next to each other, again on the left side of the trail. Dean frowned at the huge rocks, walking around them cautiously. Had they rolled down here in some kind of landslide, maybe?

But no. When he got to the far side he discovered two huge gouges in the earth. Both boulders had been pushed here. Rolled, perhaps, and even pushed uphill in places, leaving immense trenches in the earth. What sort of tremendous force could have done this?

And why?

The boulders were both torn up, covered in long deep scratches, rather like those on the Impala but much more numerous. Dean tried to examine the lines more closely, but for some reason they seemed to blur and dance in front of his eyes, bits of darkness blotting them out here and there. It began to give him a headache. All he could make out was that they were probably more claw-marks.

Dean moved on, and soon came across similar patches of destroyed forest, again with just a couple of surviving trees. Whatever had caused the destruction seemed to have consistently been moving in one direction; always everything on the right side had been obliterated, and the few surviving trees were only on the left side of the trail. Something had torched the right side of the trail, and had nearly torched the left.

Again, why?

When Dean got to the plateau at the top of the mountain, he was bracing himself for more scenes of destruction. And, especially, he was dreading the discovery of, perhaps, some tiny little scorched
parrot bones, or more of those pathetic torn-off rainbow feathers.

But the plateau at the top of the mountain was empty. There were more lines gouged into the rocky ground, like those on the Impala and those on the boulders. More marks from those gigantic talons, presumably. And there were two more of the scorched and dying trees as well — two wide blackened tree trunks sticking up from the ground on the left side of the plateau, their tops glinting a little eerily in the gleaming golden light. Dean ignored them at first, as he paced around looking for rainbow feathers (he found none; he couldn't even find any trace of the butterflies now). But after he'd been walking around a little bit, feeling more and more depressed by the lack of rainbow feathers, he glanced back over at the two blackened trees and realized they'd somehow gotten extremely thin.

Dean frowned at them.

What kind of trees looked wide from one angle, but thin from another?

And what kind of trees had metallic glints at the top?

He edged closer and soon realized that they were not trees at all.

They were feathers.

Two immense black feathers. More than eight feet tall. Dean remembered now that he had found big black feathers here a few other times, and that he had tentatively concluded they might belong to whatever predator had snatched up the poor baby parrot. But these were bigger still. Huge. Two massive feathers, each taller than his head, shining dark as ebony. Both had been stuck straight into the rock by the quill end with some tremendous force, so that they were anchored there firmly, the only things left in that barren rocky plain, impossible to miss. Both were tipped with a shining yellow border — this was the glint that had caught his eye originally.

Dean approached them warily. Whatever creature had left these behind had been something immense.

Something capable of destroying forests? Or of pushing huge boulders uphill, maybe? Of gouging marks into solid granite?

Capable of what else?

A distant shriek sounded in the air. Dean tore his eyes away from the gigantic feathers to look for the source. It was the same kind of shriek that he'd heard earlier in the Impala, the sound from overhead that had seemed to carry with it such an aura of terror and dread. It was very distant now, but it still made Dean cringe, rather like hearing the sound of nails dragging over a chalkboard. Something about the sound seemed unmistakably threatening, and he soon became aware of how exposed he was on the open mountaintop. He shifted behind the giant feathers a little bit for cover, still looking out to the horizon toward the source of the sound.

Ranks of rolling mountains extended away in the haze, like waves of an enormous sea. Dean looked all around, peering toward the very farthest points, and far, far away a flicker of motion caught his eye. He squinted at it, trying to make out any details. The perspective seemed very hard to judge — the horizon in this place always seemed strangely distant, rather as if the Earth were not round at all anymore but simply went on flat, forever and ever, endless receding ranks of mountains stretching out to an infinite vanishing point. But far, far away, suspended in that infinite sky, something was moving.
A dark looming shape in the sky. Like a great black sail.

It had to be something big, to see it from this distance. Dean shaded his eyes with one hand, squinting into the glowing sky. The dark shape seemed to be moving closer; and now he could see that all around it small spots of color were darting here and there, rather like foolhardy sparrows harassing a tremendous eagle.

Then he saw a burst of blinding white fire, and one of the tiny sparrow-things fell.

"No," Dean breathed, for he found he'd already picked sides. He was rooting for the little sparrow-things.

The wounded sparrow floated down in an uneven spiral, smoke trailing behind it, and the big black sail-thing put on speed. It was still very distant, but it was clear now that it was coming closer. The remaining little sparrows couldn't seem to keep up, falling behind now. There was a slightly bigger sparrow, perhaps crow-sized, that was trying its best, but the eagle-like black thing was outpacing it.

The black eagle thing wheeled in the sky like a kite, doing a big slow turn, and Dean realized it was heading toward the mountaintop. Something about its motion seemed deliberate. Almost like...

It accelerated. Almost like...

*Almost like it had seen him.*

It accelerated more. It was coming directly at him. The lion roar sounded in the distance, and Dean turned and ran.

"Dean! Wake up!"

Dean flailed awake, yelling, "Watch out, Sammy, it's coming!" He nearly hit Sam in the head. Sam seemed to be right on top of him somehow; Dean realized that Sam was leaning in the open back door of the car, leaning over Dean to shake his shoulder. Sam was too exposed! It would see him too!

"Get down, Sam!" said Dean, sitting up abruptly and yanking hard on Sam's arm.

"Dean, wake up," said Sam, resisting his pull. Dean was sitting up fully now, feet tangled in the blanket, still hanging on to Sam's arm. He peered outside, baffled by how dark it suddenly was. He felt for his holster; it was there again, and the pistol safely within it. A quick check of his jacket and his leg revealed that his knives were back too. He bent to grope under the front seat for the shotgun and was relieved to find it there — but Sam pulled it out of his hands.

"Settle down, Dean, chill," said Sam, holding the shotgun well out of Dean's reach. "It was a dream. You were dreaming. A nightmare this time, I guess. You okay?"

Dean finally realized he was no longer on the mountain. *It was just a dream*, he thought, looking around. It was night again. They were up in the forested hills now, heading into the mountains; Sam had pulled off at a little cross-street. Just a few dozen yards away was the main road, a few big tractor-trailers rumbling by now and then, their headlights gleaming in the dark.
"Everything all right?" said Sam, gradually lowering the shotgun.

"Yeah," said Dean, checking his pocket for the feather. "Yeah. Just... a strange dream..." He yanked his boots on, clambered out of the car and checked the door.

There were no scratches on the Impala door.

It had only been a dream.

"You sure you're okay?" said Sam, watching him.

"Yeah, I'm... fine," Dean assured him. "I'll take the next shift. Why don't you sleep a bit."

"Dean—"

"There is no way I'm gonna sleep again, to be honest," Dean said. "I'll drive."

Sam gave him a narrow look. "Was it... Cas? Your dream?"

Dean shook his head. "Just a dream. And... no maps or anything. Didn't see Ash. No orishas either." *Just huge mountains and sparrows and some kind of giant T-rex thing trying to rip the car door off. Shoving boulders around and burning down forests.*

*And leaving gigantic feathers stuck in the ground like spears.*

*Like a warning."

"Just a dream," said Dean. "Tell you about it later, but, let's just get moving, ok?"

Sam gave up and let Dean drive. They actually didn't have too much farther to go, but Dean was itching to feel the Impala's wheel under his hands, restless to put more miles behind them... more distance, it seemed, between themselves and that great black beast in the sky.

Dean touched the feather in his pocket as he pulled back onto the highway.

Black... the huge feathers had been black. Same color as Cas's little alula-feather. Could it be...

Could it possibly be...

But no. They hadn't been the same color, really. The big feathers had been black and yellow, for one thing, that shining yellow on the tips, not just pure black like Cas's. And they sure hadn't been rainbow-colored either.

And whether it had been "just a dream" or something else, some kind of sign maybe, Dean felt certain about one thing:

Whatever that huge black thing had been in the distance, wheeling toward him in the sky, it hadn't been good.

---

They got to bed just past midnight, at a tumbledown roadside motel in tiny Susanville, California. Both Dean and Sam felt a little expectant as they crawled into their beds, wondering what dreams
awaited.

But there were no more dreams at all that night.

All they saw, as they slept, was darkness.

A/N - Thank you so much for all your kind comments! I really, really cherish every one. Please drop me another comment if you've liked this weekend's installments. I hope to be able to get back to regular comment-replies soon, but please know I read every single one.

Next Friday: Dean and Sam reach Mount Shasta at last. And perhaps some of the dreams will start to make sense.
The whole of the next day took on a ceremonial feel. *The Last Morning*, Dean thought as they they stopped at a roadside diner for breakfast. (It seemed impossible to get the "Last This-Or-That" thoughts out of his head.) *Last Diner. Last Stack of Pancakes.* Dean splurged on a "Dump Truck Special" — a huge stack of pancakes and a full side of eggs, bacon and hash browns. It was the biggest breakfast he'd had in months. Sam gave him an approving smile from across his own breakfast (an absolutely massive veggie omelet, with fruit salad on the side).

As they were paying the bill at the cash register, a battered old TV perched on the diner's cracked linoleum countertop was playing the local morning news. Dean watched in silence as he waited for his change, Sam frowning at the TV beside him.

More earthquakes had happened, apparently; more landslides, more tsunamis, and a disturbingly large whirlpool was forming in Lake Ontario, as if the whole lake was starting to drain away. There was another report from NASA, as well; yet more asteroids were missing, a few dramatic solar flares had started erupting on the Sun (causing, apparently, an increase in the "solar wind" and unusually stunning aurora displays on Earth). Jupiter's Great Red Spot was shrinking even faster.

A new crater had appeared on the Moon. Black spots had appeared on the surface of Saturn.

"It's looking like the end of the world, folks!" said a chipper blond newscaster girl, beaming an *I'm-just-joking* smile at the camera.

"Keep the change," said Dean to the waitress. "C'mon, Sam. Let's get going." Sam nodded, and they headed to the Impala.

Once in the car Sam said, reaching one hand out half-heartedly to the radio, "You wanna try for some news on the radio, or..."

Dean jammed a tape into the tapedeck. "Still got some music to get through today, Sammy," he said. "Don't wanna skip one."
They headed down the winding mountain road into the Central Valley accompanied by a soundtrack of Metallica's greatest hits.

Every hunt was a potential Last Road Trip, of course. Even the minor hunts had their hazards. But today began to remind Dean, almost overwhelmingly, of the last days before the Lucifer-Michael battle years ago. Sam had been lost to him then, of course; Dean had spent those desperate last days with Cas and Bobby, vacillating between bouts of hopeless drinking and attempts to hatch some kind of plan that had even a snowball's chance of succeeding. There was something of the same feel of relentless escalation now... that same feeling of complete hopelessness alternating with steely-eyed, gritted-teeth determination.

Though, of course... no Cas this time.

No Bobby either, for that matter.

There was, also, that same disquieting sense that powerful entities were in motion behind the scenes. There was the familiar frustration with the sprinkling of bewildering hints ("Michael's sword" before; "fire gate" and "Crown of Heaven" now)... and the unnerving feel that they were walking into an unknowable abyss.

Dean knew Sam was feeling it too.

"How you doin' today?" was all Dean said, breaking the silence when the Metallica tape finally ended.

Sam shrugged. "Fine. You?"

"Fine."

Black Sabbath was next, and Def Leppard after that.

They had a long, lazy drive up the wide Central Valley as they worked their way through the last of the classic-rock cassette tapes. Mount Shasta was soon visible in the distance, a majestic, isolated volcanic cone that stuck up on the horizon almost like a child's drawing, triangular and white-topped. None of the other hills were anywhere near as high, and Shasta's isolation only drew the eye to it even more. By any standard it was impressive.

And it was huge. Dean began to experience a qualm of doubt, or actually several qualms of doubt, as they took an exit off the highway and began to make their way through the little country roads surrounding Mount Shasta. The ancient volcano was enormous; its flanks spread over a gigantic swath of land. The fire gate could be anywhere.

"Hope it's gonna be two other hunters leading us, and not us leading them," said Dean. "Cause I don't have a frickin' idea where to go. This place is huge."
"Yeah," said Sam. "And I've about had enough of deciphering mysterious maps. Whoa, wait, that's the road we want, for the teepee place—"

Sam directed Dean along a long, jouncing unpaved road, and soon they had come to the Shasta Hot Springs.

"This is big," said Dean, gazing up at the teepee's slanted canvas sides. "I guess I was picturing a mini-teepee, but this is like, what, twenty feet tall?" He looked around at the interior. The bottom half of the teepee was surprisingly roomy, with two decent-looking cots on a comfortable packed-earth floor lined with mats. There were even bedside lamps, plugged into some electrical outlets mounted a few feet off the ground on little waterproof conduits, and a couple of dressers.

"Better than expected," Sam agreed. "Bare-bones, but not bad. They're near the end of the rental season and they told me it gets chilly, but there's tons of blankets.

"I could get used to this," Dean said, chucking his duffel on the nearest cot. "Teepees! This could be cool."

"Told you it'd be fun," said Sam with a grin.

They'd arrived at mid-day, with plenty of time to check out the vicinity and look for anything that seemed like a "fire gate." A quick inspection of the actual hot springs revealed that the source of the heat was hidden far underground. They had both rather been hoping to find a convenient little shrine right at the source of the springs, maybe with a magical angel-wing-shaped "gate" that would simply pop open when they got close. But when they traced the hot spring back to its source, the steaming waters simply vanished into the mountainside under a couple of nondescript rocks.

There was also no sign of any other hunters. There were hardly any people at all, actually, this late in the year. Both brothers kept glancing around whenever anybody else came into view, hoping to spot either two hunter-type guys, or maybe an obedient flock of followers that would show up and start trailing Sam and Dean around. But save for an unlikely-looking older couple that was renting another teepee far downstream, and a few hippie-looking sorts who were part of the hot springs staff, there seemed to be nobody else around.

They checked and repacked their gear; they checked their weapons; they looked at Sam's Shasta map for a while. Shasta had hundreds of miles of hiking trails, and acres upon acres of rough wilderness. It could take months to search. Though at least, Sam pointed out, they could check the paved roads.

So they spent the whole afternoon driving around the mountain, going up and down little side roads and looking at the multitudes of mountain cabins and vacation rentals that were scattered all around.

They drove almost every road on the mountain that afternoon, but saw nothing but trees and land and the crisp October sky.

Near sunset they got back to the teepee, feeling a little discouraged.
"I don't even know what to do," said Sam. "Guess I'll just... read more?"

"I guess," said Dean, feeling similarly lost. He glanced outside the teepee's big canvas-flap door at the wide bubbling stream outside. The Impala was parked right nearby, just a few yards from the stream. "Hey... you wanna hang outside for a bit?" Dean said. "You know, by the Impala?"

Sam gave him a smile, and nodded. It was something of a tradition, of course — having a beer in the evening by whatever stream or river they might be close to. So Dean pulled out the beer cooler.

_The Last Beer_, Dean thought. _By the Last Stream._

They spent a peaceful ten minutes sitting there side by side, Sam perched up on the Impala's hood and Dean leaning against it, watching the water rush by.

For quite a while neither of them spoke. It seemed enough just to be watching the water.

A memory came to mind of Castiel, who had accompanied them for one of these evening beers when they'd all done a brief jaunt to Missouri. It had been just a few weeks before the ill-fated Ohio trip. Dean had rather thought Cas wouldn't get the idea of wanting to have a beer by a river on a summer evening, but actually Cas wouldn't get the idea of wanting to have a beer by a river on a summer evening, but actually Cas had gotten it right away. He'd turned out to be the silent-drinker type, too, sipping his beer quietly and just watching the water flow by.

Cas had fit right in.

"You know when you pulled over to wake me up?" Dean said, breaking the silence (mostly to try to break his own train of thought). "Last night? When I was sleeping in the car."

Sam nodded.

"It was another dream. Kind of a weird one."

"I figured," said Sam.

"Yeah, well," said Dean. "Whole series of weird dreams these days. Hard to know what's worth talking about. This one was on this mountain that... well, I've dreamed about it before. Kind of a recurring thing I guess. There's sometimes this little, uh, this little parrot."

Sam was quiet a moment. He took a swallow of beer and said, "You've mentioned a parrot a couple times."

Dean glanced at him. "You didn't ask about it."

Sam shrugged. "Figured you'd tell me when you wanted to."

"Yeah, well," said Dean. "It's not like the universe might depend on our damn dreams or anything, right?"

Sam snorted. Dean said, "I don't know if it's important. But just in case... figured I should tell you." He let out a sigh. "I have no idea if this set of dreams means a damn thing or if it was just me... you know, me freaking out about... Cas. Anyway, I'm always on this mountain, hiking up to the top, and..."

Dean described the mountain dreams. All of them, from the very first one when the parrot had first crawled over to him, to the one last night.

Sam was quiet when he finished. He seemed to be thinking about something.
Dean said at last, "At first I thought the parrot might have been Cas. I don't know why. It's not like it even looked remotely like him or anything. But, you know, feathers, so..." He gave a shrug.

"Rainbow feathers," said Sam, with a little laugh. "Nice, Dean."

"Yeah, I know," said Dean, rolling his eyes. "Real subtle of my subconscious there, I know. Anyway..." He gave a little sigh. "The parrot's gone. It was strange what a pang this fact still caused. I've been actually grieving about that damn parrot, Dean realized. He took a breath and went on with, "I don't know what the dreams are about. It was probably never him. And this last one, damn, Sam... it was pretty freaky. That black eagle... I don't know, man, I really don't know."

"So," said Sam. He looked over at Dean. "Your last dream, the one with the freaky black eagle and the T-rex running around the car... that dream had a theme. Did you notice?"

Dean nodded.

"Two," said Dean. "Two of things." He'd been thinking about it all day. "That's kinda why I figured I should tell you about it."

Sam nodded. "Two of everything. Two feathers, two boulders. Two trees."

"Two scratch marks on the car," said Dean.

Sam nodded again, and added, "So... Look. In my dream, about Jess... when Jess was tugging on me, now that I think about it, she was doing two tugs. Two tugs on my arm. Two tugs and she'd stop, two tugs and she'd stop. It was the weirdest thing. Also — the dream started with her handing me two house keys. I was trying to go into our old house and she showed me the keys and then started tugging me around. I didn't think of it till now, but, it was kind of the same motif, you think?"

A thought struck Dean. "Hey..." he said, staring at his beer bottle. "You know what... Charlie was holding up two fingers for her charades game." He remembered something else. "And Bobby was handing me two whiskies! He was really insistent about it, too. Kept following me around." He tried to remember what Jo's weird dance had been about; had she been hopping, or something? Two hops?

"Maybe it's about the two hunters we're going to meet?" said Sam. "The two Oshossi is sending? They're all trying to tell us something about two hunters." He thought a moment more and added, "Or... maybe Oshossi is also trying to communicate something about the number two? I mean, for some other reason?"

"Or maybe we're just totally over-thinking it," Dean said. "Maybe it's just because there's two of us."

"Yeah... I suppose..." said Sam, sounding unconvinced.

"Also, it wasn't totally consistent," pointed out Dean. "Not everybody had two of something. Like, Dad didn't have two of anything, and neither did Ash. I think some of the dreams were just, well, dreams."

Sam looked over at him and opened his mouth as if to say something. But he stopped in mid-breath and looked away.

"What?" said Dean, glancing over at him.

Sam gave an almost shy shrug. "Nothing, really. I was just wondering if..." He paused. "If... in your dream about Cas, night before last... if there were two of anything." He hesitated and then said,
stumbling over his words a little, "I, I, I don't mean that, um... I'm not thinking that Cas..." He stopped.

Dean took a swallow of his beer, and said, "You're thinking it was just a dream and wasn't really Cas, and you don't want to give me the wrong idea that Cas might still be around somewhere." For it was clear why Sam was hesitating.

Sam grimaced. He looked down at his feet.

But, oddly, Dean found it was surprisingly easy to talk about. Dean said, "I thought about that. Bobby and Ash and all, we know they're still up there. In Heaven. We know that. So those dreams could've been... you know, dreamwalking, or something like it. But Cas..." He shook his head. "We know for sure he's not up there," he said.

Sam was silent.

Dean forced himself to go on. "And anyway, that dream was different than the others. Because, the Cas dream was, um..." He paused. This was the one dream he hadn't told Sam much about. "It was a replay of a memory, actually. It was just a memory, from my own head. The other dreams weren't like that."

"What memory?" said Sam.

Dean couldn't answer for a second. He looked at the water.

Sam waited a moment longer and then started to say, "Never mi—"

"Ohio," said Dean. "The warehouse. He was up on the cross again. I got him down, and..." Dean gave a helpless little shrug. "He died in my arms again." The sentence came out fast and clipped.

He chugged the remainder of his beer (half the bottle) in one long swallow. Sam watched him quietly.

"Sorry," said Sam softly. " Didn't mean to, um—"

"Funny thing is, he did have two of something," said Dean, lowering the empty beer bottle and wiping his mouth. "He had, um, he had two tulips. Red tulips. He was trying to hand them to me. But I know that was just me dreaming. My mind, dreaming, I mean. Cause, tulips, they, uh... they got a certain significance, for me, I think..."

"I know what red tulips mean," said Sam. "I looked it up."

Dean fell quiet. He began working at his beer bottle's label with one fingernail, peeling a corner of it off the bottle.

Sam was quiet for a while too.

Then Sam said, as casually as if they talked about this every night, "You guys ever do anything? You and Cas?"

Dean blinked. It was clear what Sam meant, and it was such a blunt question. Sam had never asked before. He'd never joked. He'd never even hinted.

"No," said Dean.

"You ever want to?" Again that strangely casual calmness.
Another pause.

"Thought about it sometimes, I guess," said Dean, with a deliberately casual shrug, "But I'm not—"

No. Wait. This was unfair to Cas. Tell the truth, Dean thought. Too late to tell the truth to Cas, but at least tell it to someone.

Dean was silent a moment longer.

"Yes," Dean said.

Sam nodded. "I wondered sometimes."

Sam knew, thought Dean. Sam knew.

After a long moment, Dean said, "He never made a move." His throat was starting to feel tight. "Maybe I should've. But, just, I don't know. I was..." He shrugged. "Scared? It was just... you know. Complicated. Fallen angel, ex-demon... and I haven't ever, I mean, I'm not really... I mean... fuck, does it even get more complicated? And then the Mark... dammit. I couldn't feel a thing, really, after that...." He knew he wasn't making much sense. He looked down to discover he'd shredded the bottle label into dozens of pieces, stripping the bottle nearly clean, leaving a little litter of paper bits on the ground by his feet.

Sam just nodded. "He was worried about you, you know," he said eventually. "All last year. And this last summer. Worried how you were doing, I mean. You should know that he—"

"I broke his fucking heart," said Dean, the words coming out of him in a rush. It had to be said. It had to be admitted. "An angel loved me, Sam," he said, the words tearing out of him. "An angel. Loved me. Cas. And I broke his fucking heart."

But Sam was shaking his head. "No," he said. "I don't believe that."

Dean looked at him. Somehow that wasn't what he'd expected to hear. "What?"

"He was stronger than that. He was tough."

"I know, but..." Dean waved his beer bottle aimlessly up at the sky. "He was... new to all this. He was new to... humanity, and... it was all new to him, all the... He wasn't used to... It must've been so weird for him, all the..."

"Feelings," sang Sam, with a little singsong voice, mimicking the crappy old song. The crass humor of it was startling, jolting even, but it made Dean give a snort of laughter that somehow broke past the choking feeling in his chest.

"Sure, I get that," Sam went on. "He got hurt, sure." Again, the bluntness was surprisingly refreshing: Cas had gotten hurt. Dean had hurt him. It was just a fact.

"But, Dean," Sam said, turning toward Dean a little. "I won't say he wasn't hurt, but... he wasn't... broken, I guess is what I'm trying to say. He wasn't broken." Sam paused. "I think he could forgive you way more than you know. I'm not just talking about Ohio — and, just for the record, I am absolutely certain that he forgave you, that night. But I also mean, before that. The guy knew you, Dean. More than you ever realized, I think. And he was thousands of years old. Millions for all we know. He wasn't just what he looked like. He wasn't even a guy, not really. Hell, he wasn't human! He'd must've seen so many human lives... so many stories. I think he probably had a, a kind of... a perspective. A perspective that we don't have." Sam gave a shrug. "Sometimes I think we seemed to
him like, I don't know, a little baby species?"

A faint smile came over Dean's face. "You're saying I looked like a baby in a leather jacket to him?"

*Baby in a trenchcoat... baby in a leather jacket.* Maybe it had gone both ways.

Sam chuckled a little. "In a certain way, maybe. Yeah. I just feel like, if you couldn't... do that, couldn't go there, with him, he would've just... accepted it." Sam paused and added, "He would've forgiven it. I'm not saying he wouldn't have been hurt, but... he would've... kept his head up. Kept going. And, Dean..." Sam took a breath, as if gearing himself up. "He would've kept on caring about you anyway. I'm certain of it. Forgotten everything and kept on caring anyway and just kept right on offering whatever you could accept."

The smile had long faded from Dean's face. He couldn't talk at all now; he stared at the stream.

"Tell you one thing, though," said Sam, "The dude showed you his wings right off the bat, man. I read a couple more chapters in that book today, and, there were like a dozen other ways he could've proved he was an angel, and almost always angels pick one of the other ways. I wonder if he might've been asking you out for coffee right at the beginning. Angel-style."

It should have seemed a crude or heartless joke; it should been a painful thought. But somehow it made Dean laugh. Then Sam was laughing, and Dean was laughing more, and then the memory of those black shadows in the barn on that long-ago night swept over him and instantly Dean was wiping away tears, his throat aching, bitterly sad all over again, and yet grateful beyond measure that Castiel had ever chosen to show Dean his wings at all.

---

Sam finished the rest of his beer in silence, while Dean just stared at the stream.

"Why don't I just keep working on the maps, I guess," said Sam eventually, "and you just... scope out the area some more?"

"I'm thinking maybe scoping out the area should involve scoping out sitting in the hot springs, at this point," suggested Dean. "Been a long drive." Sam nodded and said, "Why don't you just chill a bit. Or, unchill, I guess."

Sam flipped on the teepee lamps to do a little more research; Dean got his swim trunks on and headed to the water's edge. (Sam, who'd known from the beginning they'd be staying here at the hot springs place, had packed swim trunks for both of them.)

There were two sources of water, actually — a wide, icy-cold bubbling mountain stream that came cascading down from the mountain's snowy upper reaches, and a fast-flowing little brook of piping-hot water that was bubbling up out of the mountain's innards. The two flows of water, hot and cold, came together about fifty yards upstream, creating a temperature gradient across the stream, with mostly-hot water on the teepee's side of the bank and mostly-cold water on the other. People had piled up stones here and there to separate pools of different temperatures.

Dean occupied himself for a while with floating around from one pool to another. As the evening air began to cool off he settled himself in one of the warmer pools near the teepee side.

It felt good, to get clean. It felt good to be sitting here looking out at the surrounding landscape. It felt good to just... be able to feel good.
He was in a bath of warm waist-high water now, sitting on an underwater rock with his back against the shore. There were pine trees all along the far bank, and through them Dean began to catch glimpses of the setting sun.

Setting sun.

Prayer time.

Amazing how fast that feeling-good can evaporate, Dean thought. He turned away, took a big breath and dunked his head underwater just to avoid seeing the sunset.

There were moments, now, sometimes several moments at a time, when Dean actually forgot about it. When the burden lifted; when the ocean he’d been drowning in seemed to fall away for a moment, as if a wave were lifting him up, so that he could see the sky again. But when the memory crashed back down on him again, which it always did, it seemed heavier than ever.

Why can't I drop this, he thought, surfacing a moment later with a big breath of air. Am I going to be thinking about Cas seven times a day forever now? Even when I know now that he never heard any of the prayers?

He leaned back against the rock again and shut his eyes. Theoretically this was to stop seeing the sunset and to stop thinking about Cas. But somehow, instead, with his eyes shut, he slid into a thought about what it might be like if Cas were right here with him. Sitting here beside him in the hot springs.

Realistically, could they ever have been an actual... couple? Could there ever have been even a chance of it working out?

How would it have even played out, exactly? If Cas were here with Dean... what would he even have been doing, exactly? Where would he be sitting, and what would he do?

It was surprisingly hard to envision. First Dean tried to imagine Cas in swim trunks horsing around in the pool, but somehow the image wouldn't click. The picture that came to mind instead was of Cas standing beside the stream, frowning down at Dean. With his familiar old outfit on. Tan trenchcoat, white shirt, blue tie, black pants.... He'd be staring around with that frown on his face. Maybe scolding Dean about wasting time in the hot springs instead of searching for the fire gate... maybe telling Dean some peculiar bit of physics about sunsets.

It was frustratingly difficult to picture Cas doing any cliche romance-movie moves. Like reaching out to hold Dean's hand.

Or sitting next to him, and leaning over for a kiss.

Because he wasn't human, Dean realized. That wasn't even his body. Not originally it wasn't. Somehow it was difficult to imagine how Cas might have tried to translate his unknowably alien emotions and gestures into human-sized behaviors.

Maybe Cas would have gone with his angelic instincts? "Mantling" Dean in his wings, maybe? Nibbling the back of his neck? With that thought, suddenly the image snapped to life, hauntingly vivid: The Cas in Dean's mind came walking right down into the pool, clothes on and all, utterly unconcerned that his trenchcoat and suit were getting soaked. He'd be totally casual about it, sitting down next to Dean, not caring at all that his shoes and clothes were getting ruined; maybe he'd slide a little behind Dean and wrap his arms around him...

Keeping Dean safe.
Nibbling the back of Dean's neck.

Dean could almost feel it, now, it was so real in his mind. The warm water flowing around him seemed it might be Cas, even now; Cas's arms, Cas's soft kiss on his neck.

Cas's wings.

_How are you, Dean?_ Cas would have said. He'd have whispered it in Dean's ear.

And Cas wouldn't have expected anything in return. Whatever Dean did in return, in whatever form, Cas would have accepted it. Curious, maybe; willing and unafraid. (Maybe Dean would have gotten to see one of those incredibly rare Castiel smiles....) But if Dean did nothing in return, Cas would have accepted that, too.

_Why am I torturing myself,_ Dean thought, rubbing his knuckles into his eyes so hard that he saw stars. He dunked underwater a few more times, scrubbing his head as hard as he could, and finally opened his eyes and looked around at the deserted stream in the fading light.

Empty stream. Empty forest on the other side. Nobody else was here.

Dean was alone.

"Guess I'll never know what it mighta been like," Dean muttered to himself. "Guess I'll never fucking know, Cas, huh?"

He had to put a hand over his eyes and sit very still for a while.

At last he lowered his hand to look out over the darkening sky and the black silhouettes of the trees once more. It was getting pretty dark now, the forest across the stream from him just a wall of blackness, illuminated only faintly by Sam's little reading lamp in the teepee behind him. Dean looked up at the last red streaks in the sky overhead, glanced one last time at the dark trees across the stream, and froze.

Four shining spots were hovering by the ground, among the dark trees, across the water. Four shining green spots.

They moved; they shifted. Two pairs of eyes. They glided closer. They seemed made of darkness, of Darkness, like the Darkness-spider, and Dean's heart seemed to stutter in his chest. He scrambled out of the stream, lunging over to where he'd left his clothes and his gun. The chill air hit his damp skin with a nearly icy shock, but he barely felt the cold as he scrambled for his pistol, flicked the safety off and spun to face the glowing green eyes. They were closer. They were inching out of the trees, just across the stream from him, creeping out stealthily toward him...

They weren't spiders.

They were wolves.

Two black wolves, watching him quietly.

"Sam!" Dean hissed. Dean kept his eyes on the wolves but heard a sound of motion behind him, then Sam's sharp shocked breath, and a mere moment later Sam was standing by Dean's side, shotgun ready.

"Shit," Sam muttered. "Werewolves?"
"Can't be," Dean said. "It's only a quarter moon. Nowhere near full."

"Shifters?"

"I don't know, it's not really acting like them... Look, they're not growling, they're not attacking..."

"They don't have that rabid look," Sam agreed.

They watched as one of the wolves padded up to the cold part of the stream, waded right into the freezing water without flinching, and drank a long gulp of water.

"They're not acting like shifters, or werewolves." Dean said slowly. "They're acting more like..."

The wolf still on the bank flopped down on its belly, one front paw curled under itself, watching them. The one in the stream scrambled up out of the water and shook itself just like a dog, drops of water flying everywhere. The two wolves touched noses for a moment and then the wet one sat down by the dry one, mouth open, pink tongue lolling out.

Dean said, "Wolves. They're... acting like wolves, actually."

"You know what," said Sam, "when I was looking around earlier, the kitchen staff told me that wolves just moved into California again. First time in over a hundred years, they said. Two black wolves. Apparently it's been in the news."

"Huh," said Dean. "Quite a coincidence that we'd see them, don't you think?"

Sam snorted. "Cas would say there are no coincidences."

"He would," Dean agreed.

For once the mention of Cas brought almost no pain (almost), but instead just a sort of gratitude for the way his advice seemed to still be present in both their minds.

Dean said, "No coincidences. Right. So, what then. What do wolves mean? Why would wolves..."
He thought a moment. "Sam, you know what wolves are?"

"Uh..." Sam hesitated. "Big shaggy dogs?"

"Wolves are hunters," said Dean.

Sam blinked. He lowered the shotgun a little, looking at the two black wolves, which were both lying down now, calmly watching them.

"Two hunters," said Sam, lowering his shotgun further. "Two hunters will lead us. Gotta admit I was expecting humans. But I'll take whatever Oshossi wants to send us."

"Let's get our stuff," said Dean, grabbing his towel.

They were both a little worried the wolves would take off instantly, but the wolves seemed in no hurry. Sam kept an eye on them while Dean made a rushed change of clothes, checked their gear and the packs, and flung the rest of their stuff into the Impala. (They'd prepaid for a week; Jody already
knew to come pick up the Impala after that, should Sam and Dean never get back into contact.) One wolf actually curled up and seemed to be taking a quick nap while the other one stayed on watch.

But as soon as Sam and Dean hoisted their packs on their backs, Sam's shotgun slung over his shoulder and flashlights ready, the wolves got to their feet, shaking themselves off. They both turned toward the trees, and then paused and looked back over their shoulders in an almost comical "Follow me" pose. There was a footbridge a little ways upstream; Sam and Dean hurried up there and crossed the bridge. The black wolves silently trotted up the far side of the bank to meet them on the other side of the bridge, and then they turned, single file, and led Sam and Dean into the woods.

Dean's last move, as he left the teepee and the Impala and all the rest of their gear, was to check to be sure he had Cas's feather safely buttoned in his pocket.

It was a long hike, made slower by the fact that they were doing it in the dark, for reasons perhaps only known to the wolves. The forest was pitch black around them, and the flashlights only made it barely manageable rather than completely impossible. The wolves led them at first on a long, stumbling journey sideways across the mountain flank, several miles over rocks and tree trunks and through a thick patch of forest. Dean was in the lead, and despite the flashlight, he swore a dozen times as he whacked his head into branches in the dark, over and over, Sam ducking behind him as best he could every time Dean ran into something. (The wolves, trotting with enviable ease across the rough ground, didn't seem to realize that branches at human-head-height might cause a problem.) The branches seemed to loom at them so suddenly in the dark that Dean never dodged them in time.

"We're going, like, two miles an hour," commented Dean after about the tenth time he'd walked into a branch. He turned back to look at Sam. "Couldn't we have done this in the daytime?"

Sam only shrugged. "If the wolves know where that gate is, I'm not complaining."

Dean turned back ahead to find that both wolves had stopped and waited, their eyes shining eerily in the light of his flashlight, like green embers floating in the night.

"Can I stop for a sec?" Dean asked them. "Get a drink of water? Cause seriously, you guys keep walking me into tree branches."

The wolves only blinked, but one sat down.

"I'll take that as a yes," said Dean, swinging his pack off to get his water bottle.

It might have been just his imagination, but afterwards, when they got going again, the wolves seemed to make more of an effort to find an easier, human-sized, path.

After a couple hours the moon finally rose, providing a touch more light. It might have been easier going at that point, except that the wolves chose exactly that moment to make an abrupt turn uphill. Sam and Dean trudged after them, through a patchy forest of scrubby little trees set far apart. There were fewer tree branches to walk into now, but Dean was soon exhausted from hiking so steadily
uphill. They plodded upwards, huffing and puffing.

Near midnight Dean became aware that they were approaching a massive cliff-face that had started to loom overhead like a skyscraper.

"There's no way we're going to get up that," said Dean, pausing to catch his breath as he looked up at the dark hulk overhead. The cliff-face seemed to be blotting out half the sky.

"I don't think wolves can go straight up cliffs either, actually," said Sam. "At least... I hope not."

"I wouldn't put it past Oshossi to have sent us some rock-climbing ninja wolves," said Dean.

Indeed the wolves kept heading straight up. Near the base of the cliff they came to a messy scree slope of tumbled rocks, and the wolves simply began picking their way straight up the scree.

"You know," Dean called to them, "It's really no fair that you each have twice the number of feet we do."

The wolves made no response. Dean and Sam sighed and began scrambling after them. It was rough going. The first section had large boulders that the wolves seemed to leap up effortlessly while Sam and Dean had to carefully navigate each one. Farther up, the scree became a forty-five-degree slope of innumerable tiny stones that they could more or less walk on, except that it all shifted underfoot constantly. Each footfall seemed to set off a tiny rockslide of pebbles that rolled a few feet downhill, and it began to seem like every step lost more ground than it gained. Dean was soon exhausted, but he was somewhat gratified to see the wolves scrambling too, now — they were having trouble finding solid places to put their paws, and both animals skidded a few feet downhill at one point or another.

Dean and Sam both had to stop several times to catch their breath. Finally Dean glanced up to see both wolves trudging the last few feet to the very base of the cliff. There the wolves sat and looked back at Sam and Dean. Both wolves were panting now, their tongues lolling out of their mouths.

"Ha!" Dean called up to them, between pants of his own. "Not so easy after all, was it?"

"Dean, they're like, spirit guides or something," said Sam, panting behind him.

"Yeah, and?"

"Maybe we should be more polite?" suggested Sam. "Respectful?"

"I'm polite!" said Dean, slightly hurt. "I'm totally respectful! I'm just, y'know, making conversation." Sam gave a sigh.

They finally got up to the base of the cliff to find the two wolves sitting side-by-side at the left side of a little opening in the rock. A small worn trail led inside, as if wildlife had come here now and then.

"In here?" Dean asked the wolves, gesturing toward the little opening.

The wolves stared at him unblinking.

"You're not coming in with us?" said Sam.
The wolves just stared.
"Talkative, aren't you," said Dean. "Don't we get a goodbye howl or something?"

One wolf flattened its ears slightly.
"Okay, okay," said Dean. "And here I thought we'd bonded."

"Dean," Sam whispered, elbowing him in the side. Dean glanced at him, and Sam added, in a low voice, "Just by the way, the staff at the hot springs place told me that the two wolves in California must've come all the way down from Oregon. If these are really the same wolves, that's, like, hundreds of miles."

"Seriously?" Dean said. He looked back at the wolves. "Thanks, guys. I mean it."

That, at least, earned him a slow blink from one wolf. The other one looked away.

Dean adjusted his pack, took another drink of water and turned to Sam. "Guess this is it," he said. "Ready?"

"Not really," said Sam, "But hell with it. In we go."

To Dean's surprise both wolves got up then and came over to them, heads down and ears back, in what seemed clearly a friendly posture. Dean tentatively patted one on the head, ready to snatch back his hand if it growled, but the wolf actually wagged its tail a little. Sam patted the other one, with a similar response.

"Thanks, guys," said Dean. "Fellow hunters... huh. Wish us luck. And... hey. Thank Oshossi for us if you see him." At that the nearer wolf even licked his hand. Then the two wolves shuffled back and sat exactly where they had been before, side-by-side on the left side of the trail, like two fluffy black sentries.

Sam and Dean gave each other a glance. Dean patted Cas's feather for luck, and led the way into the narrow opening.

The crevice in the rocks led to a small cave about five feet across. It was just tall enough for Dean to stand upright; Sam had to hunch a little.

"We haven't gone anywhere," complained Sam, looking around. "We're still on Earth. I thought we were gonna, like, whoosh somewhere."

"Patience, grasshopper," said Dean, feeling his way around the walls. After the moonlit slope outside it was so dark in the cave that it was hard to see anything. "I think it goes farther back — ah — yeah, here. Kind of a tunnel." One corner of the cave had been a little jumbled by a rockfall, but when Dean peered around one of the boulders, there was a tunnel there, extending back into the cliff-face.

Again Dean led the way. The tunnel seemed almost freakishly dark, a featureless matte black that seemed to swallow up the light of their flashlights completely. The direction of the tunnel was only barely perceptible as a slightly darker area of blackness. Dean had to fight the sensation that he was either about to step off into a void or about to run into a wall; just to be on the safe side he began
holding his hunting-knife in front of him a little (flashlight in one hand, knife in the other) and also
started shuffling his feet forward on the ground, feeling his way by pushing one foot forward at a
time through a litter of twigs on the ground.

Dean said, "I did not want to start this off by walking literally into Darkness."

"Yeah, it's freaky how dark this is." said Sam. "Though at least the floor's pretty flat. Someone
tunneled this out, I think. It isn't a natural cave."

Dean glanced around at the jet-black walls. "Coal mine, maybe? It's so black."

"I kind of think it's older than coal mines," said Sam, reaching out one hand and letting a finger trail
along the wall. "Basalt, maybe? No, wait, this is just dust." Their feet were kicking up dark dust too.

at the back, maybe?" He couldn't help trying to joke a little, mostly because his heart was starting to
thump a little hard. Something about the silent darkness of the tunnel was terrifically creepy. The
place had an almost museum-like stillness to it, and the dark walls seemed to somehow absorb all
sound.

It all had the aura of positively ancient antiquity.

At last the tunnel broadened out into a large round room at least twenty feet high. It was just as black
as the tunnel. And near the back of the room stood an archway, framed by two huge curved pieces of
some kind of dark wood.

"Yahtzee," said Dean. He looked back at Sam with a grin. "Does that look gate-like to you?"

"Definitely gate-like," agreed Sam, approaching the two big wooden arches. He touched one
tentatively; both brothers held their breath, but nothing happened.

Sam rubbed some of the dark dust off of the arch, inspecting it with his flashlight. "Okay... definitely
older than coal mines," he said. "Because I'm pretty sure these are woolly mammoth tusks."

"Seriously?" Dean said, walking up to the gigantic curved structures. They did seem to have an
organic, symmetrical curved shape to them. They were blackened with dust, like everything else, but
when Dean rubbed off some of the dust, an ivory-like sheen underneath glinted in the light of his
flashlight.

The ivory was covered with tiny, elaborate runes.

"Somebody made a Stargate out of woolly mammoth tusks," said Dean, with an approving smile.
"That is... awesome."

"I think these are protection runes," said Sam, wiping more of the tusk clean. "I just learned some of
these. Protection against..." He peered at it more closely. "Heh. Fire. Of course." He turned to Dean
with a grin. "Looks like this is our Fire Gate! And, you know what, this means that Elegua had some
fans on both sides of the ocean. He wasn't just in Africa, I mean. He was here in North America too,
assuming he helped set all this up. Just think of it, an angel spread his wings here... and then Elegua
stabilized it. Maybe Elegua's worshipers helped with the tusks."

Could've even been Cas, Dean couldn't help thinking, backing up to look at the tremendous archway
framed by the huge tusks. He pictured the size of Cas's wing-shadows in the barn... they'd just about
fit in the tusks, wouldn't they?
Sam was wiping the other tusk free of dust; it had a similar set of carved runes. "That would been seriously old days, by the way," Sam added. "Back when the first humans came over from the Bering Strait. Also, they would've had to drag the tusks all the way down here, from Alaska to California, too. Woolly mammoths never lived anywhere around here." He stroked one hand over a tusk. "This must've taken some serious work."

"Well... does it say what we should do?" said Dean. "Walk through the tusks?"

Sam shrugged. "Can't read anywhere near that much. Damn, I wish Cas were here—" He stopped and cleared his throat, dropping his hand from the tusk and turning away.

Dean made no comment.

Sam cleared his throat and said, "Anyway, sure, yeah, let's trying walking through." He moved back in front of the tusks to join Dean.

They stood side by side at first, looking through the pair of tusks. It didn't really look like this was a gate to anywhere at all. All that was visible through the tusks was just the back wall of the cave.

Dean said, "I'm gonna want a refund if there aren't some Stargate sound effects. Or at least Star Trek transporter sounds. At a minimum."

"Should we hold hands or something?" suggested Sam.

Dean rolled his eyes, but just in case he clapped a hand on Sam's shoulder. "We jump through on three. Ready?" Sam nodded, and Dean said, "One, two, THREE!" and they both jumped through the tusks.

And landed two feet on the other side, still in the jet-black round cave, dust puffing up around their feet.

Sam said, "We still didn't whoosh."

"No whoosh," Dean agreed. "And no sound effects. Maybe we have to go the other direction?"

It seemed worth a try. On another count of three, they jumped back... and landed right where they had started.

Sam started inspecting the walls more closely while Dean occupied himself hopping back and forth between the tusks, with similarly unexciting results except that he started coughing from all the dust he was kicking up. Walking through slowly, jumping backwards... nothing worked. Dean finally walked back out of the tunnel to check that they were definitely still on Earth. Outside there was still the scree-slope, the distant lights of towns at the base of the mountain, and the two wolves waiting patiently at the mouth of the tunnel.

"Well, this is nice and cryptic," said Dean, walking back in from the tunnel. "Very orisha-like, I gotta say."

"Whoa — hey, Dean, look at this! I think this is it," said Sam. He'd worked his way around the room to an area slightly behind the tusks, and was staring at something on the side wall. Dean joined him.

Sam had found a couple of levers set into the walls. They were so blackened from the dark dust that they'd been almost unnoticeable, but when Sam poured some of his water bottle on them and
scrubbed them a bit with the edge of his sleeve, a glint of brass came into view. Sam cleaned it all a little farther to reveal an ornate brass panel and a couple of levers.

"Either someone's been here in the last couple centuries," said Dean, "or woolly mammoths were way more into steampunk than I ever realized."

Sam wiped more of it clean. "This is Men of Letters stuff," he said. "I recognize the style. Some of the equipment in the bunker was the same era. 1940s, I think. Wartime. You know what, it wouldn't surprise me at all if they knew about some of these gates. And maybe tried to use them, even."

They both studied the brass fittings. On the left was a brass dial with a big arrow that could be set to one of several settings that were laid out in a semicircular arc, rather like the upper portion of a clock dial. There were five settings, each marked with an ornate brass glyph. The arrow was currently pointing upwards, to the middle setting, above which was a glyph that looked, even to Dean's eyes, a little familiar. He frowned at it, and after a moment he remembered where he'd seen it before.

Sam had pointed it out on Cas's maps.

"That's the Earth glyph, isn't it?" Dean said, pointing to it.

Sam nodded. "Yep. And that one next to it, I just learned it today— it says 'Ghost.' But don't know what the other ones mean."

"Ghostly plane and Earthly plane?" suggested Dean. "And in the other direction is the etheric plane?"

Sam cocked his head a little, thinking. "Maybe? Sounds plausible, at least." He started cleaning one more brass instrument, a single big lever farther to the right. It looked rather like an old-style circuit breaker that could be flipped up and down — much like the one in the Men of Letters bunker that turned the power on and off, Dean realized. It, too, was marked with two Enochian glyphs.

"Those say, 'open' and 'closed,'" said Sam, pointing to the two glyphs.

"Okay, so, in that case, don't touch anything," Dean said, swatting Sam's hand down.

"I'm not an idiot, you know," Sam said, scowling at him.

"I know, I know. But let's think a moment here. This big lever must open and close the gate, so let's try and not do any accidental bumping of any levers here. I don't wanna end up in Hell or Purgatory 'cause you sneezed wrong." Sam rolled his eyes, but lowered his hand. They stood side by side, Sam trying to wipe his hands clean of the black dust while Dean stood with his arms folded, thinking.

Dean said, "So... There are five settings. Well, Ash had five maps."

Sam frowned. "You told me he had one map?"

"It started out as one, then he unfolded it into five. This was before he gave up and drew the super-simple map that I showed you. Before the simple map, I think he was trying to tell me something about five maps. So... five locations, I'm thinking. Five realms. Five planes." Dean stared at the semicircular dial. "You know what else," he remembered. "Kevin was trying to show me something about the telescope."

Sam paused in his hand-wiping. "Jason called it a 'dimensional scope', didn't he?" He thought a moment. "I've been wondering, what if it could look into other dimensions? I mean... into other 'planes', like the angel book called them? We've never even looked through the thing. Maybe Kevin
was trying to give us the idea of going to other dimensions."

They both pondered that.

"Well," said Sam, "the angel book said there's three planes side by side. Ghostly, Earthly, etheric. Right? But it also said that there might be more."

"It did?" said Dean, who'd forgotten that part.

"Yeah, it said, it's anybody's guess how many planes there are. So I'm thinking, maybe there's two more. Five planes. Ghostly, Earthly, etheric... and... two more," Sam finished uncertainly.

"Heaven and Hell?" suggested Dean. "Like..." He tried to think of a likely order. "Hell, Ghostly, Earth, Etheric, and then Heaven?"

It made a certain sort of sense. Sam nodded slowly.

"And currently the needle's pointing to the middle one," said Sam, "which would be the Earthly plane. So... we know we want to go to Heaven, right?"

"Well, how about this," Dean said. "Let's just test the thing first. Leave the needle set right where it is, to the "Earth" glyph there right in the middle, then you swing that lever there and see if that opens the gate. If we're right, it'll just be a gate that goes... right here, nowhere. But maybe we'll see some activity in the tusks and just verify that the gate actually is there."

Sam thought that over. "Okay," he said. He raised one hand to the lever.

Then Sam hesitated, looking at his hand. It was still blackened with the dark dust that had been coating everything— the black dust he'd wiped off the lever a minute ago.

"What?"

"Dean..." said Sam slowly. "I just thought of something. So..."

"Yeah?"

"Everything's totally jet black," Sam pointed out. "Why is the dust so black? He touched the walls, and rubbed his fingertips together, and sniffed them. "Dean, I think this is soot," he said a moment later, looking up. He turned around and scanned the room again. Dean followed his gaze.

"Don't touch that lever," said Sam. "Seriously." He walked to the middle of the room and crouched in front of the gate to examine the ground. Dean came over and crouched next to him, to find that Sam was looking at the twigs that had been crunching under Dean's feet as he'd walked into the room.

Sam held one up to his flashlight.

It wasn't a twig.

It was a charred piece of bone.

"Goddamn," said Dean, looking around at the floor now. There were little bits of bone everywhere. "Holy shit," said Dean, rising to his feet, and staring around. "The entire friggin' floor is bones."

"Almost charred to ash," said Sam.
"Dammit. We've been walking on them," said Dean, chilled to realize that the "twigs" he'd been shuffling his feet through earlier, in the tunnel, had not been twigs at all.

They both stood, looking down at the crumbled bones underneath.

"Human, you think?" said Sam.

"I'm guessing that's a yes," said Dean.

"The entire passageway is blackened too," pointed out Sam.

"This place has been burned," said Dean, looking around. "Burned to shreds. Totally incinerated."

"Dean, my god, this is a fire gate. Somebody opened it and..."

"... and it jetted out fire," Dean finished. "Incinerated everybody." He turned in a circle now, looking around at the jet black room and the jet black tunnel, imagining a gigantic tongue of flame shooting out of the gate. Roasting everybody alive.

Coating the entire place in charcoal.

How many times had it happened? Even after all these years, the place was still thickly coated in soot.

Sam stared over at the brass lever. "And that's the position the settings were in the last time someone tried it. Holy shit — Dean —"

They looked at each other, faces pale in the glow of their flashlights.

"I almost just opened it like that," said Sam, an edge of horror in his voice. "I almost just—"

Dean cut him off with "Well, you didn't." He looked at the brass controls. "Let's think. Let's think. And let's definitely not touch anything till we figure this damn thing out."

"If we're right that it jetted out fire," Sam said, "that means, if you open the gate with it set to the Earthly setting, it actually doesn't open on Earth. It opens somewhere else, somewhere hot. It's connected somewhere else." He gave Dean a grim look. "I'm thinking Hell."

Dean nodded. "My best guess too. Maybe we had the order all wrong." Something was niggling at his mind— something about hot places and cold places. The hot stream and the cold water, coming together... a temperature gradient spanning the brook... Where else had he seen something like that?

Or read something like that, rather. The angel book. The Physiology of Angels. It had said: A temperature gradient spans the etheric, Earthly and ghostly planes. The ghostly plane is colder, the etheric plane warmer.

Then the last piece fell into place — from one of the dreams. The one with Dad. Dad, yanking the Impala away from the white-hot section of flame, toward the darker red flame. And further still... toward somewhere cool.

"We have to pick a cool dimension, Sam!" said Dean, almost running over to the brass semicircle. "A cool dimension! In my dream of Dad, the fire had all these different temperatures! And he steered the car off the road deliberately, toward the cool side. He was giving me this, like, super significant look when he did it, too."

"So... the ghostly realm?" suggested Sam. "The ghostly plane is the only one we know is cold."
They looked at each other.

"Should we do it?" said Sam. He set one hand, tentatively, on the brass arrow. "I'm gonna turn it to the ghostly plane. I think it won't open the gate — it'll just change the setting of the gate but won't open it yet." He glanced at Dean and said, "For chrissake stop me if I'm about to do something stupid."

It made sense, though. It all made sense. If the setting marked with the Earthly plane was, for some reason, too hot, they should aim for the ghostly dimension.

"We could stand here for years thinking it over," said Dean finally. "Do it."

Sam pushed the arrow one notch to the left, to the setting marked with the "Ghost" glyph. There was an audible clunk sound, and a groaning noise from deep inside the stone walls. The tusks trembled momentarily, a little shower of dust falling off them.

They waited a moment, but nothing else happened.

"Okay, so, before we throw the lever we should think about—" said Sam.

The air was split by an eerie wavering howl. It was one of the wolves.

Sam and Dean looked at each other and trotted back through the tunnel. By the time they got outside both wolves were howling, both on their feet, in full voice. In between howls they started growling, glancing down the mountain slope with their hackles raised.

Sam and Dean followed their gaze. There was a thick cloud of black smoke rolling steadily up the mountain slope.

_A/N - So just by the way, there was indeed a news report that wolves have recolonized California, from the north, after more than a hundred years. Two wolves have traveled into northern California from Oregon. They are both black wolves. As soon as I heard it on the news I knew I had to put them in the fic!_

_I will have something next week for sure - though as usual these days, the length of the next installment will depend on my state of health and specifically these EXTREMELY ANNOYING migraine/nausea incidents. Wish me luck. Hope you enjoyed this - thanks so much for reading, and if there was something you liked, please tell me what it was. :)_
A/N - I realized in the last few weeks that life is too short to spend your time pussyfooting around abusive controlling bullies. So I stood up to my boss last week. Cue fury and rage, cue HR and VPs getting involved, mediators, negotiations, etc. ... cue me standing my ground. I sorta gave notice. Now I'm working 12hr days to try to get my papers out so I can try to go get another job. So, not much time for fic-writing. :(

Anyway, here's a small piece - sorry it's short. I'll have the next bit tomorrow actually.

The smoke wasn't demon-smoke — it didn't have the right look. It was Darkness; Dean felt certain. And it was coming fast. It seemed nearly a solid wall, flowing up the mountain relentlessly, nearly halfway up the scree slope by now.

"Back inside!" Dean yelled. "Go! Go!" Sam led the way, pelting back down the tunnel so fast that he careened into the soot-blackened walls a few times, his flashlight only of limited help in the eerily dark tunnel. Dean ran right into Sam's back at one point, but they finally managed to get through the tunnel and into the round cave, Dean right on Sam's heels. Just as they reached the brass controls on the side wall, the wolf-howl sounds behind them switched abruptly to a cacophony of snarls and yips and growls.

It sounded like the real fight had started.

"WOLVES! GET BACK HERE!" Dean hollered over his shoulder, keeping one eye on the massive tusks. Surely Sam would fling the gate open? But no — Sam did have one hand on the lever but he'd hesitated, frowning at the brass glyphs on the semicircular dial and biting his lip. Dean followed Sam's gaze and glanced at the brass glyphs again. From left to right they were: a multifaceted polygon that looked rather like a crystal, the "Ghost" glyph, the "Earth" glyph, a pair of rippling lines ("ether," maybe?), and a star.

The brass arrow was still pointing to "Ghost," one notch to the left of the "Earth" glyph.

"We gotta just go for it," said Dean, taking a step over and tapping the "Ghost" glyph with one finger.

"But we're gonna fry if we do the wrong one," said Sam. "Are we sure we want one notch to the left? Dammit, I wish we had a second more to think—"

The growls and snarls and scuffling noises from outside were sounding even wilder now — rougher and snappier, with an edge of real fury (or was that desperation?). Then there were a couple of yelps.

"Get BACK HERE!" Dean yelled again toward the tunnel, hoping the wolves would understand. He was pretty sure there was no way a couple of wolves could hold off that amount of Darkness-smoke — they'd just be sacrificing themselves for nothing. "Down the TUNNEL! We can cover you!" he yelled. He took a few steps over to the mouth of the tunnel, bracing his pistol hand with his flashlight hand as he peered down the tunnel, hoping he'd see the wolves running toward him.

At first all he saw was the now-familiar corridor of nothingness — a hollow void that seemed to
stretch away to infinity. But then Dean saw motion. His sense of perspective seemed to click into
gear as a fuzzy black tail came into view only about forty feet away, and then an entire wolf, hind-
end first. It was backing up slowly, one paw at a time, ears flattened, snarling — obviously it was
trying to hold its ground. The second wolf came into view a half-second later, snarling viciously at
something just outside but also backing up. It scooted back to brace its hip against the first one’s
shoulder. Dean saw some streaks of red through the black fur; the second wolf had been bloodied.

"We gotta open that gate, Sam!" Dean hollered over his shoulder.

"Dammit," said Sam. "Okay. Just gotta double-check because of, you know, the whole burned-to-
a-shares thing. We're going one notch to the left. We don't want two to the left or anything else, right?
We're going one to the left. Agreed?"

Dean turned to stare at him. "What did you just say?"

Sam blinked. "We don't want... two to the left?"

*Two to the left.*

Two scratches on the *left* side of the car.

Two trees on the *left side of the trail*. Two boulders on the *left*. Two giant feathers on the *left*.

Everything had been on the left side! Dean had even noticed, during that mountain hike in his
strange dream, that whatever had been rampaging along the trail had demolished the right side so
cleanly that only the left side had any objects at all. But he'd never realized what the message had
really been: *Two to the left.*

*Two feathers to the left, two boulders to the left, two trees to the left.*

And also — Bobby! With two whiskeys in his *left* hand! Dad — pulling the Impala off the road to
the *left* — as far to the left as he could possibly get, Dean realized now. Charlie, putting two fingers
on her *left* arm. Even Oshossi's two wolves had carefully positioned themselves on the *left* side of the
cave opening. They'd even shuffled back and re-positioned themselves there, with great care, after
their friendly little farewell.

And even Cas. Poor Cas, dying in Dean's arms, choking on his own blood, had been handing Dean
two red tulips... with his *left* hand. In that dream, Cas had summoned up every last ounce of strength
he'd had. He'd struggled so hard, with his very last breath....

Just to hold up his *left* hand to Dean.

It couldn't possibly have been Cas for real, of course; it had to have been just Dean's subconscious.
But Dean's subconscious must have been piecing the pattern together from the previous dreams. And
the pattern was—

"TWO TO THE LEFT!" Dean roared. "TWO TO THE LEFT!" He lunged over to the brass arrow,
grabbed the end and yanked it over to the second notch, *two to the left* of the Earth glyph. Another
*clunk* sounded from deep within the rock walls and the tusks trembled again.

"What? Why?" objected Sam. He looked baffled. "We don't know what that plane even is! It might
be Hell! Or it might be too cold, the Arctic or something! The Ghostly plane is the only the that we
know that—" Sam had started to move the arrow back to the "Ghost" setting, but Dean grabbed
Sam's wrist and yanked the arrow back to the "two to the left" position.
"Was Jess tugging you to the left?" said Dean. "In your dream? Two tugs to the left?"

"What? Yes— oh!" said Sam. "Oh." He snatched his hand back from the brass arrow, staring at the mysterious glyph it was pointing to now, the crystal-shaped polygon.

Dean blurted out, talking as fast as he could, "Everything was two to the left. In all my dreams. Sam, we gotta—" Sam was already nodding, and he started to put both hands on the lever even while Dean was still trying to explain.

But then a new burst of snarls came from behind them — and then an awful puppy-like whimper accompanied by a painful-sounding thump. They turned to see a black blur as one of the wolves came flying into the room, thrown by some great force. It tumbled through the air right through the tusks, hit the back wall hard and crashed to the floor just a few feet away — between the tusks.

"Wait!" called Dean to Sam. Opening the gate while the wolf was lying there seemed like it might be... rather bad for the wolf. It'll only take a second to drag it to safety, Dean thought. One second. We've got one second. "Wait!" Dean cried again, dashing over to help the wolf up.

Sam ran to help him, and together they grabbed the dazed wolf, Dean grabbing the scruff of its neck and Sam the tail, and dragged it back through the tusks (Dean had totally forgotten by now about worrying whether the wolf might bite). It took three seconds, actually. The wolf shook its head and scrambled to its feet a split second later, pulling free of their hands and staggering back toward the tunnel-mouth, though it was limping badly now. Meanwhile the other wolf came backing rapidly out of the tunnel, hackles raised, growling for all it was worth. Dean turned to see that the dark tunnel looked much shorter than it had before. In fact it seemed to be shortening even more.

No, it wasn't that the tunnel was shortening; the Darkness-smoke had entered the tunnel and was flowing, almost serenely, toward them. It was just twenty feet away.

The second wolf paused in its growling. An almost serene hush fell over the cave as the Darkness approached.

"Now or never, Sam," said Dean, almost in a whisper.

"Now," said Sam, who was already back over by the lever. He hauled the lever down, with the brass arrow now set two to the left.

The brass lever seemed stiff with age. Earlier, Sam had cleaned its contact points carefully, as well as the hinge at its base, but he still had to throw almost his whole body weight on it to get it all the way down. It finally fell into place with an audible click.

For a moment nothing happened. Sam and Dean glanced at each other in dismay.

Then one rune on the tusks began to glow, flooding the room with a faint blue light.

Another rune on the other tusk began to glow. And another on the first tusk, and another on the second. They lit up in pairs, each rune on the near tusk answered by one on the far tusk. As each rune started glowing, its own small layer of soot fell off in a little shower, till it seemed the tusks were deliberately shaking themselves clean. In moments all the runes were glowing with clear white-blue light, and the tusks seemed absolutely sparkling clean.
The smooth ivory began to send out a warm glow of its own. Soon a complete loop of pure white light had formed, running the full length of both tusks, and connected at the top and the bottom by streamers of light that snaked between the tusks.

It wasn't a round circle. It was almost a butterfly-shape, rather: much wider at the top than at the bottom, dipping down at a centered point on the top, and curved elegantly at the sides. "Butterfly-shaped" wasn't quite the right way to describe it, though. *Angel-shaped*, Dean realized.

In fact, he could almost imagine Castiel standing there (or some other angel, possibly — but, of course, the image that came to mind was of Castiel). Castiel, in some other vessel, standing there spreading his wings... maybe even he'd been standing on some open landscape that had once been here in the long-ago past, before Shasta had grown as tall as it was now. The wingtips, originally down near his feet, would have swept up and to the sides. Out and up, each wing carving out its own path. Making an elegantly curved shape that was now outlined by a loop of pure light, suspended between the tusks.

All at once the entire center of the loop of light flashed with a vivid bright light of its own. (For one confused moment Dean thought it actually *was* an angel; but of course it was just the shape of one.) There was a sharp *snap* sound and a hurricane-force wind abruptly came howling out of the white light. It was absolutely overwhelming, like a tornado that had somehow snaked into the room. Dean's ears popped painfully, and a storm of soot flew up all around, whipping off of the floor and walls and blasting down the tunnel with terrific force. Sam and Dean had to grab onto each other to keep their feet. Fortunately they were standing to the sides of the gate, a little away from the main blast of wind, but the wolves, both still positioned at the mouth of the tunnel, were blown off their feet entirely and tumbled down the tunnel as helplessly as two furry dolls.

And the looming cloud of Darkness was blown back too. All the way down the tunnel and completely out of view.

The blinding light from the gate slowly faded to something more like normal daylight. The wind settled too, ramping down from its original gale force to just a brisk breeze. Once Sam and Dean could move a little, they crept a few steps around so they could look right through the tusks. They inched in front of the gate a little tentatively at first, squinting in the bright daylight, and then both brothers stood there with their mouths agape.

Between the tusks was a view of a peaceful meadow of silvery-green grass.

It was daytime on the other side of the tusks. The sky there was overcast but was shining with light, and a rolling field of the silvery grass stretched away into the distance.

The connection from one realm to the next seemed perfectly seamless: cave floor on this side, grass on the other. There wasn't any impression of looking through a surface or a wormhole, or any of the watery or wobbly visual effects Dean had imagined. It was more as if they were simply looking through an open window at a meadow that *truly* was just a foot away, with a cool breeze even wafting off the meadow to ruffle their hair.

The breeze smelled of wildflowers.

"Holy shit," said Sam.

Dean said nothing. *I really wish Cas were here,* was what he was thinking. *Cas should have seen this. Hell, Cas could have explained it. Cas might have MADE this. Cas could have helped... Cas could have guided us....*
Dean shook his head. A moment later he remembered about the wolves, and turned to say, "Wolves, you okay? — whoa!" Sam spun around too and they both blinked.

The entire cave was glittering.

Much of the soot had been blown away by the original gale-force blast of wind, and it turned out that under all the soot, the round room and the tunnel were actually made of some glittering rock — something like mica, perhaps. The floor was shining now, marred just by a few dirty black streaks that extended outwards from the Gate. The walls were sparkling with glints of light. And the formerly black tunnel, which had been virtually scoured by the blast of wind, was now as dazzling as if it had been carved out of diamond.

Dean's attention was drawn instantly, though, to two dark furry lumps far down the sparkling tunnel — the wolves. Thankfully they were both beginning to move. Both wolves hauled themselves to their feet and made their way slowly up the tunnel toward Sam and Dean. The limping one now couldn't seem to put any weight on its hurt foreleg at all, and it had to lurch its way down the tunnel in a series of awkward hops. Both of them looked exhausted; they were panting heavily, tongues lolling out of their mouths.

"You guys are friggin' champs," Dean said to them, as they straggled out of the glittering tunnel and into the mica-sparkling cave. "Really. I mean it."

Sam knelt to offer the limping wolf some water from his water bottle, first pouring a little water into his hand and then offering his hand to the wolf. Sam looked a little tentative, but the wolf lapped at the water eagerly. Dean did the same for the other wolf, which also seemed very thirsty. Each wolf lapped up as much as it could.

But then both wolves' ears perked up. Dean's wolf growled, Sam's did too, and both wolves spun to guard the tunnel mouth yet again, hackles raised. The one with the hurt paw turned its head over its shoulder and snarled at Sam.

"I think that means 'get going, you idiots'," said Sam, closing his water bottle and stuffing it back in his pack.

"Yeah, I think we're only at half-time, not the end of the game—" said Dean. "Dammit! Here it comes again." For the cloud of Darkness-smoke had reformed at the end of the tunnel and was once again rolling toward them.

"C'mon, Sam," Dean said, turning to face the Gate. "And we are goddam holding hands this time, too. Wolves, you better follow after us." He reached out for Sam's hand, and felt Sam clamp on tightly.

"On three," said Dean. "One — two — THREE!" They jumped through the tusks.

Though the meadow had looked just a foot away, there was a sensation of falling.

Falling... absolutely helpless, weightless, and terrified. For a very, very, very long distance....

...that all went by in a very, very, very short span of time. Somehow it seemed only half a second later when Sam and Dean landed, on their feet, grabbing onto each other to keep their balance. And
there they were, standing in the grasses, looking out over the wide grassy meadow in a peaceful afternoon light. More than a meadow; a prairie, it seemed, for it went on and on out of view.

Dean turned back to the Gate and discovered that they were standing by a huge block of stone about twelve feet high. The Gate was set right into the side of the stone, framed on this side by a sort of metallic arch instead of by tusks, an arch of beaten silver that was covered with hundreds and hundreds of runes. The original round cave was still visible through the metal arch, just a few feet away. From here it looked as if the round mica-cave had simply been hollowed out of the huge block of stone.

And they could see, very clearly, what was happening on the other side: the Darkness-smoke was nearly to the round cave, flowing down the tunnel again. The two wolves had been forced to back up farther, both still snarling (the snarls were audible, though they now sounded oddly distant, as if they were being heard from underwater). The limping one was leaning on the other one for support.

"Wolves!" Dean called to them. "Get over here!"

"Damn, how do we **shut** it once the wolves are through?" Sam said, starting to look all around the metal arch. "Where's the lever?"

Dean started looking too, but there was no brass lever on either side. The stone looked ancient. It seemed eroded and pitted from rainfall; any glyphs that might have been carved in it were long gone, and any controls it might once have had seemed long gone too. Some other jumbled rocks lay nearby, but there was no sign of any kind of controls.

"Maybe the Men of Letters never got to this side?" said Dean, scanning around the ground at his feet, half-hoping to see a brass lever poking up out of the ground somewhere. But there was nothing. "Shit. If we can't close it, the Darkness is just gonna come right through—"

"You know what I just realized," said Sam, gazing back through the Gate. "It might be capable of flipping a lever anyway. I mean, even if we closed the Gate... if it can throw a wolf down a tunnel, it can flip a lever."

*He's right*, Dean realized.

There was no way to keep the Darkness from coming right on through.

Dean abandoned the search for a lever and pulled his pistol out instead — which he was pretty sure it wasn't going to do any good either, but it was all he had left to try. Sam, beside him, was unslinging the shotgun from his backpack, his mind obviously on the same track. Dean risked a quick glance around at the landscape, trying to assess their options. There was only this one rather small group of jumbled stones, and the long empty plain of grass. A steep hill was visible about a mile off, but other than that there were few trees and not really any place to run.

Not much cover here. They'd just have to make a stand and hope for the best.

Back in the round room, the Darkness-smoke was boiling around in the mouth of the tunnel now. It even seemed to be *widening* the tunnel, eating away at the walls like a gigantic devouring mouth. At last a tongue of the smoke boiled into the round cave, bubbling up to cover the ceiling while the two wolves cringed below. The wolves seemed to have realized that they were overmatched; they had backed as close to the Gate as they could get without actually backing through it, both their tails were tucked down low, and the wolf with the hurt leg was visibly shaking.

Yet still they held their ground. Bracing against each other shoulder-to-shoulder.
"WOLVES!" Dean yelled. "COME HERE! COME THROUGH!"

Sam yelled, "C'MON! COME WITH US!"

One wolf glanced over its shoulder at them, but it only flattened its ears. Dean could almost read the expression in its eyes: *We can't come through.*

It wasn't clear whether the wolves weren't allowed, or were just too scared. Maybe, even, the transition wasn't safe for wolves, and they somehow knew this?

Dean's mind shot to an image of Cas in Purgatory.

*Go, Dean! Go!*

The wolf was still looking at him. Dean met its eyes, and knew it was saying: *Go.*

*We'll try to hold it off. We may die, but you must survive. Go.*

A tongue of Darkness reached right over the wolves' heads. Both wolves actually tried to rear up to snap at it, a gesture that seemed to Dean to be very brave but also amazingly reckless. But the Darkness veered above the wolves' heads. It was almost through the Gate; it was reaching straight through. Dean fired his pistol at it, but the Darkness only hesitated briefly, swallowing the bullet with a few sparks of lightning, and then came forward again. It was *coming through* —

— and something swatted it back.

Something half-visible. A wobble in the air, at the edge of the ring of light. Something had, impossibly, nosed in sideways from the tusks.

It pushed a little farther into the opening of the Gate.

It was a hooked wooden stick.

Held by a dark-colored hand.

Elegua stepped in from one side of the Gate, Oshossi just behind him, both of them framed neatly within the arch. Dean experienced, then, a dizzying moment of suddenly seeing the Gate as a something that had a space *within* it — as if had suddenly unspooled to reveal that it was actually an immensely long road, a road that was millions of miles long, with multiple places where orishas could walk in from the sides. A moment later the Gate once again seemed to have no length at all, to simply be a seamless transition from silvery grasses to a soot-streaked cave-floor.

Somehow, however it had happened, the orishas had indeed moved in from the side, from some unknowable other place. Both orishas were breathing hard, and both seemed a little scuffed up. Oshossi’s lovely blue-and-yellow tunic was torn, and Elegua had a bloody scrape on his face. *This cost them,* Dean knew at once. *It cost them something, to get here.*

It had all happened in just a moment, the two orishas appearing. They both glanced at Sam and Dean as they stepped in, Oshossi giving them a nod of acknowledgment, and then both turned to face the Darkness. Already the Darkness was regrouping, and it seemed to be almost boiling in anger now, little flashes of internal lightning showing here and there. Oshossi raised his bow and arrow and stepped into the round cave to stand with the wolves. The Darkness seemed to charge then, the entire wall of dark smoke pushing toward the Gate. *They'll never stop it,* thought Dean, but then Elegua spun around in a surprisingly graceful twirl, whipping his hooked wooden stick through the air like a scythe in a huge circle that traced out the entire outline of the Gate. At once the entire image began to
swirl, as it had all been made of colored threads that Elegua had somehow wrapped up in his hooked wooden stick. The Darkness surged forward, Oshossi and the wolves leapt to meet it — and Elegua jerked the stick.

The last thing Dean saw was Elegua's dark eyes, looking right at him just as the wolf had.

Go.

All the threads of color seemed to break at once, and Sam and Dean found themselves looking at a pitted, eroded wall of stone.

Every rune on the metal arch burst into flame.

---

A/N - Two to the left. Many of you picked up on the "two" motif, and at least two of you noticed the "left" as well. This was what it was about. (It's so fun to have alert readers who keep floating interesting theories - and some of you come with theories that are better than what I had in mind, to be honest.)

And what would have happened if they'd opened it set on "Ghost"? Maybe we'll find out later.

More tomorrow. And I swear someday I'll be able to respond to comments again. Please drop me a comment if you have a moment!
A/N - Hey, thanks so much for all your support. I really, really appreciate it. Am resisting the urge to spill my guts here and explain how 100% awesome and perfect I am, and how 100% evil and terrible my boss is — truth is it's more complex than that (imagine that! lol), but, long story short, I gotta get out.

(edit to explain that further: OK, actually I AM awesome and perfect, lol. I mean, I didn't do anything wrong, not even one tiny little thing. What's going on is: my boss is doing unethical and bullying things imho, but I don't "hate" her and I don't want to slide into hating her - don't want to go there mentally. I just want to leave. BTW of her 3 subordinates, one quit last year, I'm quitting now, the 3rd is thinking of quitting next year. Yeah.)

Anyway thanks SO much for the encouragement some of you gave me to try writing professionally. Believe me, I'm thinking about it. Been thinking of starting up some self-pubbing next year on Amazon, at least just to test the waters. PS - some of you also asked about the migraines - you guys are so kind to inquire. That has been much better as of this week. Only had 1 last week and it was short. I'm convinced this job was contributing to it. I may have to go through more stress and overwork to finally get to a point where I can have less stress and be free. By February next year I plan to be down in Rio for Carnaval and putting this all behind me. :)

Anyway here is the rest of the "Through the Looking Glass" chapter, now its own little stand-alone chapter. Hope you enjoy!

Elegua just slammed the Gate closed and the metal arch has burst into flame, and here we go:

Sam and Dean stood there numbly, staring at the blank stone.

Dean reached out one hand to touch it. It was just stone, its rough surface cool under his fingers. The round cave, with the wolves and the orishas and the Darkness, was gone as if it had never been there.

The only sound was the soft hissing of the little flames dancing all over the metal arch. Soon they began winking out, one flame after another going out. Sam took a step over to peer at the last few flames at his side of the arch.

"The runes are melting," said Sam. "I think they're destroyed." The last of the flames went out. Dean took a closer look at his own side of the arch and realized it wasn't a single piece of metal. It was made of overlapping skinny plates of silver, something like a whole set of curved spikes that had been roughly hammered and welded together. They were now covered with blurry smeared markings that must have been the runes, all illegible now.

Dean touched one of the melted runes lightly and hissed with pain, shaking his finger.

"They're still hot," he reported to Sam, sticking his finger in his mouth.

"No kidding," said Sam, laughing at him a little. "They just melted, Dean. Well, I think that's what you'd call a permanently closed Gate."
Dean nodded, checking his finger. (It looked okay.) "I think Elegua basically broke the connection," said Dean, looking up again at the blank stone wall within the arch. "Don't you think? He let it collapse, like it would have originally after Ca— ... I mean, after whatever angel spread his wings to make it."

Sam gave him a quiet glance, but made no comment.

Dean added, "I'm pretty sure Elegua saved our butts there. I really hope they're all right. The orishas and the wolves, I mean."

"They might survive," said Sam, looking back at the arch.

"They'll be fine," Dean said, faking a conviction he did not at all feel. They were both quiet a moment; the scene on the other side of the arch had been shaping up to be a serious battle, and it had seemed clear that even the arrival of the orishas wouldn't necessarily save the day.

Dean said firmly, "Oshossi'll whisk the wolves away, and they'll all be fine."

"Dean..." said Sam, his voice thoughtful, "they were seriously risking themselves just so that we could get through."

Dean nodded. "Well, at least we're through. And with the Gate collapsed like that, I think — I hope — the Darkness can't follow us here. At least not yet." A thought struck him, and he turned to look across the silver grasses out to the vast empty prairie.

Dean added, "Though I guess that also means we have no way home."

---

They took a few moments to regroup and rest. It was hard to get their minds off the battle that might, even now, be unfolding back in the round cave, but there was simply no way to know how the wolves and the orishas were doing... and there was certainly no way to help them.

Once the adrenaline wore off a bit, they both sat to catch their breath, gulp down a bit of food and drink some water. (Dean had never been so glad that Sam was such a health nut about bringing multiple water bottles; even after the hike and sharing some water with the wolves, they each still had two bottles left in their packs.) While they rested they checked their weapons, and did a little rearranging of gear. The flashlights went back into the packs, since it seemed to be daytime in whatever time zone they were in now. Dean tried to judge the time, but couldn't spot the sun; but all the swirling clouds overhead were glowing pretty brightly with what seemed a mid-day sort of light. Early afternoon, maybe.

Sam, who was sitting cross-legged next to Dean, got his compass out and stared at it for a moment, turning it around a few times. "Well, I think the compass works," he finally said. He balanced the compass on one knee and pointed in a direction across the prairie, off to the right a little toward the distant hill. "If we want to go by your memory of Ash's dream-map, northeast's that way."

"Does that mean we're on Earth?" asked Dean. "Just a, what, multidimensional extension of Earth? Or... are we in Heaven? Cause this sure doesn't look like Hell. Not the part I saw anyway."

"Me neither," said Sam quietly. They both sat still a moment, Sam still with the compass on his knee, looking out over the prairie that was spread in front of them. All the grasses were a lovely silvery-
green color that shimmered in the steady breeze. Here and there the grasses were speckled with clumps of tiny blue and white flowers that seemed almost to shine in the afternoon light.

Dean fingered a little blue flower that was growing near his feet. "Do you think Heaven is really, like, an extension of Earth?" he said. "A slice of Earth that's in another dimension? Or is this some other place entirely? Limbo or something?" He looked out over the prairie grasses. It was pretty and all, but....a little bit eerie, too. The high, swirling clouds overhead looked a little ominous. Where was the sun? What kind of place had silvery-green grasses like this? What would a "Fire Gate" connect to, anyway? It didn't look like Hell, and it didn't look like Purgatory. And, contrary to Sam's fears about "Arctic" coldness, the temperature seemed downright comfortable. Almost balmy.

Dean said, "Where the hell are we, anyway?"

Sam shrugged as he tucked the compass back into a pocket on his pack. "No way to know. Could be someone's personal Heaven, I guess? Or some part of Heaven we never saw when we went there before." He took a deep breath and sniffed the air. "The air's breathable, at least, right? I guess all we really know is, there's a magnetic field, and northeast—" he pointed again—"is that way."

Dean said, "Okay. Well, Ash drew the Crown as being pretty close to the Fire Gate, on that map of his, so maybe it isn't too far off." He tried to picture the scale of Ash's map in his mind, the huge "Dream-Map for Dummies" that Ash had drawn later in the dream. That map had been absolutely immense, actually. Jo had practically been on tiptoe, holding her arms all the way up, just to try to keep the bottom edge of the map clear of the floor, and even so the two symbols for the Fire Gate and the Crown of Heaven had been just about as close together as Ash was able to draw them. (If that had indeed been what Ash meant... and if that had really been Ash... and if Dean was even remembering it correctly... If, if, if.)

Dean tried to put the if's aside and focus on the only clue he really had. "If that was any kind of Earth-sized map — I mean, if we're on some kind of projection of the Earth — then, the way Ash drew it, I think the Crown might be less than a hundred miles away, I think? Maybe fifty."

Sam looked a little hopeful. "We can do that in a few days," he said. "A week or so, maybe. Assuming we find some streams or something for water, we could make good time on this sort of terrain." Sam made an expansive gesture at the rolling prairie around them. Dean nodded; the prairie looked relatively easy to walk on. In his Purgatory days he'd gotten used to regular all-day hikes, and that had been through much rougher country. That had been ages ago, of course — and, granted, he'd not been at his best recently, but at least he'd been hiking up and down Cas's hill several times a day. He felt pretty confident he could get into the swing of twenty-mile or even thirty-mile hiking days again without too much trouble.

"We can do that," Dean agreed. "A few days to the northeast, then. A week at most, we can hope. We might get a little hungry, but we'll survive."

Not that we'll ever get back home. But that was a worry for another day.

Dean looked around at the clumps of stones where they were sitting. "Guess we won't be back here... is there anything else we can learn? About Gates, or whatever? Some new glyphs or something?" They both stood for one last look around the big stones, and soon realized there were quite a lot more jumbled stones than they had seen at first — big square stones that had tumbled down here and there, some of them in rough rows.

"There must've some kind of building here, around the arch," suggested Sam. "Something that fell apart long ago."
"Very long ago," said Dean, eyeing a line of nubbly little wall-stones that had eroded so badly that all their square corners had worn off long ago. The stones were almost round; rainwater had even eroded little grooves into them.

"These look really old," said Sam. "Wonder why the grass hasn't grown over them? He began poking around the square stones a little more. Dean decided to take one last look at the silver arch to study its basic structure a little more closely. Some of the curved pieces of silver were very small, just an inch or two long; and some were huge, curved pieces that were a meter or more in length. Some were straight, some were curved. The melted runes had cooled off enough now for Dean to be able to run his hand along the whole thing (without burning himself this time). The feel of the silver under his hand seemed awfully familiar, and when Dean's eye fell on some of the intermediate-length, straighter pieces, he realized why.

"Sam," Dean said. Sam looked up from a line of huge rounded wall-stones that he'd been studying. Dean beckoned him closer and pointed to some of the straighter pieces. "Those look familiar to you?"

Sam leaned in and frowned. Then he let out a surprised huff of air.

"Angel-blades!" said Sam. Dean nodded.

The entire arch was made of angel-blades. Almost all had been bent and curved, somehow hammered together. And there were some different sizes that Dean had never seen before; some seemed like tiny little daggers while others seemed almost broadsword-length. But all were recognizable angel-blades.

Dean ran his hand over the angel-blades again, saying, "We are in Heaven. Or some part of it. Where else would there be so many angel-blades just lying around that somebody would use them for construction?"

"Angel two-by-fours, you mean?" Sam said with a smile.

Dean grinned back at him. But he also couldn't help thinking, Sure would've been nice if Cas were here and I could just ask him.

They got their packs back on, ready to start out. It might be quite a long journey, but they both were quite heartened by the discovery that they very likely were, it seemed, in some part of Heaven.

The prairie stretched away before them, long rolling hills carpeted with knee-high silvery grass that was rippling in the steady wind. The tall grasses were punctuated here and there only by a few gnarled trees, each tree standing all by itself on the crest of a little hummock of prairie. The trees seemed to have no leaves at all, but instead were coated entirely with flowers; some trees were all red, some all yellow, some all white. The effect created bright bursts of color here and there, like festively colored decorations capping each little foothill.

Overhead the spacious sky stretched in all directions, completely overcast but gleaming with light. Roiling swirls of clouds were stirring here and there, making Dean slightly worried they might be in tornado-country, but the breeze around them seemed relatively mild.

The wide-open scene made it rather hard to get a fix on what they were aiming for. Sam kept
consulting his compass, but the only landmarks in sight were the stone ruins behind them, and the single hill they'd noticed ahead, a small but steep butte that poked up out of the surrounding prairie.

"Let's head up that hill to see if we can get a view, to try and see where we're headed," suggested Dean, pointing to the hill. It was about a mile away, and looked only a few hundred feet tall and maybe a thousand feet long— easy enough to walk up and get a look around. Sam agreed, and they started walking.

After the chaos of the battle that they'd left behind, the prairie seemed downright peaceful. As they strolled along, it began to sink in that they'd actually found the Fire Gate, and managed to open it without dying, and had actually managed to reach Heaven. (Or, at least, somewhere with a lot of angel-blades.)

"We actually made it here," commented Dean.

Sam, walking beside him, laughed. "I know. Amazing, isn't it? Now all we gotta do is find the Crown of Heaven."

"And not die," Dean reminded him. "And not get our souls obliterated forever and ever."

"Well, yeah," said Sam. He added a moment later, "Oh, and, figure out how to defeat the Darkness. And save the universe."

"Oh, right, that," said Dean. "Almost forgot about that. I need to write out a to-do list or something. Some of these little errands keep slipping my mind, y'know?" And all at once they were both laughing, caught in such a weird mix of hope, and stress, and relief, and worry, that the only reasonable course of action seemed to be to laugh.

They soon settled into a steady traveling pace. For a while the only sound was the rustle of their jeans through the grasses, and the ceaseless wind rolling past. The silvery grasses were quite lovely in the wind; when they bent in the breeze they caught the light so that they seemed to shimmer, almost like they were glowing themselves. Waves of lovely rippling light seemed to run across the prairie whenever all the grasses bent in sync. It was undeniably beautiful.

"I bet this is the Heaven of some Plains Indian or something," said Dean. "Don't you think?"

"A prairie Heaven," Sam said, considering the idea. "Could be. Somebody like that. Somebody from the Great Plains... or the African savannah or Mongolia or something. Who knows."

"Somebody who liked grass, anyway," said Dean.

But then they came to a huge patch of earth where no grass was growing at all. It was a long stretch of barren earth packed down flat, with not a single thing growing, as if all the topsoil had been neatly stripped away. Farther away, on the grassier areas nearby, was a jumble of thousands of clumps of uprooted grass and clumps of sod, along with a few fallen trees. It looked rather as if some giant piece of farm equipment had raked the ground clean and tossed all the vegetation aside.

The two brothers eyed the bare patch of ground suspiciously. It was the first thing they'd seen that seemed to have almost an air of... menace.
"Maybe it's cursed ground?" said Dean.

"Or maybe a patch of Darkness was here," suggested Sam.

They detoured around it.

"Jeez, it's like, four football fields long," said Dean, as they worked their way around the edges of the barren area, clambering over a few sad-looking fallen trees (their bright flowers had faded) and jumbled heaps of sod. Finally they managed to straighten out their course again and head once more for the little hill.

They found no more patches of bare earth, and couldn't think of what might have caused it, so they kept going.

After only about ten more minutes they came to the hill. It loomed sharply up out of the flat prairie around it, some kind of geological outcropping that stuck far above the surrounding terrain. It was somewhat oblong, steep on three sides and sloping on the fourth, so they walked up the long sloping side. After some huffing and puffing they got to the top and surveyed their surroundings.

From here they could see the little clump of stone ruins, nearly a mile behind them now. The silver arch was even visible, a tiny silver-colored glint of light among the old stones. It was easier to see from here that there had, indeed, once been some kind of squarish structure around the arch that had eroded away nearly to nothing over the eons.

"I wonder if this hill had some kind of sentry-post to keep an eye on the Gate?" Dean suggested. "You can see it great from here. Along with everything for miles in every direction. Actually... this is the only hill. Maybe it was built for that."

"You mean, an artificial hill?" Sam said, looking around. "For a lookout? Could be. It's a little weirdly shaped. I wonder..." He thought a moment. "I wonder actually if this might be a building too? Like, an overgrown ruin or something? Maybe from the same era as the stones around the Gate. The grasses and trees might've grown right over this hill by now. Like, look down there—" Sam pointed down the steep side of their hill to a set of five big jagged rocks down below, on the flank of the hill, that seemed laid out in a little array. "That looks, structured, sort of."

"A big sentry building," Dean concluded. "Grown over like those old Aztec pyramids. Well, it does have quite a view."

They looked in all directions. The prairie seemed to go on and on forever. Endless low rolling hills, wave after wave of them stretching out forever, as if they were adrift on an endless ocean.

"I feel like I can see for a thousand miles," said Sam, shading his eyes as he peered off into the horizon, focusing now on the northeast. "Jeez. The perspective here is really weird. It's like it's infinite."

"Like I said," said Dean, "Somebody's idea of Heaven. Endless prairie."

"Yeah, but," said Sam, squinting now, "Where's the Crown? I mean, I can see a long way and I am not seeing any kind of building or a city or any sign of... well, anything. I guess I was also kind of hoping we'd see one of those weird roads that Heaven has? But... damn, I see nothing." He lowered his hand with a sigh. "If the Crown's small we're going to miss it. All we've got to go on is kinda northeast," you know? That's not exactly precise GPS coordinates."

Dean dug out his phone then, curious to see if it was picking up any GPS satellites. (Doubtful, he thought, but it seemed worth checking.)
As expected, the phone showed no cell service, and no GPS signal either. And it wasn't downloading any kind of map.

"Well, we're not in Kansas anymore," said Dean. Sam automatically gave him a whap on the shoulder — it was a long-running old family joke (as it was for anybody who'd been born in Kansas) that always required a whap on the shoulder — and Dean went on, "or the African savannah, for that matter, or anywhere on Earth as far as I can tell."

Dean was about to put the phone away when he remembered Cas's voicemails.

He stared down at the phone. He'd been meaning to have one last ceremonial listen to the voicemails at the teepee, but then the wolves had shown up. Things had happened so fast after that that he hadn't had the chance. And now Dean's stomach seemed to plummet into his shoes as he realized that he was out of cell range. Possibly forever.

Which meant he might have lost his last chance to ever hear Cas's voice.

It seemed such a terrific loss that Dean actually felt a little nauseous. *I just wanted to hear his voice again*, he thought, barely able to breathe, clutching the phone tightly. *I just wanted to hear his voice one more time...*

He opened the phone app. Then he heaved a huge sigh of relief when he saw that the phone had fully downloaded the three messages long ago. *Fully* downloaded. The phone had the full recordings.

The wave of relief was so intense that Dean had to actually stand still a moment, one hand holding the phone and the other hand over his breastpocket where Cas's feather was, just blinking back the tears of relief.

Then he realized the phone's battery wouldn't last here more than a day or two. He had the voicemails now, but he'd lose them soon.

"Sam, be back in a sec," Dean said.

Sam turned from his horizon-scanning to give Dean a curious look, and glanced down at the phone in Dean's hand. "Don't tell me you've got cell service? Here in Heaven?" Sam said. He added, with a grin, "Pretty sure even Verizon hasn't put any cell towers out this far. Unless they have some new other-realms plan I hadn't heard about."

"Just want to listen to some old stuff," said Dean. He knew his voice was coming out a little stiff. "Back in a sec."

Sam's eyes flicked again to Dean's phone, where the voicemail list was clearly visible. Sam's smile vanished at once. He said, in an entirely different tone of voice, "You sure you wanna hear them?"

Dean nodded. "Last chance," he said, unable to meet Sam's eyes.

"You gonna be okay?"

"Don't know," said Dean. He shrugged. "Gotta hear 'em."

Sam gave an uneasy nod. "Sure. Okay. But... don't go too far, okay? Stay in sight?"

Dean nodded. He walked about fifty yards farther along the crest of the hill, just far enough so that he was out of earshot. He could feel Sam's eyes on him as he turned his back and hit Play on the first
message, looking out over the shimmering silver prairie.

To his intense disappointment, the first voicemail had no message at all. Cas had hung up without a message.

Dean took a deep breath. *Please be a message. Please be a message*, he thought, pressing Play on the second voicemail.

At once Castiel said, right into Dean's ear, "Dean. Call me."

That was it; just those three words; but it had been *Castiel*, it was *Cas*, it was *Cas's voice*. So stunningly Cas, so heartbreakingly familiar that Dean was instantly in tears, gasping for breath, just from hearing *that voice* again after all these months. That rough growl... so hoarse and low, so unmistakable.

So beloved.

Dean hit Play again. Again Cas said, "Dean. Call me."

The recording seemed so fresh and crisp that it seemed Cas *must* still be alive. Maybe just out of sight.... maybe just around a corner....

Dean had to play it again.

And again.

And again.

*Dean. Call me.*

*Dean. Call me.*

*Dean. Call me.*

Over and over.

"I would if I could, Cas," Dean whispered to the sky. "You know I would."

The third message was longer. Dean pushed Play and again that beloved voice was growling in his ear, so clear that again it seemed Castiel must be standing just behind Dean's shoulder. Dean pressed the phone tightly to his ear with both hands, his eyes screwed shut, as if Castiel could somehow come back to life again if Dean just listened hard enough.

Cas said: "Dean. Sam dropped me off back at the bunker but you're not here. He said you were still sleeping in your room but you're not there. I'm a little worried. Please let me know where you are." A pause, then a slightly gruffer, "Dean, I... might be able to help. As I... as I used to do. If you wish." The message ended abruptly.

A ragged breath tore out of Dean. The mantling. Cas was talking about the mantling.

Cas had been offering to help, and Dean had never even listened to the voicemail.

It suddenly seemed to require an impossible effort to remain standing upright, so Dean crouched down on his heels in the grasses. He pressed one hand to his forehead and closed his eyes, blocking out the strange world around him as much as he could while he listened to the third message again. And again. And again.
I might be able to help.

As I used to do.

If you wish.

Dean finally got himself pulled together enough to open his eyes and check the date on the message. It turned out to be from about a month after the Mark had been removed. Dean was pretty sure he remembered the day, too; it must have been the day when Dean had staggered out of the bunker for one of his first unsteady walks around the building, the first time he'd been feeling well enough to venture outside. Cas and Sam had been out doing some errands and Dean had thought they'd both been gone for a while. But when Dean had returned from his unsteady walk, feeling exhausted and still a little sick, Cas had been sitting at the library table. Cas hadn't been reading anything, either; he'd just been sitting there at the table, staring at his phone.

Cas had jumped up when Dean had walked in. Such a look of relief had washed over Cas's face....

Dean listened to the message again.

I might be able to help.

As I used to do.

If you wish.

"Oh, god, Cas..." Dean said now, in almost a groan, looking up at the sky. "Why aren't you here? Why aren't you here with me?" He finally managed to stand up again, but now he felt another prayer spilling out of him, one he knew was not being heard, and yet he could not help it. "Cas, I need you, my god, Cas, I need you so damn much. I do need your help, I do...."

Dean had actually been fighting back an awareness, all day and all night, of just how much they needed Castiel. Cas would've been able to read the Enochian runes on the ivory tusks. He would've known immediately what all the brass glyphs meant, and how to open the Fire Gate. He could've helped them get through so fast that the poor wolves would've been able to escape, and the orishas could've been safe too. Hell, Cas might've even made that gate. (Maybe that's why he'd known where it was, on his maps?)

Cas would've known where to go, here in this endless prairie; he would've known where the Crown was, and what it looked like.

Dean said, to the empty air, to the sky, "We got through the Fire Gate, Cas, can you believe it? But just by the skin of our teeth. But now we're up on this hill, and we cannot see a damn friggin' thing anywhere but grass. We don't really know where to go except, sorta northeast, and we're gonna wander off into the prairie and probably die of thirst or something. You would've known where to go, wouldn't you? And..." Dean stole a quick glance over his shoulder; Sam was well out of earshot, hands jammed in his pockets, just gazing out over the horizon. Dean whispered, "If Sam dies out here, Cas...." A heavy breath. "It'll be all my fault. Like everything is, but... if I have to watch Sam die here... Dammit, I keep thinking, you would've been here with us, if I hadn't..." The next words came hoarse and rough. "...killed you. If I hadn't killed you. Ah, dammit, Cas... I don't know if I, if we, can do this without you. Dammit, man. I miss you so fucking much. In so many different ways."

He stared off toward the strangely distant horizon for a long moment. "I'm trying to finish this for you," Dean said at last. "I mean, I'm doing it for everybody, of course. To save the universe and all, to put things right, all that too, of course. But also... I'm doing it for you. This was your idea, Cas,"
said Dean. "This whole Crown-of-Heaven thing. You spent so much time thinking about it and planning it. I want to see it through for you." He paused. "You were gonna try to redeem yourself, weren't you," Dean said softly. "I know you wanted that. I know you did. Because you were always someone who always tried to do the right thing, you really were, and it was tearing you apart that you thought you'd messed up. Wasn't it. You wanted to fix it."

This had been in the back of Dean's mind all along. It was something he'd never mentioned to Sam: that this journey to the Crown would have been, for Castiel, some form of redemption.

"I want to do this for you," Dean finished. "I want to finish this for you. I want it so bad. But I don't even know how."

A very distant sound caught his ear. Some long, low sound, remote in the distance. Just the wind, maybe? The wind had, in fact, grown rougher; and a second later it almost blew Dean off his feet. He staggered and caught his balance, looking around. Looked like Sam had felt it too, for he was trotting over to Dean now, looking a little concerned.

"You okay?" said Sam.

Dean shrugged, trying to get the Cas thoughts out of his head. He shoved the phone in his pocket, saying, "The weather's getting weird. Maybe we should try to find some cover and—"

Then Dean was almost blown off his feet again — but this time he realized it wasn't the wind. The wind hadn't shifted. He looked around, confused. Sam had staggered too. "What the hell?" said Sam. "Did you feel that?"

Dean nodded.

The entire hill began to shake.

"Earthquake?" said Dean.

"We should get off the hill," said Sam. "Could be a landslide—" Another tremor shook them, then a whole series of tremors, and they both began to run down the long sloping side of the hill. Showers of earth were soon tumbling down around them, grasses sliding around and tipping over. A thought flashed through Dean's mind, about the jumbled grasses and clumps of sod that they'd passed earlier, by the huge barren patch of ground; had those clumps of grass fallen off of something? Had there been an earthquake there too?

The hill was a good thousand feet long, and Sam and Dean half-ran, half-slid down the long sloping side of the hill. Off to the side, far below them to the right, motion caught Dean's eye. He glanced over and realized a huge section of grass hundreds of feet long, a whole section of the flank of the hill, was somehow lifting up.

The entire hill was disintegrating around them. Sam and Dean both accelerated, shifting into near-panic running mode, pelting down the hill now, skidding as the grasses and earth underneath gave way. Dean fell at one point and slithered down a section of loosened earth; Sam grabbed his arm and hauled him up. They kept going. The chunk of land on the flank of the hill was still lifting, up over their heads now, dirt showering down from above. Another section of land seemed to be rising up on the other side of the hill too, grass and trees tumbling off as it moved.

An absolutely deafening shriek split the air. Dean had to clap his hands over his ears; it felt like his eardrums were bursting. He kept running through it, and so did Sam. They were almost off the hill when the last few feet of the earth jerked right out from under them, and they slid down in a heap of
uprooted grasses. Dean glanced behind, panting, to see that the sides of the mountain were not "collapsing," as he'd thought.

They were unfolding.

They were wings.

Wings a half a mile across.

The "last few feet of the hill" that had jerked out from under them shifted back abruptly, almost bowling Sam over — he'd been staring up at the wings, and Dean had to yank him to safety. They scrambled farther away, dodging some kind of chunk of land that was starting to wave around nearby. It was the long "slope" that had been on one side of the hill, and now it became clear it was a tail; a tail at least a quarter-mile long. Dean and Sam got clear of it and stumbled back in shock, looking up at the "hill," as some sort of impossibly immense creature that had been buried under the grass rose slowly to its feet. It stood on four immense legs, shaking off the dirt and grass and trees that must have been encrusting it for untold eons as it lay there sleeping. It stretched its impossibly huge wings, wings that must have been folded for millennia. Some of the "rocky outcroppings" that Sam had noticed earlier flexed, and more dirt fell away. The "rocky outcroppings" had been toes. On a foot. With talons ten feet long. Another shattering scream split the air; again Sam and Dean had to clap their hands over their ears. The source of the sound finally came into view as a huge fanged head rose up at the other end of the "hill." The beast's head alone was the size of a jet airplane, its eyes some ten feet in diameter.

It screamed again. And this time came an answering scream, from a long way away. Dean managed to tear his eyes away just long enough to scan the sky, and soon he spotted what he'd been dreading:

The black "eagle" from his dreams.

But the thing they were next to was no eagle. It was a thousand times bigger.

"Celestial dragons," Sam said faintly by his side. He was staring at one of the huge wings as it spread out overhead, too stunned to even move.

The moment Sam said the word "dragons" the great head swung around toward them. The enormous eyes focused, and the celestial dragon opened its immense jaws. Inside its mouth was a spark of fire.

"Run," said Dean, and they ran.

---

A/N -

Uh-oh.

The next chapter will be up sometime next weekend. It'll probably be Sat or Sun this time instead of the usual Friday; depends how the crazy stuff at work unfolds - it's all going to come to a head on Friday when a grant is due. (And thanks all for your constant encouragement to not overwork myself on this fic, but the truth is that working on the fic settles me; it takes me away from all the real-life problems.)

As always, if you liked anything in particular in this chapter, please drop me a comment and tell me
what you liked! Thank you for reading my story!
They ran. But as Dean looked ahead at the endless prairie, his heart sank.

Where could they even go?

*Nowhere to run, nowhere to hide.*

Another deafening screech sounded behind them as they pelted over the prairie. Dean cringed at the sound that came next; a gusting, wind-tunnel-like roar that seemed all too much like the sound of... a blast of fire. A millisecond later came a wave of searing heat on his neck and a *whoomp* sound of something bursting into flame.... but nothing worse than that. Dean glanced behind, stumbling as he ran, to see that a long swath of grasses behind them had erupted in flame. But by sheer luck the flame had fallen just short of Sam and Dean. It seemed the dragon was still trying to pull its feet free of the earth, a little off balance, and had missed them slightly. Though there was now a line of flaming grasses a solid hundred feet long right behind them, sending a black curtain of smoke up into the sky.

The dragon shot another gigantic blast of flame toward them. This time Dean saw it happen, a searing blast of bright yellow flame shooting out of the thing's jaws for *hundreds* of feet.

Yet it missed by even farther this time. Another swath of grasses (and some of the fallen trees) erupted in flame, but this time the line of fire was a couple hundred feet away. The dragon had missed them completely this time, as if it'd been aiming blind.

"It lost us!" hissed Sam. He grabbed Dean's arm and pulled him farther over toward the dragon's tail, whispering, "The smoke!" Dean realized what Sam meant: The curtain of smoke from the first swath of burning grasses, and now the second one too, was screening them from the dragon's view.

It was likely to be the only stroke of luck they'd get. "Tree," gasped Dean as they ran. "Get to a tree —" For the only cover in sight for miles, of course, was the fallen trees that were now scattered all around, the trees that had originally been growing on the dragon's back. Their one shot was to get to a tree to hide behind before the smoke cleared.

Under cover of the smoke, Dean and Sam sprinted even faster, veering off their original course toward a few of the fallen trees. They passed the first two and dashed down behind the third, a gnarled old tree that was lying on its side. It wasn't very big (the trunk was only a few feet off the ground) but it was, at least, clothed in puffy red flowers that might make a semi-decent cover.

They crouched there behind the tree's thick trunk, panting in exhaustion. After a few moments passed with no more bursts of flame, Dean risked raising his head just enough to peer through the bright red flowers.

They'd gotten about half a mile away, but the massive dragon was so unbelievably gigantic that it still seemed that they were practically within arm's reach. The thing was the size of an ocean liner. As they watched, it finally pulled its last foot free of the ground and gave a gigantic body-shake like
a huge dog, flapping its colossal wings a couple times as it did so. A blinding cloud of dirt and dust flew in all directions (the brothers had to duck their heads back down to avoid a few lethal-looking flying clumps of dirt). When the dust settled the dragon was slowly spreading the immense sails of its slate-grey wings, all tipped with black. Soon the wings began beating the air with tremendously powerful wingbeats that flattened all the grasses for miles around and made Sam and Dean's little tree shake. The entire animal, as unbelievably heavy as it must have been, somehow began to rise up into the air, forefeet and hindfeet tucking neatly underneath it.

"Some kind of magic?" Dean whispered to Sam. "That thing's way too heavy." It seemed like it shouldn't even have been able to stand up, let alone fly.

"Maybe physics is different here?" Sam murmured back.

No way to know; somehow the beast had gotten off the ground. It was even doing a fairly respectable hover, though each wingbeat was still causing such a hurricane of wind that Dean was pretty sure he could feel the actual ground shaking just from the wingbeats. Dean was trying his best not to feel awestruck, but he felt so infinitesimally tiny under the dragon's jaw-dropping wingspan that it was hard to even think of what to do next. It took him a while of blinking up at the wings before he realized that something about them wasn't looking like he'd expected: The dragon's wings were feathered. Rather than the bat-like wing membranes Dean had been expecting, the wings had feathers.

Though of course each colossal feather seemed at least the size of a wind-turbine blade.

The celestial dragon hovered in the air a long moment, its great head moving around as it scanned the ground, the huge gusts of air fanning the grass-fires down below and still buffeting Sam and Dean. As the huge head pivoted around both brothers crouched a little lower; it was clearly looking for them. Dean could even make out a pair of tufted ears that were flicking forward and back, apparently listening for them as well.

But it could not seem to find Sam or Dean. Soon it roared in obvious frustration, this time with a trumpeting bugle-like sound.

Two answering sounds came from different directions: another bugle from the west where they'd caught a glimpse of the other celestial dragon, the black one, and also a lion-like roar from the northeast. "Oh, that's not good," whispered Sam. Two had been bad enough, but apparently there were three of the things.

Finally the celestial dragon spat another tremendous gout of flame out of its mouth, setting a patch of grass on fire apparently at random (again it seemed frustrated), and soon it began wheeling around to the side, starting a big, slow circle.

"Shit," whispered Sam. "It's looking for us." Indeed the thing was scanning the ground intently. The brothers wedged themselves a little farther under the tree as the celestial dragon cruised in as tight a circle as it could manage (this turned out to be about a mile in diameter). It did nearly a complete circle around them, but still it couldn't seem to see them. Finally it began to pass right overhead. Sam and Dean froze absolutely still under the red-flowered branches.

Great glittering silver eyes went by.... then the vast dark shadow of the body, all in shades of grey and black... a glimpse of those awful silver talons... the huge wings blotting out nearly the entire sky. It seemed to take hours to cruise past. I thought I felt tiny before, thought Dean, hardly daring to breathe, but now I feel like a speck of dust. Finally the long tail went by (fringed on both sides with silver-grey feathers) and the celestial dragon moved on, scanning the prairie a few miles ahead.
Sam and Dean stayed as quiet as mice till it was at least a few miles away.

"That thing's a frickin' Imperial Star Destroyer!" whispered Dean at last.

Sam nodded and let out a quiet, shaky breath. "And we're the tiny rebel ship," he whispered back. They both wriggled around under the tree's branches to try to keep an eye on the dragon. "Tinier, actually. We're just the little rebels."

"You can be C-3PO," said Dean. "I get to be R2." He was trying to lighten the mood, of course, but it was probably a sign of how rattled they both were that Sam didn't complain about being assigned the role of C-3PO, and that Dean didn't pursue it with some Princess Leia jokes. All Sam said was, "Damn. It's turning. I was hoping it was leaving."

Sure enough the dragon was veering around in another great sweeping circle as it scanned the ground. It was finally far enough away that Dean at last managed to get a clear view of the whole shape of the thing: Two wings, four feet, was the basic body plan. Slate-grey wings, on a slate-grey body, all tipped with black wherever possible: black wingtips, black feet, a black muzzle, black edging on the tail, and even a delicate black stripe right down the middle of its back. The front feet, which were tucked up under its chest, seemed almost like eagle's feet, armed with gigantic curved silver talons. The back legs, trailing behind, looked more like a lion's paws, with no talons visible.

"Is it even a dragon?" Dean said. "We've met dragons before, and they didn't look like this. Also, it's got feathers."

"Yeah, and check it out its body, too," whispered Sam. "That's feathers or fur, right? Some kind of pelt." Sam was right; it wasn't just the wings that had feathers. The dragon didn't have reptile-like scales at all; its whole body was covered some kind of sleek-looking coating.

An awful possibility occurred to Dean as he watched the thing wheel around in the sky, its grey wings glinting like silver as they caught the light. "Could it possibly be some kind of angel?" he whispered to Sam.

The thing was feathered, after all.

And they were in Heaven.

Sam let out a little groan. "If that thing's an angel, then we're in trouble," he said. "Cause then it's some type we've never seen. Some gigantic type that's been buried for a million years."

"And that seems even more dickish that the usual type," added Dean.

Sam nodded, and he said, softly, "The guardians of the Crown of Heaven. Some special type, maybe? Cause I'm betting they've been stationed here forever to guard the Crown from whatever came through that gate. You know what...." Sam frowned, still peering at the celestial dragon in the distance. "I wonder if it might be where griffin legends came from, too."

Dean blinked at that, remembering how the old medieval bestiaries had drawn griffins: a feathered flying beast with two wings and four legs. It was the right basic layout, certainly. Eagle-like wings, eagle front feet with talons, lion back feet with the talons hidden... "Could be," said Dean, considering the idea.

Sam went on, "I'm kinda thinkin' this is the original 'dragon,' you know? That the other ones we met on Earth just took over the name. And... maybe dragons have been feathered all along and we never knew? Kind of like how dinosaurs turn out to have had feathers. What if 'griffin' was just another word for 'dragon,' all along?"
"Different words for a giant flying thing that can kill you," Dean summarized. "Okay. I can buy that. People see it zoom past and don't get much of a look before they get killed. They see wings, four feet, maybe they see the fire and maybe they don't, they slap a name on it. So... what else does the lore say about griffins?"

"King of all creatures," replied Sam. "They guard precious things. They're a symbol of divine power and— oh, jeez. I just remembered. They're a guardian of the divine."

"Huh," said Dean. "Pretty good match. So is there any way to kill them?"

"Nope," said Sam.

"Fantastic," said Dean with a sigh. "Well, let's just call it a celestial dragon like Hannah said... and let's try to get the hell away from it." They watched the celestial dragon finishing a pass over to the farthest visible hill and turning around for another pass. Dean frowned, looking around to try to figure out where they could go. They'd been lucky enough to get a few minutes' respite here by the red-flowered tree, but what now?

There were a few other trees not far off. "Maybe if we go from tree to tree," Dean suggested, "keeping behind the smoke screen, and crawling down in the grasses, and once we get away—"

"Oh, shit," said Sam. He pointed behind them. Dean looked up to see the second dragon, the black one, zooming over the nearest hill. It had gotten much closer, much faster, than they'd realized. It didn't seem to have seen them yet but it was soon clear that this one had a different strategy; rather than trying to look for Sam and Dean, it seemed to be simply setting the prairie on fire everywhere it flew, coasting low and blasting out jets of flame at one patch of prairie after another. Soon it was close enough that they could hear the sound of each burst of flame, ominous hoarse hissing gusts of fire that sounded terrifyingly deadly.

The black dragon seemed to be hitting a lot of trees. Fallen trees were bursting into flame before it, one after another. After another moment Dean noticed it seemed to actually be zig-zagging to target specific trees.

Dean realized what it was doing. "Shit. It's trying to flush us out."

And soon enough it succeeded. One of its zig-zags happened to take it right toward Sam and Dean's tree. Dean was still blinking at it, barely able to comprehend how fast the thing was coming at them, when it opened its toothy mouth, the hoarse flame-roar sounded, and a wall of fire was looming right at them.

Sam and Dean scrambled out from under the tree and began running again, the tree erupting in fire behind them.

Two dragons and a third on the way. No more trees to hide behind. It was hopeless, and they knew it. But they ran anyway, because they couldn't give up; they had to at least try. They ran. They ran as fast as they could, they ran till their lungs were bursting and their hearts pounding, through that endless meadow of silvery grass, and this time they knew they were doomed. Dean heard a whoosh, whoosh behind him, and felt a puff of wind on the back of his head. Sam and Dean both veered to the side; the black dragon soared right by on their right, the wing actually blotting out the glowing sky over their heads. The size of it made Dean almost want to give up and just sit down and wait for
it to destroy them. What could they possibly do against a behemoth the size of a skyscraper?

The black dragon had seen them; it had craned its head around. It was looking right at them. The mouth opened. Dean saw that spark of light shining within.

Yet it missed; the gout of fire went directly ahead of them.

"STOP!" yelled Dean. They screeched to a halt, just barely managing to teeter to a standstill before plowing right into the flaming grasses. Sam had to actually windmill his arms to keep from falling into the flames; Dean grabbed the back of Sam's pack and yanked him back. The dragon's momentum carried it on past.

But now the grey dragon was directly in front of them, hovering like a perversely immense hummingbird, beating its huge shining wings rhythmically. The wings flashed silver where they caught the light; it was almost blinding. Sam and Dean spun around, trying to dash back the way they had come, but now the black dragon had wheeled around to position itself behind them. The grey one roared out another jet of fire, again aiming it so that it hit nearly at their feet.

Somehow the grey one missed again. The black one tried again, and missed too.

But after a few more "misses," each "miss" corralling them neatly, Sam said "They're toying with us," and Dean knew he was right. The dragons had never been "missing." They were doing this on purpose.

Maybe it had been a while since they'd had some prey to play with. Maybe they wanted to have some fun.

Dean and Sam were half-hanging on to each other now, trying to dart here and there, evading the burning grasses where they could. "We gotta get to the arch!" said Dean. It was their only chance at all — try to get back to the arch, try somehow to re-open the Fire Gate — and of course it wasn't much of a chance. They tried to run in that direction, but the two dragons had them perfectly cornered now, and kept sending bursts of flame right in front of them, or just to the side, herding them here and there. The brothers also kept having to run to keep ahead of the walls of flame that were now creeping through the grass on all sides. "Bastards!" Dean muttered. He stumbled, and caught himself, and stumbled again, and realized he was very near the edge of exhaustion. His legs were getting heavy; his lungs seemed to be searing. He couldn't seem to get enough air any more, heaving for breath. Sam, next to him, was gasping heavily too. They were near the end.

Soon he and Sam had to stumble to a halt. They were neatly caught between walls of fire, with three lines of burning grass penning them in, in a triangle of flame.

All they could do now was stand there, turning in place, watching the black and grey dragons wheeling in the air around them, those vast feathered wings spread, tails lashing the air. Dean pulled out his pistol, and Sam his shotgun, and they fired several rounds at the dragons. They hit them, too. But the weapons had no effect. Instead the dragons merely started to swoop over them now and then, reaching their silver-taloned front feet down almost lazily, trying to snatch them up. Dean and Sam both had to duck and roll to escape.

"Hate... these..." Sam gasped, scrambling back to his feet. "...FUCKERS. HATE THEM."

"Me... too," panted Dean.

They were back-to-back now, waiting for the end. The lion-roar that they'd heard before sounded through the air again, much louder now. Dean glanced to the side and saw something like a black
dart coming right at them. The third celestial dragon was arriving.

"Another one," said Sam. He sounded as if he were so tired he didn't even care.

"Friend of theirs, I guess," said Dean. Three celestial dragons seemed not much worse than two, after all; there really seemed to be nothing else to do other than watch the third dragon approach.

*So this is how we die,* thought Dean. *Roasted alive by celestial dragons.*

It had a certain ring to it.

"We tried," said Sam.

It was all he said, but the defeated sound of his voice almost made Dean want to cry. They'd tried. They really had. They'd tried their very utmost; they'd done their best.

Maybe the other hunters, and the orishas, would solve the Darkness problem without them?

Well, at least it was an interesting way to die.

The black and grey dragons let out some ear-splitting screeches and trumpets, greeting the third one as it approached, its wings beating the air ever faster. The lion-roar sounded again, from the third one.

"Make it quick," muttered Dean. It was one last prayer, really. To the missing God, maybe? To the universe...or, really, to Castiel. To his memory, at least. "Please. Let it be quick."

It wasn't quick.

The black and grey dragons seemed excited by approach of their friend; as it got closer they both raised their heads to call to it with those ear-splitting screams, and it answered with another series of throaty lion-roars as it approached, louder and louder. The grey dragon wheeled then, and charged right at Sam and Dean.

Dean knew right away, from the intent look in its shining silver eyes, that this time it wasn't going to miss. This time it meant business.

It opened its mouth.

Sam hurled Dean to the ground and flung himself over Dean.

Dean yelled, "Sammy, NO!" But it was too late. A terrifying blast of fire scorched right over both of them, lapping so hot at Dean's boots that Dean knew Sam must be taking a very bad hit. Again Dean screamed "NO!" and in the next moment many things happened all at once: a tremendously loud roar, a bolt of black lightning, a massive WHUMP, and a jet of cold air like a hurricane bowled Sam and Dean apart. Great silver claws snatched at Dean but there was another WHUMP and the claws seemed to miss, just grabbing at the edge of Dean's pack and then losing hold. He was flung several meters in the air, though, and saw a blur of feathers and talons and flame as he soared right over a swath of burning grasses. *This'll be bad,* thought Dean, and he hit the ground very hard, rolling roughly, the world spinning wildly around him. All the air blew right out of his lungs, and then he couldn't breathe at all. For a few awful moments all he could do was writhe helplessly in the prairie
ashes, before finally he managed to suck in a few short, crippled wheezes. At last his lungs began working again and he managed to gasp in a breath of hot, smoky air.

Dean opened his eyes, finally able to breathe. He was lying in hot scorched grasses, coughing, his hands over his ears, his head ringing with the roars and screeches around him. The pack had cushioned his fall; somehow, improbably, he was okay. "Sammy!" he croaked, trying to scramble to his feet. At last he managed to draw a deeper breath and he yelled "SAMMY!"

But Sam was nowhere to be seen. All around was a sea of flaming grasses; it seemed nearly the whole prairie was on fire now. And whirling around him overhead was a great tumbling mass of feathers and wings, black and grey and white all tangled together in a blur, jets of fire shooting out in all directions, screams and roars and trumpets making the very air shake. Dean could barely make out anything through the choking smoke, but caught glints of the silver talons, flashes of teeth, and saw black jaws and shining fangs snapping at a silver-grey tail.

The three dragons were fighting over them. Like cats fighting over a mouse, each one wanted to have its own little prey item to play with. But there were three dragons, and only two little humans, so one of the dragons would have to go without a toy.

_Fighting over who gets to eat us_, Dean thought, staggering around, trying to see anything through the smoke. "SAM!" he hollered, desperate to find his brother. "SAMMY!" At last the smoke cleared a little, and Dean saw him. Sam was sitting up about a hundred yards away, blinking a little. Just sitting there in the ashes looking at one of his hands. He was alive! Dean sprinted over.

Indeed Sam was still alive, but as soon as Dean got close enough for a good look, Dean's legs went so wobbly they almost buckled. He had to take a deep breath and look away for a moment before he took the last few steps to Sam and sank to his knees next to him.

"Sammy," whispered Dean.

The whole left side of Sam's face, and his entire left arm, and the left side of his torso, had all been burned black. He was awake — his eyes were open — but he seemed numb, staring almost vacantly at his horrifically burned hand.

It was simply too awful to look at. For an eerie moment Dean actually could not decide whether it might be better to cut Sam's throat on the spot, before the pain set in. Before the dragons roasted them both even more... before the dragons tore them to pieces.

_The Crown destroys_, Dean remembered. _The Crown destroys_. In more ways than one: If Sam died here, so close to the Crown, he was dead forever.

"Sam?" Dean said again, touching Sam's good shoulder lightly.

Sam didn't answer.

Dean got Sam's good arm across his shoulders and staggered up, pulling Sam up with him. Sam still hadn't said anything, and he was breathing in fast shallow breaths now that seemed very unnatural. But he seemed able to move a little, so Dean helped him limp away.

The dragons were still fighting; in fact the fight had shifted away from them a bit, about a mile to the north. _They're distracted_, thought Dean. He started to hobble south, guiding Sam back toward the Fire Gate — really for lack of anywhere else to go. _Maybe we can get away_, he thought. _Maybe Sam can still live. He'll be scarred... but maybe he can still live. People have survived worse. Maybe we can get back to the Gate while the dragons are distracted, and... and... and maybe Elegua will open
it for us. Maybe the orishas can deal with the Darkness? Maybe we'll just go home, maybe I can get Sam to a hospital, and he'll be fine....

Dean knew there was no chance.

He pulled out his pistol. It was no use against the dragons, obviously, but there were enough bullets left for what he had in mind. Meaning, at least two.

*Maybe soul-obliteration isn't the worst thing that can happen.*

"Sammy?" Dean asked, the unspoken question clear.

"I don't want to die," said Sam, his voice just a rough rasp.

Dean put the pistol away.

They made their way slowly out of the burned area and began to limp slowly through the silver grasses, which were now shimmering in the wind, shining with light, almost as if they were already on fire. *Into the fire*, thought Dean. *Now we know what it really means.*

*Into the fire.*

The limping-away was only buying them a couple more pointless minutes, of course. There was more trumpeting, more lion roars, more commotion behind them, and then the silvery-grey dragon wheeled into view in front of them, apparently having taught its friends a lesson. Sam and Dean drew to a halt, Dean gasping for breath, Sam nearly passing out. Sam started to sink to his knees, the last of his strength failing him. Dean tried to hold him upright, but couldn't; Sam slid through his arms to the ground.

Dean stepped in front of him to try to shield him from the huge grey dragon.

The silvery-grey dragon opened its mouth and.... a blistering jet of fire roared right *over* Dean's head, from *behind* him, *toward* the grey dragon, and then something huge and dark was rocketing overhead. A massive hand seemed to close around Dean and the ground fell away. A dragon had *grabbed* him, had actually grabbed hold of him, had snatched him up bodily, and it was taking him away to devour him somewhere else. Great feathery black toes were closed right around him, with enormous silver talons squeezing so securely he could barely breathe. This time he was not dropped, and instead he was lifted up, up and away.

After about thirty seconds of flying, Dean began to wish the dragon would just crush him, or eat him immediately, just to put him out of his misery, for the flight was beyond terrifying. *I hate flying*, Dean thought, closing his eyes. *I hate flying, I hate flying, I hate flying....* And of all the flying he'd ever had to do, this was by far the worst. The dragon was banking its wings this way and that, veering here and there with such sudden and violent changes of course that Dean's head started slamming onto the sides of the talons, so painfully that he saw stars. He was soon nauseous. Jets of flame were still shooting past at intervals from the other dragons, earsplitting shrieks threatened to shatter Dean's skull, and there wasn't a single thing he could do other than cling to one of the big feathered toes.

Eventually, during a very brief moment of level flight, Dean spotted Sam. Sam was in the other foot! Dean was in the beast's left front foot, and Sam was in the right front foot. Dean couldn't decide
whether this was good or bad, but at least it was somewhat comforting to know where Sam was. Though... Sam was completely limp, his head and the terribly burned arm and one leg dangling down loosely in the air through the animal's feathered toes. "Sam," Dean croaked, but Sam made no reply.

Dean forced himself to try to look around. All he could see was white belly feathers above, and the black feet, and occasionally glimpses of wings that seemed mostly black. Not the grey dragon, Dean thought. Not the all-black one either. Apparently it was the third dragon, the new one, who had won the fight and grabbed the tasty prizes. And it was flying somewhere safe to tear them apart; somewhere out of range of the other dragons.

This white-bellied one seemed a much smaller dragon, for its taloned feet were only a few meters across. Unfortunately that didn't make it any less terrifying. The smaller dragon seemed all too agile, and its main flight strategy seemed to be to zigzag here and there with sickening changes of velocity, apparently trying to get its prey away from its bigger siblings by virtue of sheer agility. The brief moment of level flight ended soon enough, when it soon began soaring up, plunging down, jerking left and right, and launching into wild barrel rolls, apparently to avoid the two great behemoths, the black and the grey, who were still gliding into view on either side now and then. Dean was beyond terror now, and soon he was barely even able to keep on clinging to the toe he'd been hanging on to, for he was shaking so badly with sheer exhaustion that his hands were actually losing their grip entirely. He could barely even breathe through the rush of air in his face.

Eventually the white-bellied dragon did a terrifying freefall vertical plunge straight toward the ground, pulling out of it at the last second with such extreme g-forces that Dean saw black spots swimming in his vision. Trees went whipping by, and foothills too; they seemed out of the prairie and into some kind of forest. The bigger dragons couldn't quite follow this maneuver, and Dean saw the black one hit the ground awkwardly, pancaking down into the trees with its wings spread, where it let out an annoyed bellow and another jet of flame. The grey one was still accompanying them, though, and soon the white-bellied dragon did another crazed dive at the ground, this time spinning so wildly that Dean actually threw up. He managed to spit out most of the bile and closed his eyes, just trying to breathe. He could only wish it would all end soon. On the next dive Dean blacked out.

__________________________

Dean awoke to find himself sprawled on the ground, choking on bile, his head still spinning. It took a while to even figure out which way was up; at last he managed to roll over to his hands and knees, still retching. The now-familiar sounds of a dragon fight were still echoing in the distance.

He finally managed to draw a shaky breath and raised his head, and was astonished to discover that Sam was lying on his stomach only about twenty feet away. Amazingly, Sam was stirring, his feet moving a little; he was still alive! And better still, they were in the forest now, near what looked like another jumbled stony ruin, this one much bigger than the one by the Fire Gate. Cover, Dean thought, a faint glimmer of hope coming to him for the first time in the entire last hour. He wiped his mouth as he glanced around at the dim forest. The trees were so tall overhead that they were blotting out most of the sky; the ruins even looked semi-intact, some type of pyramid-like structure with high sloping walls and a ramp running around the outer wall.

Cover. We found cover. The dragon had to drop us, and we found cover. Though actually there wasn't much underbrush, but there were some doors visible in the ruins about fifty feet off the ground. Maybe they could get up that ramp? Maybe they had a chance after all? If they could get inside the ruins and find some place to hide....
Dean crawled over to Sam. "Sammy?" he said, his voice hoarse. "Sam?"

"Yeah," croaked Sam. Dean helped him sit up.

Dean had been rather hoping the burns weren't as bad as he'd first feared, but actually they seemed worse. They were horrific. Sam had third-degree burns over at least a quarter of his body if not more. His backpack had shielded him from some of it, but his arm, the side of his torso, half his neck and half his face were... black.

"How bad," whispered Sam. "How bad am I?"

"Uh," said Dean, trying to give him a smile. "You'll be... fine."

Sam closed his eyes. Dean thought, *I'm not gonna ask him if it hurts.*

Dean said, "We just gotta... "

*Just gotta sit here and die.*

"Why don't you drink some water," said Dean, scrabbling at Sam's pack. He managed to inch it off Sam's back, trying not to wince too obviously when he realized that one of the nylon straps had melted onto Sam's shoulder. Sam seemed in shock; he barely even seemed to notice when the nylon pulled free.

Most of Sam's gear had been lost or ruined by the fire. The shotgun was long gone. The water bottles had melted and burst. Dean dug a water bottle out of his own pack and held it to Sam's mouth, trying to keep his own hands from shaking. There were some pain pills, too, in Dean's little med kit; he gave Sam a fistful of those, knowing full well that they wouldn't do a damn bit of good. He thought of making a token effort at dressing Sam's wounds, too, but all he seemed able to do was stare at Sam's horribly burned arm and shoulder for a while, thinking, *Vaseline? Antibiotics? Damp gauze?* He didn't have any of those anyway.

*We just gotta get going,* Dean thought at last. He quickly rearranged his pack, stuffing in what little of Sam's gear he'd been able to salvage. At least the demon-blade was still intact; Dean jammed it into his belt.

And then came a sound Dean had been dreading. *Whup, whup, whup.*

A dragon, flying nearby.

Worse still, there came a crashing noise as if the thing had come down through leaves. Dean could even see a tree shaking, not far away, and a glimpse of black feathers. A dragon had *landed;* a dragon was *here.*

It was looking for them.

"We gotta hide," whispered Dean to Sam. He threw the pack on and tried to pull Sam up. Sam seemed very woozy now, almost sliding into unconsciousness. "Sam!" Dean hissed in his ear. "*Stand up! Walk!*"

Somehow he got Sam on his feet. He could hear crashing nearby now, and even caught a glimpse of motion, only a few hundred feet away. The dragon was walking around, snuffling noisily. Probably trying to sniff them out. Dean looked around, still trying to brace Sam as best he could. If the dragon was actually walking through the forest, they couldn't hide in the trees.
The ruins. They'd have to go into the ruins. They had to get into one of those doors. The doors seemed small, human-sized; the dragon wouldn't be able to follow them.

Dean began pulling Sam over to the ramp that led gradually up around the sides of the pyramid. Sam was trying his best to walk, but it was a struggle. They stumbled up the ramp, painfully slowly. Sam was losing strength already, his feet dragging. Dean coaxed him along with whispers: "C'mon, Sammy. C'mon, just a little farther. You can do it. Don't give up on me now, Sammy, don't you dare, c'mon now..."

Sam was soon shaking all over. Dean knew they'd be lucky if Sam could walk even another fifty yards.

And then they came to a gap in the ramp.

They'd made it only partway up, to a sort of little flat landing that was nearly at tree-top height. It turned out the ramp had crumbled here; big stones had fallen down from a collapsed section of wall up above and had crushed the next section of ramp completely, knocking a big hole right through it. There was at least a twenty-foot gap, far too much to jump across.

They'd have to climb right up the sloping wall. For a few deluded moments Dean even managed to convince himself it was climbable. There were a few outcroppings in the ancient wall that would make some handholds and footholds, maybe. There were even some handy boulders sitting nearby, left over from the rockfall, to use as steps to get going. I just gotta get Sam started, Dean thought, pushing Sam at the wall. I'll push him up the wall and I'll go up next and we'll get in a door and then...

Then what?

"C'mon!" Dean hissed. "You gotta climb! You gotta!" Dean tried to shove Sam up the wall, even trying to place his hands for him, but Sam whispered "Can't." Sam slid down, his unburned side against the wall, knees folding, staring dully in front of him.

Dean knelt to try to get him up again, cradling the unburned side of Sam's face in one hand. But Sam's eyelids were sagging closed. His breathing was getting shallower.

"Sammy, please, no—" Dean said.

Dean heard a huff of air behind him.

It sounded extremely close.

Very, very slowly, Dean stood, and turned, and there it was. A celestial dragon. An immense head was rising right out of the trees, right next to the ramp, a mere twenty feet away. It was the smaller one, the white-bellied one that had taken them on that terrifying flight, come back at last to claim the prizes that it had dropped. "Smaller" turned out to be only a relative term; the thing seemed enormous close-up like this. It was standing with its feet still on the ground some thirty feet below, but even so it was nearly at eye level to Dean. Its head alone was almost the size of the Impala, each vast glittering sapphire eye a couple feet across. An array of serrated teeth could be glimpsed at the edges of its mouth, with two particularly impressive-looking fangs at the corners.

It was looking right at him.

It had found them.

Dean took one step back on stiff legs, trying to position himself in front of Sam. What can we do,
what can we do? There had to be something to do — there was always something — something always happened at the last minute —

Cas would come to save them —

But Cas was long gone.

Dean did the only thing he could think of; he pulled the demon-blade out of his belt, aimed, and threw. It killed demons, after all... maybe it would work? Maybe this thing was a demon?

But no. The dragon flinched at the motion of Dean's arm, and jerked its head. The blade only sank into the flesh of the animal’s cheek, not into the eye as he'd hoped. And it didn't kill it. It didn't kill it at all.

The dragon's vast eyes widened and it turned to the side and snorted out a great spurt of flame. Dean had the oddest impression that it was laughing.

It turned its head away for a moment, rubbing it on the edge of one wing, and when it turned back, the demon-blade was gone, only a trickle of blood marking the location where it had struck.

Dean had only succeeded in amusing it.

A set of massive silver claws appeared right at the cliff edge, just a few steps away. The dragon had put one huge forefoot on the edge of the cliff face, to Dean's right. The other forefoot appeared, on Dean's left. Each black feathered toe was nearly the size of Dean's torso, the long shining claws the size of scimitars.

It lifted its left foot toward Dean, spreading the gigantic claws. It started to open its jaws.

It's over, thought Dean. This is it. This is where we finally die. It's finally over.

He felt Sam tugging faintly on Dean's leg. Without even having to look, Dean knew that Sam wanted Dean to flee, and wanted Dean to try to save himself. But even if Dean could bear to leave Sam (at least just to continue the completely hopeless quest to fight the Darkness if for no other reason), where would Dean even go? The thought of climbing the wall had been insane. The dragon would just pluck him up like a bug.

"We're going down together, Sammy," Dean said.

Dean looked into the beast's glittering sapphire eyes and tried to square his shoulders, hoping he wasn't trembling too obviously. Sorry, Cas, he thought, putting one hand over the feather in his pocket. I tried.

The dragon let out a sort of low purring growl.

Then it reached out the great feathered foot. Dean tried to back up, but the claws just closed around him, like a cage, and...

... pulled him away from Sam, slowly shoving him to the side. It held him there, off to the side, while the thing reached its toothy jaws to Sam.

"No," Dean said, suddenly frantic. He'd been ready to die with Sam, but he was not ready to see Sam die first. "No—" he begged, struggling desperately against the huge claws, watching that huge head glide over to Sam. "No, NO, take me, take ME—" The dragon was going to kill Sam first. It was going to kill Sam, and eat him, and Dean was going to have to watch.
"NO!" Dean yelled, almost hyperventilating with panic. The feathered toes only tightened slightly around him, almost cradling him. Dean wanted to close his eyes, but he couldn't; he had to watch this last horrible thing, he had to be there for Sam, he had to see it happen.... He had to. So he kept his eyes open, and he watched, helpless, sick, as the terrible jaws opened, those fangs glinting in the light, while Sam tried, weakly, to scuffle a little farther back against the wall. But Sam had no strength left, and nowhere to go, and then the dragon was right on him, sniffing his burned face.

The dragon opened its mouth, and—

It licked Sam.

It stuck a wide pink tongue out of its mouth, just like an enormous cat's tongue, and delicately licked the side of Sam's face. The burned side. Very slowly, as if gently tasting him. Lick, lick, lick; over Sam's face several times, and over the top of his head, and his ear, and his neck.

The dragon pulled its huge head back for a moment and inspected Sam carefully with one vast sapphire eye, tilting its head sideways to get one eye up close to him.

Dean was still struggling so hard against the talons that it took him a minute to realize that the dragon, for some reason, had not gotten around to actually eating Sam yet. In fact... it was doing another bout of licking now. Dean paused, both hands still pushing helplessly against a huge talon, and he watched in confusion.

"Dean... it's... it's..." said Sam. His voice seemed a little stronger.

The dragon licked Sam's neck. It did Sam's shoulder, even tilting its head delicately to get its tongue full over the bend of the shoulder. It began on his arm.

"It's healing me," Sam whispered. With every lick his skin had improved, the terrible black fading into patchy black, then to red blisters on the next lick, then the blisters fading away on the lick after that. Soon his skin was only a bright pink, like a sunburn, and the dragon licked him one more time and even the sunburn was gone. Even Sam's singed hair had straightened and gone back to its normal color.

The dragon kept going, licking all the way down Sam's arm. Then it used one huge sword-like fang like a lever to pull Sam carefully away from the cliff face and turn him around. Sam had been burned on the back of his head and neck too, and the dragon licked him several times there. It licked his back, the back of his head, his ribcage, while Sam sat very still, staring up at the dragon, darting very confused glances at Dean now and then. At one point the dragon rolled one huge eye toward Dean and opened its talons, releasing Dean from his cage. Dean was too confused now to even know what to do, and he just stood there with his mouth open, watching a gigantic celestial dragon lick his brother's face.

At last Sam pointed, a little hesitantly, to a spot on his neck that the dragon had missed. It leaned close and licked the spot immediately, and then looked at Sam again, as if waiting for guidance.

Sam pointed to his hand. "Between the f-fingers?" Sam said, his voice shaking a little. His fingers had been badly burned, and apparently the dragon had not managed to lick between all the fingers. The dragon eyed his hand for a moment, made a smooth move forward and closed its mouth completely around Sam's hand, engulfing it up to the elbow. Sam flinched a little at the sudden motion, but the dragon just held Sam's arm in its mouth for a long moment and released him unharmed a moment later. Sam spread his fingers, gaping at his hand. It was fully healed.

Sam and Dean stared at each other for a moment.
"It healed me," said Sam. He patted his face with both hands, and ran a hand down his arm. "Dean, I'm, I'm, I'm fine, the pain's gone, I'm fine!" He got to his feet, a little unsteady, looking down at himself in disbelief.

"Maybe it just doesn't like its food burned?" said Dean, so numb with relief and confusion that he couldn't seem to take it in. Sam was okay? Sam was okay? All Dean could do was stare at Sam for a long moment. At last Dean glanced back at the dragon, which had put both front feet back against the cliff, bracing itself there, looking back and forth between them both. Dean said, not thinking the dragon could understand, "What the hell are you up to... are you just gonna kill us somewhere else?"

The dragon shook its head.

Dean felt his mouth drop open.

Sam took an uncertain step forward and said, to the dragon, "You... understand us?"

The dragon nodded. It was absolutely unmistakable: a single, slow, deliberate nod.

There was something very eerily familiar about that nod.

Now it was just staring at him with those huge eyes. Those huge... sapphire... eyes... Blue eyes.

Dean felt the hairs standing up on the back of his neck.

"Who... are you?" Dean said, his voice hoarse. It can't be. It can't be.

The dragon looked at Dean steadily, and Dean felt himself mesmerized, almost falling into that unblinking gaze from those huge blue eyes. The dragon reared up then, sitting up on its haunches so that its front legs were dangling in front of its torso, almost as if it were trying to stand vertically, like a human. It was almost twice the height of the trees around it. Then the dragon lifted its wings.

Vast, huge, magnificent black wings unfolded. Black as night, gleaming like dark silk. Every feather was tipped with shining gold, as if the very end had been dipped in gold paint. The wings spread up, arcing up over the dragon's head.

Dean was almost unable to think. His eyes tracked up and down the huge beast, taking in its steady gaze, its huge wings, and the colors, oh, the colors: Black wings with yellow tips... like those on the dream mountain. Black feathers on the dragon's sleek, dark head. Its hind legs were a glossy black as well. But it had a sort of mantle of golden-brown on the front half of its body, across the shoulders and down the forelegs, of a subtly patterned tan. Its belly was white; and it had a little ruff of blue around its neck.

Its eyes were blue.

It stood there, sitting up on its hind legs with those huge black wings flared up, looking at Dean.

Staring at him.

Dean couldn't breathe. He tried to say it; to say... the name... and found his throat had closed.

Beside him, Sam said "Dean...." He sounded awed.

"I know," said Dean.

"Dean... the colors. The colors, look at its feathers... Dean... Dean, look at its eyes..."
"I know," said Dean.

The dragon tilted its head, scanning the sky with one eye. (What is it like to be a winged creature, thought Dean, always having to scan for aerial attack?) Then it cocked one feathered black ear at him, and squinted its eyes.

It folded its wings, sank back down to all fours, and walked closer, right up to the edge of the cliff. Rearing up once more, it set its huge clawed forefeet on the edge of the cliff again, and bowed its immense head down, its smoke-tinged black snout just a few feet away, and it stared.

"Dean, if you don't say it, I will," whispered Sam.

Dean said, "Cas?"

He had to croak it out, feeling the ground dropping from under him.

Impossibly, unbelievably, the great dragon nodded. One slow nod.

It dipped its head even closer and opened its jaws again, and out came that huge pink tongue. It licked Dean, right over the face, almost suffocating him. It turned to Sam and licked Sam, too, and came back to Dean and licked him all over, licking each side of his face, and the top of his head. Dean's legs had buckled; he'd sunk to his knees. He'd started to cry. But the enormous black-winged dragon licked the tears from his cheeks, as gently as an immense mother cat licking a kitten.

---

A/N -

:)  

edit added the next morning: (1) I may have to skip a week. I've been pushing like hell to get this chapter to you (for obvious reasons) but have also been pulling 12-16 hr days at work all week (work crisis got craaaaazy, HR ruled in my favor but it got even more depressing and stressful). I worked 8am-2am yesterday, can't keep that up, headaches are back & I need some time off the computer. So, really sorry if there's a delay but I need a weekend free. But I really wanted to get this chapter to you! (2) FEEDBACK, PEOPLE, I NEED FEEDBACK! hahaha. I want to know every single detail of what you thought! I've been looking forward to your reactions to this chapter for ages!
A/N - I missed you all so much last week! That's the first time I've ever had to miss a weekly update while I had an active fic going. I'm sorry, my work pressures got beyond insane - 12- and 16-hr days endlessly, straight through the weekends. Partly related to the drama I mentioned before, which is turning out to involve a job search and a whole lot of wrapping-up-of-projects and paper-writing, a lot of which was due on 30 Sept.

It was such a thrill to see all your reactions to the last chapter. I've been waiting for MONTHS to tell you all that Cas is still alive! It was sheer agony not being able to tell you! Now at last you know. I don't think I've ever had so many comments on a chapter! (and omg the art, and the comments and the photos 'n' things... whee!) I had zero time to reply because of a paper I was desperately trying to finish, but I read every single comment, over and over actually, and I'm SO glad you all liked it. I hope to get my replying back in gear this weekend.

And now back to Dean being licked by a dragon. :)

Cas.
Cas.
Cas.

Was it even possible? Could it truly be him?

Dean felt almost physically dizzy with the shock of it. He knelt there on the stone ramp in stunned disbelief as the dragon licked his face, his hands starting to tremble as what was happening began to really sink in: Cas. Cas. Cas.

But — could there possibly be some mistake? Could Dean have imagined the nod? Were he and Sam just deluding themselves?

Because, really now, it couldn't be true. It couldn't possibly be Cas. The thing was a friggin' dragon. A dragon that seemed to be getting a little carried away with licking Dean's face instead of roasting him alive, sure, that was a little odd, yes, but... there must have been some mistake. Some miscommunication. It couldn't really be Castiel.

Could it?

Dean was soon trembling harder, and then truly shaking, his breath hitching unevenly. He knew tears were streaming down his cheeks, but was helpless to stop it; he couldn't seem to get his breathing under control at all, and couldn't even get his hands to stop shaking. But the dragon just kept right on licking the tears from Dean's cheeks.

Oddly, the touch of the dragon's velvety tongue began, slowly, to calm him. There was a certain surreal absurdity to it (I'm being licked by a dragon, Dean kept thinking; I'm being licked by a dragon), yet it also felt soothing. There was something reassuring about the gentleness with which the enormous beast was treating him. They were as mismatched in size as a cat and a mouse (the
beast's tongue was so wide it felt like being scrubbed gently with a big damp bathtowel), and yet the
dragon was licking him with almost cautious tenderness. It kept switching sides on Dean's face, too,
first licking Dean's left cheek carefully for a few swipes of that great tongue, and then tilting its huge
head to reach the other side. Its warm breath kept puffing across Dean's face and through Dean's
hair, bringing with it a distinctly smoky scent, almost a campfire scent, something like cedar or pine.

*It's a fire-breather,* Dean remembered. (He was still thinking of the dragon as an "it," not a "he.
And it seemed far too great a stretch to think of it as "Castiel.") *It's a fire-breather. It could kill me in
a second if it wanted.*

But it didn't.

It just kept licking Dean's face.

Eventually it licked its way up over Dean's forehead and began washing his hair with great long
licks. Soon it had stretched its neck out a little more and twisted its head around, pushing Dean to the
side slightly to lick the back of Dean's neck.

*Cas did that,* Dean remembered. *Cas did that once. On the back of my neck.*

Though the dragon was growling now, with a low, rumbly, almost engine-like sound. Was it angry?
Was it about to attack?

No. Wait. The rumbly engine-like growl was a little familiar. The memory surfaced slowly, as Dean
braced himself (on hands and knees now, under the odd assault of neck-licking) listening to that
growl: *the mountain-dream.*

Dean had heard exactly that rumbly sound in the last mountain-dream, when he'd woken up in the
dream-Impala. And with that thought, Dean suddenly felt certain that *this exact same dragon had been there,* in Dean's final mountain-dream. This dragon, *this* one, had been the dark shape outside
the Impala window. It had been the thing that had made that distinctive-sounding lion roar; it had
been the owner of the lethal-looking silver talon that Dean had glimpsed outside the car window.

It had visited Dean's dreams, somehow.

And that meant... it probably had been the entity that had left all the "two to the left" signs. The two
boulders, dragged with such obvious effort across that open field. Entire forests carefully burned
down to reveal two last trees. Dean felt fairly sure that if he inspected the dragon's wings now, he
would find two gaps. Gaps where two long, black, gold-tipped feathers had been pulled out, and
stuck carefully in the ground, just to try to give Dean a message.

Two feathers.

Two tulips....

The dragon left Dean alone briefly to swing its head over to Sam, who was a few yards away. It
sniffed Sam all over — it seemed to be trying to make sure that Sam didn't have any more burns
anywhere. Sam was choking back tears, but he managed to say softly, "Cas?... It's you?" The dragon
gave another little nod, and Sam patted its nose tentatively. The rumbly, purr-like growling sound
(which seemed to be near-constant now) accelerated a little, and the sound got louder still when the
huge black head swung back to Dean.

Wait. The rumbly growl wasn't just "purr-like." It was an actual *purr.* The dragon was *purring.*

It had been purring in that mountain-dream, right outside the Impala door, as it waited patiently for
Dean to wake.

And it was purring now.

Dean stumbled slowly to his feet. The dragon (Cas, Cas...) was snuffling its way noisily along Dean's arms now, inspecting each arm in turn — perhaps searching for burns or injuries, as it had done with Sam. Dean's hands, unbIDDEN, rose to stroke its long black muzzle.

The dragon (Cas...) froze as Dean touched him, the vast wings on either side twitching up a little. It watched him carefully with those huge sapphire eyes as Dean began to stroke its face.

It felt something like petting the nose of an immensely overgrown Clydesdale horse — one that was inexplicably covered with tiny feathers, that is. There was tremendous strength and solidity in the long bony skull, but the skin was velvet-soft, covered with a lining of short, fine, delicate black feathers that felt almost like satin. Mesmerized, Dean traced his hands up the dragon's long profile and up over the broad forehead (the dragon kept absolutely still), and he found that the feathers got gradually longer here, lengthening into a fluffy, feathery mane of very soft foot-long plumes that extended along the neck. Dean would have inspected the feathers further but next he got transfixed by the eyes, for he was standing right next to one of the huge eyes now. Dean stood staring right into its eye, and the dragon stared right back. Its eye was shockingly lovely, a dazzling sapphire-blue that was glittering with flecks of silver and indigo. It had cat-like vertical pupils that somehow, despite their slightly alien look, seemed to have a friendly expression.

One sapphire eye squinted at him then, the head tilting toward him slightly, and it was such a familiar expression (despite being on such an unfamiliar face) that Dean found himself leaning closer, wrapping his arms across the dragon's huge forehead, embracing it as best he could, and burying his face in the soft dark feathers.

"Cas," he said at last. "Cas... Cas." The name had been almost impossible to say before, but now Dean couldn't stop saying it. "Cas, Cas, Cas..."

The purring was so loud now that the dragon's whole head was vibrating.

"Dean," Sam said, "maybe you should let go of his ear?" Dean opened his eyes to discover that one of his hands was hanging tight to a three-foot-long clump of feathers that was indeed, Dean belatedly realized, one of the dragon's ears. The dragon had gone patiently still again, its long chin now lying flat on the ground and its whole head angled slightly toward Dean, letting Dean half twist its ear off, one eye now squinched shut to protect it from Dean's belt buckle, still making that rumbling purr all the while.

Dean had to force himself to let go, and as he did so, he saw a glint of red on the side of the dark feathered head.

"I stabbed you," Dean said, appalled. A burst of horror hit him out of nowhere and Dean stumbled back from the dragon with his hands up.

The dragon blinked in alarm, widening its eyes and raising his head to look at Dean. "I stabbed you — oh god — I stabbed you —" said Dean, backing away farther.

He'd found Cas and had immediately tried to kill him again.

Dean felt abruptly nauseous, still trying to stumble farther back, sick with horror. What had he been doing, thinking he had any right to touch this beautiful creature, this wonderful angel, after what he'd done?
The dragon let out a sort of worried-sounding moan, and Sam said, "Dean, Dean, he's fine, look, he's not bleeding anymore, it's already healed—"

But all Dean could think was I hurt him again, I hurt him again, I hurt him again—And then around him the warehouse seemed to leap into view, bloodier and more awful than ever. I hurt him again...

A shadow was moving overhead. Dean glanced up to see that both of the great wings had lifted up and come forward. Sam stepped back as the wings arced around to surround Dean almost like a huge tent.

He's mantling me, thought Dean. Under the shadow of the wings the dragon leaned forward and licked Dean's forehead again. The soft touch didn't "heal" Dean exactly, but it did bring a measure of calm; the image of the warehouse faded away, and the panic, and even a little of the sickening guilt, receded a little.

The dragon folded back its wings. Sam moved closer and set a hand on Dean's shoulder. "Dean, you ok?" he said.

Dean gave a very shaky nod, trying (and failing) to hide how desperately disoriented he felt."Yeah... I just... I can't believe, I really can't believe, that I... what I did, I... I stabbed him again....I...

"You thought he was about to kill me," pointed out Sam. "He's a freakin' fire-breathing dragon, after all. You didn't know it was him. Honestly I would've done the same thing — I mean, if I hadn't been busy passing out. Cas..." Sam said, turning to the dragon. "Why didn't you say anything? You scared us both half to death."

A distinctly frustrated look came over the dragon's face, and its tufted dark ears drooped in apology. It let out a low, soft, burbling growl.

"I don't understand," said Sam. "Can't you talk?"

The dragon shook its head.

Then it gave a rather resigned-sounding sigh. It brought one wing forward, and a set of small feathers at the bend of the wing brushed Sam lightly on the head. At once Sam's eyes closed, his head sagged and his knees buckled. He would have pitched face-forward onto the ground except that the dragon nimbly slid one wing down below him, catching Sam neatly on a wide bed of feathers as Sam toppled over. The dragon shook its wing a little, sliding Sam carefully to the ground, as Dean looked on in confusion. He blinked up at the dragon, totally bewildered now — was this for real? Was it really Cas? Or had it all been just a trap? The other wing was moving closer now, and all Dean seemed able to do was stare at the feathers at it moved closer. There was a small clump of feathers sticking out a little bit right at the bend of the wing, a little line of feathers that had not only gold tips but also golden shafts, and they reached out and brushed Dean's forehead. Sleep flooded through him; the last thing he saw was the pair of huge sparkling blue eyes gazing at him.

The blue eyes were still looking at him. They seemed a little worried.

"I thought it would be easier to talk this way," said Cas, stepping back a little, still studying Dean. "Though we'll have to be ready to leave in a hurry if needed. I'm not sure how safe it is."
Dean blinked, looking around. Beside him stood Sam, equally surprised. Dean and Sam were standing side-by-side on a dock by a lake, and Cas was standing right there in front of them. Cas in his human vessel. Standing right there in his trenchcoat outfit. Dark shoes, blue tie and everything.

It was Cas. With Cas's face. Cas's human face. Cas's human body.

The body that Dean had destroyed. The body that had died in Dean's arms. The body that Dean had buried.

"Jesus fucking christ it really is you," blurted out Sam, and a second later he'd grabbed Cas in a tight hug.

Dean stood completely frozen now, his mouth actually agape. If it had been overwhelming to meet dragon-Castiel, it was downright impossible to meet human-Castiel, and Dean could not seem to take it in. Cas was looking over Sam's shoulder at Dean, and though Cas was patting Sam's shoulder he started to look increasingly concerned. As soon as Sam finally released Cas (Sam was sniffling again), Cas reached over to Dean with one hand, squeezing him on the shoulder. But it didn't feel real; it felt ghostly, amorphous. Dean thought, It's all just a dream.

Sam was looking around at the lake. "Where are we? What is this place?"

"It's my lake..." said Dean slowly. "It's a dream."

"Yes. This is a dream," Cas confirmed. "It's a dream setting I've borrowed from Dean's mind. A rather hastily cobbled-together dream, I'm afraid, hence why it feels a little unconvincing. Sorry, I didn't have much time; it was the quickest option. Listen, both of you—"

It was almost hard to focus on what he was saying, for that rough, low, heartbreakingly familiar tone of Cas's voice was sending shivers down Dean's back. That low, rumbly voice... (like the low roar that that Cas had as a dragon? Did Cas have a low voice no matter what form he was in?)

That beloved voice... To hear it again at last seemed unbelievable.

Cas was frowning at him, and soon Cas had reached out to grip Dean's shoulder again, as if trying to stabilize him. He left his hand there as he went on, "As dearly as I want to talk with both of you — especially you, Dean—" (Cas's hand tightened a little) "— we may not have much time. We have a long journey ahead of us and I've got a lot to explain. By the way, in reality I'm still in my true form and you're both asleep at my feet. I've brought you both into this dream, and I've borrowed your memories of my old form, my vessel, to give me a way to speak to you."

"You're alive," said Dean.

Cas squeezed Dean's shoulder. "Yes. And I'm back in my true form, as you saw. The problem is, I can't speak English in my true form. English is rather a crude language, and I can't form the right sounds given the shape of my natural mouth. That's why I had to take a human vessel in the first place, Dean, as you may recall. I first took a human vessel so as to be able to speak English with you, remember?"

"You're alive," said Dean again, for his mind was completely fixated on that one fact. Nothing else actually mattered at all, other than: Cas was alive.

Cas frowned at him, opening his mouth to reply, when Sam said, "Wait, why weren't we being deafened then? By your, your ... roar or whatever? If that's your true form, isn't that your true voice? Shouldn't it deafen us or something?"
Cas gave Sam a little smile. "It would, normally. But you chose the right coordinates at the Fire Gate. We're in a different dimensional plane here, two slices over from the usual plane, and you're somewhat protected from excesses of Heavenly power in this plane. Heavenly power here is spread very thinly, and all my natural powers are much weaker. That's why I couldn't heal you instantly, Sam," he added, with an apologetic look.

"No worries," said Sam, with a grimace. "I am really glad you could heal me at all."

Cas smiled at him, and then looked back at Dean. He still had his hand on Dean's shoulder, and Dean slowly raised one hand to rest it over Cas's. Everything still felt distinctly unreal, and Cas's hand, frustratingly, felt unreal as well.

"You're really alive," said Dean again, trying to believe it.

"Yes," said Cas, squeezing Dean's shoulder again. "Anyway, as I was saying, there isn't all that much power here. I can't shift between dimensions here, for example — it's far too dangerous anyway, of course, given our location." (Something about this comment didn't quite make sense, but Dean let it slide; it still seemed much more important to concentrate whole-heartedly on the "Cas is alive" issue.) Cas went on, "I can't do my usual everyday miracles, either. The low power is also why this dream we're in isn't very stable and is not feeling entirely real. But there are a couple of benefits to being in a low-power dimension. You can hear my true voice safely. Though of course you still can't understand my language. Also, you can both look at my true form without your eyes burning out."

"Definite plus," said Sam, nodding. "Appreciate that." Sam seemed to have found his stride already, accepting the reality of both dragon-Cas and dream-human-Cas without hesitation, but Dean still found himself just barely able to focus on one fact at a time.

"You're alive," said Dean, clinging to his one fact.

This time Sam and Cas exchanged a slightly worried glance. Cas squeezed Dean's shoulder yet again and said, "I'm okay, Dean. I'm okay." He went on, mostly to Sam, "I should warn you, I think the guardians' voices still may hurt you both. The guardians have been storing up power for eons; they're much stronger than the rest of us. I was speaking High Enochian, by the way, as I flew to the guardians — I was begging them to let you go, but..." He hesitated, glancing at the horizon across the dream-lake. "It's probably best you couldn't understand their replies."

"You can purr," said Dean. He still seemed to be three steps behind the conversation.

"Purr?" said Sam to Cas, a wide smile breaking over his face. "Is that what you were doing?"

Cas looked a little bashful about that, finally removing his hand from Dean's shoulder. "Yes. Angels do have a... uh... a sound that rather like a cat's purr, I suppose. It just...um. It just happens. When we're..." (a shy glance at Dean here). "... happy. Anyway, to really speak with you I had to bring you both here to this dream. My worry, though, is that the guardians may detect that we're communicating this way. They'll overhear us sooner or later — dreams can be overheard, as you both know — and they may be able to home in on us. So I may have to cut this short and move you to another place—"

"Wait," said Sam. "Guardians? You mean, guardians of the Crown? Is that what those... those huge-ass sons of bitches were?"

Cas gave a curt nod. "That's as good a term for them as any, I think. They've been here since the dawn of time. Their names are Gog and Magog; they're among the oldest of the angels, and they're
extremely old, extremely large, and extremely powerful. They have been guarding the Crown since the dawn of time; they were set to guard all alone here, and all they remember is that they were put here to guard the Crown. They are close to insane by now, and totally single-minded. And there is no turning them aside. They will try to destroy anybody who comes to this place. Especially humans, and—"

"You're a dragon," interrupted Dean.

"Well, really I'm still an angel," said Cas. "That's just what angels look like, actually."

"You're a friggin' dragon," said Dean.

Cas tilted his head a little. "You must understand, humans have applied many names to the true form of angels. Dragon is one, but the term is not an exact fit. There are other names as well."

"Griffin?" broke in Sam eagerly.

Cas glanced at him in surprise, "Yes, actually. Griffin was an older term for angels. But neither of those terms quite capture the reality of what we are—"

It seemed beyond absurd that Sam and Cas were both standing there chatting with each other about goddam lore and friggin' terminology when the real point was that CASTIEL WAS ALIVE. "You're friggin' alive and you're a friggin' dragon," said Dean, interrupting Cas yet again.

Cas didn't seem to mind the interruption. Instead his mouth twisted a little, in what surely was a suppressed smile. "Okay, Dean. Yes."

"You never mentioned you were a friggin' dragon," said Dean.

This seemed to take Cas off guard; he blinked at Dean, a little confused. "I... thought you knew," he said. "You didn't know? I thought it was obvious."

"Obvious?" said Dean. "How was it obvious?"

"Well, you know," said Cas, spreading his hands with a little shrug. "I've told you both that my true form is very large. Also you both know I have wings. And you know angels use a special kind of fire as a weapon against each other. And that our other main weapon is a sort of a claw, the angel-blade. We carve the angel-blades from our claws, actually." He glanced back and forth between them, looking a little puzzled. "Wasn't it obvious what my true form is?"

There was a little pause.

"It wasn't obvious," said Sam. "It was... not obvious."

Cas just looked even more puzzled. "What were you picturing, then?"

"How come you're alive?" burst out Dean. "How come the orishas didn't know you were here?"

"Oh. The orishas can't come here," said Cas. "It's the one place they can't search. Didn't they tell you?"

Sam and Dean stared at him. And slowly, Dean remembered:

We cannot go to the Crown, said Elegua.

We searched everywhere we could, said Oshossi. We did not find your friend. We searched and did
not find him. We searched everywhere we could.

Sam said, "But Elegua said he'd searched Heaven — oh." He paused, thinking. "No. Wait. Dammit. What he said was, he'd searched 'within the borders' of Heaven."

"Ah," said Cas, nodding. "That makes sense. We're just outside the borders here."

"We're outside the borders of Heaven?" said Dean.

"Just outside, yes," said Cas. "We angels used to call this area the 'outer lands' sometimes. Though topologically it's a sphere, of course. We're usually unable to travel here — the transition here is normally too dangerous for us to survive."

"You know what, Dean" said Sam, "I bet the orishas thought they'd explained that very clearly. They told us, they can't go to the Crown, and then they said, they searched everywhere we could, and also said, they searched within the borders. And they were probably wondering afterwards, why don't those two bozos realize that we just told them where Cas is?"

"Frickin' orishas," snapped Dean, a blaze of fury running through him. For it almost seemed, for a moment, that the orishas had stolen away Castiel himself. Dean had been so convinced that Cas was still alive somewhere, and it was the orishas who had made him so sure that he'd been wrong.

But the memory of Elegua and Oshossi stepping into the Fire Gate made Dean bite his tongue.

"They did the best they could," he said, grudgingly, after a minute.

Sam gave a tired little laugh, and then turned to Cas to ask, "But how did you survive? I mean... you... died, right? You died?"

Cas glanced at Dean, and held his eyes for a long moment. Dean's skin prickled as realized that Cas must be remembering what had happened in the warehouse.

What had happened in the warehouse... Cas remembered. Cas knew. Cas was about to say something. Dean's eyes dropped to his feet, and he closed his eyes.

A moment passed, but Cas said nothing. But Dean, eyes closed, could still feel Cas's gaze on his face, almost like a physical pressure. I gotta look at him, Dean thought. He was dreading what he would see — pain, fear? Accusation? Distrust? Anger? Hatred, maybe, even?

But when Dean finally managed to drag his eyes up to Cas's face, the expression in Cas's eyes was something else entirely. There was something soft and warm in his eyes; something worried, too.

After a long, helpless moment pinned under Cas's gaze, during which Dean couldn't even breathe, Cas turned back to Sam and said, "It seems this is where angels come when they die."

Sam diplomatically ignored the entire episode, just saying, "But the lore says angels get torn to pieces when they come here."

"They do," agreed Cas, nodding. "I was. I was torn to pieces. Angels are blown apart when they die. But it turns out the pieces are automatically drawn to Heaven, as if drawn by a magnet. Coming home, in a sense. All the pieces end up here, just outside the border of Heaven. We all knew something of the sort — we knew a dead angel's grace flies apart into particles that fly toward Heaven — but what we never knew, none of us, is that the angel's essence comes here too, and that
the pieces reassemble. The bits of grace drift about, somewhat at random at first, but eventually the pieces of grace find the angel's essence, and they gather to it, and..." Here Cas looked down at both his hands and made a gesture as if he were gathering something together, pressing it all together like making a snowball. "They merge with it."

*The butterflies*, Dean thought. *The white butterflies. Those were pieces of grace.*

"The grace also carries away the dying angel's memories," said Cas, "and certain abilities, and of course the grace carries some power as well. And so when the grace is reunited with the essence, the angel is reborn." He was still staring down at his hands, somewhat lost in thought now, and he added, "I was probably more surprised than you are, to find myself here, to be honest." He looked up slowly, gazing out over the dream-lake. Eventually he turned back to Sam and said, "Though, the angel is reborn in a much smaller and weaker form than before. Almost embryonic. It can take quite a while to gather enough power to start growing and start molting new feathers. My true form, my, um, what you called my 'dragon' form, is much smaller than it used to be. I started out even smaller still, a few months ago. Smaller than a housecat, actually. I could barely even crawl." Cas looked over at Dean, an uncertain look on his face. "I think you... I think you saw something of the process?" he said. "I don't remember it very well but... I do remember looking up and seeing your face." Cas paused a moment, studying Dean's face.

Cas added, more firmly, "You were protecting me. I know that much."

You were the baby parrot, thought Dean. But by now he seemed to have completely lost the ability to speak. All he could do was stare at Cas's face. Again Cas looked back at him, though at least this time Dean was somewhat better able to hold his gaze.

This time, actually, Dean felt he could fall head-first into those beloved blue eyes, and be lost forever in them. And be happy there.

He didn't realize how long they'd been staring at each other till Sam broke the silence to say, hesitantly, "Dean saw a baby parrot."

The spell broke. Cas looked over at Sam. Sam seemed a little embarrassed to have spoken up (he was fidgeting a little) but he explained, "On a mountain, in one of his weird dreams. He saw a baby parrot. But he said it had, um..." Sam cleared his throat, glancing over at Dean. "Rainbow wings."

"Ah," said Cas, nodding. "My juvenile plumage, yes. The first feather coat of a nestling does always look quite different from the adult feathers, and my first plumage did grow in rather brightly colored this time." With a little sigh he added, "Gabriel will not stop teasing me about it."

"Gabriel?" said Sam.

Cas gave him a little smile. "I'm not the only angel who was reborn here. There are many others. They're scattered very widely, but I have found some of my old companions."

He then gave Dean a rather serious searching look. "I've wondered if you were influencing the color of my first set of feathers," Cas said. "At least a little. Juvenile plumage — the first feather coat, that is — can be influenced by the angel's caretaker. And those dreams of yours were mostly real, you know. You were actually doing astral projection, by the way — for the most part — with elements of dreamwalking, elements that were filtered through your own perceptions. And you may have had an influence on some things." Cas frowned, gazing at Dean. "Perhaps if you were thinking of me as rainbow-colored, for some reason, it might have affected my first plumage? Though I can't think why you would be thinking of me as a... rainbow?"
Dean felt himself blush. Sam seemed to be stifling a cough. Or a laugh. "Ah," said Sam. "Maybe. Yeah. Can't imagine what rainbow might mean..." He shot a significant glance at Dean here, who had to stare down at his feet again.

Sam gestured to Cas's trenchcoat. "And then what, your next batch of feathers turned the same color as your clothes? How'd that happen?"

Castiel laughed, glancing down at the familiar coat. "It's the other way around, Sam. I've always had those colors. I chose the clothes originally to match my feathers."

Sam's eyes widened. "Seriously?"

Cas looked a little embarrassed, but he said, "When I was looking for a human vessel I was drawn to Jimmy for — well, for many reasons, but one was, I did feel at home with his natural coloring. His hair and eye color, I mean. And then I selected clothes to match my plumage. The truth is, taking a vessel can be..." He paused, looking down at his human body, smoothing one hand over the familiar tan trenchcoat and running the other down his blue tie. "It can be disorienting. Even for an angel, to find yourself on Earth and in a new body is... quite unsettling. It's comforting to be able to glance down at yourself and see the same colors you've always seen. Most angels do the same, if they have the chance to. It helps us settle into the vessel. So, I've always had a white belly, black feet, tan across the shoulders... I've always had black head feathers, too, and I've had a bit of blue in my neck ruff since I was a fledgling." Cas was fingering one of the lapels of the trenchcoat, gazing down at it. "The moment I saw this coat in Jimmy's closet, the moment I put it on, I felt more at home. It was... familiar. Though I, uh..." Here he glanced at Dean. "I got... quite comfortable in my human body after a while. I got... fond of it."

And now, once again, Dean could think of nothing but what had happened to that body. How it ended up, flayed and bloody and broken. And where it had ended up... buried up there on the hill... no doubt decayed beyond all recognition by now....


By Dean.

"Dean?" Cas's voice said. Dean glanced up to find Sam and Cas both watching him.

Sam said, "Dean, you okay?"

"Uh," said Dean. "Yeah, sure, I..." His voice faltered.

Cas gave Dean one more careful look, and turned to Sam to say, "Would you mind, Sam, if I send you back to wakefulness, and I'll just stay in this dream a moment longer with Dean and —"

"Yeah, yeah, absolutely," Sam said, already nodding. "You guys take your time. Yeah." He added, quickly, "And, Cas. It's good to have you back. And I mean, it is really good."

Cas gave him a soft smile. Then he touched Sam's forehead with two fingers, and Sam disappeared from the dream at once.

---

Dean had actually been coming up with a sort of a plan, during the last ten minutes. The plan was, if
he did manage to actually get Cas alone for a minute, Dean would get down on his knees and beg Cas to forgive him. (Sure, there'd been that "I forgive you," in the warehouse, but that hardly counted, did it? Poor Cas had been desperate and delirious by then.) Dean needed to ask for forgiveness, and so he would beg, he'd friggin' grovel, and if Cas couldn't forgive him, that would be totally understandable and Dean would just... accept that. And if Cas somehow did manage to forgive him, Dean would grab him with both hands and never let him go.

That was the plan.

But now that they actually were alone, Dean found it completely impossible to say anything at all, or even to move. Once again he couldn't even meet Cas's eyes.

Dean stared down at his feet for a few moments, trying to slow his racing heart.

I killed him.

I tortured him, and I killed him...

What could he even say after something like that? How could they ever start up a friendship again? How could it possibly be repaired?

Something caught Dean's attention, in his peripheral vision, and he glanced over at the lake to find that the dream was changing. The lake was fading away, gradually replaced by what seemed to be a vision of the mountaintop. Soon the two vast dark feathers were even standing nearby, their gilded tips shining in the light.

"Why're we here?" ventured Dean at last, a little worried.

"I don't know," said Cas. Dean glanced over to see that Cas was looking at him, a little uncertainly, out of the corner of his eye. "I'm not changing the dream," said Cas. "You are." He glanced over at the feathers and added, his voice a little hesitant, "Maybe you... associate me with this setting?"

Dean thought, He's nervous too.

"So," said Dean. "Uh... how ya been?" His voice came out almost in a croak.

I killed him. I killed him. How can he ever forgive me?

The whole image of the mountain-top wavered yet again, the dream-setting apparently cycling on to yet another setting. "Dean—" Cas started to say, but then Castiel himself flickered out of sight; and then there was a pool of blood at Dean's feet, and a jumble of wooden pallets all around. Pillars around him. High ceilings.

The warehouse.

Dean was alone, and he was in the warehouse... standing in a pool of blood. Dean raised his eyes, slowly, slowly, to the cross in front of him, knowing what he would see—

"Dean," said Cas sharply, and Dean felt a touch on his cheek. The warehouse vanished, and Dean opened his eyes to find that Castiel was standing directly in front of him, just a foot away now, cradling Dean's cheek with one hand. Cas had also somehow wrenched the dream-setting back to the original lake. Dean wanted, almost desperately, to grab him tight in both arms, but felt certain he had no such right -- and also felt horribly unsure about whether Cas would even welcome the move.

Instead he pressed one hand to Cas's, and put the other hand on Cas's wrist. This was as much as
Dean dared.

"I'm so sorry," Cas said. "I'm so very sorry."

Dean blinked. Cas was sorry?

"You're not the one who needs to be sorry," Dean muttered.

"I'm so sorry," Cas repeated, his hand still on Dean's cheek. "You've been in such terrific pain, and I couldn't reach you to tell you that I was okay. It's been immensely frustrating. Ever since I woke up enough to realize where I was and who I am, I've been trying, constantly, to send some kind of communication back to you. But—" Cas's hand tightened a little, pressing to Dean's cheek— "it turns out to be very difficult to communicate from here. As I said, this dimension inherently has less power. I kept trying but I could never quite reach you." He was stroking Dean's cheek lightly now, rubbing the pad of his thumb softly across the uneven stubble on Dean's cheek, his fingertips brushing lightly around Dean's ear. It brought to mind the last time Cas had touched him... the very last time Cas had touched him... on the side of his jaw... in the warehouse...

Inevitably the warehouse-nightmare started to flicker into view again. "Dean, look at me," said Cas sharply, putting his other hand on Dean's shoulder. "Focus on me. Look at me, Dean, look at me." Dean dragged his eyes up to Cas's, taking in a gulp of air. He clung to Cas's hand even more tightly, concentrating on the feel of Cas's thumb rubbing across his cheek. And he looked unblinking into Cas's eyes (which had, it seemed, that soft, warm expression once again). The lake snapped back into view around them.

"I kept trying to reach you," said Cas. "I always kept trying. But I could never reach you on my own. But, fortunately, you began breaking through to me instead. I think it may have been occurring when you fell asleep with my feather?"

Dean's eyes widened. He moved one hand to his breastpocket... to Cas's feather. Cas stepped back and dropped his hands from Dean's cheek and shoulder then, a little smile on his face as he watched Dean pull a single feather from his pocket.

For some reason the version of the feather in this dream was solid gold, instead of the usual black.

Cas gave a soft laugh when he saw it. "Interesting," he murmured. "I don't know if that's me or you..."

Dean was confused by the shining gold color, but it was clearly some kind of dream-version of the alula-feather. He looked up at Cas, the gleaming golden feather held in his hand. "It was the feather that helped me reach you?" Dean said. "I mean, the real feather, the black one?"

Cas nodded. "I believe so. Alula-feathers can have great power, and they can call directly to the feather-owner. Especially in combination with a prayer... and even more so in sleep. Still though, this is a dimension that is very difficult to reach, and even the alula-feather wasn't enough to allow very clear communication. But it seems that at least it was able to pull you here. And you were also feeding me power through it. I never could have grown so fast otherwise. Gabriel's quite irritated; I'm already much larger than he is and he's been here years—"

"Wait, what?" said Dean. "I was... what?"

"Feeding me power," said Cas. "You were feeding me power. Every day."

"How?"
"You were praying to me," said Cas.

Dean stared at him.

Cas added, with a smile, "Sam was praying as well. And Claire, too." Cas's eyes went a little distant for a moment. "She's still praying, actually. She thinks I'm dead, but she's still praying. As you did." His level gaze returned to Dean, and Cas said, "But your prayers were by far the strongest. Not only did you have my feather, but also—"

Cas fell abruptly silent, drawing a sharp breath in with a hiss and jerking his head up. He turned slowly, searching the horizon all around. "Drat," he muttered. "I think Gog or Magog may have picked us up." He seemed to be listening for something, still scanning the horizon as he added quietly, "Unfortunately they can sense quite a few kinds of communication. Gog was woken by your dreams— he was the one who attacked you, in that dream of yours. I had been planning to meet you and had a whole plan for how to communicate with you, but Gog attacked and I had to leave you to lure him away. And then today Magog woke when you prayed to me from atop his back. I can't tell you how alarmed I was when I heard your prayer and realized where you must have been standing." Cas cocked his head a little, as if picking up some distant noise that only he could hear. "Dammit. Yes, that's them. We have to go." He looked at Dean. "And I haven't even told you about the Darkness yet, and what we must try to do, but — we must go. I'll try to talk again later." He began to raise two fingers to Dean's head.

"Wait, Cas," said Dean, "Wait— " There was so much more that Dean needed to say. So much more. "Cas—"

"We have to go," said Cas.

"But... you ... heard me?" said Dean. It was the one question he seemed able to get out. "My prayers?"

Already the dream was changing, fading from around Dean. The sky overhead began to glow again with that eerie amber color; the clouds overhead were swirling now in those strange great looping arcs. But for just a few seconds longer, Cas, human Cas, was still standing there looking at Dean.

"I heard every word," said Cas. He set both hands on either side of Dean's face, cradling his jaw, and said intensely, leaning close, "I heard every song. I heard every thought. I heard you, always. Look at my feathers, Dean." Dean did try to take hold of him then, reaching out to try to take Cas in his arms, but his hands went right through Cas's body. Cas was going translucent. The entire dream-setting was tearing apart, the lake evaporating away. Great shadows began to loom into view behind Cas, one on the left and one on the right, stretching high out to the sides; Cas's wings. The real wings; the dragon wings. A ghostly Sam began to fade into view as well, off to the side, and Dean knew he was waking up. Yet Cas was still standing there, dream-Cas in his human-form, even as the great hulking shape of his dragon form came into view slowly behind him, overlapping him eerily like a double exposure. Cas leaned forward — To say one more critical thing? Was he going to whisper something? Or was he...

Dean made one more hopeless effort to grab hold him. But it was too late; his hands closed on empty air as the dream faded to reality, and the human face that Dean loved so well turned to mist and was gone.

No. Not gone. Not entirely. Another face was right behind it, and this new face was still there, coming into sharp focus now as Dean woke fully. The new face was much larger, and much more ferocious, and covered in sleek black feathers and it bore two tufted dark ears, and it was armed with an impressive set of teeth. Yet it had exactly the same expression in its big blue eyes that human-Cas
had had. That same warm, soft look; that same stare. The same blue eyes that Dean felt he could almost dive into, head-first, forever.

The dragon was still an alien-looking beast, in many ways. Dinosaur-sized, four-footed, two-winged, armed with teeth and fire and claws, it still seemed wild and dangerous and almost impossibly dramatic. The great glittering eyes, the tousled blue-and-black feathery mane, the tremendous gold-fringed wings arching overhead... it was, by any standard, one of the most impressive (and terrifying) sights Dean had ever seen. Yet this time, somehow, it no longer looked unfamiliar. This time, as Dean met its eyes, somehow it looked like Castiel.

It looked like Cas.

It was Cas.

Cas huffed out a mournful growl that Dean was almost positive meant, "I'm sorry, but we've got to go." A screech sounded in the distance, a sound that made a chill run up Dean's spine. The other celestial dragons, Gog and Magog, were on their way — the insane angels, the "guardians" who had obsessively protected the Crown for so long. Cas snatched up Sam and Dean in his black feathered forefeet once again, beat his enormous wings and shot off like an arrow. Together, the three of them — Sam, Dean, and the celestial dragon Castiel — rocketed low over the treetops toward the distant horizon, with the guardians of the Crown again in hot pursuit.

---

A/N - A slightly awkward reunion, right? Dean's overjoyed, of course, but is so confused he can barely think, and is also nearly paralyzed by the lingering trauma and guilt. The fic isn't going to zip right into happy Destiel smut, as you probably realized already. For one thing, there's a bit of a size mismatch now :) but the more serious problem is actually that Dean is still really messed up psychologically. He went through a real hell and he is not going to bounce back instantly - even with Cas's help and love and support, it'll take time.

And also, they have that pesky Darkness thing to deal with. And, oh yeah, Gog and Magog. But at least they're all together now.

I know the DCBB's are coming out... and I know the new season is about to start! I feel like my little fic is going to be totally blown out of the water by all the other awesomeness. But I hope you still want to see how it ends, just the same. :) I really will try to get a chapter up next week but I fly to Europe on Wednesday for a meeting. I think I'll be able to post from there but I'm not exactly sure of my wi-fi situation, so there might be some travel-related delays. Stay tuned! And please do let me know if you liked this chapter. I so love to hear from you.
The Crown of Heaven

A/N - OK, this fic is officially now an A/U, and it turns out it has a VERY different take on the Darkness than what the show is doing. Hope you still want to come along for the ride! :)

Speaking of rides...

Once again Dean was suspended in that huge feathery foot, with four enormous toes and a set of long silver talons closed securely around him. Once again they were rocketing along at dizzying speed over treetops that seemed horrifyingly far away, once again hearing the deafening shrieks and the sound of bursts of fire far behind them.

They were right back in the thick of it, it seemed. Maybe it wasn't going to be so easy after all to escape the Guardians? Out of the frying pan, into the fire, Dean thought.

Or rather: Out of the fire, and right back into the fire.

At least Cas seemed to be outpacing the huge celestials much more easily this time. He didn't even seem to be trying that hard; sure, he was definitely flying fast, wings beating the air steadily in powerful, sharp strokes as he hurtled along, but the flight seemed comfortable and almost relaxed, a level flight without all the wild diving and barrel-rolls. (Which was a considerable relief).

And best of all, this time Dean knew the entity that was carrying him was not a foe at all, but was a friend. And not just any friend. It was Cas.

All of which made being carried by a big clawed foot seem much more pleasant than before. Cas had a pretty solid hold on Dean, too, talons and toes wrapped snugly around Dean's torso and legs, and it no longer felt like being an inch from death but felt instead, rather like being curled up inside an odd hammock. Though, granted, it was a rather hard-edged hammock, and there were some alarming gaps between the huge toes; so just to be on the safe side Dean clung on tightly, both arms clamped around two of the toes and both his legs locked around a third. He even kept his ankles crossed around the third toe to keep a secure hold. Partly this was because, well, Dean really didn't like flying. (As much as he trusted Cas-the-dragon, it was awfully hard to shake the unnerving thought that he might accidentally slither right through one of the gaps somehow and plunge to his death).

And also Dean was hanging on tight because he seemed was still be wanting to "grab" Castiel however he could — whatever form Cas happened to be in. And if Dean couldn't grab hold of the familiar Jimmy Novak vessel, well then, he'd grab on to whatever form Cas was in, whatever he could grab onto. If that was just a big feathered toe, then so be it.

The wind whipping at Dean's face was soon making his eyes water, and also began making it hard to breathe. It was a few minutes before he even realized that it wasn't the wind at all that was causing the problems.
He finally managed to wipe his eyes on one sleeve and loosen his death-grip on Cas's toes enough to get a look around. Peering out between the toes, he could just make out Sam, who turned out to be sitting in the other foot several yards away. Sam had ended up facing backwards, inside his own nest of talons-and-toes, his knees tucked up almost to his chin. He seemed to be concentrating on distant Gog and Magog far behind them. The two immense Guardians were visible now as large specks on the horizon.

"Sam!" Dean hollered through the wind. "You good?"

Sam pointed to Gog and Magog and shouted something, but Dean couldn't make it out above the wind.

"What?" Dean hollered. "Can't hear you!"

Immediately both of the huge forefeet shifted, swinging the brothers around in mid-air. Dean yelped at the movement, tightening his hold again on Cas's feathered toes, but it turned out Cas was only shifting his feet closer together. A moment later Sam was just a couple of dragon-toe-widths away.

"Thanks, Cas," said Sam. There was a rumbly growl from far ahead, where Dean could see the underside of Cas's long black jaw. Cas tilted his long head down for a moment, angling one big blue eye toward them as if to make sure they both looked okay.

"We're good, Cas," said Dean. Another friendly rumble, and the huge black head turned to face forward again.

It was crazy, really. This gigantic beast truly was Castiel. Dean had to take a few moments then to just gaze up at him, trying to grasp the size and shape of what Castiel was now.

Mostly what he could see from here was the broad white belly overhead. It appeared almost like a sleek white ceiling, the white belly feathers all overlapping each other neatly with an appearance of something like a huge sheet of white silk, dotted here and there with tiny flecks of gold. Farther away to the left and right Dean could see glimpses of the soft brown that covered Cas's flanks and shoulders, a light tan patterned with golden scalloped edges; Cas's "trenchcoat" coloring, apparently. Beyond that, the huge black wings were flicking into view periodically, the long gold-tipped black feathers just dipping down into view on each of Cas's downstrokes.

Much farther back, several car-lengths away, Cas's black hind feet were barely visible. He had them tucked away up into his white belly feathers, but the edges of a few black toes were sticking out. Dean felt an embarrassing twinge of curiosity about what else Castiel might have on his underside. (What ... equipment might be between the hind legs of a celestial dragon?) He almost laughed at himself, for it seemed beyond ridiculous to even be wondering about this, but he couldn't even see anything anyway; all that was visible from here was the apparently seamless layer of fluffy white belly feathers. A plumy black tail extended farther back from there. It wasn't a fan-like shape like a bird's tail, but was skinny and long more like a lion's tail, fringed on the sides with two wide vanes of black feathers.

Dean looked forward, trying to get a glimpse of Cas's strange new face again, but Cas's head was mostly out of view. What Dean could see was the underside of the long black jaw and the end of Cas's "neck ruff," as Cas had called it. The neck ruff seemed to be a set of much longer, plumier feathers, rather like a lion's mane, glossy long plumes that seemed to cover his entire neck and that were several feet long each. The neck feathers seemed to be black farther up the neck (where they joined the black head feathers), but shaded to a deep shining blue on their lower ends. A few of the longest neck-ruff feathers extended right down the center of Cas's white chest, almost to where Sam and Dean were. The very longest neck plume was only a few feet away, a rich deep blue dotted with
gold on the very tip, fluttering a little in the breeze.

Blue right down the midline of the chest... *That goddam blue tie*, Dean thought.

No wonder Cas had gone to such pains to try to recreate his original wardrobe after he'd lost his first one. Sure, he'd had to switch to a striped blue tie instead of a solid blue tie, but it had still been blue. The new coat that he'd found hadn't been quite the same cut as the old trenchcoat, but he'd picked out just the same tan color.

Dean had been amused, at the time, by what he'd taken to be Cas's lack of imagination, a reluctance to experiment with any other colors of clothing.

But Cas had just been trying to feel at home, hadn't he? He'd just been missing his own natural coloring.

Dean thought then, once more, of their first meeting in the barn, Cas spreading his black wing-shadows. He'd have just picked out those clothes, just a few days before...

He'd just rescued Dean from Hell....

---

"I thought of another one," spoke up Sam, breaking into Dean's thoughts. "The roc."

"What?" said Dean, trying to focus. "Rock... what?"

Sam gave Dean a lopsided grin through the feathered black toes. "R-O-C. Roc. Another legend that might be about angels. You remember the Sinbad the Sailor stories? There was a roc in them."

Roc; the word sounded a little familiar. Dean thought a moment, and said, "Wait, I remember. The huge bird? From *A Thousand And One Arabian Nights*?"

"That's the one," said Sam. "The roc's most famous from that story, where it carries Sinbad away to its big ol' nest, remember? But there are lots more roc legends besides that one. It was a mythological creature of the Middle East and parts of Asia. A gigantic bird of prey, so big it could carry people away. I'm thinking, maybe 'roc' is like 'dragon' or 'griffin.' People must have seen these giant bird-things from time to time and made up different stories about them, and never realized they were really angels."

There was a short rumbly growl. Dean glanced forward to see that Cas's jaw, and presumably the rest of Cas's head, was nodding in agreement.

Dean began to laugh then, for the whole situation really so completely absurd. Here they were being carried across an impossibly huge landscape toward the Crown of Heaven by a friend who was not only an angel, but also a *dragon*, and a *griffin*, an a friggin' *roc* apparently too. A dragon that was named *Castiel*...

Dean's laughing lurched into something more like sob.

Sam reached out one hand across the giant toes and managed to grab Dean's arm, giving it a reassuring squeeze. "You good?" he said.

It took a moment for Dean to steady his breathing.
"It's really Cas," Dean finally managed to say.

Sam nodded, giving a rather uneven laugh of his own. "Sure seems like it," he agreed. "Hard to believe... but I believe it."

"Didn't I tell you?" Dean said. "You gotta have faith." At that Cas started up another rumbly growl, this time a softer and more liquid-sounding growl that seemed to come directly from his white-feathered chest overhead. This growl didn't stop right way. Instead it continued, going on for so long that at last Dean realized Cas had started purring again.

It became nearly impossible to speak at all then, so Dean closed his eyes and hung onto Cas's big feathery toes. He could feel the rumbly vibration of the purring right through the toes.

"Goddam, buddy," Dean whispered. "I missed you. I really missed you." He had whispered very quietly, but somehow Cas heard nonetheless, for the toes tightened a little and the purring got even louder.

Another shriek from behind brought Dean out of his toe-clinging reverie. He twisted around to glance behind them. Gog and Magog were still visible in the distance, a great black flapping thing and a gray one, but they'd fallen a little farther behind.

"Why aren't they catching up with us?" said Dean.

Sam said, "They're being harassed by some other little things. I was trying to shout to you before about it. I think that's why Cas seems so calm this time; he's got help. Something's slowing them down. The Guardians are being — Oh, there! Look!" Sure enough a small flying speck came into view, spiraling down from a higher cloud layer to dive-bomb enormous black Gog. The newcomer looked absolutely infinitesimal beside the immense, thousand-foot-long celestial dragon, rather like a seagull attacking a 747, but the tiny little fluttering dot swooped boldly right at Gog's head. It seemed, though, that the little attacker was able to make a pretty effective charge at Gog's eyes, for the great black dragon lurched unevenly, blinked its huge eyes shut, swung its head to snap at its little harasser and barked out a jolt of flame. But it missed; the tiny interloper had already zigzagged nimbly away, sailing up safety out of range and soon beginning another strafing pass.

Soon Gog had fallen even farther behind.

Dean could now make out two other little dots harassing Magog too. Squinting into the glare of the distant clouds, Dean was pretty sure he could make out some colors on the three little darting forms: red on one, some glittering gaudy iridescence on a second, and what looked like a combination of gray and black on the third.

"The birds from my dream," Dean said aloud.

"What?" said Sam.

"I saw these in one of my dreams," Dean said. "Remember I told you how three eagle things were driving me away from Cas? From the baby parrot, I mean? Those three are the same colors." And now he remembered that in the most recent dream he'd even seen them once harassing a distant huge black form, just as they were doing now. They'd been joined, in that dream, by a medium-sized "bird," a "crow-sized" one with black wings that Dean now realized must have been Castiel.
They were all trying to keep Gog away from me, Dean thought.

Sam was studying the three little dots. "Three more angels..." he said slowly. "Has to be, right? Gabriel and... two others." Cas's purring sound stopped, interrupted by a complex series of long burbly growls, and Cas even angled his head down again to look at Dean and Sam with one big shining blue eye. It seemed he was trying to tell them something, possibly the identities of the three little angels, but whatever he was saying was totally incomprehensible.

Dean patted his toe. "Sorry, Cas," he said, "but that was clear as mud."

Castiel gave a disappointed *hmm* sound, his ears drooping a little, and seemed to give up, raising his head to look ahead again.

"Did they really attack you, Dean?" Sam said quietly.

Dean knew what Sam was thinking: Were the three small angels really allies, or enemies?

*They drove me away from Cas,* he thought. The three "birds" had dive-bombed Dean and forced him away from baby-parrot Cas. Could they be angels who weren't really on Cas's side? Some of the angels Cas had killed in the past, maybe? (And there certainly had been a lot of those.) Yet apparently they'd helped keep Dean safe from Gog, later.

Dean thought back, trying to remember more about the earlier dream. Butterflies had been clustered around Cas, Dean had been trying to brush them off, and the three "eagles" had started charging at Dean. But... wait.

They hadn't actually attacked Dean very hard, had they? In fact they'd only driven him back; they'd never once used those lethal claws, or the terrible teeth. Or the fire.

They'd just been moving him backwards, without hurting him. Moving him away from Cas. Right when...

*Right when I was trying to brush the grace-butterflies off Cas,* Dean realized.

"They were only trying to protect Cas," Dean said to Sam. Another growl from Castiel, who swung his head upsidedown again to nod his head emphatically this time.

"You sure?" said Sam, sounding a little doubtful.

"Yeah," Dean said, shaking his head at the memory. "I didn't know what the butterflies were. I was trying to get them to leave Cas alone. But now I think they were really pieces of Cas's grace and they were just trying to, y'know, reassemble with him or whatever." Castiel nodded again.

"So maybe the other three were just saying, 'Leave his butterflies alone, he needs them'?" suggested Sam. "They were trying to help him?"

Dean nodded. "I really hope so," he said, looking back again at Gog and Magog. "Because here comes one of them."

One of the three little dragons was flapping its way toward Castiel now, leaving the other two to keep slowing down the Guardians. Cas didn't seem worried; in fact, he even stopped flapping for a bit, going into a long, level glide to let it catch up.

It took a while, but eventually the little dragon hove into view along Cas's right side. It was a smaller one, perhaps about elephant-sized to Castiel's dinosaur-size. It turned out to be the iridescent dragon,
the "gaudy" one that Dean remembered from his mountain-dream. Close up, its plumage turned out to be actually a dark green that was speckled with glossy iridescent flecks that caught the light beautifully, so that the dragon seemed to shine different colors when the light was right. As it pulled up alongside Cas, it let out a long sequence of clicking, warbling growl-sounds at Cas. Cas turned his head a little and answered in kind; some kind of complex exchange of dragon-Enochian, presumably.

The iridescent green dragon then executed a sort of side-slip maneuver and slid right underneath Castiel, sailing below Sam and Dean like a glittering little airplane. It then did a neat half-barrel roll, till it was actually flying upsidedown, staring up at the two brothers.

It turned out the bottom side of the iridescent dragon was a deep velvet-black. Dean studied it. Black belly... green neck ruff and green wings. He tried to think of any angel he'd met who had worn some combination of black and green clothes, but none came to mind.

The iridescent dragon cruised below them a few moments longer, looking up at Dean and Sam with a pair of large amber-colored eyes. Eyeing Dean, it said something to Cas that, while totally unintelligible, seemed to have an unmistakable teasing edge to its tone. Cas let out an rough growl, baring his teeth slightly, and pulled Dean up sharply till Dean was almost buried in white belly feathers. At that the smaller dragon actually stuck out its tongue at Cas, gave Sam a broad wink from one shining eye, flipped neatly in the air and shot off behind Cas back toward the distant battle with Gog and Magog.

"That's GOT to be Gabriel," said Sam. Black shirt, green jacket, Dean remembered. Cas just gave an irritated snort.

Gog and Magog soon dropped entirely out of view behind them, harassed endlessly by Gabriel and the other two dragons. Cas flew on for nearly an hour longer.

Dean was soon exhausted. The overwhelming reality of Cas-the-dragon, and Cas being friggin' alive, and the fight with the Guardians, was taking its toll. The landscape streaming past underneath began to get almost dizzying; the ranks of mountains seemed positively endless, and with the eerie light from the overcast sky it began to seem like they were flying over huge waves on an endless glowing sea. Dean was soon wobbly with fatigue. He couldn't even seem to keep any thoughts straight in his head other than He's alive, he's okay, he heard me, he forgave me... He spent a long time gazing up at Castiel, at the sheet of soft white belly feathers and the gold-tipped wings, trying to adjust to what Cas was now, till his eyes were burning in the wind again. Eventually Dean had to shut his eyes and just lean his head against one of Cas's big feathery toes, stroking the little toe-feathers over and over.

The toes tightened a little. And the purring began again.

"Where the hell are we?" Sam said after a while. "We should've passed the Crown by now but I don't see a damn thing."

Dean was a little startled to realize that he'd entirely forgotten about the Crown. Oh yeah, he had to remind himself. End of the world and all that. Pay attention. Sam was right; there was nothing in sight below, just rank after rank of the mountains, and occasionally a glimpse of another tumble-down ruin. And given the rate that Cas was flying, it seemed they must have passed the Crown
already, but they'd seen nothing obvious.

"Where are we going, anyway?" Sam added. He pointed far ahead, where, across a high mountain range, the mountains flattened out into something like a large ocean.

Where was Cas taking them?

Over the next few minutes Dean also began to realize that, though it was truly incredible to be flying with Cas-the-dragon like this, perhaps it wasn't the most comfortable position ever. He'd been suspended in mid-air for some time now with his body weight half on Cas's toes and half on the silver talons, and though Cas had the talons carefully angled so that the sharp points weren't pressing into Dean's flesh, even so it was starting to feel rather like curling up on a set of sabers: tolerable for a few minutes, but more and more uncomfortable as time went on. He tried to shift a little, then realized his legs had gone numb, and then became a little panicky about the possibility that, with numb legs, he'd be unable to hold position and would at last slip between one of those alarming gaps between Cas's toes.

Dean was also getting pretty thirsty; he still had his pack on, but couldn't reach around to get the water bottles out. He glanced over at Sam. Sam was fidgeting around a little, trying to rearrange his long limbs too.

"How you doin'?" Dean asked.

Sam gave him an awkward smile. "Actually... hate to break the mood here, but to be completely honest, I'm trying to figure out how to take a leak without messing up Cas's toe-feathers."

"Cas!" Dean hollered. "Cas, buddy! We need a break!"

Cas looked down at them with a snort and began scanning around the mountain-tops that they were flying past. He soon veered over toward a rocky crag nearby.

At the last moment, as the crag loomed up under them, Dean thought, How is he going to put his feet down without crushing us? But Cas braked into a noisy hover with a tremendous flapping of wings, tilting himself up so that he could land just on his hind legs. He set down Sam first with one front foot, and then Dean with the other, still flapping his wings in a great gust of wind to keep his front end up in the air. Once both brothers were safely on the ground he settled down on his front feet before them with a heavy sigh, shook his long wings and folded them up along his flanks. Dean watched him settle down, somewhat awestruck all over again.

Cas. It's Cas, Dean thought, walking slowly up to him on somewhat wobbly legs. He reached out one hand to try to pat Cas on the nose, feeling almost timid as he did so, but Cas's soft purr started up again almost at once. Dean stroked a hand down his long nose, and Cas lowered his head so Dean could reach him more easily, even closing his big blue eyes.

"I still can't believe this," Dean whispered, still stroking Cas's nose as he looked Cas over: the huge black wings, speckled with gold, the great black feet with the talons, the silky long feathers of the neck ruff....

Cas was spectacular.

Not the form Dean was most used to, to be sure, but spectacular.

Dean walked back along Cas's side to the folded wings and finally dared to touch one wing a little, marveling at the gigantic shining feathers with their glossy gold tips. "It's really you," Dean whispered, tentatively setting one hand on the edge of the wing. It felt cool, and strong, and silky.
There were some smaller feathers here at the bend of the wing that Dean knew must be the alula-feathers.

*Look at my feathers*, Cas had said.

Dean reached out to stroke the alula-feathers. They lifted slightly under his hand, fanning out a little, a skinny clump of feathers some three feet long. "Your feathers changed color," Dean said slowly, reaching into his pocket and pulling out the much smaller, older alula-feather for comparison. The old one was all black. The new alula-feathers were much larger, of course, but also they were not all-black. They all had golden tips (as did practically every feather on Cas's body, Dean realized). The alula-feathers seemed to be unique in having golden shafts as well.

"But what does gold mean?" Dean murmured to himself.

He jumped as he felt a soft touch on the back of his neck, and turned to find Cas's huge dark head right there next to him, the liquid blue eyes watching him carefully; Cas had craned his head around to lick Dean on the back of the neck. He was still purring.

Sam eventually got Dean to leave Cas long enough to chug a little water and down some energy bars (and they each took a discrete trip behind a nearby boulder to relieve themselves). Cas, meanwhile, got deeply engrossed in rearranging the feathers on his back between his wings, his long neck arced around to pull a few feathers loose and carefully preen all the others. (He incinerated the loose ones in a puff of flame.) Dean sat down cross-legged before him and watched him work on the feathers, still trying to take in the reality of what Cas was now.

"Cas..." asked Sam, bundling the water bottles back into Dean's pack, "not to interrupt your preening or anything, but... where are we going? Where's the Crown?"

Cas stopped his preening and craned his head around to frown at Sam, tilting his head a little. He let out a grumbling long growl, and looked over his shoulder back to the south where Gog and Magog had been. The giant Guardians were nowhere to be seen (nor were the three smaller dragons) but Cas seemed a little uneasy, his folded wings shuffling loosely against his sides as he studied the horizon. After a moment he swung his head back at them with another complaining grumble.

"You're worried they'll hear us again?" Dean said. "Gog and Magog?"

Cas nodded.

"So what are we gonna do to communicate?" asked Sam. "A big game of twenty questions? All yes-and-no answers?"

Cas narrowed his eyes at that. After a moment's thought he spread his wings, shuffled closer and arced his wings forward like a tent, spreading them around Sam and Dean. He lifted his head up once, sticking it up from between the wings to peek out at the horizon again, and then tucked his head down under the wings. He gave Sam a soft lick on the forehead, and then Dean.

"I think I can shield us somewhat from them if I keep you both mantled with my wings," said Cas — in his human vessel, with his human voice, standing by the lake.
This dream seemed much fainter, almost like a hallucination layered on top of the real world. In fact, Dean could actually see the real world, hazily, through the dream one. Castiel's human vessel seemed a little translucent, almost like a ghost, and Dean could still make out the shadow of his dragon-form as well, especially the bright glittering eyes and the dim shape of the wings arcing overhead.

"I'm keeping the dream very faint, too," said Cas. Indeed the whole dream seemed so wispy that it was hard to hear him. Dean felt almost on the verge of waking up. Cas explained, "A quiet dream will be harder for them to overhear. But even so I may have to keep this even shorter than last time. Gog and Magog are not likely to give up the pursuit. But I really have to tell you both a bit about where we're going, and why. Also, I wanted to let you both know that I think you should try riding on my back after this. I'm trying to weave my back feathers into a spot where you can sit; I think you'll be more comfortable. We have several days' journey at least, to the northeast."

"Is that where the Crown is?" Sam said. "But... we thought it was just a hundred miles off, or so?"

Cas looked at him. "We're going a bit farther, actually."

"How much farther?" asked Sam.

"About fifty thousand miles," Cas said.

Dean and Sam looked at each other.

"A bit farther," said Sam to Dean.

"More than a two-day hike, then," Dean said blandly. "We might need one more water bottle."

"Just a bit more," agreed Cas, nodding. "I'll find you some water. But I can accelerate my flight to get you there. I need to explain. You see, I've remembered some things. When I was... well, reassembled here, some old memories came to light. That is, some pieces of my grace came back to me that I have not had for a very long time. Pieces of grace that apparently have been floating around here for a very long time. I was once...." He hesitated. "I once was a different form of angel," he said.

"An archangel?" said Dean.

Human-Cas looked startled; dragon-Cas, dimly visible in the background, gave a surprised snort.

"You knew?" said human-Cas.

"We just found out," said Sam. "The orishas remembered you from back then."

Human-Cas let out a surprised little laugh. "The orishas..." he said, shaking his head. "I should have thought to have talked to them. Well, I found out when I got here. I didn't remember any of it till I was reunited with my lost pieces of grace. Though, some of them were so old and fragile that unfortunately they didn't survive reassembly with me." (Dean remembered, then, finding pieces of a few mangled grace-butterflies.) "So I did not recover all my old powers," Cas went on, "but I did retrieve some of the memories. And some of the memories were..." He hesitated again.

"...significant. One involved the fact that God was never seen after he came here to wrestle back the Darkness. He was never seen in his usual form again after he gave Lucifer the Mark."

Sam said, "But God's been heard of since then, hasn't he? Like when Lucifer fell. And, you know, two thousand years ago. And—"
"There were messages from him, yes," said Cas. "But they were... avatars, almost. They did not feel like him...that is, they..." He paused. "It's hard to define how it felt, but it was not fully him. I became convinced that it was not him, in some crucial way. Something was lacking." He gave a small sigh.

"And another memory was that indeed Lucifer was only supposed to carry the Mark for a short time. In fact I think Lucifer would never have turned against Heaven, as he did, if he had not had to bear the Mark for so long. At any rate, I became convinced that God was no longer truly with us, that something had gone wrong while he was dealing with the Darkness, and that he needed our help; and so I decided to find him." He gave Dean a small smile. "I seem to have retained that impulse ever since — the impulse to find God — though I no longer remembered the reasoning for it exactly. And the problem was, his last true message had been an explicit order that angels could not visit the Crown, this area where he was last seen. I and two other archangels who shared my concerns tried to disobey that order, and tried to search for him anyway. We were demoted, and our memories wiped."

Dean frowned, studying Cas. It was starting to make sense why the other angels had so often seemed to flip-flop between scorning Cas, and following Cas, and fearing Cas. All along, Cas had, truly, always been a little different; whether or not the other angels had remembered what he was, they'd known he was something unique.

Sam was saying, "So the Mark was only supposed to be temporary?"

Cas nodded. "I think so. I think it was just a stopgap, and that God was preparing a better lock, something more permanent, to hold Creation together. So, when he came to the Crown—"

"Wait," said Sam. "Where is the Crown, exactly? Or to back up a little, where are we?"

"We're right outside Heaven," Cas said.

"Yeah, but, see, I don't get that," said Sam. "How are we right outside Heaven? Because, I thought the etheric plane was Heaven, and maybe the Ghostly one was Hell, but this one seems really far from the Heaven setting..." Sam faltered, for Cas had started to look puzzled. Sam paused a moment and said, "Those five settings the Gate had, they are realms, right? Five realms, right? Heaven, Hell, Purgatory, Earth?"

"Oh!" said Cas, his eyes widening, as if something had come clear. He started shaking his head. "Oh, no, no, no. I see, no, you've had hold of it wrong. It's not five different realms. It's five different planes. Five different slices. Like pages in a book—"

"Yeah, we got the book analogy already," said Dean. "Pages in a book, yeah, but then why—"

"What I mean is," explained Cas, setting a hand on Dean's shoulder, "Earth itself exists in all five of those planes. If you stand on Earth and go to the etheric plane, you're still on Earth. That is, you're not whisked to Heaven or Purgatory or any other location. You're still standing on Earth, but just... in the etheric version of Earth, if that makes sense. If you go to the ghostly plane, you are are, again, still on Earth, just a different slice of Earth. And Earth exists on the other two planes as well. Five different slices of the Earth, all looking and feeling different, all different temperatures, each with slightly different gravity and its own form of matter, but all still the Earth. Similarly the Moon exists in all five planes. The Sun exists in all five planes. Mars exists in all five planes, Jupiter exists in all five planes, Saturn exists in all five planes. Do you understand? The planes are simply different dimensions."

Dean nodded, a little uncertainly.

Cas went on, his hand still on Dean's shoulder. (He seemed to have developed a habit of wanting to
keep one hand — or one big clawed foot — in contact with Dean. A habit that Dean had absolutely no problem with). He said, "And not every one of those dimensions is conducive to life. Depending where you are, one plane or another may be conducive to life. For example, Earth is most habitable in what we call the "material plane", the one that you are used to — the middle setting on the Gate. However, Mars and the Moon are both most habitable in the etheric plane, while Jupiter —"

"Wait," said Sam. "Heaven's not the etheric plane? Or the one past it?"

"No, Heaven's a location." said Cas, finally removing his hand from Dean's shoulder in order to make some completely incomprehensible gestures about where Heaven was. "It's a spatial location. It's a place, not a dimensional plane," said Cas, waving his hands around. "The Sun exists in all five planes, like Jupiter exists in all five planes." (Again with the planets, Dean thought, getting even more confused. Why is he talking about planets?) Cas went on, "The Crown, in fact, exists in all five planes, too, but it's only habitable in this plane, which is one reason it's so hard to get to. Likewise, Venus is—"

Cas went on, chattering about planets again. Dimly, through Dean's confusion, he realized there was something odd in Cas's phrasing. Castiel had referred to the "Crown" as if it were a place, not an object.

A place like Heaven, apparently. A place like Hell.

"Cas..." said Dean, slowly. "Where's the Crown of Heaven exactly?"

Cas stopped his string of planetary descriptions and looked at Dean. "What? What do you mean? It's... " He gestured around. (The dream thinned a little bit, revealing the rocky mountain crag under their feet, along with Cas's dark dragon-head gazing at them.) "It's right here. It's all around."

Dean and Sam blinked at him.

"We're standing in it," Cas elaborated, now starting to look even more confused. "But you... knew that, right? You saw the flares, didn't you? Overhead?"

"Flares?" Sam repeated.

"The loops in the sky," Cas said. He glanced at Dean, adding, "You've seen them several times by now, Dean."

Loops in the sky. Loops.

Loops of cloud in Dean's mountain-dreams, great skeins of light and dust towering impossibly high up into the sky. Loops of dust in the dream of the warehouse... glowing loops of clouds over the glowing silver plain... Dean had, in fact, seen them many times now, but hadn't noticed the pattern. Huge high loops like auroras, high overhead, in a strange glowing overcast sky, over a strangely glowing landscape... but with the sun never visible at all.

"What is the Crown?" said Sam. At Cas's baffled look, Sam added, "Pretend we don't know anything, Cas."

Cas said, a little slowly, "Well... the Crown is the corona, of course. You know that 'corona' means crown, right?" He looked back at Dean. "But didn't you—"

"Corona," repeated Sam, very softly. "Corona... of... the... " He hesitated and finally finished, faltering a little, "... of the Sun?"
"The corona of the Sun," Cas confirmed, nodding. "The outer atmosphere of the Sun. Because, as you know, Heaven is the Sun. We're standing on the surface of the Sun. But you knew that, right?

A/N - Ahahahaha. So now we know why the sun was never visible. They're STANDING ON IT.

Next up: Road trip. Or rather, air trip.

BTW I haven't been able to see the S11 premiere and I'll miss next week's episode as well. I've heard enough, though, to know what they're doing with the Darkness. I'm probably going to not watch S11 at all till I finish this fic, so as to try to focus on getting the fic done without new lore messing up my plan. Hope you all enjoyed the premiere though!

Also - I'm traveling this week in Germany w/family. It turns out to be EXTREMELY difficult to get any writing done while sharing a room in a foreign country with chatty family members who also want me to go everywhere with them. (I'm actually crouched in a bathroom right now, at 5am, to finish this draft, so that I can have some quiet and so that I don't wake anybody by putting the light on. And since I'm all hunkered over, guess what's getting triggered, that's right, the headaches and neckaches again) I think it's going to be really difficult to get another chapter written this coming week. So I might have to skip one more week. Not sure yet. I will do my best! I really want to get this wrapped up for you all. :)

Thanks so much for accompanying me on this long fic journey.

If you liked this, please drop my a comment about what you liked! Thanks so much.
"We're on the..." Dean said, almost stuttering with surprise. "We're... what? We're on the what?"

"The Sun, of course," said Cas, now sounding a little puzzled. "Um... you do remember where we actually are?" He glanced around at the dream-lake and said, "Oh, I see — the dream setting must be confusing you. Here, let me change the dream-setting for you. I'm going to make the dream-setting look exactly like the real world, so that you'll see what I'm seeing in real life. Remember, you're both really asleep at my feet, under my wings, and this is what is really around you right now in the waking world."

The lake vanished, and now the vast mountain landscape (which had been rather mistily hovering in the background) sprang into clear view around them. Human-Cas still stood before them, with the faintly visible shadow of dragon-Cas crouching just behind him too, as if Cas couldn't help bringing an image of his true form into the dream as well. But all around now was an image of the real world.

The real world. The real... sun? That strangely glowing sky was overhead now, and that flat, distant horizon all around, with endless mountains receding away in rank upon rank, like waves on an infinite ocean. And overhead were some of those "loops."

*Flares, he called them*, thought Dean, looking up. Three of the arched, streamer-like clouds were visible now, two with their tops just peeking up over the horizon in different directions and a third soaring dramatically up from very close by. Its arched, rippling top spread up across nearly a third of the sky like a great glowing banner.

"So that's a solar flare, obviously," said Cas, following Dean's gaze to the great arched band of weirdly glowing cloud in the sky. "I assumed you noticed them?"

*Loops in the sky*, thought Dean, staring up at the immense solar flare. *Solar flares. We're standing on the frickin' Sun.*

The size of Ash's gigantic map should have been a clue. Ash had been trying to draw the very largest map possible; he'd gone to some pains to make it noticeably larger than all his other maps. And, too, there'd always been that strange look to the horizon. The higher Dean got here, whether high up a mountain or flying with Cas, the more he'd felt something weirdly awry in what he was seeing. There seemed to be almost too many mountains within view, stretching too far away into an impossible distance. Receding endlessly to an unthinkably far horizon. Sam had even mentioned it;
"I feel like I can see forever," he'd said, when they'd been up on that hill (standing on Magog's back, really, though they hadn't known that at the time).

Dean tore his eyes away from the solar flare to examine the infinite expanse of mountains all around. He started turning in a circle, looking all around, trying to take it in.

How far could they see here? Hundreds of miles? Thousands?

No wonder perspective had been so hard to judge. Against that unfathomably distant horizon, the black flapping thing outlined against the sky in Dean's mountain-dreams had seemed only "eagle-sized," when it had really been Gog, an ancient celestial dragon who, Dean now knew, was a solid mile long. The "crow" in the distance, in that same dream, had been dinosaur-sized Castiel. The "sparrows," presumably, had been elephant-sized Gabriel and his friends. Everything had been much bigger — and much farther away — than Dean had first assumed.

"The sun as in... the Sun?" Sam was saying, as Dean finished his little circle trying to grasp the scale of the vast landscape. "Giant flaming ball of fire?" Sam said. "That sun?"

"Well, it's plasma, actually," said human-Castiel. (The shadowy dragon form behind him nodded as if he were agreeing with himself). "Not fire exactly, because it's really undergoing nuclear fusion, and also there's no oxygen, not in your dimension I mean, so actually it's not combustion in the classic sense, but if one is speaking purely metaphorically, then—"

"Cas," Sam said.

"Yes, that sun," Cas said. "You did both know Heaven is the Sun, right?"

Dean had to break in then with, "You know what, Cas?" Cas looked over at him, and Dean said, "Those things you think are obvious? Are not obvious."

Cas gave him one of those familiar puzzled squints, the classic variety complete with head-tilt. Just behind Cas's slightly translucent dream-form, the shadowy shape of Cas's dragon head tilted too, the fuzzy sapphire eyes squinting as well, his real-life dragon form and his dream-human form doing the familiar motion in perfect synchrony. It was such an odd combination of completely adorable and completely surreal that Dean suddenly had to bite back a laugh.

"It wasn't obvious?" said human-Cas, a little doubtfully.

"Just trust me on that," said Dean, on the verge of nearly hysterical giggles now.

"Okay, but, just out of curiosity," human-Cas said, "may I ask, where did you think Heaven was exactly? I'm just curious, because... well, you both knew Heaven wasn't on Earth, right? You knew angels fell *from* Heaven to Earth? You did know that Heaven was up in the sky somewhere? And that it had to be big enough to house millions of individual human Heavens? I mean — did you think that..." His eyes lit up. "Oh, did you think Heaven was on the Moon? That's a reasonable error, actually, except that it's not big enough. But I can see why you would have thought that. The Moon is actually Faerie, though."

Dean couldn't contain his laughter then. Sam started laughing too.
"So... the Moon is infested with fairies," said Dean, trying to get himself under control. "Right. Got it."

"I'm serious," Cas said, frowning. "It's the land of the Fae. Fairyland, you could call it. It's on the Moon. In the ethereal plane of the Moon, that is."

"Fairy-land's on the Moon," Sam repeated. "Okay. Right. And so Oz is on, what—" He had a kind of a glazed smile on his face. "— Mars?"

"Of course not," said Cas, with a little laugh. "Oz isn't on Mars. Don't be silly."

Dean turned to Sam and said, "You heard the guy, Sam. Don't be silly. Just because there are fairies on the Moon doesn't mean Oz is on Mars. Obviously."

"Exactly," agreed Cas. "Purgatory's on Mars. Oz is on one of the moons of Saturn. Oz is in the ethereal plane of Titan, Saturn's largest moon."

Cas looked back and forth between Dean and Sam, who were both staring at him again. After a moment he said, "I guess that wasn't obvious either?"

"No," said Sam.

"No, it... wasn't," said Dean.

Cas gave a little sigh (the shadowy forms of his wings drooped slightly as he did so). "I should have thought to explain this long ago. My apologies. I'm so used to it that it didn't occur to me that you didn't know. Let me explain." He picked up a stick that had materialized nearby and began tracing shapes in the dirt at their feet, making a rough map of the solar system. "The realms are locations,"

Cas said, rapidly sketching out a large circle to represent the Sun, and much smaller ones to represent all the other planets, with dots for the moons. "Spatial locations. All the realms are housed on the heavenly bodies — planets, moons, asteroids. The largest realm, Heaven, is in the largest heavenly body, here—" (he tapped the biggest circle) "—the Sun. The other major realms, like Earth and Purgatory, are housed on the major planets. And the lesser realms, especially the little pocket-sized magical realms like Oz, are on the smaller heavenly bodies, meaning moons and asteroids. And which dimension the inhabitants live in simply depends on which dimension is most habitable on that particular heavenly body. Are you following me?"

"Actually, I totally am," said Sam. "These are your maps, right? Your ten maps! They were the planets and the Sun! Right? The Sun, the eight planets, and... let's see...." Sam was frowning down at the map now.

Cas nodded. (His shadowy dragon head nodded too.) "The tenth map had Pluto and some of the largest asteroids. Ceres and some others." He shook his head. "Poor Pluto..."

"I'm still back on the Purgatory thing," said Dean. "Do you really mean that you and I spent a year on Mars? Like, literally?"

"Well, in the ethereal plane version of Mars," Cas said. "But, yes. Literally we were on Mars."

"And Charlie went to... Saturn...." muttered Sam, half to himself.

"A moon of Saturn," corrected Castiel. "In the ethereal plane."

Dean said to Sam, "She only went to a moon of Saturn, Sam, in the ethereal plane. Jeez. Get it straight."
"It's all rather logical, really," said Cas. "The colder Heavenly bodies, like Mars and the moons, are most habitable in the etheric dimension since that is a warmer dimension. But hotter bodies, like the Sun, are most habitable in colder dimensions. Your Earth is a special case, you know, because it's actually the only place that is most habitable in the material dimension. And in fact, that's what makes human souls so unique. Human souls are a unique combination of energy rooted in matter — energy that springs from matter, essentially — and that combination is what gives human souls such beauty — " (he glanced at Dean here) " and such power. I told your friend Bobby once that a human soul is like a delicately contained nuclear explosion, and that wasn't an exaggeration. In fact, since we're on the topic…," he tapped the Sun again on his map. "The Sun is actually powered primarily by human souls."

There was another little pause.

"I thought the Sun was powered by... um... hydrogen?" said Sam. "Didn't you just say nuclear fusion?"

Cas shrugged. "Different ways of looking at the same thing," he said. "One can describe it in terms of energy or of matter, or of souls and divine power, but it's all really the same thing viewed from different perspectives. We angels bring human souls to Heaven primarily in order to provide deserving souls with spacious individual Heavens, of course, to reward them for living a good life, but there's a side effect in that a happy soul also gives off a slow, steady flow of power. It helps keep the Sun running. Hell, of course, takes quite a different approach— they try to strip all the power from human souls much more rapidly."

"Wait," said Sam. "What? Hell gets power from souls?"

"Of course," said Cas. "That's why Hell wants souls in the first place, didn't you know? And, though happy souls release a steady, slow stream of power that lasts for many millennia, tortured souls release it all at once, in just a few years." Cas said. His eyes flicked to Dean again. "That's why the denizens of Hell are trained to torture human souls," Dean had to glance away, but Cas apparently hadn't meant it personally, for he just went on calmly with, "Misery and pain makes a soul radiate its power away — and Hell needs that power. When Lucifer set up Hell, his goal was really just to harness power. The suffering inflicted on the souls was entirely beside the point; torture was, and is, simply a means to collect the maximum amount of power, as rapidly as possible."

"And he wanted all that power," said Sam, very slowly, "Because.... because why?"

Cas gazed down at his little map. "I'm not entirely sure," said Castiel, "but I've always suspected that his plan was, and still is, to ignite Jupiter. To make it a star." He slowly tapped Jupiter on the map with his stick. "It makes sense, right?"

There was, again, one of those long silent moments when Sam and Dean simply stared at Castiel.

"Hell is... Jupiter," Sam said.

Castiel nodded. "It's the second largest realm, and so it's in the second largest heavenly body." He frowned and said, "Actually... honestly, I really thought that was —"

"Don't you dare say you thought it was obvious," said Dean.

"But you can even see the Gate of Hell from Earth," said Cas, squinting at him. "You can see it with a telescope. Even in your dimension! It's the Great Red Spot."

"It wasn't obvious," insisted Dean. Cas gave up with a little sigh. Sam started laughing again.
There'd been clues, actually, Dean realized a moment later. Crowley had even told them that the Gate of Hell was collapsing the very same week that NASA had announced that the Great Red Spot on Jupiter was mysteriously shrinking.

Sam said, "Wait. So... Lucifer was trying to ignite Hell and make it a star?"

Cas replied, "I think so. I've never been totally sure, but all his actions point to that goal."

Sam nodded slowly, and said, his gaze now a little far away, "I should've known. He said some things sometimes... about burning everything up, about how Earth wouldn't last very long...."

Sam fell silent, staring down at the map.

After a little pause Cas said (mostly to Dean, since Sam seemed lost in some memory now), "The battle has always been a battle between the Sun and Jupiter. Between whether to make this solar system a stable single-star system, or an unstable binary-star system — which may in fact be more beautiful from a cosmic perspective, but is also completely inhospitable to human life."

Sam was still staring at the little map of Jupiter.

"You good, Sam?" said Dean.

They never talked about Lucifer much, but it had always been clear that the terrible time in the Cage, and the awful years after, still haunted Sam to this day.

"Yeah," Sam said, finally raising his head. He gave himself a little shake. "Yeah. Just... thinking. Lucifer even used to talk about bringing light, sometimes. Kind of a, uh, a running joke."

"That's how he got his name, you know," said Cas. "The name 'Lucifer' means Light-Bringer. It really refers to the fact that Lucifer was trying to 'bring light' by igniting Jupiter. He's also sometimes called a 'fallen star,' too, but it's not him that's the fallen star, it's Jupiter. Jupiter is a lost little star that never fully ignited." Cas gave a tired little sigh. "It's probably good we're going through all this, actually, because unfortunately it's all relevant to what's happening right now. Now that the Darkness has been rampaging through Hell, Hell's infrastructure is utterly collapsing and the power bleed from the remaining souls has become uncontrolled. The Sun has been attacked as well — you must have seen all the sunspots?"

"Oh, right," Dean realized. Sunspots all over the Sun... just when they'd realized that Darkness was attacking Heaven. And, a few months later, NASA had announced that the sunspots had completely vanished, just when Hannah had arrived to tell them the Darkness had been corralled deeper inside Heaven.

"I really should've been paying attention to those NASA reports," muttered Dean.

Cas glanced at him curiously, but went on with, "The Darkness burst right through to the surface of the Sun several times. Some sunspots are normal, of course, but these were not normal at all — they were gaping holes in the fabric of the Sun itself. One came very close to here. I barely escaped myself, and some angels were completely lost — Raphael among them, by the way. I was able, briefly, to communicate with some stray souls then. It turns out that many souls in Heaven have been completely terrified by the rampaging Darkness. And that, of course, means those souls are bleeding out power, and the Sun is now destabilizing too. So it's rather a race now between whether the Darkness will destroy Earth by simply gobbling it up, or by making the Sun go supernova, or by Jupiter igniting. Right now Jupiter's ignition is probably the most imminent threat."

Dean and Sam could only gaze at him blankly.
"Any one of those three things is bad," supplied Cas helpfully. "In case that wasn't obvious."

"Actually that \textit{was} obvious," said Sam.

"Yeah, that part we kinda got right away," said Dean. "Okay...." He ran his hands through his hair, trying to stretch his mind around this new picture of the solar system — and the multiple ways it was now falling apart, apparently.

It was too much.

It was too huge; too overwhelming. How could they possibly do anything useful in the face of such vast, cosmos-scale chaos?

"Okay," said Dean, squaring his shoulders and looking at Cas. "So what do we do?"

---

Cas wiped away the solar-system map and drew a new one of just their local area of the Sun, marking the positions of the Fire Gate and where they were standing now. "My only idea, which may not even be a good idea," he began, "is to travel to the area where God was last seen. Which I believe to be this spot here." He tapped a location far to the northeast. "I believe this to be where God made the Mark of Cain. There are multiple signs of his passage there. I believe that the Mark was just temporary — a patch job, really, a rush job — and that God later went to this area again, to try to build a better lock for the Darkness. We do know that he bid Gog and Magog to guard the Crown — the corona, that is — and prevent anyone else from following him. He also forbade the other angels from approaching the Crown as well. And off God went. Into the corona," Cas straightened up with a little sigh and looked at his map. "None of us ever saw him again."

Cas was quiet a moment. His human dream-form kept staring at the map, head bowed, but the shadowy dragon head behind him lifted a little, and turned to gaze off toward the northeast. Dean watched Cas's dark dragon head (dramatically framed by the solar flare) as he studied the horizon, and Dean thought, \textit{That was his father. His father left him.}

"I don't know if he gave up and simply abandoned us," said Cas finally, "or whether he was killed. All I know is that he never returned. Gog and Magog remained here and they have followed God's last command ever since. I suspect that God really only intended for them to guard the Crown for a few days, but since he never returned to rescind that last command, they have been here ever since, defending the Crown from all comers. For eons upon eons. Till they've forgotten the original purpose of their task, and have gone nearly insane in the solitude." He gave a sigh. "They seem even to have forgotten parts of our language. There is no reasoning with them. Fortunately, we smaller angels are nimble enough to keep clear of them, and we've been able to make our way around them." He nodded toward the northeast. "My hope is if we travel in that direction, we can figure out what God was doing and perhaps learn how to make another lock to trap the Darkness. It's a long shot though. We might not find anything. Also, I've already tried to go there, and it turns out it's an area that's very difficult for angels to approach. It seems our essence begins to shred if we approach too near to that site." Cas began to slowly scratch his map away with the stick as he spoke. "Gabriel has tried several times and he's been killed repeatedly; he's been reborn several times, in fact, starting all over each time as a young fledgling." Cas dropped the stick and glanced up at Dean. "Despite his warnings I tried to approach once and was nearly shredded apart myself; it was only your songs, Dean, that held me together."
Dean blinked at him, and Cas gave him a soft smile. "You were singing Puff The Magic Dragon, coincidentally enough," he said. "It saved me; I focused my mind on your song, and it kept me together, and I managed to fly clear of the danger zone."

Dean could not even speak.

Cas reached out and squeezed him on the shoulder, and looked again to the northeast. He said, "I have reason to believe humans may find the site easier to approach. Your souls do not fray apart as easily as an angel's essence does, because of the unusual power of your souls, and how they are interlaced into matter, as I mentioned before."

He released Dean's shoulder and looked back and forth between Sam and Dean, positioning himself squarely in front of them as if to make a very clear statement. "I have to be clear," he said. "This will be an extremely hazardous journey. Any or all of us may die. Gog and Magog may catch us, or the Darkness may simply tear us apart. And if either of you die here your souls will be completely destroyed — torn into pure energy and absorbed into the corona and the solar flares. If I could send you back to Earth instead, I would." He turned a level look to each of them. "I can fly you to a safe place if you prefer. Gabriel has volunteered to guard you both while I try to do the journey on my own."

Dean didn't even hesitate. He said, "We're coming with you, Cas," and found himself speaking in chorus with Sam, who was saying, "We're in. We're both in."

But Cas didn't actually look all that happy about their answer. For a long moment he gazed at Dean, and this time Dean felt a ghostly warm touch on his shoulder. It was not Cas's dream-human-hand this time. "That's feathers, Dean knew. In the real world, Cas was stroking Dean with his wing."

"I've been so hoping that I'd someday see the two of you again," Cas said, as Dean tried not to get too distracted by the invisible feathery touch on his shoulder. "It's been my dearest wish, to be honest. And, Dean... I so wish we had some time to talk." He gave a sigh, and said, "Taking you both on a possible suicide mission immediately is really not the reunion I'd hoped for."

"We're going with you," said Sam. Dean nodded, his throat tight.

"But you must understand," said Cas. "We might not even last a day. It'd be much safer for you both if I leave you with Gabriel."

"It's not about being safe," said Dean, reaching out and putting a hand on human-Cas's shoulder. "Cause, really... we.... I mean, we're... I'm...."

Dean ground to a halt. He'd been intending to make a little speech about how they were all in it together. Maybe something about Three Musketeers, "all for one and one for all;" maybe something about the end of the world, maybe something about how if he only had Cas back for one day, then, risks be damned, Dean was going to spend that day with Cas, not with any other angel. The speech was all ready on the tip of his tongue. But as Dean felt that soft touch of Cas's feathers, this time stroking the back of Dean's neck, his little inspirational speech evaporated from his mind completely.

Instead Dean found himself yanking human-Cas into a rough hug. Dean just had to grab hold of him, at least for a moment. He hadn't really had the chance to hug Cas in the other dream, after all. And hugging a giant dragon-toe wasn't quite the same thing.

Grip you tight, Dean thought, wrapping both arms around him.

Strangely, human-Cas didn't hug him back; his arms stayed down at his sides. But instantly the feathery touch tightened around both of Dean's shoulders, and Sam staggered a little, as if something invisible had nearly knocked him over. Cas must be hugging Dean, in real life, with both his wings.
"Oh, sorry," whispered Cas into Dean's ear, after a moment. "I forgot I had arms." With that he lifted his dream-arms and hugged Dean back — in all possible ways, now, with dream-arms as well as real-life wings. Dean closed his eyes and hung on.

It was hard to breathe. It was hard to think. It was hard to do anything other than hold Cas close, and wish that it were somehow possible to embrace the real Castiel like this. For Cas's dragon form, as impressive as it was, was intimidatingly large (and undeniably still a little strange), and also was just plain too big to embrace properly. And the dearly beloved human vessel, of course, wasn't really here at all.

This dream version of Castiel would have to do.

So Dean hung on.

After a moment Cas said, "Dean?" He sounded a little worried.

"If we just have one day," whispered Dean to him, his eyes still closed, "I want that one day. Wherever the hell we are. Whatever the hell shape you are. Whatever happens."

Dean opened his eyes to discover that the shadowy form of Cas's real dragon head was hovering right before him, a misty darkness with two fuzzy blue spots. Distantly Dean felt a vibration along his shoulders, where Cas's wings were touching him in the waking world, and he knew Cas must be purring again.

*I can adjust to this*, thought Dean, looking at the misty dark shape. *I'll adjust. I kinda miss the human vessel, sure, but he's alive. He's here. That's all that matters.*

He finally managed to make himself release Cas's dream-human-form.

"I'm sorry this is only a dream," said human-Cas, softly, taking hold of one of Dean's hands. "I've been wishing I still had my human vessel for you." (Sam, arms folded, had diplomatically turned a little to the side and walked a couple paces away to stare up at the solar flare.)

"S'okay," said Dean to Cas. "Doesn't matter. Doesn't matter at all. S'totally okay. Just glad you're back. Really. Really glad you're back. Really. Sorry, I'm getting all, uh, sorry, let me get a grip here." He heaved a breath, squeezed Cas's hand once and made himself let go, wiping both hands over his eyes. "Okay. Sam, you can stop staring up at that solar flare like it's your new best friend. Unless the two of you, you and the flare, want to get a room or something."

"Actually, it's a pretty cool solar flare," said Sam, turning back to them with a tiny smile on his face. "I could stare at it some more. Or I could go take a nap behind a rock or something. Or maybe Cas can drop me off on a different mountain for a bit? If you guys want a minute to talk? Seriously."

"No, no, we're good," said Dean. "End of the world and all. Gotta focus." There was actually nothing more he wanted in the world than to just sit here and talk with Cas, but... *the universe is being destroyed and all that*, he thought. Reluctantly he pulled the topic back toward business, saying to human-Cas, "Okay, so, we're in, like I was saying. And now what?"

"Now we go on a suicide mission," said Castiel. "But this time you ride on my back. I've rearranged my feathers to make a spot where you can both sit. Feel free to hang on to the longer feathers — they're well anchored and they won't pull out. The first thing is to try to shake Gog and Magog, who—" He narrowed his eyes and glanced to the south. "Who are not far away, I believe. And I've got an idea for shaking them off the trail completely. I just need to accelerate my flight a little. Your job is just to hang on. Ready?"
Sam and Dean glanced at each other and nodded. There was a soft touch on Dean's forehead, and the dream ended.

It turned out to be a little disorienting to wake from a dream that was set in the real world, to the real world itself. The whole landscape stuttered strangely around them, the colors changing slightly. Human-Castiel faded from view, dragon-Castiel snapped into sharp focus, and Dean discovered that he was not actually standing on his feet as he'd thought, but lying across Cas's foot (Sam was on the other foot) with one of Cas's wings still draped around him.

Dean scrambled to his feet, and there they were, standing on a rocky mountaintop on the surface of the Sun, with a gigantic solar flare arching through the sky overhead. (Or, this dimension's version of a solar flare, at least.)

Dragon-Cas gave a low rumble and rolled his sapphire eyes toward his own back. He crouched down, stretching his long neck along the ground, chin pressed down on the rocks. The gesture was clear: Climb aboard, boys.

Sam went first, clambering up onto Cas's huge neck (which was a good four feet in diameter, covered with sleek neck-plumes that made it look even larger). He scrambled up to the top and tottering his way along it, arms stretched out as if he were making his way along a balance beam, till he got up to Cas's torso. Cas's torso was a little farther off the ground, a good ten feet up or so, and as Sam reached Cas's shoulder area he had to pull his way up by the long feathers of Cas's neck ruff, yanking the feathers all out of position in the process. Cas squeezed his eyes shut and his wings twitched, but he made no audible complaint.

"Sorry," Sam said, wriggling his way upward. "Next time I come to the surface of the Sun I'll bring a ladder." Cas gave a snort that must have been a laugh, and shrugged his wings a little in a gesture that Dean took as, "It's okay, don't worry about it."

Dean had let Sam go first on purpose, so that he could linger a moment by Cas's head. But now he couldn't seem to think of the right things to say. He was starting to feel a little alarmed at how solemn Cas had been about the journey ahead, and about Cas's warning that they might only last a day here. One day? They might only have one day together? The thought was appalling, and Dean found he wanted to give Cas some kind of pep talk. They would have more than a day together. They had to have more than a day together.

But all Dean could come up with was "We're gonna get there, Cas. I swear."

It wasn't much, but Cas gave an appreciative-sounding grumble. Then Dean wanted to give him an encouraging pat, but found himself suddenly feeling a little shy. Would Cas even like a pat? Would it come across as patronizing or unwanted or something? Uncertain what to do, Dean ended up tentatively stroking Cas's tufted black ear. The feathers on the ear turned out to be awfully soft, and Cas seemed to like it (he angled his head toward Dean a little) and next Dean found himself running his hands over the top of Cas's head and down into the long plumes at the back of Cas's neck.

This instantly elicited a such a strong purr that Sam, who was clambering around on Cas's back by now by now, nearly lost his footing — apparently Cas's whole ribcage was vibrating. Dean dug his hand deeper down into Cas's feathers, and soon he noticed that all the neck feathers all seemed a bit disarrayed from Cas's long flight. So Dean took a moment to try to rearrange all the long neck-
plumes into position as best he could. Cas's eyes went a little glazed, his ears went limp, and the purr got even stronger. Dean grinned and made a mental note: He likes the back of the neck. Got it.

But there was no time for more, for just then a sparkling green-and-black form darted into view from the south with a warbling cry and dashed away again. Dean paused the neck-scratches and feather-rearranging and looked up. It was Gabriel, apparently shouting some kind of warning to Cas, for Cas snapped to alertness, raising his head to look to the south. Sure enough, two dark dots were lumbering into view over the southern mountains: Gog and Magog again. Despite being harassed by the two other angels, the huge celestials were catching up. Cas's purr stopped the second he saw them, and he gave a grumbling warning and gave Dean a little nudge with the side of his head. So Dean reluctantly left off the feather-scratching and got going, scrambling up Cas's neck to follow Sam.

He had to pull himself up by the bluish-black neck-plumes, just as Sam had done (I'll have to help Cas preen those later, Dean thought). Soon Dean found himself standing on an eight-foot-wide expanse of broad muscular back between Cas's wings. Most of this area was covered by a sheet of three-foot-long black plumes, layered on top of each other so thickly that Dean felt like he was wading through a knee-high field of feathers. He waded a few steps over, pushing his way through the feathers, and found that in the center, right over the spine, Cas had pulled out a swath of plumes to expose a soft downy layer that was nearly a foot and a half lower down than the rest of the feathers. Cas had shaped and woven the downy area into two rough saddle-shapes along his spine, one in the front and one a few feet farther back. Sam was already sitting in the back one.

"I knew you'd want the front seat," said Sam, grinning up at him.

"Damn straight," said Dean. "And no back-seat driving, now." Cas gave a snort, and Sam said, "I think that meant, Cas is the driver, not you, Dean." Cas gave a nod and craned his head around to look at them.

"All right, all right, I guess I can let someone else drive," Dean said with a mock-grumble as he got settled in the front saddle-area. It turned out that Cas's back slanted away a little on either side, so that it was almost like sitting in a horse saddle; Dean's feet disappearing down on either side into the puffy field of deeper feathers.

"I'm ready if you are," said Sam. "And remember he said to hang on to the feathers."

Dean did so, taking hold of some sturdy-looking plumes on either side. "Take it away, Cas," he said, and Cas leapt into the air.

The powerful wings stroked the air, the ground plummeted away, the muscles under Dean's feet shifted, and they were aloft. Within seconds they were dizzyingly high up. It became clear instantly that Dean's previous flight in Cas's front foot, as uncomfortable as it had been, had had the considerable advantage of the sturdy toes wrapping around very securely from all sides. Now it was up to Dean to hang on. There was nothing but air all around him, nothing holding him in place at all — just feathers! Spindly little feathers! Practically nothing! Dean's hands tightened reflexively on the feathers, but it was hard to believe that the shining slender plumes wouldn't just tear free instantly. Soon they were so high up that Dean had to close his eyes. He felt an awful tilting sensation and opened his eyes to find that Cas was wheeling in a turn so steep that it seemed inevitable that Dean was going to just slide right off Cas's back to the side, bounce off the wing and plunge to his doom.
Dean buckled over, face-down in the feathers, hanging on tightly to the plumes on both sides with his eyes squeezed shut again.

It seemed best to stay that way. So Dean flattened himself down into the feathers, hoping that Cas couldn't feel how hard Dean's heart was pounding. After a moment Cas straightened out his flight and gave an inquiring rumble. Dean managed to grunt out, "Yep, doing fine" — but it still seemed like a good idea to keep clinging onto the feathers for dear life, flat on on his belly on Cas's spine, and keep his eyes squeezed shut.

A minute went by. Dean could hear the steady flapping motion of Cas's wings — *whup, whup, whup*. The flying motion actually seemed relatively stable. Feathers seemed to have tightened down around him somehow, too; some long plumes in front had shifted to cover him and some were even lying right across Dean's back. Yet Dean still couldn't bring himself to open his eyes.

Sam finally tapped him on the back. "I know flying isn't your thing, Dean," he said, "but you gotta take a look at this. It's pretty awesome. 'How To Train Your Dragon' had nothing on this. Also, Cas is holding onto you, in case you hadn't noticed." Cas rumbled in agreement, and Dean opened one eye cautiously. To his surprise he saw only blue-black plumes all around him, even over the top of his head and back; Cas had somehow rearranged his neck-ruff feathers and back feathers so that they covered Dean up completely, almost like a blanket. Dean tentatively opened the other eye and forced himself to raise his head a little.

He couldn't even lift his head at first; it turned out the long back feathers were pretty stiff, and the way Cas had the feathers arranged it was almost like Dean was being held down by a set of broad tie-down straps. Dean tried again to raise his head and some of the feathers shifted a little to let him sit up.

"Feather-seatbelts," said Sam. "Cool, huh? And look at that view!"

Sam was right; Cas had gotten a pretty secure hold on them just with his feathers. Even when Dean sat all the way up, the feathers over his legs seemed to be hanging on securely. Dean still kept a tight hold on several plumes with his hands just the same, but at last he managed to look around.

Cas's broad back extended to either side like a waist-deep sea of black silk flecked with gold. Dean couldn't even see his own feet and legs, which were buried deeply down in the feathers. Off to the sides Cas's immense black wings were stroking away tirelessly, wingbeat after wingbeat, the golden feather-tips flashing in the light. His long blue-black neck was stretched out in front, his dark head looking ahead to the northeast. He was occasionally flicking one black feathered ear forward to check out something in front, but mostly he kept both ears angled back toward Dean and Sam.

"Can you hear us, buddy?" asked Dean. Cas nodded with a snort. So they'd have one-way communication, at least.

Dean began to relax. Cas would take care of them. Cas wasn't going to let them fall.

And Sam was right: The view was amazing. The endless mountain-range was spread out dramatically below them, the serrated mountains marching away in endless folds. Far, far ahead of them (hundreds of miles away, maybe? Thousands?), Dean could glimpse some flatter, glittering areas, perhaps more of the silver grassy plains or some kind of ocean. There were several more solar flares visible in the far distance, arcing up like gigantic fountains. One flare was just a loose wavering spire of cloud; a couple others seemed to have broken loose of the ground, almost like wobbly ribbons that were flying loose in the air, tracing out large parabola-shapes high overhead and then plunging back downwards. The biggest flares were complete arches that connected to the ground at both ends, shaped something like gigantic rainbows. Cas was high enough up now for them to see
the base of the nearest solar-flare, the enormous one that had seemed to fill half the sky. Its base turned out to be a sort of wall of glowing cloud that seemed to bursting up out of a large lake a few dozen miles away. Presumably, back in the Earthly plane, the solar flare was some sort of superheated plasma, but in this dimension the flare seemed to be composed of cloudy air rather like a water-spout that rushed straight up like a vertical river, the whole thing glowing faintly silver.

It was an astounding sight.

*Even if we only last a day, this is a hell of a day,* Dean thought.

"Pretty cool, huh?" whispered Sam softly from behind him. Dean could only nod.

But soon an earsplitting shriek sounded from far behind. *Gog and Magog,* thought Dean. He twisted around to peer behind them, and found that Sam was doing the same thing. They watched the two dark dots in the distance, which seemed, worryingly enough, to be getting closer.

"Dammit," said Dean. "I really hate those guys."

"Me too," said Sam, his voice tight. Dean shot a look at him; it hadn't been that many hours ago that those celestial dragons had nearly roasted Sam alive. The pain of it must still be fresh in Sam's mind.

But then Sam brightened. "Look, one of the little ones," he said. "They're still helping us."

Indeed a tiny dot was shooting forward, coming forward to consult with Cas. "Is it Gabriel?" Sam said. But as it got closer they realized it was the black-and-gray one, a dragon that they hadn't gotten a close look at before.

This dragon seemed to be struggling a little to catch up. Cas slowed his flight a little, as he had for Gabriel, but even so it took a while. Soon Dean realized why: Its black wings were a bit damaged, smoking a little. The dragon looked tired, too, there was something exhausted about its labored wing-beats. *They've been dodging Gog's and Magog's flames all day,* Dean realized. *They must be exhausted. They can't keep that up. We've got to get away from Gog & Magog for good.*

But the black-and-gray dragon revived enough, as it drew close, to give Dean and Sam a snort of greeting and even a cheery little wing-waggle.

*Black and gray,* Dean thought. *Who wore black and gray?* He studied the dragon a moment: black wings, black shoulders and haunches, but a gray belly.

Black jacket, gray t-shirt, maybe?

It came to him after a moment. There was only one angel who'd ever worn an outfit like that, and he'd worn it very consistently. "Balthazar?" Dean called out. The black-and-gray dragon gave a bark of surprise, snorting out a little puff of fire, and it nodded its head.

Cas greeted Balthazar with a long rumble that sounded rather concerned, and he maneuvered closer to study Balthazar's slightly singed wings. Balthazar replied with something rather short. Cas nodded, and Balthazar immediately fell back behind, wheeling back to rejoin the battle. Cas glanced back toward Dean and Sam with a warning look, and his feathers tightened around their legs.

"I think that means 'hang on'," said Dean to Sam.

"Yeah, the other three can't hold off Gog and Magog forever," Sam replied. "But where can Cas take us that Gog and Magog can't follow?"
Cas accelerated. Dean and Sam both had to lean forward to brace themselves against the wind, Sam leaning against Dean's back, Dean bending low down like a jockey, both of them hanging on tightly at the plumes all around. Cas was really rocketing forward now. He'd also changed direction. Dean squinted ahead, the wind stinging his eyes, to try to see what Cas was headed for. The mountains petered out ahead. Where was Cas going? He'd said something about "I just need to accelerate a little." Did he need to accelerate more than he already had? He'd deviated substantially from his original northeastern course. They were now headed straight north, and there was nothing in view there but the base of the nearest solar flare, the one with the near-vertical column of glowing cloud that was shooting, at terrific speed, almost straight up into the sky.

"Oh, hell," muttered Dean. He called over his shoulder, "Sam, hang on!" as Cas shot forward toward the solar flare.

---

**A/N -**

So now you know my elaborate headcanon about the locations of Heaven and Hell and Purgatory! And why it is exactly that Hell wants souls in the first place. It came to me one day all in a rush that the supernatural realms could be mapped onto the planets and moons almost perfectly. And then, the persistent bit of lore about ghosts making rooms colder had been ticking around in my head for a while, and that plus the way Cas's wing-shadows look, as if he were lit up from some brighter, presumably warmer, place... it all clicked into this idea of adjacent dimensions that are different temperatures. And then it all came together with the planet idea in one beautiful headcanon! I expect this to be totally contradicted by canon at some point (maybe it already has been - I haven't seen S11 yet) but I'm well off into A/U land by now and just having fun with it. Some of you figured it out early and I love that you did. One more detail for the astronomy geeks: the River Styx is the asteroid belt... and that's why Crowley said the River Styx had drained half away just when NASA announced that half the asteroids were gone.

And now off they go on their journey, and into a solar flare trying to outrace Gog and Magog. This'll be a tough race. I'm still majorly slammed at work and have some dr's visits next week too, but I'm going to try to get back into the every-Friday schedule, even if the chapters have to be short. Tune in next week. If you liked this chapter, please let me know what you liked! Thanks so much, and thanks for reading.

**PS -** I haven't been able to see any of S11 yet. From my tumblr dash it seems to have been three episodes solid of Dean rolling Cas up in a blanket, right? ;) I'll catch up soon, but please no super-specific spoilers. Thanks!

**PPS -** the title of this chapter is a deliberate homage to Felix Palma's gorgeously strange novel "A Map Of The Sky", part of the Map Of Time trilogy - highly recommended.
Fear Of Flying

A/N - Short chapter this week - sorry, I lost most of the middle of the week to yet more medical stuff, and was so doped up on meds Thursday (usually the day that I finish up a chapter) that I couldn't get any writing done. All good now but I only have a short chapter tonight, but that's better than nothing, right? :)

Cas gained altitude quickly, his wings beating the air in fast, powerful strokes. Soon they were high enough to get a clear view over the next mountain range. Beyond the jagged ridge of mountain-tops was a huge lake that seemed to fill the entire next valley. It seemed a little odd, actually, to see such a vast lake so high up in the mountains; but maybe it was normal for the Sun, for the gigantic solar flare sprang straight from the center of the lake. From this close, the base of the flare looked like a near-vertical pillar of glowing silver cloud.

For another half a minute Cas flew straight as an arrow toward that pillar of silver cloud. He seemed to be aiming high in order to clear the mountain range at a comfortable height. As he flew, a warbling sound reached their ears from quite far away, a sort of bugle that sounded almost like a distant trumpet. Cas flinched at the sound, and (to Dean's considerable alarm) Cas's wings snapped inward. Cas lost a few dozen yards of altitude all at once, in a sickening drop, before he flicked his wings open again a half-second later. Dean couldn't help giving a yelp, tightening his hold on Cas's feathers.

"Jeez! Was that on purpose?" Sam said. "Cas, what's wrong? Why'd you take us down?"

But for once Cas didn't look back at them, and didn't do one of his growly attempts at speech. He seemed to be focusing on something else. His big, dark head was tilting from side to side — first to the right, then the left, then the right again — and both ears were flicking back and forth.

"He's looking for something," thought Dean. Had the trumpeting sound been some sort of warning from the little angels? Dean twisted around to glance behind, and beyond Sam's shoulder he caught a glimpse of Magog's silvery-gray shape in the distance. But only one fluttering dot was with Magog now, the red one, and even that dot was falling far behind Magog, apparently exhausted.

"Where were Balthazar and Gabriel?"

"And where was Gog?"

Cas gave an odd growl that almost sounded like eeeeeeen — an attempt at "Dean," maybe? Dean looked forward to see that Cas now had his head turned a little sideways. He was looking at Dean with one big blue eye.

As soon as Cas caught Dean's eye, he raised both his forelegs in the air, slowly lifting both front feet till they were clearly in Dean's field of view.

"What are you...." Dean said, puzzled. "What do you mean?"

Cas made a deliberate grasping motion with both huge taloned paws. At the same time he ducked his head down unusually low. He peered at Dean again with one eye, head still held very low. The
intensity in his expression seemed clear: He was trying to convey something. And Dean was pretty sure he knew what it was.

"Got it, Cas," Dean said, and he hollered over his shoulder, "Hold on and stay low, Sam! Really hold on. And get your head down!"

Cas nodded, adding an emphatic snort.

"Okay," Sam called back. Dean felt motion behind him as Sam adjusted his grip on the nearby feathers. "I'm trying. You're kinda in the way," Sam complained.

"Reach past me, then," suggested Dean. "I think we both gotta lie really low — I think Cas is gonna try something."

Cas had returned to tilting his head back and forth — perhaps scanning the clouds overhead. Sam got hold of one good fistful of feathers by Dean's side, and was still reaching around with his other hand, saying, " Okay, but— " when Cas banked wildly to the left, one wing flaring high and the other dropping so low it went completely out of sight. The world tilted crazily and they dropped fifty feet in half a second and shot sideways, just as Gog came roaring out of the cloud layer above them, barreling down at them like a freight train with his tremendous jaws wide open.

A huge blast of flame ripped through the air where Cas had just been.

Sam and Dean both yelled. But Cas had somehow managed to evade Gog's initial surprise attack. Cas was in near free-fall now, taking a steep, erratic zig-zag course downward, while Gog plunged after them, sending blast after blast of flame in their direction.

"Grab on to me!" Dean hollered to Sam. "Grab on, grab on!" Sam managed to get his free arm around Dean's waist and Dean yanked Sam's arm tighter till Sam was pressed right behind Dean, wrapped right onto Dean's back. Dean tightened his grip on his own feathers, wrapping some of the longer ones tight around his hands like a pair of reins, and then Dean bent down very low, practically lying down, while Sam flattened himself down on Dean's back.

Tree-tops rushed at them from below. But just as it seemed they were about to crash, Cas pulled out of his dive and simultaneously did another sharp turn, whipping to the right with both wings pumping hard. He began to climb, fast, toward a low pass in the mountain ridges just ahead. Gog didn't pancake into the trees this time, as he had during the previous chase a few hours ago (maybe he'd learned not to fall for that trick), but he had lost quite a bit of altitude. Gog tried to follow Cas back up, and soon Gog's enormous wings were beating the air with hurricane-force gusts, the huge trees below him actually bending with each great wingbeat. But apparently Cas was better at climbing, for the gap between Gog and Cas began to widen.

Gog let out an ear-splitting shriek and shot several more gusts of flame at them. The flames were alarmingly long, and a few of them got within a dozen yards of the tip of Cas's plumed tail. Dean felt Sam cringe against his back. The sensation was all too familiar: This was how Sam had nearly died, just a few short hours ago on the silver plains — when Sam had been lying across Dean, just as he was now, and taking the brunt of the flames.

Sam can't get burned again, Dean thought, closing his eyes. He can't. He can't. He can't go through that again. Please.

Cas gave a snort and somehow sped up a little bit more, wings beating even faster.

Only then did Dean realize he'd sent out a prayer to Cas without even intending to.
You can do this, Cas, Dean prayed then, pressing his face down into Cas's feathers. You can do this. You can do it.

Another snort; another spurt of acceleration.

Dean stole one more glance backwards — Gog was terrifyingly close now, looming behind Cas's plumed tail. The next roar of flame nearly got them but then Cas crested the pass.

There was a dizzying moment of weightlessness as Cas banked steeply downward down the other side. It seemed he thought his best chance was in skimming the tree-tops, not in a straight level flight, for he was headed right back down toward the treetops on the other side of the pass. It felt almost exactly like being in a roller-coaster heading down its first big fall.

"Oh my god," muttered Sam, pressed so flat against Dean now that he was almost talking into Dean's ear. Dean just hung on tight, heart in his mouth.

Down the slope Cas went, veering wildly through the tree-tops. Gog came barreling over the pass behind them with such momentum he couldn't follow their course at all; he shot straight ahead, but Cas had already dodged down and to the left. Gog gave a tremendous roar of rage and tried to wheel around after them, setting half the mountainside near him ablaze in his fury. But Cas had pulled ahead again and was picking up tremendous velocity, still pumping his wings even while headed down. Tall treetops were shooting past them with terrifying speed, Cas dodging each one at the last second, angling his wings so far that sometimes he went almost completely sideways. Behind them, Dean heard a series of crashing noises and more roars — Gog hitting those very same treetops, probably.

Then the treetops stopped, and they shot out over the glittering mountain lake. Ahead was the base of the solar flare, a wall of roaring cloud several miles across.

As they got closer it became apparent that the cloud-wall was rushing upward horrifyingly fast. Yet Cas charged right at it. He'd abandoned his zigzagging now and was charging at the flare head-on. Just when it seemed they were going to shoot straight into the cloud-wall and be torn to pieces by what looked like tornado-speed winds, Cas banked sharply upwards, so that he was flying straight up, the edge of the cloud-wall just a dozen yards away from his feet. Dean tightened his hold on his feather-reins, thinking he and Sam would surely have to hang on by their arms, but oddly there seemed to be a puff of air behind him that was almost pushing them up. They seemed to be in some kind of border zone of moving air that was rushing along right next to the flare, carrying them upwards. Cas had managed to make a tight enough turn to get them safely into this calmer vertical current of air, without yet plunging into the fastest part of it.

Dean could only gaze between Cas's ears to the rushing wall of cloud ahead. It was dizzying to see it from this angle, like being dangled above a wildly rushing river, or hanging upside-down in front of a tremendous waterfall. The cloud-wall seemed to be racing away at a blistering pace, shooting straight up into the sky. Dean stared up at it, totally disoriented for a moment.

It occurred to him, I should be scared.

It all should have been terrifying. Dean had always been scared of flying. Sam had always teased him about it. Everybody had teased him about it, actually. It was just a known fact: Dean Winchester was afraid of flying. So, as Dean watched the seething wall of cloud that was framed between Cas's black feathered ears, while he held Cas's long neck-plumes tight in his hands, he waited for the inevitable rush of fear to strike him. I should be afraid, he thought. I've always been afraid of flying. I should be afraid.
He waited for the fear.

But no fear came.

*I'm not afraid*, Dean slowly realized — with some disbelief. *I'm flying straight up, straight UP, on a dragon, a hundred miles in the air — without a seatbelt! With a deranged psycho-dragon in hot pursuit! On the surface of the sun!*

*But I'm not afraid.*

Maybe it was all too disorienting to take in? Maybe the scale of it all was just too vast. Maybe the threat of Gog's fire, just behind, was too much of an imminent threat for fear-of-flying to seem very important in comparison.

Or maybe he'd lost his fear of flying because...

*I trust Cas*, thought Dean.

He heard a faint *hmm-mm* sound. It almost seemed to be a vibration under his feet; almost a fragment of a purr.

"I trust you," muttered Dean aloud, this time making a deliberate effort to send it out as a prayer. "I trust you, Cas. I trust you. And I know you can do this. You can do this, Cas."

Dean kept muttering his prayer, and Cas doubled down on his efforts, again somehow summoning up another scrap of acceleration. He also began angling his vertical climb so that they edged closer and closer to the flare, the air around them flowing faster and faster as they did so. A wail from below caught Dean's ear and he looked down; Gog had veered away from the flare and was staring up at them from far below, unmistakable fury in his eyes. Gog couldn't seem to make a sharp enough turn to climb the flare, and seemed reluctant to charge right into the fastest part of it. He tried again, getting a running start this time (or rather, a flying start), but he hit the flare head-on; he was simply too big to make a smooth transition. His head and shoulders entered the flare while his long tail was still a good mile away, and in a split second he'd been flipped end over end and flung back through the air toward the mountains.

Gog tried again and again. But Cas was soaring ever higher now, and Dean watched as Gog, and the entire mountain-range around him, began to shrink in the distance, till Gog was nothing but a tiny distant speck.

Cas was very close to the main part of the flare now, the vast silvery wall of rushing cloud right next to his feet. Dean felt Cas's whole back shudder. All the feathers on Cas's back puffed up, sticking several feet up. Cas gave a weird groan, and somehow Dean knew what he meant: *Get under my feathers.*

"Get under the feathers, Sam!" Dean yelled. He wriggled farther down. Sam had still been hanging onto Dean's waist, but with a little rearranging they managed to get reorganized so that they were each lying down on one side of Cas's spine, Dean on the left and Sam on the right, burrowed far down into Cas's feathers now. Cas gave another shudder and the forest of back-feathers clamped right down over them, covering them up like a thick blanket. Cas angled his flight a little further. Dean felt a tremendous surge of acceleration grab them, so powerful it felt like they were on a rocket, but the feather-blanket held tight.

*I'm on a rocket-powered dragon, taking off into space*, thought Dean. *But I'm not afraid.*

There was an immense roar all around, and everything went shining white.
A/N - More next week I hope. Life continues to be uber-chaotic — if I can ever get through a week without a cross-country trip, a major presentation at an international meeting and/or a surgery, I will be sooo happy. So, chapters might routinely be shorter for a while and/or sometimes might have to be bumped to Saturdays, but I’ll be trying my best to post something every week. Because even a short dragon-ride is better than no dragon-ride at all, right? :)

If you enjoyed this please let me know!

Thanks so much for reading.
A/N - One more conference talk down, one more trip down, one more paper out the door. Saw some old friends and feel really rejuvenated. Feel like I've turned a corner... And here's one more chapter for you! This one ended up being longer than I planned, possibly at the price of a chapter next week, but I wanted to post it all tonight. :)

Dorothy had nothing on this, Dean thought. Even riding that tornado to Oz — or Saturn or wherever — can't have been this crazy. It was impossible to see anything, the roar was so deafening Dean could barely hear himself think, and Cas was being buffeted from side to side so violently that Dean could barely even hold on. It felt like hanging onto a bucking bronco. Dean knew that he and Sam would have had little chance if Cas hadn't had his outer layer of feathers clamped down over them so securely.

After a few minutes, Cas's flight finally seemed to steady a little. It seemed he'd found some kind of stable zone right in the middle of the flare. It was still deafening — the winds around them seemed to be at pretty much hurricane-volume — but at least the more violent shaking seemed to stop.

Something brushed Dean's shoulder; Sam had snaked one arm over Cas's spine and was fumbling his hand around through the lower layer of downy feathers, probably trying to find Dean. Dean risked letting go of a feather-clump just long enough to tap Sam's hand.

"DEAN?" Sam yelled. Dean could barely hear him above the roar.

"YEAH," Dean hollered back. He had to really shout to even hear his own voice. "YOU GOOD?" Dean shouted.

"I'M FINE," screamed Sam.

"HELL OF A RIDE," screamed Dean back.

"YEAH."

Maybe it wasn't the world's most informative conversation, but it seemed far too much effort to talk further, so they left it at that. Sam left his hand where it was and grabbed hold of some feathers by Dean's shoulder, and Dean shifted his arm so it was in touch with Sam's. Even if they couldn't really talk, it was good to just be able to feel that Sam was still there.

Eventually Cas's flight seemed stable enough that Dean risked raising his head a little to peer out through a small gap in the top layer of feathers.

They were flying inside a glowing cloud cover that was so thick it almost looked as if Cas were swimming through foamy whitewater. Dean could just make out Cas's head, a dark fuzzy shape in front that was nearly lost to view in the swirling white fog. Cas was no longer flapping, but they still seemed to be accelerating (so much so that Dean was having to brace his feet against the sturdy shafts of the feathers farther down Cas's back). The flare-current must have been carrying them along. A glint of gold at the sides caught Dean's eye; Cas's golden alulas were spread as wide as they would go, flared up from the main joints of the wings at the leading edge, almost like separate
A phrase from Schmidt-Nielsen floated through his mind: The alulas provide a degree of control in turbulent air.

"Turbulent air" was an understatement. The violent winds all around were still gale-force or worse, and Cas's whole body was still shuddering now and then whenever sudden gusts tried to push them this way or that. Cas also had his wings tucked in pretty tightly, folded so much that he was using only about a quarter of their usual flight area, as if he'd tried to reshape himself into a sort of torpedo. It seemed to be working — Cas was managing to keep a more-or-less straight course by means of tiny adjustments in the alulas, and rudder-like motions of his long tail. But his whole body seemed to almost vibrating with the effort.

Dean closed his eyes and tried to send him a prayer of encouragement. (He hadn't had a chance yet to ask Cas if prayers actually "worked" if sent from the Sun rather than from Earth, but it seemed worth a try.)

You can do this, Cas, Dean thought. I trust you. I have faith in you. You can do this.

Cas couldn't seem to spare the energy for even a purr-fragment this time, but his flight did seem to get a little smoother.

They were buried in the changeless silvery fog for so long that, despite the persistent sensation of acceleration, Dean began to wonder if they were actually moving anywhere at all, or whether they could be simply hovering in place just above the mountain-lake where they'd started. But finally Cas shifted his wing-angle very slightly and began maneuvering toward the outside of the flare. They went through another very bouncy layer of turbulence, but at last the cloud-cover above them began to thin, and thin further, till the top of Cas's head — and his back, where Dean and Sam were — began to poke free of the fog into the boundary-layer of clearer air.

The deafening roar died down. Through Cas's feathers Dean got a glimpse of the landscape ahead, and his jaw dropped.

They were just past the very top of the flare. Ahead they could see the vast sweep of the huge horizon. And this time, at last, they were so high they could actually see the horizon curving slightly.

They were so impossibly high that they were seeing the curve of the Sun itself.

Dean looked around, trying to understand the scale of what he was seeing, and realized there were hundreds of flares in view. The flare they were on was actually pretty small; there were many others that were much bigger, including a few that seemed nearly half the size of the Sun itself, unfathomably gigantic arcs that must have reached well out into outer space. Below those behemoths were dozens of much smaller ones (including the one they were on), which decorated the endless landscape in all directions like festive little ribbons of silver and gold. Some seemed to be just starting up, lifting up from the landscape below like rocket-trails; others were petering out (some thinning out, some collapsing, and some simply fading to invisibility); and a few, like the one they were on, seemed to be just reaching their peak height.

And far, far below, underneath all the flares, was the surface of the Sun itself. In this dimension it wasn't superheated plasma, of course, but it seemed to have a faint glow nonetheless, all in shades of silver, green, gold and blue that seemed almost luminescent. From this height the Sun's surface looked something like watered silk — shining with wavvy bands of light, textured with millions of delicate little ripples, and dotted here and there with specks of blue. It was all glittering like some sort of vastly overgrown Christmas tree ornament.
"Oh wow," said Sam, from the other side of Cas's spine. He sounded genuinely awestruck. "It's beautiful."

Dean had to agree. "It really is," he said. Cas managed a pleased-sounding *mmm* sound — the first he'd spoken in a while. Dean reached through the downy feathers to give him another little pat. "Quite a view, Cas," he said.

Sam and Dean took in the landscape for a few moments.

"What are those ripples?" Dean asked.

"Mountain ranges, I think," said Sam.

"Oh..." said Dean. "Oh. Right." That perspective problem again. The "tiny ripples" were *entire mountain ranges*. Right.

"And I guess the dots are lakes?" added Sam. "Huh. Each one of those lakes must be bigger than the Earth." There was a snort of agreement from Cas, who nodded his head. Sam added, "How high do you think we are?"

"Let's not think about that," suggested Dean.

"Cause it seems like we ought to run out of air this high up, shouldn't we?"

"Let's not think about that either."

Cas stayed in the boundary layer for most of the ride down. (Somehow they were still able to breathe. Sam soon developed a theory that Cas must be using his meager store of Heavenly power to keep them supplied with air.) Soon they were plunging straight down at the Sun's surface. When they were about four-fifths of the way down, Cas separated from the flare entirely. He spread his wings very wide, cupping them slightly into almost a parachute shape, and began banking steeply away from the flare itself. Gradually his downward trajectory flattened out into a more horizontal flight path. The g-forces as he did this long, slow maneuver were terrific. For the first several minutes, Dean couldn't even hold his head up and had to just let himself be pressed down into Cas's downy feathers.

"Hey! Look!" Sam said a few minutes later, once they could at last move a little. "Look behind!"

Was Gog after them? Dean managed to roll over to peer up at the gigantic solar flare behind them through a little gap in Cas's feather-blanket. But there was no big black Gog in sight. What Sam had spotted was three little dots of color that were now separating from the huge silver flare, all three heading in Cas's direction. Dean squinted at them: a black-and-gray dot, a red dot, and a glittering green dot. The other three angels had managed to follow! Apparently Gog had never managed to make the transition into the flare, but the smaller three angels had succeeded.

"Balthazar and Gabriel too!" commented Sam, from the other side of Cas's spine. "I was worried about them. I wonder if they followed Gog up into the clouds. In fact... I was wondering if that was Gabriel that we heard, earlier. That sound that Cas reacted to. Could've been Gabriel giving an alarm-call or something."
"That trumpet sound? Could be," said Dean, and then he almost laughed. "Oh. Trumpet sound, Sam. I bet it was Gabriel."

"You mean..." said Sam, thinking. "Ha. You think Gabriel's trumpet is really just his true voice?" He pondered that for a moment. "Huh. Makes sense, actually."

By now Cas's flight had leveled out into something approaching normal flight. Sam and Dean were soon able to scramble up to their original seats, the down-feather saddles straddling Cas's spine, Dean again taking the front seat and Sam the one in back. (Dean felt only slightly guilty about this; after all, Sam was taller anyway.) They were flying over water now; this end of the flare seemed to be plunging down into one of the gigantic lakes that they'd spotted from above, and Cas was now sailing far out over the lake. He'd picked a course that was heading toward the only visible speck of shoreline, a distant line of low hills that (fortunately) seemed not too far off. Dean nearly cheered when he spotted the shore. They'd made it — they were out of the flare! Dean reached a hand under the feathers again and stroked Cas's warm skin. "Amazing flying, buddy," he said.

But Cas gave only a very faint huff in response.

The three smaller angels were calling to Cas now, too, very short cries this time that echoed thinly through the air. Cas tried to call something back, but again he didn't seem able to call very loudly. He sounded a little like a tired human runner who could only get out one short word at a time.

Only then did Dean start to wonder how much effort this flight had cost Cas, to fight for control during that long ride up the flare, and then brake all the way down. It had been going on for a couple hours now. And there's not much power in this dimension, Dean remembered... and who knew how much power Cas had burned through earlier, during that crazy chase with Gog? Not to mention having to protect Dean and Sam, and keep them breathing somehow.

Cas must be exhausted.

"Hang in there, buddy," called Dean, stroking him again through the feathers. "You're almost there. The worst is over, right? You did it."

Cas gave only another faint huff of acknowledgment.

Soon the smaller angels caught up, gliding into view on both sides. Iridescent Gabriel and black-and-grey Balthazar slid up along on one side, and the red dragon on the other. They all looked exhausted — something in their flapping even looked tired — and they were definitely a little worse for wear. Balthazar had a gap in one wing where some feathers seemed to have been torn completely out, Gabriel's wing-tips were even more singed now, and the red angel had a burned tail.

Dean called to them, "You guys all okay?" There were some terse nods and short snorts. It seemed nobody felt like talking much. The red angel veered a little close, though, and gave Dean a more emphatic nod, as if it were trying to greet him. Dean studied it curiously.

It seemed to be making an effort to catch his eye.

Red, Dean thought. Who wore red?

No angel he could think of had consistently worn red clothes.

Ah. But one angel had had red hair, hadn't she?

"Anna?" Dean called. The red dragon nodded again.
And Dean, unexpectedly, felt tears pricking his eyes.

There was a bit of a complex history there, after all. They hadn't really been all *that* close, but they'd definitely shared a moment or two. They'd also shared, it had to be admitted, some serious betrayals. Even so it was good to see her again — surprisingly good, actually, to know she'd survived (or had been "reassembled" or however angels thought of it). And surprisingly good, too, to know that she and Cas were again on the same side.

Now Dean's eyes roved around the ragged little band of dragons, as he tried to remember all their past histories with each other. Castiel, Balthazar, Gabriel and Anna... there was a terrifically complicated set of relationships there, wasn't there? Alliances, superiors and subordinates; demotions... battles... wars....

And betrayals. So many betrayals.

But something that had become very clear, over the past several years, was that all the angels, *all* of them, had been manipulated from above for a very long time. Up to and including actual brainwashing. Several times Cas had let slip comments about Heaven's methods of "persuasion," which had sounded to Dean awfully like a euphemism for torture.

Maybe here, on the surface of the Sun, the angels had at last been able to just be themselves. Maybe here they could make their own choices.

Maybe here they had found some semblance of free will at last?

Maybe getting killed wasn't the worst thing that could happen to an angel after all.

At that thought, Dean closed his eyes and ran one hand into the downy feathers again to Cas's skin. Cas's skin, under the down, was ridiculously soft (it seemed to have another separate layer of miniature down, almost like a thin layer of velvet). It was very warm against Dean's hand. Dean could feel muscles sliding underneath with every wingbeat, and when he concentrated, focusing all his attention on his hand, it seemed he could feel Cas's heart beating.

"Frickin' perspective," Sam said, from behind Dean, breaking into his thoughts. "Threw me off again. That shoreline's much farther than I thought."

Dean opened his eyes and looked ahead. The shoreline was pretty far. But he said, "Cas'll get us there." Because he was certain Cas would.

As he examined the thin dark line on the horizon, though, he had to concede that Sam had a point. It had been nearly an hour since they'd left the flare, and only now were the tiny trees on the shore finally starting to get larger.

Dean felt Sam lean closer, his chin practically on Dean's shoulder.

"I'm worried about Cas," Sam whispered. "I think he's really tired."

Again, Sam had a point. The heartbeat under Dean's hand was starting to feel a little more labored, the wingbeats more strained.
Dean nodded and whispered back, "Try praying. Send him some encouragement."

"Already doing it," Sam hissed back.

They fell quiet after that, both concentrating on trying to send Cas whatever prayer-energy they could. But soon there was no denying that Cas must be feeling tired. He started lapsing into short glides periodically, as if trying to take little breaks from all the flapping. Dean soon started up a nonstop patter of encouragement, muttering it all under his breath ("Doin' great, Cas. Just keep going. You can do it. Keep your eye on that tree, that tall one, you see it? You're gonna get there.")

It seemed to help, at least a little; Cas did seem to get little spurts of energy whenever Dean managed to really focus his mind and get into that elusive "prayer mode" (which, maybe not surprisingly, was becoming harder and harder to do as Dean himself got more and more tired.) He started keeping one hand on the alula-feather in his pocket, too. Just in case that might help somehow.

The three smaller angels had been silent for some time, all of them apparently too tired to do any of their mysterious vocalizations. For a while Balthazar and Anna took up positions just ahead of Cas, one ahead of his left wingtip and one ahead of his right, like a reverse V-formation. It seemed to help Cas revive a little, whether through just moral support or some kind of aerodynamic drafting effect, but it also seemed to tire out Balthazar and Anna so much that they eventually slipped much farther behind. Cas called to them then, a clear tone of worry in his voice, and almost tried to circle back to them, but they gave some cries back, and Gabriel took to swooping back and forth between them, chivvying Cas forward again and calling something cryptic to all of them.

"Damn," said Sam. "I was about to suggest maybe we could jump over to the other angels or something, to spare Cas our weight. But they look just as worn out."

"Our weight's probably pretty insignificant anyway," Dean pointed out. "I hope, at least. I think it's the flare that did him in. And Gog."

The distant shore inched closer, and closer. Only a mile off now. But the water surface was looming closer and closer, too — a hundred feet below them at most. Cas was panting audibly now. His glides were getting longer, the bouts of flapping shorter, and soon his flight was more gliding than flapping. On every glide he lost a little height, and the increasingly shorter episodes of flapping weren't quite enough to gain back the lost altitude. Dean eyed the shore ahead, trying to assess the remaining distance, and glanced at the waves below. Were they going to reach the shore?

"This is gonna be close," Sam whispered.

"Cas is gonna make it," Dean whispered back.

Fifty feet up... then forty... thirty... twenty. Waves that had looked tiny from higher up soon resolved into long swells that were rolling past under them like a series of shallow hills and valleys. Cas sank lower still. Fifteen feet... ten... the crest of one big wave passed just a few feet under his feathered feet, so close that Sam and Dean both flinched. But the shore was so close now! Just a half mile away!

"We can swim from here, if we have to," whispered Sam quietly. "Surf's a little tricky, but we can do it."

"Yeah."

"So..." Sam lowered his voice to a whisper again. "Can angels swim? In this form, I mean? Would his wings get waterlogged?"
This was an awful thought. The idea of Cas possibly drowning this close to shore was unbearable. The shore was only a few hundred feet off now; but then Cas actually dipped down down a little into a trough between waves, flying between the waves instead of above them. And a wave-crest at head-height was coming directly at them. A distant trumpet-alarm from Gabriel sounded from farther back, but Cas, who was gasping for breath now, panting with his jaws wide open, seemed completely unable to steer any higher.

"Whoa, Cas!" yelled Dean. "Flap, flap! C'mon! Higher! Higher!"

"Up, up!" said Sam. At the last second Cas gave a little burst of six or seven slow, lurching flaps and gained a few feet of height, barely managing to clear the wave. Dean heard a splash sound and glanced back to see that the very end of Cas's tail had actually brushed the crest of the wave. And Cas had already gone right back into another exhausted glide, his wings braced out stiffly. Within two seconds he'd sunk right back down into the next wave-trough, with another wave-crest approaching them.

"Pep talk time," Dean muttered to Sam. Dean sat up straight, put his hand over the black alula-feather in his pocket, and called out to Cas, "Okay, Cas, home stretch now, I know you're exhausted, but YOU CAN DO THIS. Clear that wave. C'mon. UP a little, Cas, up, up, higher!" The wave-crest loomed at them like a six-foot wall of water. Surely Cas was going to plow right into the face of the wave — there seemed no avoiding it this time. Dean yelled, "C'mon, FLAP, Cas, FLAP!" and Cas somehow summoned up the strength for another burst of flaps. He managed to clear the wave crest, but again the end of his long, plumed tail dragged into the water, sending up a long line of spray this time.

Cas sank heavily into the trough on the other side. Another wave crest loomed. The shore was so close — so close! "FLAP, c'mon, FLAP!" Dean called out. Cas's ears were pinned back now, both ears aimed back at Dean, and this time, every time Dean said the word "flap", Cas did exactly one flap. "FLAP, FLAP, FLAP!" called Dean, and Cas managed three flaps. This time it wasn't quite enough; his tail, now heavy with water, was dragging in the water again. It braked him substantially, and even though he'd mostly cleared the wave, one foot hit the water, and then one wing-tip, which shot up a huge line of spray and slewed him sideways. With a lurching effort, wheeling his tail and giving some more desperate flaps, Cas managed to straighten out — almost.

*He can't keep this up*, thought Dean. Cas was trembling now and both wings were shaking visibly. But they were nearly there! Just ahead the waves were rising up and curling — it was the break zone, where the waves crashed onto shore. Dean tried to stand up, straddling Cas's back, to try to look ahead and judge how to guide Cas through the breaking waves, when a wave suddenly rose right up underneath Castiel's belly. It took them all by surprise. "Cas!" Sam yelled. "Up, up, look out below!" But it was too late; a fat mound of water swelled up all around them and then Cas was in the water, wings splashing helplessly, water surging over his back up to Dean's knees. Cas's whole neck and half his head were instantly under water. He snorted heavily, trying to paddle with his front feet, as the wave bore them along. It surged beneath them and accelerated, actually lifting them up, and then they were soaring along in a line of sea-foam.

Dean, who was still standing on Cas's back trying to keep his balance, had the brief thought *Am I surfing on a dragon? Yes, yes, I'm surfing on a dragon* — and then they were at the shore, Cas floundering in the whitewash of the retreating wave, his waterlogged wings stretched far out to either side as he tried to stagger to his feet. A great shadow rose behind — another wave! This one came crashing down right on Cas's back, and Dean and Sam were swept right off into the water.

There was a desperate moment of wild tumbling and motion. Water was all around, foam and bubbles and sand and water all rolling Dean around like a rag doll with no air anywhere. *Which way
was up? Dean flailed for the surface and hit sand instead. Then a huge wet wing rose from under him, bearing him up and depositing him in a sodden heap on the sand, choking and gasping.

Dizzy from the tumbling, Dean coughed up a few mouthfuls of water. It turned out it was fresh water — it really was a gigantic lake, not a saltwater ocean — not that that made it any more pleasant to nearly drown in it. He finally managed to look around. Sam was on his hands and knees over by Cas's far wingtip, scrambling through the last bit of surf to the sand. And Cas himself was half in the water and half out, but his head was on shore now.

They'd made it.

Dean had to spend a few minutes coughing before he could even move.

"Oh my friggin' god," he said at last, rolling to his hands and knees. "You made it, Cas. I told you you would. God damn, that was awesome flying, Cas!" Cas gave a short grunt of acknowledgment but lay still, half in the water and half out as the waves crashed around him. His neck and head, and one soaking wet forefoot, were half out of the water on the damp sand, but his entire hind end and torso were still in the waves. His wet wings were flopped out widely, surging limply up and down on the water like a pair of gigantic fallen sails, the eddies from breaking waves swirling around them.

Sam came stumbling over to Dean, looking a little wobbly.

"There's the others," said Sam, pointing downshore while he bent over to catch his breath. Dean looked; about a mile away, two other bedraggled angels were floundering their way to shore — Balthazar and Anna, looked like, separated by a few hundred yards. Gabriel, meanwhile, was already on land, a half-mile away trotting along the shore toward Cas, his wing-tips almost dragging in the sand, apparently too tired to fly but still able to run. Sam waved a hand at him, calling "We're okay!" and Gabriel stopped, nodded and turned back to help Balthazar, who had just been tumbled completely onto his side by a huge wave.

"Cas, you gotta get out of the water," said Dean, tottering to his feet. The big wave that had just hit Balthazar was a little worrisome; what if a bigger wave came along and dragged Cas back out to sea? Cas even had his eyes closed now — he'd never even see if a big wave were coming. Dean stumbled over toward Cas's head and tapped him gently on the nose.

Cas still didn't open his eyes.

Dean said, "C'mon, Cas, you gotta get farther up on shore. Get on your feet. Just a little farther. See if you can get up to those grasses up ahead."

Cas opened one eye halfway and looked at him with a slightly glazed expression, but didn't move. Or couldn't move, maybe? He seemed barely awake. Dean patted his ear, saying, "Cas. C'mon. It's not safe here. Also, the water's cold. I don't want you getting hypothermia or something."

"Not to mention, getting hypothermia on the Sun would be just, you know, silly," pointed out Sam.

"Sam's right," said Dean. "It would be silly. Cas, seriously. You gotta move."

Cas made a faint effort at moving, lifting his head a little bit off the sand and trying to get his feet under himself. He was clearly totally worn out, though. He couldn't even seem to get his feet under his body, and when he tried to swing both wings forward a little, they were so water-logged that he seemed barely even able to move them. He let his head sink down on the sand again, with a heavy sigh.
"I'll help you," said Dean, moving over to one wing. "I can pull this wing along a little and Sam can get the other, okay?" Sam got the idea and waded over to the other wing. Dean positioned himself halfway along the wing, at Cas's golden alula, which turned out to be bigger than he'd realized. Close up, it turned out a full-size alula on a full-size angel's wing was a pair of stout, long bars of feathers a couple feet long, about the same dimensions as the blade of a canoe-paddle. They seemed to have a sturdy bony structure within, and made pretty decent wing-handles, actually. Dean got his arms around the golden feathers, saying, "Cas, stand up on three. One, two, THREE!"

Dean and Sam hauled hard on both alulas. Cas made another wobbly effort but didn't actually move anywhere, but with both brothers pulling on his wings, at least he seemed to wake a little more. Dean felt the alula tighten down on his hands, as if Cas was really grabbing on to him.

"Try again!" said Dean. He had to get Cas to safety. He had to. "One, two, THREE!"

This time Cas managed to lurch up onto his feet. He was absolutely shaking with fatigue, but started to wobble up the shore, Sam and Dean doing their best to help him drag the two vast wings along. Soon he started holding the wings up more on his own, but he was still tottering pretty unevenly, so Sam and Dean kept hold of the alulas to steer him along.

They made their unsteady way up the grasses until they reached a broad stretch of dry grasses by a little stream. They'd barely reached the stream when Cas's legs buckled and he folded heavily down onto the grasses, his wings still half-spread. He managed to avoid falling on either Sam or Dean, but the second he was down on the ground his eyes shut again.

"Cas?" said Sam tentatively, coming over to join Dean by Cas's head. To Dean he whispered, "Is he okay?"

"Not sure," Dean whispered back. "Hey, Cas?" He patted Cas's nose.

There was no response. Not a flicker of an eyelid, not a hint of a purr.

"Cas, buddy," said Dean, tapping Cas's nose harder. Still no response. A twinge of worry stirred in Dean's stomach. He did his best to ignore it, putting both hands on Cas's head, stroking the long black nose with one hand and tugging lightly on Cas's damp feathery ear with the other to try to wake him. "Sorry to bug you but you gotta let us know you're okay, and then we'll let you sleep," said Dean. "Okay? Cas? You okay?"

Still no response.

Dean had to try to keep a slight wobble out of his voice as he added, "C'mon Cas. Wake up for a sec? Please?"

I've gotta get more than one day with you. More than one day. Please.

At last there came another purr-fragment, barely audible, more a vibration under Dean's hand than anything else, and Cas opened his eyes. Dean let out a short sigh, only aware then that he'd been holding his breath. "All right, Cas," he said, stroking Cas's nose again. "Okay. There you go. You just rest now. Sorry to make you wake up. Just wanted to be sure you were okay."

But Cas was looking at him now with rather a worried expression, and soon he'd hauled his head up off the grasses to give Dean a little lick on the forehead. He shifted one forefoot forward to a stretch of damp sand by the edge of the stream and made a few strokes in the sand with his longest silver talon.

Dean looked down at what Cas had drawn in the sand. He'd written two words:

"I'll help you," said Dean, moving over to one wing. "I can pull this wing along a little and Sam can get the other, okay?" Sam got the idea and waded over to the other wing. Dean positioned himself halfway along the wing, at Cas's golden alula, which turned out to be bigger than he'd realized. Close up, it turned out a full-size alula on a full-size angel's wing was a pair of stout, long bars of feathers a couple feet long, about the same dimensions as the blade of a canoe-paddle. They seemed to have a sturdy bony structure within, and made pretty decent wing-handles, actually. Dean got his arms around the golden feathers, saying, "Cas, stand up on three. One, two, THREE!"

Dean and Sam hauled hard on both alulas. Cas made another wobbly effort but didn't actually move anywhere, but with both brothers pulling on his wings, at least he seemed to wake a little more. Dean felt the alula tighten down on his hands, as if Cas was really grabbing on to him.

"Try again!" said Dean. He had to get Cas to safety. He had to. "One, two, THREE!"

This time Cas managed to lurch up onto his feet. He was absolutely shaking with fatigue, but started to wobble up the shore, Sam and Dean doing their best to help him drag the two vast wings along. Soon he started holding the wings up more on his own, but he was still tottering pretty unevenly, so Sam and Dean kept hold of the alulas to steer him along.

They made their unsteady way up the grasses until they reached a broad stretch of dry grasses by a little stream. They'd barely reached the stream when Cas's legs buckled and he folded heavily down onto the grasses, his wings still half-spread. He managed to avoid falling on either Sam or Dean, but the second he was down on the ground his eyes shut again.

"Cas?" said Sam tentatively, coming over to join Dean by Cas's head. To Dean he whispered, "Is he okay?"

"Not sure," Dean whispered back. "Hey, Cas?" He patted Cas's nose.

There was no response. Not a flicker of an eyelid, not a hint of a purr.

"Cas, buddy," said Dean, tapping Cas's nose harder. Still no response. A twinge of worry stirred in Dean's stomach. He did his best to ignore it, putting both hands on Cas's head, stroking the long black nose with one hand and tugging lightly on Cas's damp feathery ear with the other to try to wake him. "Sorry to bug you but you gotta let us know you're okay, and then we'll let you sleep," said Dean. "Okay? Cas? You okay?"

Still no response.

Dean had to try to keep a slight wobble out of his voice as he added, "C'mon Cas. Wake up for a sec? Please?"

I've gotta get more than one day with you. More than one day. Please.

At last there came another purr-fragment, barely audible, more a vibration under Dean's hand than anything else, and Cas opened his eyes. Dean let out a short sigh, only aware then that he'd been holding his breath. "All right, Cas," he said, stroking Cas's nose again. "Okay. There you go. You just rest now. Sorry to make you wake up. Just wanted to be sure you were okay."

But Cas was looking at him now with rather a worried expression, and soon he'd hauled his head up off the grasses to give Dean a little lick on the forehead. He shifted one forefoot forward to a stretch of damp sand by the edge of the stream and made a few strokes in the sand with his longest silver talon.

Dean looked down at what Cas had drawn in the sand. He'd written two words:
"You're ok?"

"Yes, we're fine, we're fine," said Dean, almost laughing. Of course Cas would ask if Dean was okay, even if Cas himself seemed practically at death's door. Typical. "But what about you?"

"I'm fine, wrote Cas in the sand.

Then he added, below it:

Just tired
don't worry

... and he put his head down and closed his eyes again.

Sam, who'd come up next to Dean to read Cas's sand-notes, whispered, "He's probably too tired to be able to do the dream-communication thing." Cas confirmed this with a tiny nod, eyes still closed.

"All right, buddy," said Dean. He gave Cas another pat on the nose, saying, "You better rest then. And... that really was awesome flying, just by the way."

Dean took a few steps back, whispering to Sam, "He's sure got a right to be tired. Took us through a solar flare. Escaped from the oldest celestial dragons in existence."

"Pretty good writing for an exhausted dragon-angel, actually," whispered Sam back, glancing down at Cas's note in the sand. "He only forgot the apostrophes."

Cas gave a faint snort and opened his eyes again. He studied his sand-writing for a moment. With a slightly annoyed sigh he put his foot forward again, extended one claw and added three careful apostrophes to "you're," "I'm," and "don't."

Gabriel came trotting up the beach about fifteen minutes later, panting heavily. Much farther down the beach Dean could just make out the shapes of Balthazar and Anna, who now seemed to be huddled together around some kind of a fire. Gabriel seemed to be the only one of the four angels who had come out of the flare-ride with any kind of energy left. Maybe, as an archangel, he'd been able to draw on a few more power reserves? Yet even Gabriel seemed too tired to fly; he'd trotted the whole way on his four feathered feet instead.

Gabriel picked his way through the grasses to Cas's side, where he sniffed Cas's nose (who blearily opened one eye, saw who it was, and drifted off to sleep again). Gabe checked Sam and Dean over, too. By now Sam had opened their one surviving backpack (it had ended up squashed under Dean for much of the ride and was a bit worse for wear) and he'd tried to spread out a few things to dry on the grass. The extra jacket, the extra socks, the powerbars — it was all soaked. Gabriel gave a little hmph noise at the sight of all the wet gear, and he began to drag a few pieces of driftwood over. This included effortlessly picking up some tree-size pieces with his wide jaws and casually tossing them into a huge heap. Once he'd assembled a pretty decent bonfire-sized stack of driftwood, he set it alight with a few snorting puffs of white-hot flame and gave Sam and Dean a significant look that seemed to mean, "Now dry yourselves off."

While Sam and Dean got dry, Gabriel made a little circuit around Cas, jetting out another whole
series of puffs of flame. Each jet of fire seemed carefully aimed to not actually hit Cas, but to clear his feathers by about two feet.

"Oh," said Sam after a few puzzled moments of watching this. "He's drying Cas off."

"Angel blow-dryer, heh," said Dean. Gabriel heard the comment and gave a very exaggerated eye-roll, but kept doing the flame-jets for about ten minutes more. Indeed Cas ended up substantially dryer. Dean, not to be outdone, went over and began working on Cas's bedraggled neck-plumes, trying to straighten them and fluff them out a little so that they could dry in the heat of the fire. Gabriel, noticing Dean working away at preening Cas's neck-feathers, gave a snort that sounded an awful lot like a laugh. Cas seemed deeply asleep now, his head canted a little sideways against one of his paws and his breaths coming slowly and evenly, but even so faint purr-rumbles seemed to be happening on every exhalation as Dean worked away at the neck-plumes. Gabriel snorted again at that.

"Everybody's okay?" Sam asked Gabriel, taking a seat on a piece of driftwood next to Gabriel while Dean dried out Cas's neck-feathers. "Balthazar and Anna are all right?"

Gabriel nodded. He'd noticed Cas's sand-writing earlier, and now he cleared a little patch of ground of his own, right in front of the fire, and began writing his own note in the sandy soil with a front claw. He wrote:

ALL OK
TIRED - NOT MUCH POWER HERE

"But you seem fine," pointed out Dean.

PRAYERS FROM EARTH, Gabriel wrote. FUELS ME UP. NOT TO TOOT MY OWN HORN, (here he actually wrote out "HEH" and winked a shining amber eye at Sam) BUT MY NAME STILL WIDELY KNOWN. HELPS A BIT. He'd filled up the whole patch of sand now. With a swipe of one glittering green wing he wiped it clean.

"We were trying to pray to Cas," said Dean, somehow feeling a little bad that totally anonymous prayers from far-away Earth would have helped Gabriel more than his own heartfelt prayers had helped Cas.

Gabe cast a slightly amused look in Dean's direction and wrote, PROB HELPED A TON. YOU HAVE HIS FEATH (Here Gabriel nodded toward Cas's little black alula-feather, now slightly damp, that was still in Dean's shirt pocket).

ALSO YR PRAYERS MUCH MORE PERSONAL, added Gabriel. (Here he seemed absolutely unable to restrain another wink.) LOT OF POWER IN YR PRAYERS.

Well, that did make Dean feel a little better, actually.

Another wipe with the green wing-feathers and Gabriel started over, writing:

CAS HAD MUCH HARDER JOB. VERY TRICKY TO RIDE FLARE @ HIS SIZE. AMAZED HE MADE IT.

He glanced over at Cas, wiped the sand clear again and added: JUST NEEDS SLEEP.

"I thought angels didn't sleep?" said Sam. Gabriel gave him a very narrow-eyed look, brushed away his previous entry and wrote:
"My god," said Dean. "Do you really have to add snarky comments even when you're taking damn near half an hour to write each one out in the sand?"

YOU BET YOUR —, wrote Gabriel carefully, now carving each word extra-big and adding dramatic flourishes, apparently just to take an unnecessary amount of time. Of course he ran out of room and had to erase the whole thing just to add the next word of the phrase:

—ANGEL-LOVIN'— he wrote, again in extra-big letters, then wiped that away too, and added:

— BOOTY I DO!

He paused there and looked at Dean. And Gabriel actually managed, somehow, to waggle his feathery eyebrows. (Exactly as he'd once waggled his human eyebrows when in his human vessel.)

"Oh, jesus," muttered Dean, already deeply regretting having led Gabriel down this particular conversational path. But there seemed no stopping Gabriel now, for he'd already erased his last phrase and was writing, one flourishy phrase at a time,

AND WHEN I SAY
ANGEL-LOVIN',
WHAT I MEAN IS,
"Yeah, you can stop right there," said Dean.

GEN-YOO-INE— wrote Gabriel. He was giving little snorts of satisfaction with each word now, and finished with a careful, neatly lettered:

LUUUUUUUUUV! (This word came complete with two little hearts on either side.)

"I said, you can shut up now," said Dean.

IT'S DOWNRIGHT SICKENING, wrote Gabriel.

"The feeling's mutual."

REAL LOVEBIRDS, YOU 2.

"Did you not hear me say you could shut up?

CAS USED TO SIT ON HIGHEST MOUNTAINTOP WAITING FOR YR PRAYERS, wrote Gabriel. Then he let out a snort that was most definitely a laugh, and added:

SOOO ROMANTIC! ... and here he drew another neat little heart-shape.

"Would you please just.... stop..." said Dean helplessly.

SIZE DIFFERENCE PROBABLY A BIT OF A CHALLENGE THOUGH, ISN'T IT?

"Oh my god..." muttered Dean. (By now Sam had gone into a rather odd coughing fit, hiding his mouth with one hand.)
I'M SURE YOU'LL FIND SOME WAY, Gabriel wrote, totally unfazed. JUST HAVE TO GET CREATIVE. KIND OF LIKE IN 'SHREK' WITH THAT SONG WHERE—

Finally Dean thought of jumping forward to scuff a foot over whatever Gabriel was writing.

HEY, I'M JUST TRYING TO HELP, wrote Gabriel, once he'd batted Dean back with a gigantic wing. ALWAYS KINDA WANTED TO BE A CUPID TBH. ARCHANGEL JOB'S TOO STRESSFUL.

"Hey, since we're on the topic," said Sam, finally coming to the rescue (and only after Dean shot him a truly desperate look), "was Cas really an archangel?"

That at last stopped the string of sarcastic sand-messages. Gabriel looked at them both for a long moment, his large amber eyes studying Sam and Dean in turn. He glanced over at Castiel, too, but Cas was still fast asleep.

YES, Gabriel finally wrote.

"And you... knew?" said Dean. "All along?" Gabriel gave a reluctant nod.

Dean had to think about that for a moment. Cas had been misled for eons about who he really was. Misled, manipulated and lied to. How much of Castiel's confusion, his periodically flip-flopping loyalties to Heaven, had been due to this ancient wrong that had been done to him so long ago? Had his true self, buried far underneath, been fighting with his falsified memories all this time?

_How much did they mess him up?_ Dean thought.

_And Gabriel knew all along...._

Sam said, a little quietly, "Did the other angels know too?"

Gabriel shook his head and wrote, more slowly now, ONLY THE OTHER ARCHS KNEW.

"You knew and didn't tell him?" said Dean.

Gabriel's wings drooped a little. He gave a long sigh, staring at Dean for a moment. Then he turned his attention to the ground and began to prepare a bigger patch of ground for sand-writing, first roasting a few stray clumps of grass and then raking at the ashy ground with his claws till he had a pretty large writing-space. Then he carefully wrote out:

WANTED TO TELL HIM.

WAS AFRAID IT MIGHT BLOW HIS MIND.

I MEAN THAT LITERALLY.

BECAUSE HE'D BEEN MINDWIPED. AND—

Gabriel paused, looking over at sleeping Castiel for a minute. After a long moment of thought he wrote:

THE OTHER 2 WENT INSANE.

Sam and Dean studied that sentence for a moment, while Gabriel watched them coolly, his amber eyes unreadable now.
"You mean..." said Sam, raising his eyes to Gabriel's. "The other two archangels who got demoted along with Cas? The other two of the original seven?"

Gabriel nodded.

*Seven archangels,* Dean thought. Michael, Raphael, Lucifer and Gabriel were the four that they already knew about. The other three had been Cas and... who else?

"Who were the other two?" Dean asked.

Gabriel glanced over at Cas again, who still was deeply asleep, his breathing slow, his head still slightly tilted sideways onto one forefoot.

*URIEL & RAMIEL,* Gabriel wrote. He was writing very slowly now, as if each word were painful; or as if each phrase had to be thought through carefully.

ALL 3 MINDWIPE

& DEMOTED.

FOR TRYING TO FIND GOD. HERE.

AFTERWARDS,

URIEL LOST HIS

Gabriel paused a long moment here, thinking. Eventually he erased the "URIEL LOST HIS" sentence and started over:

URIEL WAS ERASED COMPLETELY.

BECAME MICHAEL'S PUPPET.

NOTHING LIKE WHAT HE WAS.

NOT URIEL ANYMORE.

Gabriel paused to let both brothers read, and then erased every word, starting over with:

& RAMIEL WENT INSANE.

RAMIEL DIED FROM IT.

HAVEN'T FOUND EITHER ONE HERE BTW.

Gabriel gave another long, slow sigh, wiping the sand clear with a swipe of his forefoot this time. It had all been a lot for him to write out — a lot of careful scratchings, and wiping the sand clean, and starting over. There seemed to be no snark anymore, no more eye-rolling or jokey comments; his wings were tightly folded and his ears had been flattened back against his neck for a while, as if the memory, even after all this time, still made him angry.

Gabriel began writing again:

CAS WAS ONLY 1 OF THE 3

WHO STAYED HIMSELF.
LOST HIS MEMORY, BUT WAS STILL HIMSELF.

I DIDN'T WANT TO JEOPARDIZE THAT.

SO I DIDN'T TELL HIM.

Gabriel stopped writing and looked up at them.

The only sound was the crackling of the fire, and the distant crashing of the waves on the nearby beach.

"Okay," said Sam at last. "I can see that. Okay."

"Cas didn't deserve any of that," whispered Dean, looking over at Castiel.

Gabriel nodded.

NO HE DIDN'T, wrote Gabriel.

NONE OF THE 3 DID.

THAT'S WHY I LEFT AND HID.

THEY WERE COMING FOR ME NEXT.

"You left Cas with them," Dean said. The realization had just dawned: Gabriel had gone to Earth. Cas had had to stay alone in Heaven. "You just... left. You left him alone with them. Thinking he was just a soldier... You left him alone. With them." Dean hadn't even really meant it to sound accusatory — it just came out that way.

But Gabriel only nodded. He wrote:

I DID.

THAT IS MY SIN.

AND I WAS ASHAMED.

BUT

Gabriel paused a long moment, looking up at the horizon for a while, and then glancing over at sleeping Castiel.

Dean almost wanted to add three dots after the "BUT" for him.

Gabriel's foot finally moved again, and he added, after the "BUT":

HE FORGAVE ME.

Dean looked at Gabriel a long moment. Gabriel met his gaze, the large amber eyes holding his own steadily.

"He does that," said Dean softly.

Gabriel nodded.

Then that a bit of the old joking light returned into Gabriel's eyes. He brushed the sand clear and
BIG SOFTIE. HE NEVER COULD HOLD A GRUDGE WORTH ANYTHING.

Gabriel left soon after that to go check on the others, leaving them with just a roughly scratched YOU GUYS SLEEP.

But it was completely impossible to get to sleep. For one thing the sky was still pretty bright ("Guess the sun never sets if you're on the sun," commented Dean). And for another, though both Sam and Dean were near collapse from exhaustion by this point, neither could seem to actually fall asleep.

After a few minutes tossing and turning on a rather uneven bed of dried grasses, both of them got up and sat on a big piece of driftwood by the fire.

"This has been just way too freaky a day to be able to just lie down and shut my eyes," Sam said quietly, tossing one more piece of wood on the fire. "Not to mention, I'm kinda freezing." (They'd both managed to get their clothes pretty dry, but it had taken a while. By now both brothers were feeling pretty chilled.) "But mostly I can't stop thinking about it all. Jesus, that flight. We're on the Sun. Cas is a dragon. We rode a solar flare. And Dean..." Sam glanced at Dean with a little smile. "Also... Cas is alive. You notice that?"

"I noticed that," said Dean. "Yeah, I, uh..." His breathing was suddenly getting a little uneven just thinking about it. "Yeah, he... uh... Jeez, Sam, honestly, it..." He ran a hand through his hair, looking over at Castiel, and finally said, "It's hard to even take in, to be honest."

After a minute Sam said, still watching him, "You believe it yet?"

Dean gave a little laugh. "Not quite, actually. Still feels, um..." Now he couldn't take his eyes off Castiel. The great dark head... the silky feathered ears... the hulking shape of his torso, the black feathered feet with those huge silver talons, the tremendous wings half-spread at his sides, ebony-dark, glittering with gold flecks. The blue-and-black neck plumes. The long tail, curled around now at his side under one wing.

Castiel.

"It feels like a dream," Dean confessed at last. "Like a really crazy dream. Like the most insane dream I ever had."

_The best dream I ever had._

_The dream I needed._

_A dream that I might be having right now. A crazy whiskey dream, maybe. A dream I'm having while I'm passed out drunk on Cas's cot... holding the guitar, maybe... And nobody's there but the guitar. Nobody's there at all._

"It's a little hard to believe," said Dean, his voice half a whisper.

Sam reached out and chucked him on the shoulder. "Believe it. You got your dragon back, Dean. You got your angel back. And I'm so frickin' happy for you."
Dean gave him a rather wobbly smile.

"How you feeling?" Sam continued.

For once Dean gave him a straight answer. "Honestly? Like I'm short-circuiting."

Sam considered that, still looking at him, and said, "Actually... you kinda look like you're in shock, now that I get a look at you. Hey, maybe have something to eat. You think the M&M's might have survived?" He began digging around in the half-dried-out gear for the powerbars and the M&M's.

Eating turned out to be a good idea. Dean's appetite roared to life once he got a few bites, and apparently so did Sam's, for they'd soon scarfed down most of the M&Ms and powerbars. They drank a little water from the stream, too. Soon Sam was yawning, so once again they tried to settle down for the night.

Dean, though, still found himself far too wired to sleep. Too much had happened... too much to think about. He was also still feeling a little cold. So then he got a little worried about whether Sam might still be cold. Sam was at least somewhat near the bonfire, but still was wearing only a half-burned shirt.

When Gabriel came walking back a while later, he found Dean trying to sneak the one remaining fleece jacket over Sam's shoulders without waking him up.

Without a word, Gabriel gently nudged Dean out of the way, spread a wing over Sam and settled down by the fire next to him. Dean braced himself for more eyerolls or winks or something, but Gabriel simply tucked his head behind his other wing and seemed to go right to sleep.

Dean, though, was still wide awake. He returned to Cas to sit by his head. After a while he leaned back, very cautiously, against Cas's big black forefoot, trying his best not to wake him.

For he'd found he didn't want to leave Cas alone. He didn't want to let Cas out of his sight, actually. Not for a moment; not even in order to go to sleep.

After a while of sitting there watching Castiel sleep, he realized, *I'm sorta scared to go to sleep.*

*What if this is all just a dream? The whole thing?*

*What if I'm still really in the bunker?*

*If this is a dream... I don't want to wake up.*

So Dean sat there by Cas's neck, shivering now in the breeze, stroking one hand through Cas's feathers.

*Please don't be a dream,* Dean thought. *Please don't be a dream.* The horrors of the past few months, as much as they'd started to recede today, were not really all that deeply buried. Now that Dean had finally stopped moving for a moment, now that the dramatic chases and the confusing sand-writing-stories and dream-conversations had all stopped, now that Dean was sitting here with this enormous feathered dragon asleep by his side... now that he had a moment of quiet to think....

It turned out the events back on Earth did not seem that far away at all.
The warehouse. The things that had happened.

*The things that had happened.*

The things I did to him, Dean corrected himself.

*The things I did to him.*

"Please let this be real," Dean muttered, very softly. "Please be really alive." Cas's neck-feathers were all dry now, but Dean continued to stroke the feathers anyway. Very slowly, very gently, he ran his fingers through the soft ends of the plumes, feeling the dark feathers slide like silk across his palm, watching the shining golden feather-tips slip across his fingers like glints of light. Dean closed his fingers on one golden feather-tip. It was soft and cool under his touch. *Be real*, he thought, holding the delicate feather-tip in his hand. *If you're a dragon, I don't care. Please just be real. Be alive and be real.*

A touch on his shoulder startled him. Dean looked around to find that the corner of Cas's wing was nudging Dean gently. When he looked forward at Cas's head, Cas had one blue eye open, studying Dean.

"Sorry," Dean whispered, letting go of the feathers. "Didn't mean to wake you."

Cas gently pulled his foot out from under Dean and began to scratch something in the dirt by Dean's feet.

YOU'RE COLD, Cas wrote, delicately adding the apostrophe to the "you're." GO SIT BY FIRE.

"I'm okay," said Dean. "It's not too cold. I'm fine."

Cas shook his head. YOU'RE SHIVERING, he wrote.

"I'd rather stay here," Dean told him.

Cas looked at him a long moment, his great dark head half-lifted off the ground and tilted a little toward Dean, studying Dean with one shining blue eye.

Then the golden alula-feathers pulled at Dean's arm. Cas's foot shifted again, and next thing Dean knew he felt himself sinking back into soft feathers, right where Cas's neck met his chest. The plummy blue-black neck-feathers were on one side, a big black foreleg on the other side, and a thick, soft layer of Cas's chest-feathers was just behind Dean's back like a huge fluffy warm pillow.

Cas scratched another little message into the dirt just in front of Dean.

WON'T CRUSH YOU, wrote Cas. DON'T WORRY.

"I'm not," said Dean. (And he wasn't.)

Dean then spent about five seconds feeling embarrassed about the fact that he was burrowing into his friend's feathers pretty much like a baby chick snuggling up to its mama. But the embarrassment disappeared as the warmth stole over him. It was Cas; it was Castiel. The feathers even smelled like him, somehow. And his feathers were so warm. Cas then fluffed out his neck feathers a little, and fluffed-out neck feathers turned out to be long enough to make almost a tent, rather like a series of soft fluffy curtains that Dean could work his way into. Dean burrowed a little deeper, till he was almost covered up in feathers.
"Cas," Dean said, reaching one hand through all the feathers to Cas's neck and resting his hand there. "Cas, I—"

All at once his voice left him.

"Is this really real?" Dean managed at last. "Is this happening? Am I really here?"

Cas nodded.

"Cause I missed you," Dean said. "I mean... I really missed you."

The soft rumbly purr started up. Dean could feel it through his hand, and all across his back.

"Can't believe I found you," Dean said. "Can't believe it... Cas... I mean... Cas, I..." Then Dean couldn't keep his eyes open any longer. The world seemed to warp then, as Dean fell into a dream in which Cas, in his human vessel, was arranging a nest of extremely soft, downy feather-comforters all around Dean.

"This is a dream," said Dean.

"Yes," said Castiel, in his old familiar human voice, as he tucked a comforter around Dean. "And it's also real."

"Okay, but," said Dean, "just... don't leave."

"I won't," said Castiel. It was wonderful to hear his voice again. The soft sound of his rumbly purr was somehow still audible too.

"'Cause... I need you," said Dean.

"I know," said Castiel, somehow even closer now, his voice very nearby, calm and quiet. "I need you too." There was a whisper-soft touch on Dean's forehead; was it human-Cas kissing him? Or touching Dean with that old healing touch, the two-fingered touch? Or was it a lick from dragon-Castiel, maybe, or a touch from the golden alula-feathers? It no longer seemed critical to know which it was exactly, for it was Castiel. That was all that really mattered. It was Castiel, alive, impossibly alive, right here next to Dean at last. Keeping Dean warm. Sending Dean to sleep.

"Sleep, Dean," said Castiel, and so Dean slept.

---

_A/N - I almost only posted the first half of this (the flight over the water) but I really wanted to get to the part where Dean finally gets to snuggle into Cas's feathers. I felt like Dean needed that, THIS week, not next week. Or maybe I'm the one who needed it, I guess. :) Anyway - next week's chapter will probably be shorter or I might even have to skip a week, but I really hope you enjoyed the longer chapter this week._

_BTW Cas's flight over the water, with exhausted Cas trying to keep above the waves, is inspired partly by Fred Bodsworth's classic nature story "Last of the Curlews", specifically the chapter where the last curlew tries to cross the Atlantic Ocean with a small flock of golden-plovers and they run into a storm._
edited to add: Uriel is very frequently listed as an archangel in much of the real-life lore, as is Cassiel/Castiel. (Ramiel is another of the names often listed - there's quite an assortment of names actually - but Uriel's name probably comes up most often.) And then there's that time when Naomi made a stray comment that indicated that she's been controlling Cas for a long time, at least back to Biblical times, and had even altered his memory. So I was thinking about all that and came to like the idea that Uriel & Castiel were both once archangels and that both had been working together on something important - and that both were demoted & brainwiped as a result, Cas losing his memory and Uriel "losing himself" completely. It fits nicely with the lore and with Cas's flipflopping loyalties to Heaven. (Plus it's a bit of retroactive redemption for Uriel, which was kind of interesting to consider.)

If you liked anything in particular in this chapter, please let me know what it was! Thank you so much for reading, and I hope you're enjoying my story.

edit, 13 Nov: Looks like Dean will have to keep snuggling into Cas's feathers for another week - work's too crazy. I have a grant due and also have to work this weekend. :P Tune in next week I hope! At least I managed to leave Dean in a good place. :)
Dean woke slowly, the vivid dream still echoing through his mind.

He burrowed deeper into the down comforter, reluctant to face the new day. This was the part of the morning that Dean always hated most: the moment when he first awoke, his mind still fuzzy from sleep. Because, usually there was a second or two of dissociated confusion just when he first surfaced from sleep, a moment before full wakefulness hit. And during that all-too-brief moment, sometimes Dean actually didn't remember what had happened in Ohio.

That wasn't the part he hated, actually. The part he hated came a second later, when he suddenly did remember what had happened in Ohio.

So Dean sometimes kept his eyes closed when he woke, as he did now, hoping to delay the inevitable and somehow slip back into the dream. Though these days Dean's dreams were sometimes as bad as reality, of course (or even worse).

But this time it had been a really wonderful dream.

In this particular dream, Cas had still been alive. Those dreams didn't happen very often, so Dean clung to them when he could.

It'd been a particularly crazy dream, actually. Cas had been a dragon, of all things. It had been one of those elaborately plotty dreams, as long and as colorfully detailed as a Hollywood movie. Sam had been in the dream too. There'd been an early part about wolves and Stargates and pagan gods, and a later part where Cas had been carrying Sam and Dean around on a complicated journey, all three of them flying around together on the surface of the Sun. They'd had a wild escape flight from a huge monster; they'd ridden a solar flare halfway to outer space; they'd crossed an immense lake the size of an ocean. They'd had all kinds of unlikely adventures.

It had been a crazy dream.

An impossible dream.

Impossible because Cas was dead.

Cas was dead and buried. He wasn't a dragon; he was up on the hill buried in the frozen earth, under the leafless maple tree, never to return. Dean had lost him forever. The Darkness was still wreaking havoc on the world, and Sam and Dean were powerless to stop it. All they could do was watch the destruction unfold.
And today, like every day, all Dean would be able to do was send out hopeless prayers to a long-
dead angel who would never return.

Dean pressed his face into his forearm, hiding his eyes from the soft glow of daylight that was 
seeping through the bedroom door. He even tried to burrow a little farther into the bedding, shifting 
more deeply under the soft down comforter until he was backed up against the warm wall at the side 
of his bed. Images from the dream were still rattling around in his mind, and though Dean knew it 
was kind of a hopeless effort (he was already too far awake to be able to fall back into sleep), he 
summoned up a mental picture of Cas from the dream.

In the dream, Cas had had huge feathered wings, and he could spit fire. He'd been enormous, 
practically dinosaur-sized, so big that his black-feathered head had been almost the size of the 
Impala. He'd had great glittering blue eyes that sparkled like sapphires; he'd had a white belly, and 
golden-brown feathers down his sides, and black feet with silver talons, and even a blue-black ruff of 
long neck plumes around his neck. His wings had been a shining black with lovely gold tips, and 
he'd licked Dean on the forehead, and he could purr, and he'd heard all of Dean's prayers, he'd even 
waited on a mountaintop every day for Dean's prayers, and he'd written messages in the sand....

Only a dream.

An all-too-familiar sensation of crushingly bitter loss closed in around Dean.

"Cas," Dean whispered, aloud, into the crook of his own elbow.

A soft vibrating rumble began. Dean sighed. Damn phone, he thought.

The rumble went on. Even the wall behind Dean's back, behind the down comforter, seemed to be 
vibrating slightly. The phone must have gotten wedged between the mattress and the wall, somehow 
making everything shake. Actually the phone seemed to be stuck in a non-stop vibration mode too, 
for the rumble kept going on. Dean groped around the bed, feeling around for the phone.

There seemed to be feathers everywhere. Big ones and little ones, sitting around loose. Feathers... 
thought Dean, still a little fuzzy-headed from sleep. The down comforter must've ripped open. He got 
a little more confused though, at the sheer quantity of feathers that seemed to be all around. He was 
just starting to think Wait a sec, I don't own a down comforter when his hand fumbled through the 
feathers to the wall by the bed (Wait a sec.... there is no wall at the side of my bed...) and he 
encountered not a flat wall at all, but a huge, warm, solidly muscled shoulder.

Dean's eyes snapped open as he sat up with a jerk. He wasn't in his bedroom at all. He was lying not 
against a wall, but against that big warm shoulder, and he was completely wreathed in feathers. A 
thick feather bed lay underneath him (it looked like it was a layer of long white belly feathers that 
had been pulled loose and heaped under him to make a sort of mattress). Slender blue-black plumes 
were fanned over Dean's shoulders and chest like a cape, and another set of golden-brown shoulder-
feathers were layered across his hips and legs. The glow from the "bedroom door" was actually a bit 
of daylight seeping through a small gap in a great black wing that was spread overhead like a tent, 
arched forward to shield Dean from the light outside.

And the rumbling was, of course, a purr.

The rush of relief hit Dean so intensely that his hands actually began to shake. He had to knot both 
hands tightly on the silky plumes just to make his hands stay still. He lay back down slowly, burying 
his face in the soft neck plumes, concentrating on taking slow, even breaths to try to keep his heart 
from pounding so hard.
The purr paused.

Something dark blocked the light. The front of the wing lifted up a little, revealing the side of a huge, black head that was now twisted around to study Dean, one big blue eye peering in at him through a gap in the wing-feathers.

There was a questioning "hmmm?" noise.

"Yeah, uh, hi," said Dean. "Hi... Cas. Hi, Cas." He forced himself to loosen his hold on the neck-feathers. "Um. Morning. Sorry, did I, uh, was I pulling on your feathers?"

Cas nodded.

"Sorry. Just a bad dream." Just a bad three months of reality. Dean tried to pat the neck feathers back into place, and sat up again. "I'm cool. Just a dream. I'm all rested. I can, uh, I can get up now. Thanks for the... uh... the featherbed."

The wing folded back fully. Bright daylight made Dean blink as he clambered to his feet. Cas still had his head craned around to look at him, a bit of a concerned look in his eye now. Soon the edge of the wing was poking at Dean from behind, a set of long golden alula-feathers running over Dean's shoulders while Cas's huge black snout also began nosing around at Dean's chest and face, as if Cas felt he had to inspect Dean from both sides.

Dean's first instinct was to hide how rattled he'd been, so he said, "Hey, I'm fine. Don't worry. I'm fine. Just a bad dream. Or a bad... non-dream, I guess."

Cas pulled his head back a little and frowned at him. A frown on his big dragon face turned out to look almost exactly the same as his usual human frown, his eyes even squinting in the same way and his whole head tilting a little bit.

Cas made another questioning "hmmm?" sound, and Dean reluctantly confessed, trying to make a joke of it, "Thought I'd woken up in my bedroom. Heh. Just got mixed up. Funny, huh?"

Understanding dawned in Cas's eyes, and at once the huge black snout was in Dean's face again. This time Cas began licking Dean's face, as he had yesterday. Dean was soon half-smothered under a series of licks on both cheeks, and then across his forehead too. The huge wing was cradling Dean's shoulders now, the alula-feathers brushing repeatedly at the back of his neck.

Dean was about to try to make light of it again (he was trying to work up a casual joke, something about "Hey, don't lick my face off!") when he thought, One last day with Cas, and without even thinking it through he grabbed Cas's wide snout with both arms and planted a quick kiss right in the middle of Cas's velvety nose.

They were both a little startled (Dean really had not thought it through). Cas's eyes widened, and Dean looked back up at him a little uncertainly.

Cas blinked at Dean, holding himself very still.

"I am awake now, right?" said Dean. (It seemed worth doublechecking.)

Castiel gave him a very emphatic nod.

So Dean kissed his wide feathery black nose a second time, and the purr started up again.
After a little more face-licking (by Cas) and some nose-stroking (by Dean) — Gabriel's advice about "you'll have to get creative" drifted through Dean's mind a few times — it seemed the morning had gotten off to a surprisingly good start after all, so Dean eventually made his way over to the stream to splash some water on his face and try to freshen up a little. Meanwhile Cas did some morning stretches that looked oddly like some kind of dragon-yoga.

Cas ended up sprawled out flat on his belly with both wings stretched out as far as possible to either side. Dean was laughing at him a little, walking back toward him past the ashes of the bonfire, when he finally realized that Gabriel and Sam were nowhere to be seen.

"Hey! Cas! Where's Sam?" Dean asked, looking all around.

Cas shook himself and sat up a bit (though still leaving his wings splayed wide out). He shifted one front foot to the ever-reliable patch of sandy ground and began writing. Dean hurried back over to him and read:

GABE TOOK HIM FLYING. W/B&A. THEY'LL BE BACK SOON.

"You mean... with Balthazar and Anna?" said Dean.

Cas nodded.

"But where'd they go? Are we, uh... are we staying here a while?"

I WISH, wrote Cas, giving a little sigh. WE HAVE TO GET GOING SOON. THEY'RE SCOUTING A ROUTE. BUT I NEEDED A BIT MORE TIME TO RECHARGE. 1 MORE HR I THINK.

"Time to... recharge? What?"

Cas rolled his eyes toward his widely spread wings, and Dean looked back at them.

"Oh," Dean said. "Recharging with... your wings? Really?"

Cas nodded, and wrote:

SOAKING UP POWER. WINGS GATHER POWER.

While Dean was taking that in, Cas added:

POWER'S THIN HERE. TAKES HRS TO RECHARGE.

Dean had to smother a grin. "What, so, you're like a huge cellphone? A cellphone hooked to two giant solar panels? On a cloudy day?"

Cas narrowed his eyes at that analogy, but after he considered it for a moment he gave a terse nod.

ESSENTIALLY, YES. he wrote. WHERE WE'RE GOING I'LL NEED FULL POWER.

"And, speaking of that, where are we going?" Dean asked. "You said it was days away, right?"

Cas glanced at the horizon.
This should have been good news. The journey would be shorter! They were soon going to be able to tackle the Darkness problem for once and for all. But Dean couldn't help feeling a sharp twinge of disappointment at the news. In addition to a certain apparent possibility-of-death, also it had suddenly became clear that Dean wouldn't get to have a weeks-long journey with Cas after all, but just a single day.

One day. Just as Cas had predicted.

"I guess that's... good?" Dean said at last. Cas was silent a moment, looking at him, and then he curled his neck closer and laid his huge head on the ground right at Dean's side. Right where Dean could stroke Cas's soft feathery ears, and his feathery neck.

Which, of course, Dean did.

"Well, um," said Dean, stroking one hand slowly through the neck-plumes (they'd gotten all disarrayed again, maybe due to Dean pulling them all the wrong way in his sleep), "We gotta do it, I guess. So... where we going again? I mean, what are we headed for exactly?"

But Cas seemed totally incapable of moving (or of writing words in the sand) while Dean was stroking his neck feathers. He seemed to have gone into one of those blissed-out feather-preening trances again — a tendency he'd already showed a couple times yesterday and that Dean, of course, had taken keen note of.

However, Dean did need to know something about the Darkness plan, so he stopped the feather-stroking, grinning a little to himself at Cas's disappointed sigh.

Cas heaved his head up again to look at his sand-writing.

WE'RE GOING TO THE PLACE I TOLD YOU ABOUT, Cas wrote, more rapidly now, scrawling the words rapidly with one silver talon. IT'S CALLED THE STONES. The second he finished the last word he flopped his head down again by Dean's side, feathers all fluffed out, obviously ready again for Dean to get back to the preening.

"And... what's there?" asked Dean.

STONES, wrote Cas with the last talon of one sideways-splayed foot, this time not even bothering to lift his head up from Dean's side. The word came out barely legible.

Dean had to laugh. "Well, that's illuminating. Stones. Thanks for the detailed explanation. Not that I need to know what we're facing or anything."

Cas gave a little snort that sounded a bit like a rueful laugh, and grudgingly he hauled his head up again, clearly forcing himself to return to business. He wiped the sand clear with a swipe of his front foot, and wrote (more carefully now, trying to make it legible):

THAT'S ALL I KNOW. ALL ANY OF US KNOW. OLD LEGEND SAYS, STONES.

GABE DIED 3X TRYING TO LEARN MORE.

I NEARLY DIED TOO.

TURNS OUT ANGELS CAN'T GET CLOSE ON OWN.
One of Cas's ears had now slanted forwards and the other one backwards, giving him a lopsided, distinctly uncertain look. He looked off at the northeastern horizon, ears still pointed in two different directions as if he couldn't quite decide what to do. He tilted his head to regard Dean again. Then he turned back to the sand, wiped it clear again and added:

I WANT TO TRY AGAIN.

NOW THAT YOU'RE W/ME.

IF YOU WANT?

Cas drew the question mark very slowly, and looked at Dean.

"I'm with you," said Dean. "And Sam is too, I know he is."

IT'LL HELP TO HAVE YOU BOTH, Cas wrote, nodding his head. BUT. He paused again, with a steady gaze at Dean, and he added, YOU'RE SURE?

"You already asked yesterday, Cas. And we already said yes. And we meant it. I meant it."

BUT WHAT IF, Cas started to write, but then Dean stepped forward onto the patch of sand, blocking him from writing further.

"I'm not ever leaving you again," Dean said. "Not if I have any choice about it. And that's final. Now put your head down, cause I really need to straighten out your neck-feathers."

The "BUT WHAT IF" disappeared completely as Castiel flopped his head down on the sand, right by Dean's feet.

Dean soon had both arms buried in feathers up to the elbows. The longer plumes had really had gotten into kind of a tangled mess — seemed like Cas had managed to preen his feathers everywhere else on his own, but couldn't quite reach the back of his own neck (which made sense, once Dean thought about it). And Sam and Dean scrambling up and down his neck yesterday, not to mention riding the flare and flailing around in the waves, probably hadn't helped. So Dean took his time, uncombing them all one by one and straightening them out.

It was only a few moments more till Cas's eyes had slid half-closed... and then three-quarters closed... and then ninety percent closed, his eyes open only the faintest crack. The purring was going nonstop now as Dean carded his way through one neck-plume after another.

I should do this for him every morning, Dean thought to himself. He obviously likes it.

Then he remembered they might not get another morning.

Well, I'll do it all I can right now, he amended.

By trial and error Dean soon discovered a sort of neck-scritching routine that involved pulling on a few long feathers to straighten them out, sleeking each one down individually with one hand, while simultaneously scratching around the feather-roots deeper down with his other hand. Cas was soon almost catatonic with bliss, his eyes totally closed now. His ears had flopped out sideways again, his big feathered front feet had gone completely loose, and he kept angling his head so far toward Dean
that Dean had to push back at Cas's heavy skull now and then to remind him not to roll over completely on top of Dean. The purring was now an incessant throaty rumble.

*Wonder if we could just stay here a while,* Dean thought, spreading his fingers wide to comb through a dozen plumes at once. Cas gave an actual shiver at this, all his feathers fluffing out so much that Dean couldn't help laughing a little. The sound of his own laugh actually took him by surprise; it seemed he hadn't laughed in quite a while.

"You look like the world's biggest pufferfish, Cas," Dean said. "Or the world's biggest porcupine. That's good, I hope?"

Cas gave a long, happy-sounding growl, still with all his feathers fluffed out.

"I'll take that as a yes," said Dean, and soon even the sleek feathers that lined Cas's wings had fluffed out too.

*We could just camp here for a few days,* Dean thought. *Stay here just a little bit. Have bonfires by the beach. I could sleep in Cas's feathers every night. We could gather berries or fish or something to eat, and there's water in the stream; we'd get by. At least for a few days.*

*More than one day with Cas...*

*The Darkness can wait just a little while longer, can't it?*

It was tempting.

It was very tempting.

But then Dean thought, *No.*

*I can't put this off. Cause... the Darkness'll get Cas.*

That had become very clear. The Darkness was going to gobble up the entire Sun sooner or later... which meant, it was going to gobble up Castiel too. Not to mention the Earth, and all the other planets as well.

*It'll get Cas. It'll get Sam, too. It'll get everyone.*

*I gotta stop it.*

*I gotta save them.*

*I gotta save them both. Cas and Sam both. Whatever I have to do. Whatever it takes.*

*Even if that means I don't survive myself.*

Dean finally managed to put the grim thoughts aside and just focus on Cas's feathers, and Cas's purring, and how contented Cas looked. There Castiel lay, an angel of the Lord, a great big dragon... with his feathers all fluffed out and his eyes closed and his ears all floppy, and one taloned foot twitching loosely at the air now and then. He looked more than a little ridiculous, actually... and totally adorable, and totally relaxed.

Dean glanced around once more at the great wings that were sprawled out so wide, and at the peaceful sandy shore and the little grasses, and then down at Cas's feathers again, the purring rumble vibrating through his hands, and he thought, *This is a perfect moment.*
This is absolutely perfect. Right here, right now. I have to memorize this. I have to soak it in.

Then he realized, with a start, If there's a Heaven for me, it'll be just like this.

And then there came a distant bugle call.

Cas gave a sharp snort, snapping his head up and jumping to his feet in such a fast, fluid move that he almost knocked Dean over. All Cas’s feathers had sleeked down instantly, and he suddenly was looking a lot less like a snoring pincushion and a lot more like a lethal flying machine, wings already poised for take-off as he scanned the sky. But Dean thought he could read, just from Cas’s expression, and the way he had his ears pointed forward, that there was no threat of imminent attack from above this time. Rather, Cas was looking for his friends.

Sure enough, three flying dots soon came into view. They drew closer, and closer, and got larger, and larger, and then in a great flurry of wind Balthazar and Anna were swooping overhead and Gabriel was landing in a big whirlwind of flapping and dust, Sam leaping off from his back and running over.

Balthazar and Anna didn't land at all — they just zoomed overhead like a pair of fighter jets and took off again, to start doing big circles much higher up. Patrolling, apparently. Gabriel and Cas were soon involved in a complex growly conversation while Sam ran over to Dean.

"The Darkness!" Sam called, out of breath. "A huge wall of it! We came back as soon as we saw it."

"What, like in California?" said Dean, running over to repack the remnants of their gear in the backpack.

"No, WAY bigger," said Sam, helping Dean shove the last things in the pack. "I mean, HUGE, Dean, great big wall of black like the end of the world, gotta be a thousand miles wide and I'm not even exaggerating. Bigger than the entire friggin' Earth! We gotta get moving, whether Cas is all charged up yet or not." He grabbed the pack and threw it on his back.

"Dammit," Dean said, reluctantly giving up on the sweet vision of camping by the stream with Cas. I got my one good moment, he thought, more than a little wistfully, and that is all I'm gonna get.

And now I gotta focus on: Save Sam and Cas.

Cas and Gabe seemed to have come to some arrangement, and Cas soon gave a rough bark toward Sam and Dean, nodding sharply toward his back. Dean turned to Sam and asked, "So, you riding with Gabe now?"

Sam shook his head, already trotting over to Cas as he explained over his shoulder, "Gabe was just giving me a ride for fun while you guys rested a bit. They seem to think we should stick together for the real battle. You and me both riding on Cas, I mean. Not sure if that's cause he's bigger or what. I think they have some plan to try to guard behind him, so that he can get us through to wherever he's going." Sam scrambled up the base of Cas's neck, one big foot stepping right on the glossy neck-plumes that Dean had just combed out.

"Watch the feathers!" Dean said, brushing some sand off the feathers and straightening out a misplaced plume. "Don't mess up his neck ruff!"
"Oh," said Sam. "Sorry. Didn't realize you were on neck-ruff duty now. You ready?" He reached a hand down toward Dean, and Dean managed to pull himself up without stepping on any neck-plumes.

They had barely gotten settled in the feather-saddles when Cas sprang into the air. Soon they were spiraling upwards, Cas's strong black wings beating the air powerfully on each side. Soon he'd outstripped the other three angels, climbing dizzyingly high.

It was exhilarating to be airborne again (Cas really seemed to have done wonders for the fear-of-flying), but when they got high enough to get a really clear view, Dean's heart sank.

Sam had said the Darkness-cloud was big, but seeing it firsthand was something else. There was a gigantic wall of smoke on the horizon that stretched in both directions as far as the eye could see. It seemed to be sweeping across the entire surface of the sun, turning everything in its path completely black. The smoke at the gate on Mount Shasta had been child's play in comparison; this was an wall of complete obliteration.

It took a moment to comprehend how it was moving: It was sweeping over the sun in a great curving arc, relentless, even swallowing up entire solar flares as it went. As the bases of the flares disappeared, the upper parts collapsed slowly, one huge shining ribbon after another crumbling down from the sky. And in the other direction, far, far ahead (ten thousand miles? A hundred thousand?) there was another thin line of dark across the horizon.

"Oh, hell," said Sam, who had spotted the same thing. "There's another wall of it ahead, see?"

But Dean had just realized something else. "It's the same wall," said Dean, looking all around. "Shit. Cas!" he called. "Cas, it's a circle! It's a huge circle. We're inside it. We're surrounded!" Cas gave a sharp bark of agreement and let out a deafening roar, his whole body vibrating with it, presumably trying to alert the other angels. The Darkness-smoke had already surrounded them completely. They were on an intact island of landscape (or sun-scape, rather) with Darkness all around. It was still a big circle, at least — hundreds of miles wide, by Dean's best estimate — but the Darkness had them penned. Could Cas fly over the top of it, maybe? Doubtful — it looked like it extended an extremely long way. And with the flares collapsing, Cas couldn't turn to the flare-riding option as he had yesterday.

And the circle was already shrinking.

How do I save Cas and Sam from THIS? thought Dean, tightening his hands on a couple fistfuls of sturdy feathers as Cas flattened his ears, wheeled away from the looming black wall, and shot toward the center of the circle.

A/N - wooo, action!

Sorry I have to stop here, but that's all I could get done with the tiny specks of free time I have at the moment. I had, like, 1/2 teaspoon of free time this week. It's gonna be serious crunch time at work right up till Jan 1st (this is all part of me trying to pull free of my current job) so chapters may continue to be every-other-week. Hope that's okay, and please keep checking in!

Thank you so much for reading my story, and as always, please let me know if there was something you liked.
A/N - Happy Friday! Thanks for not minding the every-other-week schedule - it's helped me get not one but THREE of my science papers done. Right up till midnight on Thanksgiving Eve I was working till 3am every night! One was submitted today, one will be submitted Monday, and the 3rd is in final circulation to co-authors. WHEW. I more paper and a book chapter still to go by Dec 31, but it's all in pretty good shape now. Thanks so much for your patience!

And finally I get to leave the multivariate ANOVAs and the Endnote citations behind, and return to Castiel and Sam and Dean... my absolute favorite kind of writing. :) I'm still going at a slower pace than usual but finally we get to a scene that I've had in mind for months: Cas and Gabriel and the others in full flight with the Darkness nipping right at their tails! Yipes! Here we go:

The wind howled past Dean's ears as Cas hurtled away from the wall of Darkness-smoke, the landscape shooting past in a blur beneath them. Cas seemed almost to flatten out as he picked up speed. He'd taken a laser-straight path aimed at the dead center of the wide circle of intact landscape that spread out ahead of them. This wasn't a zigzag chase, not like yesterday's' flight from Gog; this wasn't about agility at all, it seemed, but simply about sheer speed. Cas, and the three other angels flanking him, were just plain trying to outrace the Darkness.

Dean curled down as much as he could against the wind, adopting his "horse-jockey" position once more, with his nose almost down in Cas's feathers and a clump of feather-reins held tight in each hand. Sam shouted something from behind, but the wind was roaring so loudly past Dean's ears now that Dean could barely hear him.

"What?" called Dean, twisting around to look at him. But Sam was twisted around too, looking back, transfixed by something. Dean saw it too, and for one long moment he could only gape, staring back past Sam, and past Cas's long black tail, at the thing that was behind them now:

The end of the universe.

The Darkness.

It had already gotten closer, and it was huge. It must have been sweeping toward them with incredible speed, for it was barely a mile away now, a huge advancing wall of boiling black smoke that towered to the very skies. And it had grown, it seemed, somehow getting much, much taller. Even from a mile away it seemed to be reaching impossibly high, towering above them like some kind of unthinkably massive tsunami. Gabriel, who had taken a rear-guard position just a few wing-lengths behind Cas, seemed absolutely dwarfed in comparison. Gabriel really wasn't all that small at all (elephant-sized, Dean had to remind himself), but against that huge backdrop he looked tiny — a little feathered speck of green, against a gigantic roiling stormfront of black cloud that seemed to fill the whole world.

Dean craned his head back, peering up to the very top of that huge black wall. The flare they'd ridden yesterday was still just visible. Its base had been completely surrounded by Darkness-smoke now, but the arched silver top still stood proud, rearing up out of the sooty black smoke like a shining silver banner.

The arched silver top began to wobble.
It shuddered, thinned, and blew apart into a thousand drops of shining mist. They dissipated in the air high overhead. The flare was gone.

The Darkness rolled on. It had been sweeping across the vast lake as it approached, and soon its leading edge had almost reached the lakeshore where they’d been just moments ago. Only a little sliver of lake still remained, narrowing rapidly — and for some reason even the bit of water left in that sliver seemed to be flowing away too (disrupted by the Darkness, apparently).

A scant few seconds later the lake had vanished entirely, nothing left of it but a wide strip of brown mud.

For a moment more Dean could still pick out the lakeshore, though. He could still see the line of pale sand where they’d landed after battling the waves. And there was the little winding stream... there the flattened patch of grasses where Dean had slept in Cas's feathers.... there, the place where Dean had thought, just moments ago, while preening Cas's feathers in the sunlight, Castiel sprawled out blissfully under Dean's hands, Maybe I could stay here a while with Cas....

Just a few days with Cas.

Just a day or two...

The lakeshore, the grasses, the stream — it all disappeared, all of it, into the wall of black smoke.

When the Darkness ate up the stream, the land actually fractured, a huge fissure cracking wide open that extended far down below ground-level. The fissure yawned wider, and it became clear that the Darkness wasn’t just rolling across the surface of the Sun; it was extending down too, down below the surface, long tendrils of thick smoke worming their way down, eating their way through rock and earth effortlessly. The fissure gaped open, twisting and widening with a deep, almost sub-sonic groan. As it ripped wider, it extended forward — right under Castiel, who gave a huff of alarm and gained a little altitude. Dean peered down over Cas's shoulder and caught a glimpse of bright colors far below— round colored eggs, it seemed, nestled next to each other like jewels in a filigree of white.

In one “egg” was a glimpse of a mountain-range; in another a sunny beach. In a third something that looked like houses, or maybe a little town.

Each egg was a world of its own.

Worlds upon worlds, full of meadows and oceans and cities... peaceful forests.... beloved homes.

Thousands upon thousands of individual Heavens. Linked by a filigreed network of white corridors.

But tongues of Darkness-smoke were reaching down and snaking forward, wrapping around one egg-world after another. Something seemed to go catastrophically wrong with the structure that was holding the egg-worlds in place, and the eggs began to tumble around, a few shattering entirely. Dean caught one awful glimpse of tiny figures scrambling out of a little broken egg-world and trying to dash for cover. Some angels had burst out of the filigree-corridors as well, transitioning into their dragon-forms in a flash of an eye. They began darting around, trying to scoop up the little running figures

Cas hesitated a little, veering slightly downward. He was just starting to go into a shallow dive, clearly thinking of going down to try to help, when a vast flood of Darkness poured across the entire fissure, sweeping forward underneath Cas.

"Go, go, go!" called Dean. Cas gave a rough grunt, pulled out of his shallow dive and began
climbing as fast as he could. Below him, all the little Heavens popped, like so many soap bubbles, as the dark smoke swept over them. Soon they were lost to view, and below Cas's wings was nothing but black smoke.

Gabriel, still behind them but now a little bit higher, let out another of his trumpeting alarm-calls. Cas had soon regained his lost altitude, and all four angels got ahead of the Darkness-smoke, but Cas was breathing heavily now, tired from the rapid climb. Soon the three smaller angels had pulled a little in front.

Dean glanced back at Sam to find him looking very grim. Sam met Dean's eyes silently, and Dean stared back at him, wordless. What could they even do?

Sam said something. But the wind was howling so loud that Dean couldn't hear Sam at all. "What?" called Dean.

Sam pointed forward, toward Cas's head, and mouthed one word at Dean, carefully and slowly:

Pray.

Ah, yes. There was something they could do after all.

Dean prayed. And he knew Sam was praying too.

You can do it, Cas. thought Dean, turning to face front again, leaning his face down into Cas's feathers to try to focus his thoughts. You can do this.

Go, Cas. Go. Go. Go.

Maybe the prayer helped. Maybe the night of rest had helped too, or the "recharging:" maybe the neck-preening, even. Whatever the reason, Cas seemed to regain some energy, his wings whipping at the air in quick, shallow strokes. Soon his speed had really picked up, and he pulled up even with the smaller angels again.

"Go, Cas, go!" prayed Dean, now muttering the words out loud, right into Cas's feathers. "You're going like a goddam cheetah! Keep it up!" Then he corrected himself: "Wait — like a peregrine falcon! Fastest animal in the world, right? You're a falcon, Cas, look at you go!"

Then Dean corrected himself again, a faint grin coming to his face this time: "Wait. Like an Impala!" Because that's what Cas was. Cas was like the Impala! Unstoppable! Unbeatable! Crossing a continent in a single night... bounding forward, engine roaring, devouring the miles, carrying Sam and Dean wherever they needed to go. Nothing could catch the Impala. Nothing.

Dean's prayer had lapsed now into sort of a wordless image directed at Cas, a (somewhat illogical) image of Cas as a winged black Impala surging tirelessly forward. Illogical it may have been, but as Dean focused his whole mind on the idea, Cas gave a snort and a sudden burst of acceleration seemed to hit him — the sort of acceleration he'd had yesterday when riding the solar flare. The sort that seemed to mean that one of Dean's prayers had really hit home.

Soon Cas's wings were moving so fast they seemed just two black blurs on either side.
**Like the Impala**, Dean thought again, closing his eyes.

*You're my Baby, Cas.* (There was another surge of speed.)

Dean even leaned onto his right foot a little, for luck, pressing it down into Cas's back a little as if he could somehow ram an imaginary gas pedal to the floor. *Like the Impala! Nothing can stop you! You're my Baby! Go, Baby, GO!*

Another snort. Cas blazed forward. He was soon leading the three smaller dragons again; in fact, the other three rapidly rearranged to start drafting off of Cas's lead position. Soon Balthazar had positioned himself just off Cas's left wingtip, and Anna off Cas's right, with Gabriel just behind her. Cas somehow seemed to pull them all forward.

But, when Dean snuck a glance behind, it seemed the Darkness had accelerated too.

---

Dean kept up the Impala-prayer-image for as long as he could, his head buried down in Cas's feathers, with Sam hunkered down close behind him. Now and then Dean raised his head to try to get a glimpse ahead, but the wind was so strong that it was hard to even see anything. Cas had to be going at least seventy miles an hour by now, if not more, and whenever Dean peeked forward, his eyes were soon streaming with tears from the wild wind. It was hard even just to draw a real breath of air. Dean kept sneaking short glimpses forward, though, hoping that they would soon reach "the Stones," or whatever turned out to be at the center of the circle of open landscape.

But all Dean could make out from here was some kind of hazy patch of cloud or fog that still seemed dozens of miles off, visible only as a fuzzy white blob outlined against the far wall of the Darkness.

And then, on one of Dean's periodic glimpses ahead, he spotted something.

**Lines of light.**

Sparks and streams of light. Had they reached the Stones? But, no, they were nowhere near the center of the circle yet; the lines of light seemed to be emerging from a clump of forested hills that was quite close, only a mile or so ahead.

**Lightning, it looked like.**

As they got closer Dean realized it was an entire web of lightning bolts, all shooting up into the sky. The lightning bolts got denser and more frequent as they approached, soon forming almost a wall.

A wall that they were headed *directly* towards.

"Oh, that's not good," Dean said — or, tried to say, the wind still so strong that he could barely even speak.

"Cas!" Sam hollered from over Dean's shoulder. "Lightning! Up ahead! Look out!"

But Cas only gave a tiny nod. He had his ears pricked forward now, studying what was ahead of him, but he kept going straight. Straight toward the lightning.

"This is not good!" Sam hollered into Dean's ear. "What is that? Does Cas see it?"
"Don't know!" Dean yelled back to Sam. Dean shot another glance backwards. The three smaller dragons were still positioned just off Cas's wingtips, and all three seemed to be looking forward, their ears pricking up too. But they didn't stop flapping, and indeed they couldn't stop; the wall of Darkness was still so close behind them that it almost seemed that Dean could reach right out and touch it.

"He's gonna run right into the lightning!" said Sam, screaming into the wind.

"Don't know that he has much choice!" shouted Dean, gesturing back at the Darkness. "It's almost on us!"

Cas flew on, and all Dean and Sam could do was hang on. It looked like they were flying right into a gigantic illuminated spider-web now, a spider-web of electricity that stretched for miles to either side. Surely it was going to just incinerate them if they flew into it?

Sam tapped Dean's shoulder and pointed past Cas's right wing. Dean glanced over and saw that another hill-top, a few miles away from the dramatic lightning-web, seemed to be be surrounded by sparks of color that zinged through the air like fireworks, all in lines of bright blue and yellow. And in the other direction, beyond Cas's left wing, was an arrangement of no less than nine fat tornados, of all the things, all spaced out in a tidy formation almost like a set of gigantic bowling-pins.

Beyond that, at the next hill over, were some wobbling blue-and-white things that Dean slowly realized were seven huge waves of water. They were moving; Dean stared at them, baffled, and finally realized the waves of water weren't just "moving;" they were walking, pacing to and fro like animated water-giants. Each one was thousands of feet high.

The water-giants left huge muddy tracks as they walked; the tracks led back down the hills toward the fresh-water lake that had emptied so mysteriously just a few minutes earlier.

"What... the hell... are those?" Dean muttered. Cas let out an mm-mm sound, shaking his head as if to say, I have no idea. Cas had slowed again now, his head angling right and left as if he were trying to puzzle out what to do. As Dean sat up and peered farther around, he realized the strange weather phenomena were arranged in a big curving line. Lightning-bolts, blue-and-yellow fireworks, walking water-giants, the row of tornadoes — they all seemed arranged to form part of a gigantic circle that was positioned just inside the Darkness-smoke. A circle that was perfectly centered around the little white cloud blob in the middle.

"This is some serious-ass magic," Sam commented from behind Dean. "You think the Darkness is causing it? A trap for us, maybe?"

"If it's the Darkness, why isn't it all just... darkness?" pointed out Dean. He gestured at the wall of black smoke behind them. "Like that. What's with the lightning and water and all? Why isn't it just black smoke?"

"Hell if I know," said Sam.

A bark from Gabriel drew their attention, and they looked back to see that some advance tendrils of Darkness-smoke were almost licking at Gabriel's tail now. They had to keep going forward.

Cas was forced to pick up speed again as they drew closer to the lightning-web. Dean could feel him hesitating, though, and, watching his ears flick around as he looked from side to side, Dean realized Cas was trying to pick the safest course. Probably assessing whether he could zip between two of the water-giants, or past the tornadoes.
But Gabriel trumpeted again. Dean glanced back and found the Darkness was actually reaching out some long tendrils of dark smoke above Cas's back, almost reaching to Cas's wings — and to Sam! Dean turned forward again and screamed, "GO, Cas, it's ON US, GO, GO, we don't have time!"

Cas glanced back and gave a sharp snort of alarm; as he turned his head forward again he accelerated hard. Dean tried to get the flying-Impala image back in his head, in case that would help, and Cas went into almost a hyper-speed sprint of flapping, so fast now that Dean began to worry the wind might tear him and Sam right off of Cas's back. He felt Cas's feathers clamping down hard around his legs. Sam had grabbed on to Dean's waist again, muttering, "Holy shit!" into Dean's ear.

There was no way Cas could keep up this speed. Dean could only hang on, thinking, Go, Cas, go, go, go, as Cas hurtled directly at the vast wall of crackling lightning-bolts, which were so dense now that they formed almost a solid wall.

But they had no choice.

And then, as they drew closer, a neat round gap appeared in the web of lightning bolts. Cas saw it and angled toward it, letting out a throaty roar to the other angels. He gave one last burst of frantic flaps as they hurtled at the gap. It seemed tiny, too small, but at the last second Cas folded in his wings and shot into the lightning-wall like an arrow....

... and into what turned out to be a tunnel of lightning. Massive bolts of electricity crackled and sizzled around them. The very air seemed to have pressure; there was sensation of terrifying electrical potential all around them. Dean felt the hair stand up on the back of his neck, and even Cas's feathers began to stand on end, his whole back fluffing up and his neck-plumes sticking almost straight out into a fuzzball of static electricity. A glowing ball of light even appeared on one of Cas's wings, right near his alulas, buzzing and sparking. It didn't seem to burn his feathers, but just sat there, a buzzing ball of light a couple feet wide, like a strange passenger that had decided to hitch a ride. Cas flinched, snorting and flapping the wing hard as if to try to shake it off, but it seemed to cling to his feathers as if it were made of velcro. But a moment later, just as Cas emerged from the other side of the lightning-wall into clear air, the buzzing ball of light rolled silently down his wing, floated off his wing-tip and evaporated in mid-air.

And they were through. The wall of lightning was behind them. Gabriel, Anna and Balthazar shot through behind them.

"St. Elmo's fire!" Sam called out, looking back. "That was St. Elmo's fire! I never thought I'd see any! Look, Gabe's got one too." Gabriel was actually turning in somersaults in mid-air as he tried to shake his own weird little lightning-ball off of his left wing, snapping at it and growling. Cas finally veered back toward him and barked some kind of gust of hot air at the lightning-ball, and it disappeared.

The four dragons had to slow a little on the other side of the lightning, all of them seemingly a little out of breath. Dean (and Sam too probably) had been blown entirely out of mental "prayer-mode" by the encounter with the lightning-wall. Dean tried to recapture his flying-Impala image, but the lightning and tornados and water-giants all around were proving to be a bit too distracting. Not to mention the static-electricity shocks; at least half Cas's feathers were still fuzzy with static electricity, sticking out in all directions, and sparks were literally flying off his feathers, some of them sparking at Dean's hands whenever he readjusted his hold on Cas's feathers. Cas finally shook himself all over like a dog, several times, clearly trying to get his feathers settled down. He was still airborne, but he
(and the other three angels too) seemed to be only drifting along slowly; they all seemed to be having some real trouble getting up to speed again.

Dean glanced behind and realized they were out of time. The gigantic, mile-high tsunami of Darkness-smoke was on them. It was rolling right up to the lightning-wall.

Where it stopped dead.

Or rather, the lightning seemed to be zapping it into pieces. Darkness-smoke kept trying to push through, but the bits that managed to sneak past the lightning-bolts seemed fragmented and confused. They merely wafted around harmlessly and dissipated — mere bits of smoke now, it seemed, instead of an organized, destroying force.

On the right and the left, the blue-and-yellow fireworks and the tornados were having similar effects. Farther away the walking water-giants were doing a more direct attack, striding around slamming their big water limbs at the Darkness-smoke. The water-giants got a little smaller in the process, occasional sluices of water pulling free and raining down on the landscape below, but the Darkness had been stalled.

"What the..." muttered Dean. Could it be? Had the Darkness really been stopped?

Sam said, "It's a wall! Isn't it? It's a wall to hold the Darkness back?" Cas gave an uncertain grunt and banked his wings to go into a wide, slow circle, studying the lightning-wall. He was calling constantly to the other angels now, in a series of gruff roars and grunts, his ears flicking right and left constantly and his head angling around as he tried to figure out what was going on.

As Cas sailed around in his scouting circle, Dean glanced down past Cas's neck to the ground far below. And he spotted a tiny colored figure moving along a rocky ridge below the lightning.

It looked like... somebody dressed in red?

Somebody dressed in long flowing clothing of red. Long loinclothes and robes, almost. Somebody who was running around on the ridge below... running amazingly fast, it seemed, and swinging something that looked like....

"An... axe?" Dean said. Cas flicked an ear back and Dean said, "There's a guy down there — at ten o'clock, Cas, almost right under us — a guy with an axe. Wait, wait..." Dean (and Sam, and Cas) peered at the figure. "A double-headed axe," Dean added.

"And there's another guy over there, under the fireworks," Sam said, pointing over to the hill that seemed to be the center of the blue-and-yellow streaks of light. At three o'clock, Cas, about a mile out." Cas veered over toward Sam's sighting. Sam was right; there was another person there too, this one wearing....

Blue and yellow.

It was a combination of colors that seemed rather familiar.

In fact the guy's whole outfit seemed familiar. And his posture, and his dark skin; and then the man lifted one arm up toward the sky, the other elbow bent sharply back, in what Dean realized was a
classic archer's stance.

"Bow and arrow," said Dean. The man in blue-and-yellow loosed an arrow into the sky, and the arrow streamed a trail of blue-and-yellow fire behind it. The fireworks were arrows.

"OSHOSSI!" Sam and Dean yelled at the same moment, just as Cas let out his own roar of recognition.

"It's Oshossi!" Sam cried. "With his arrows! The fireworks are his arrows! Look, it's holding the Darkness back!"

"The other guy, the lightning guy, that's got to be Shango!" Sam added a second later, pointing back at the man with the double-headed axe. Cas was nodding as Sam explained to Dean, "Shango and his double-headed axe, he's the god of thunder and lightning, remember?"

"It's the orishas, Cas, it's the ORISHAS!!" yelled Dean. "They must've come to try to help!" Cas wheeled back toward the other angels, calling the news to them. Then he turned back to Oshossi and Shango and let out a positively ear-splitting roar. Crashes of thunder and lightning came back, the whole lightning-wall sparking, a shower of arrows shooting into the sky from Oshossi's mountain. Cas kept roaring (it was so loud it was making Dean's head ring), and the tornados bobbed and swung, and even watery blue giants bellowed and raised their hands, as the orishas greeted Castiel in return.

"Holy smokes, Dean, all the orishas, look, they're trying to hold the Darkness back," called Sam, "and, look, it's working! Look, look, there's lots of them! That's got to be Yemanja there with the ocean-giants, goddess of the sea, don't you think? Look, over there, that's rivers, rivers in the air, look at that woman underneath, that's got to be Oshun— they're all here!"

And indeed they were. Orishas were stationed on every mountaintop, dozens of them. They seemed positioned every few miles, most of them on the tops of the highest hills, scattered around a huge circle that must have been a hundred miles in diameter. And, it was clear now, they making a sort of a gigantic fence to keep the Darkness out — presumably to try to defend the mysterious white fog-blob in the center (the "Stones," or whatever it was).

Every orisha seemed to be organizing some kind of counterattack according to that orisha's particular skills: walls of wind from one mountain, animated rivers coiling around in the air at the next one. Cas had gained a little more altitude now as he surveyed the area (he was still roaring greeting after greeting) and as he got higher, even more orishas began to come into view. One hill was topped by a vortex that seemed composed of nothing but bits of straw; another seemed populated by an army of floating fishes. Cas swooped in a huge circle, apparently determined to greet all the nearby orishas personally, and when he glided back to Oshossi's hill, Dean even spotted a few dark dots racing along the mountain ridge just inside the lightning-wall, snapping at stray bits of Darkness as they went. It seemed even Oshossi's two wolves had come too.

"YEAH! OSHOSSI! YEAH! YEAH!" Sam was screaming by now. He slapped Dean's shoulder so enthusiastically Dean almost got knocked off his feather-saddle.

Dean didn't mind at all. "YOU ROCK!" he bellowed, waving one arm exuberantly at Oshossi. "YOU FUCKING ROCK, ORISHAS!"

And he was pretty sure he saw Oshossi flash a smile at them in return.

Then a strange ripple in the air caught Dean's eye, low down on another hilltop. There was a boom of thunder, and a doorway appeared. A thin dark figure stepped into view, with another orisha just
behind him. The dark figure raised one hand toward Cas, stepped back out of view and disappeared.

"Elegua!" said Dean, pointing down below. But Elegua was gone — only to reappear on another hilltop nearby, with another ripple and another boom.

"Elegua's opening gates!" said Sam. Cas veered over to the new gate, but Elegua had disappeared from that one too — and reappeared on the next hill over. Cas and Gabriel both followed, both of them snorting with excitement now.

Through some gates came orishas — it seemed Elegua was helping them hop from hill to hill to set up more defenses.

And then, through other gates, regular-looking people appeared. Dozens of people, all stepping through the gate single-file. All, incongruously, were wearing business suits.

"What the..." muttered Dean, but it began to make sense when the people in the suits began throwing their heads back and opening their mouths. Out of their mouths flew bright streamers of light that seemed to unfold, opening up and unfurling and twisting in a blink of an eye to become...

Feathered dragons.

"Angels!" said Dean. "Angels, Cas!" Cas gave a snort of fire this time, accompanied by a sort of body-wide flinch and a little flap. Gabriel, flying nearby, did almost exactly the same thing: a cough of fire and a flurry of startled little flaps. Surprised, Dean realized. They're surprised. This has startled them.

"New angels," Sam said. "With vessels. That's unusual, Cas?" Cas gave a whole series of emphatic nods (Dean interpreted that as "This is extremely unusual, Sam!") Cas was still staring at the new angels as Sam added, "Are these angels from inside the Sun? I mean, not just, um, dead angels like you? Sorry, you know what I mean — I mean, not angels that were stuck here on the outside, but the ones who've never died and who were just in Heaven like usual?"

Cas nodded again, letting out another snort of fire. He was flying in a tight circle now above the angel-gate (along with Gabriel, Anna and Balthazar, who were all wheeling around within a few wing-lengths of each other, all apparently fascinated by the new arrivals). Together they watched one new angel after another leap into the air. Dean felt a shaking under his feet and realized Cas was actually vibrating, shaking all over, all his muscles trembling. Some kind of intense emotion seemed to have come over him at the sight of his fellow angels appearing. But what emotion?

Fear?

Anger?

Excitement, maybe? Hope?

One of the new dragons had beautiful silver plumage, offset by an ebony-black belly, and this one soon veered over toward Cas and the others, flapping hard to get over to them. It was letting out snort after snort of fire, and as it came, it let out a roar that seemed more than a little alarming. The new dragon had its ears pricked forward, though, and its feet seemed relaxed, tucked up by the belly with the talons curled closed. Not really in attack-mode, Dean thought. Just excited, maybe? Excited like Cas?

The silver dragon roared again as it drew close; a roar of greeting, maybe? Maybe so, for Cas called back (also with his ears pricked forward). It swooped up next to him and actually gave Cas a quick nuzzle on the cheek, and he gave it one in return. A friend, then.
When the new dragon caught sight of Sam and Dean, it gave a start of surprise, and even a little burbling noise of greeting. Then it let out another snort of surprised fire at the sight of Gabriel, and Balthazar and Anna, and had to go over to greet them too.

Dean studied the plumage color: silver, with a black belly. Silver jacket? Or grey jacket? And a black shirt....Who's that?

He thought a moment. Friend of Cas's... was probably inside Heaven... Recognized me and Sam.

"Hannah," Dean guessed. Cas nodded.

"Aw," said Sam. "Hannah just found out Cas is alive. And that Gabriel is, too, and the others. Must be quite a surprise."

"It's a nice surprise," said Dean, patting Cas through his feathers. "Speaking from experience."

Several other angels flew up too, all in dragon form, to greet Castiel and the others. But they couldn't linger long; the orishas were still hard at work, but more tongues of Darkness-smoke were starting to push through the orisha's barriers. Cas soon let out a series of ear-splitting bellows. All the angels jumped in mid-flight and turned to look at him. More bellows followed from Cas, and soon all the new angels had veered away to help patrol the most thinly-defended areas, the areas between orisha-hills.

"Still a commander," commented Sam from behind. Dean could hear the smile in his voice. Cas only let out an odd little sigh. The other angels seemed to have listened to Cas, and soon he'd taken up a pattern of circling back and forth along the orisha-line, as if checking on everybody else. But Dean knew Cas was still pretty stunned at the arrival of the other angels; he could still feel Castiel trembling, under the feathers.

"The cavalry's here, huh, buddy?" Dean said at last, reaching down a hand and stroking Cas's back. Cas let out another rough sigh. It sounded both tired and grateful.

Dean added, "Must be nice to have your family show up after all, to help you out at last."

At that, Cas twisted his head sideways to give Dean a long look out of one narrowed blue eye. Something in Cas's expression made Dean wonder if there had been something particularly stupid about Dean's last comment. Then Cas gave another sigh, this one somewhat exasperated (or maybe it was a laugh?). He actually rolled his eyes, shook his head a little, and turned his head forward again.

"What did that mean?" Dean whispered over his shoulder to Sam.

Sam was laughing a little. He explained, "I think that meant, his family was already here." Cas nodded again and embarked on a long, complex burbling grumble of cryptic commentary that went on for nearly half a minute, looking back at Dean now and again with blue eyes that were now wide and sparkling. Whatever he was saying, he obviously had a lot of opinions on the subject.

Dean was about to say, Oh, your family was already here - right, Gabriel was here. And Balthazar and Anna. It wasn't till Cas twisted his head almost all the way around, apparently just in order to give Dean a quick lick on the forehead, that Dean realized what Castiel had really been saying.

Dean could only pat Cas's big velvety black nose in return, muttering, "Right. Yeah. Got it. Right back at you." Maybe it wasn't all that articulate a response, but Cas seemed to understand.
There weren't an infinite number of angels, of course; just a few dozen, in fact. Cas seemed to be trying to reposition them here and there, redeploying them where they were most needed, but even so the Darkness smoke-streamers were sneaking through with increasing frequency.

And then a red streak flashed across the sky, parallel to the wall of Darkness. It seemed to be carrying some kind of fiery sonic boom with it, some great compression of air that pushed the Darkness-smoke back and threw it into disarray. Cas, and the other angels, all swung in mid-air to stare at it. The red streak wheeled around and made another wild pass, streaking across a mile of sky in mere moments, with another burst of wind that again blew the Darkness back. The red streak paused for a moment; it was a dragon.

A red dragon.

"It's Anna!" said Dean. "Jesus. Is that a sonic boom? Or has she supercharged her fire or something?"

"She's carrying something," said Sam. Dean squinted, and the next time the red streak paused, he saw that Sam was right: there was a tiny figure on Anna's back, scarves of bright yellow trailing in the air behind her.

Sam said, "Yansa! It's got to be Yansa!"

"Who the hell is that?"

"Orisha of the wind!" said Sam. "I think she made the tornadoes. And I think some of the lightning was hers too. She controls air. Oh, I get it, Anna's flying Yansa around so Yansa can do, like, moving wind-walls. Jeez, look at them go!" Even as he spoke Anna started another tremendously fast dive across the sky, accelerating into a red blur. A sonic-boom-like foomp sound reached their ears a moment later, and a pressure blast rippled across the wall of Darkness-smoke, a blast of wind that must have been going a thousand miles an hour.

Balthazar, not too far off Cas's wingtips, let out a ringing cry and swooped down toward Oshossi. A moment later Balthazar was charging back up into the air again, now with Oshossi standing on him, both feet spread wide Balthazar's back, bow and arrow at the ready.

"Show-off," Dean muttered. "He's standing up."

"Yeah, no feather-seatbelts for him," said Sam. "No fair."

Balthazar flew up high near the lightning-wall, Oshossi somehow magically keeping his feet, and then Balthazar copied Anna's strategy, swooping down parallel to the Darkness smoke in a blistering fast dive. Balthazar tucked his wings in too (maybe getting them safely out of reach of Oshossi's arrows) and Oshossi let loose a virtual storm of blue-and-yellow arrow-bolts, peppering the Darkness for the whole length of the dive and fragmenting all the tongues of Darkness-smoke that were trying to sneak through.

"Orishas and angels!" Sam said. "Killer combo."

In another direction now there was a green streak across the sky that seemed to warp the very fabric of reality as it went, some kind of knot in the air forming that swallowed the Darkness down.

"Gabriel picked up Elegua!" Dean said. "Holy shit, this really is the All-Stars. Oh man. Actually
Elegua could eat him alive. Hope Gabriel's up to that.

Sam said, "If anybody can hold his own against Elegua, it's Gabe."

"Assuming Gabe doesn't piss him off instantly with some stupid joke," said Dean.

"Yeah, that's definitely a possibility," Sam said. "Maybe keep your mouth shut for once, Gabe." Sam fell silent, and when Dean glanced back he found that Sam's lips were moving silently as he watched Gabriel and Elegua soar toward the Darkness. Sam gave Dean a sheepish smile. "Just sending out a prayer," he explained. "Can't hurt."

With Gabriel now carrying Elegua, Balthazar carrying Oshossi and Anna carrying Yansa, the orisha-dragon combination was proving formidable. Castiel was soon bellowing out some kind of announcement, and soon all the other angels (in their dragon forms) seemed to have gotten the idea and were swooping down to pluck up the other orishas as well. Within minutes the sky was peppered with colorful missiles charging from side-to-side across the sky.

And the Darkness was halted. It wasn't beaten back, but neither was it advancing. It stood still all around them, a vast vertical wall of jet-black storm-cloud, with the angels and orishas defending a huge circle of clear air in the middle. Far, far ahead, hundreds of miles away, Dean could see the far wall of the circle of Darkness-smoke, with yet more angels in the distance holding that wall back too.

*Like we're in the eye of a hurricane*, Dean thought. *Hurricane on all sides, but clear air in the middle.*

"But they're just holding it back," Dean said to Sam, the realization dawning on him slowly. "They're not beating it. They're still just holding it back temporarily. What are they gonna do to actually stop it? They can't keep this up forever."

"They're just buying us time," said Sam. "Just time. It's still up to us to stop it for good." Cas flicked his ears back toward Sam and nodded.

And then Cas changed course. He gave one last call to the other angels, spread his wings wide, wheeled away from the Darkness entirely, and put the dramatic battle at their back. And he began flapping again, a steady even rhythm. He was heading straight to the center again. To the little patch of white fog, and whatever lay within it.

*Does it have to be us?* Dean almost said. *Can't someone else do it?*

But Cas clearly felt he had to be the one to fly to the mysterious spot at the center.

And if Cas felt he had to go there, Dean would go with him. Of course. Obviously.

Gabriel let out a bugling cry behind them, and many other distant calls sounded too. By now Dean could pick out some of the voices. He recognized Balthazar and Anna, and was pretty sure he heard Hannah as well.

Cas called back — a series of loud throaty calls that sounded almost mournful. But he kept flying forward. Dean knew it was a goodbye.

"Your family's still with you, Cas," murmured Dean, stroking Cas's warm velvety skin again through the feathers. "We're with you all the way." Cas gave a long, slow sigh, and Dean felt the faint vibration of a purr under his hands as Castiel flew on.
A/N - wooo action chapter!

Just in case it wasn't clear: In my universe, Hannah never died. :)

The next chapter will be more personal - Cas and Sam and Dean have to continue on alone from here. Just Team Free Will against the universe. Wish them luck. BTW, I'm going to try to see if I can return to every-week updates. (that may not work out, so don't hold me to it) Also, next Friday I will be on a plane across the country and I'm not sure of my wi-fi access that day. I will try to at least update this A/N to let you know when the next chapter is coming.

We only have a few more chapters to go, by the way (I think 3). Probably it'll be wrapped up by the new year.

Hope you enjoyed this! Please drop a line if there was something you liked. Thank you for reading.
The Stones

The raucous sounds of the battle began to fade as they flew away. Yansa's sonic booms, the crackle of Shango's lightning, the roars of the water-giants, the dramatic fire-bolts of Oshossi's arrows, even the calls of the other angels; it all began to recede into the distance behind them.

The scene ahead seemed oddly peaceful in contrast, almost ethereal. Rolling hills of green trees and fields of flowers flowed past below as Cas flew straight toward the little white patch of fog.

The fog grew slowly larger ahead of them. Dean studied it, trying to assess how big it actually was. A couple miles across, maybe?

What were they in for, exactly? Could they just fly right into it?

What, exactly, was hidden inside?

It looked almost innocuous — just a quiet little patch of clean white fog. From here it seemed nowhere near as alarming as the turbulent, roiling wall of Darkness-smoke that they'd left behind. Nonetheless there was something eerie about the white fog, the way it hung in the air ahead of them, so still and quiet. For a while Dean couldn't take his eyes off it.

Then a flash of motion on the right side caught his attention. Something else was nearing the edge of the fog. Dean squinted at it. It looked like a small flapping thing.

"Hey," said Sam, tapping Dean's shoulder and pointing at the little moving thing. "See that? Is that another angel?"

They peered at it. Cas turned his head toward it too, and he stopped flapping momentarily and went into a brief glide as he studied the little flapping dot. After a moment he gave a short nod to Dean and Sam (apparently confirming that it was an angel) and then let out such a thunderous bellow toward the other angel, his whole body shaking with the noise, that both Dean and Sam had to clap their hands over their ears.

"Jeez, give us some warning, Cas," said Dean, lowering his hands cautiously. Cas glanced back at him, looking only slightly apologetic, before refocusing his attention on the distant angel far ahead.

A moment later it called back to Cas, its voice faint and tinny in the distance.

Then the other angel soared on into the fog, vanishing into the whiteness.

A few other faint calls sounded from the left side of the fog too. "There's another one," said Sam. Indeed, a couple other angels were approaching from the other side—coming from yet another part of the circle, it seemed, where presumably other battles were raging, other orishas helping to hold the Darkness back.

"They're gonna beat us there," Sam said. "They'll get to the center before us."

Cas made a soft little hrm noise, his shoulders shrugging slightly under Dean's feet.

Dean was a little ashamed to find that he felt a distinct surge of relief at this idea. "Maybe we and Cas, and Sam, can just go home? Maybe someone else can do it?"
Whatever "it" was.

But somehow Dean knew they had to keep going. And Castiel didn't even hesitate; he just kept flying.

It would be another fifteen minutes or so, by Dean's best estimate, before they reached the border of the fog. Dean found himself enjoying the oddly peaceful interlude as Cas flew forward, high over the flowering meadows and the leafy green trees. Neither Sam nor Cas seemed to be in a talking mood either, and Dean let the silence stretch out. The steady motion of Cas's wingbeats, the soft breeze in his face, and the warmth of Cas's back were surprisingly soothing.

One more good moment, thought Dean. After the battle behind, especially, each rare moment of peace seemed precious. One more good moment. Soak it up. Remember it.

Dean worked one hand down into Cas's feathers and stroked Cas's warm skin. The familiar faint rumble of a purr shook Dean's feet slightly.

Then Sam said in Dean's ear, whispering very quietly, "So... I'm assuming this is the area where Cas said something about, angels fray apart here? Where Gabriel got killed a couple times?"

The purr stopped.

"Hey, I was trying to ignore that," Dean muttered over his shoulder. "Thanks for breaking the mood."

"But what are we gonna do?" Sam whispered, even more quietly now. "Did Cas tell you anything more about this place? What happened to him here? What're we gonna do?"

"No idea," Dean whispered back to Sam. "We'll just have to wing it." At that Cas let out a series of little snorts, each one accompanied by a little shower of fiery sparks that flew out of his mouth. Wing it... oh, right, thought Dean.

Sam said, his voice back at a normal volume, "Pretty sure that's dragon-laughter. Guess you heard me?" Cas nodded, still snorting sparks.

"Cas... " Dean ventured. "So, since you're eavesdropping anyway, what exactly happens in this fog? What happened to Gabe? What happened to you here before?"

Cas an exaggerated shrug, tipping his head and drawing his shoulders up high. He even turned his front feet palms-up (or talons-up, rather) in an almost comical copy of a human spreading his hands wide. Dean knew what he must be saying: I don't remember. I don't know.

"Okay then... winging it sounds like a plan, then," said Sam.

Cas flew on. He seemed to be feeling pretty good, despite the exertions of the battle earlier, for his flight path was straight and smooth and his wingbeats still steady. Soon it was just a few miles to the
fog... then a mile... then half a mile. Thin wisps of haze began to float in the air around them as they approached the thickest part of the fog, which hung ahead of them like a blank white wall.

A chill began to settle over the landscape as the wisps of mist grew denser. The ever-present sunlight dimmed a little. The vegetation below had changed, too; the fields of flowers had stopped, and there were no more leafy green trees. Instead, below them now was a flat landscape of sparse, short dark evergreens that were draped with pale green moss, all dotted haphazardly around what seemed to be an endless series of hundreds of little ponds.

*Or is it all one giant pond with hundreds of little islands?* thought Dean. It was hard to say where the water ended and the land began.

Here and there, little round hills broke above the water's edge, and on each hill lay a cluster of old ruins — the same sort of ruins they'd seen in the days before, on the silver plains and in the forest where Cas had first healed Sam's burns. Rubble piles of dark grey stone.

"The Stones?" said Sam. Cas shook his head, adding a growly rumble of cryptic commentary.

"That's *some* stones," translated Dean, "but not *the* Stones." Cas nodded.

They flew almost directly over one of the little hills, and Dean and Sam peered down at the ruins past one of Cas's wings. The stones seemed ancient, jumbled in heaps with their edges long worn smooth, coated with multicolored lichen and edged with moss. It was impossible to tell what sort of structure it might once have been. More ruins lay to the right, and the left, some of them on long curved ridges that were barely above water level.

"Do you think this could've all been one building once?" said Sam, pointing out some of the other ruins. "In, like, gigantic circles maybe? Look at those ridges. Is that natural or are those... polygons or something?"

"No idea," said Dean, glancing around. But Sam had a point; the ridges and hills almost looked like a gigantic blueprint, as if maybe some enormous structure here had collapsed, or eroded, or been flooded, long ago. It seemed that all that was left now, eons later, was this lonely moss-covered swamp, with the white mists hanging low around, and just the few clumps of remaining stones here and there. Maybe they were all that was left of the foundations of long-ago battlements and towers.

It occurred to Dean then that they seemed to be flying above the site of some ancient, long-ago disaster that must have destroyed everything in view.

"Got a great sort of Mount Doom feel, doesn't it?" remarked Dean, determined not to let the eerie atmosphere rattle him. "Or Winterfell or something?"

Sam gave a faint laugh and responded, "I'm keeping an eye out for Rodents of Unusual Size, myself." But he sounded a little unsettled too.

The mist grew thicker. Just before Cas seemed about to plunge into the thickest part of it, he hesitated. His steady flapping faltered, and he swooped a little lower, inspecting the misty ground beneath him. He glanced at Dean, slowed a little, inspected the ground again, veered toward a small patch of stone ruins, turned his head to the other side to glance at Sam, looked at the ruins again, and began to bank in a little circle around the ruins he'd picked out.

Dean could sense, by the way Cas was flaring his wings to brake, that he was about to land.

*He's found a landing spot,* Dean thought. *And I think I know why.*
"Nope, forget it, Cas," said Dean. "Not gonna work. We're not gonna get off your back."

Cas flinched a little and straightened out, looking back at Dean in surprise.

"Abort landing," Dean said. "Don't even bother trying another pass. Just keep going. We're not getting off. We're staying with you. We've already been through this."

Cas huffed at him and turned his head farther sideways, studying Dean with one big blue eye. The eye narrowed, and Dean thought, *This is where, if he were human, he'd start frowning at me and he'd start to argue and he'd say something like, "Dean, this is unwise—"

Cas's feathery black face scrunched up in a frown, and he let out a complaining growl that sounded so much like "Dean, this is unwise" that Dean almost burst out laughing.

"Cas, you gonna let those other angels go on without you?" said Dean. "The ones ahead of us? You gonna let them do this thing all on their own? You gonna let them do that?"

Cas shook his big black head vigorously, adding an affronted-sounding series of snorts (complete with gust of flame). Dean translated it in his head as: "That's not what I was going to do!"

"You're not stopping, right? You're going on?" said Dean. Cas nodded, so Dean said, "Then we're coming with you."

Sam agreed, from behind, "There's absolutely no way we're letting you do this alone."

"Especially not with that angels-fraying thing," said Dean. "You're not ditching us."

Cas turned his head even farther around, then, to give a good long stare to both Dean and Sam. Finally he gave an almost sad-sounding little whine.

"That was an excellent puppy noise," Sam said cheerily from the back.

"Yep," Dean agreed. "Super pathetic. But we are not leaving you, Cas. Yeah, yeah, it's our last chance to get off the bus — we understand, and I appreciate you giving us a look at one last bus stop. But no way, we're staying on the bus. If you're going into the weird white fog, we're going into the weird white fog with you. Whatever it is." He reached a hand down to Cas's back and gave him a little rub through the feathers, and he added, more quietly, "We don't want to stay behind, Cas. Damn the torpedoes."

"...Full speed ahead," finished Sam.

Cas gazed at them both for a few more moments, his head twisted around to look at them both. At last he gave a slow nod. With a little sigh he straightened out his flight path and flew on.

The fog closed around them.

---

A hush fell. The distant sounds of battle were long gone; the only sound now was the soft, steady *whup, whup, whup* of Cas's wings.

Thick skeins of fog hung all around. The ground below had disappeared. Just a field of white hung below them, with only the occasional thin tree-top visible now and then, far below, each tree-top...
sailing past like a tiny boat in an all-white sea.

Cas kept flying straight and strong. *Whup, whup, whup,* went his wings. Dean could feel his increasing tension, though — the muscles of Cas's back had started knotting up under Dean's feet as soon as they'd entered the fog. Soon Cas felt as wired up, and as on edge, as he had during the battle. Dean worked one hand through the feathers again to keep one hand in contact with Cas's skin. Cas gave a grateful-sounding *mmm* sound.

"Seems okay, don't you think?" whispered Sam after about a minute of flight.

"So far so good," whispered Dean back. But just as Dean was whispering to Sam, "He seems a little tense," Cas gave an uneven flap that veered him slightly sideways.

He straightened out. But a moment later it happened again, both wings hesitating slightly, the usual steady flapping rhythm stalling briefly, and again he veered a bit sideways.

Then he quit flapping entirely for a moment, going into a short glide and sinking a little lower.

"What's up, buddy?" Dean called to him.

Cas made no sound in return.

"Cas?" said Sam. "All good?"

Cas did not turn his head to either of them.

"Cas?" said Dean. He scratched Cas through the feathers again. "Hey, you listening?"

No reply from Castiel. Then both of Cas's ears flattened tightly down to his neck, and he let out a soft growl.

"Cas?" said Sam. "You spot something?"

"You okay?" said Dean. *Still* no response, and Dean began to get worried. He called a little more loudly, "Cas... hey, Cas, are you hearing us?"

Again Cas said nothing. His flapping grew ever slower, and more sporadic, till he was just doing one or two flaps at a time with long glides in between. And then the *whup's* stopped entirely as Cas braced his wings stiffly out, both wings tilted up and locked into a V-shape, as if he were trying to get into the most stable possible position for a glide of unknown length over unknown terrain. Dean caught a glimpse of Cas's front feet and realized Cas had splayed all four feet out, his talons spread out too as if he were about to land — even though he was still high above the tree-tops.

"Emergency crash position?" muttered Sam, at Dean's ear.

"But we're nowhere near the ground," whispered Dean back. "What's he worried about?"

Cas gave a tense-sounding moan. And then one of the puppy whimpers, and this time the puppy-whimper wasn't funny at all.

"CAS!" Dean called, loudly now. "CASTIEL, talk to me, you okay?"

A nervous snort from Cas, then a burst of hurried, lurching flapping, and then he locked back into his stiff-winged sail.

"He doesn't seem tired," whispered Sam. "It's not like yesterday. It's more like he's... dizzy, maybe?"
"Disoriented?"

"Think he's flying blind," muttered Dean back, and again he yelled "CAS!" as loudly as he could, really alarmed now. "Cas, just keep flying, you gotta get out of this fog—"

Sam hissed from behind him, "Dean, his feathers! His wings, look!"

Dean glanced over at Cas's wings and gasped.

The golden tips of all of the Cas's flight-feathers were shining. All of the big feathers on his wings, all of them, were glowing.

His back-feathers began to shine too, and his neck-plumes. Dean and Sam both flinched, looking down around them as every feather around their feather-saddles began to glow. The light seemed to center at the golden tips of the feathers... but somehow the golden tips seemed to be turning bright white.

There was a particularly long neck-plume that ended just in front of Dean's hands, and he leaned a little closer to study it. It turned out the golden feather-tip wasn't changing color; rather, a silver dot of light was forming at the end of the golden feather-tip. Even as he watched, the dot seemed to grow, expanding slowly into a blob about two inches across.

Then the end of the feather began to flutter in the wind. All around, all of Cas's feathers were fluttering strangely. Every feather now seemed to have a fat glowing silver blob attached to the end of the golden tip, and all of the blobs were moving oddly in the wind. Most of the blobs were all-silver, but a rare few were streaked with gold.

"Cas!" Dean called. "Your feathers! Something's happening to your feathers!" But it seemed clear by now that Cas couldn't hear him — or maybe couldn't understand him anymore.

"Are they falling off?" said Sam, studying the wing-feathers. "What do we do? What's happening?"

"I don't know!" said Dean. He peered again at the neck-plume, looking at the flattened silver blob at the end. It was growing, changing shape slightly. It was almost a butterfly shape now....

Wait. It wasn't just a butterfly shape. It was a butterfly.

A silver butterfly.

There was a silver butterfly growing right out of the feather-tip.

A moment later the butterfly simply came loose from the feather and embarked on its own wobbly flight, flapping its wings slowly and lofting up into the air just a few inches from Dean's chest. Cas was gliding so slowly now that the butterfly kept up with his flight speed with no problem, but Cas gave a distinctly frightened-sounding moan as it came loose. The butterfly gave a couple more uneven flaps and careened right into Dean. It landed on the sleeve of Dean's jacket and settled there, batting its wings lazily; Dean stared at it, baffled.

"What the hell..." Sam was saying from behind him. "Dean, there's these butterflies—Look, there's, like three of them. No, look, more, they're all over! Dean, there's lots—"

"Grab 'em," Dean ordered. He closed one hand lightly around the butterfly on his sleeve. It stirred faintly in his grasp, but seemed unbothered. It was warm to the touch. "Grab 'em all. Get hold of them."
"What? Why?"

"They're bits of Cas's grace," Dean said. It seemed clear that these must be the same grace-butterflies that had been surrounding Cas in the mountain-dreams. "Saw 'em in my dreams," Dean explained. "He needs them. Don't let them get away." Another silver butterfly was drifting out of the end of a nearby neck-plume; Cas gave another pathetic puppy-whimper as it came loose, and Dean snatched up the new butterfly too. "His grace, and some of his memories, I think," Dean added. "That's why he can't talk to us, I think, he must be totally confused, he probably isn't even sure who we are or where he is — whoa, get that one! Grab 'em all."

"Oh, shit," he heard Sam mutter. "So this is why the angels can't get through... That's what Cas meant by fraying apart. He meant, like, literally. Damn."

"Hell of a way to keep angels out of an area," said Dean, glancing around at the strange white fog — a fog that, it seemed clear now, was somehow pulling grace right out of Cas's feathers.

"Kind of clever," Sam said. "I mean, clever because it blows the angels right back into pieces, like they were when they first got here. Like when they first got killed. Oh, one's coming loose, look—" Dean felt Sam shifting around behind, reaching off his feather-saddle to grab a butterfly that was drifting over Cas's back a couple feet away. "I got it! Whoa, it's warm. There's another—" Sam made another lunge. "Got it."

"Cas, Cas, Cas, hang on, we're getting them, we're getting your butterflies," said Dean. "I got two of them. Sam got a couple too. Just keep going. Keep flapping, Cas, you can do this. But go slow."

One butterfly after another came loose. Thankfully the butterflies seemed to be trying to stay near Castiel, hovering around him in a loose little cloud, a few of them even landing and walking along his feathers. A lot of them seemed drawn, oddly, to Dean, and some to Sam as well. They gathered them up as best they could, and soon had dozens in their hands.

"These are his memories?" Sam said. Dean glanced over his shoulder to see Sam looking down at a nearly basketball-sized blob of fluttering silver butterflies that had accumulated in his lap. Sam asked, "His memories and his power?"

"Think so," Dean said, staring down at the two fistfuls of the lovely little glowing things that were in his own hands. "Something like that. Not all his memories, I think..." He remembered how the baby parrot had crawled over to him even before it had had any grace-butterflies; Cas had somehow recognized Dean even when Cas had been at his very weakest. "It's not all his memories, but some, I think. And definitely a lot of his power. Enough so he's probably feeling really messed up right around now." He tried to give Cas another hurried pat with one hand without losing any butterflies. "Cas, you hang in there. Keep flapping." Cas gave a brief, uneven series of lurching flaps; he was certainly trying, but soon he lapsed back into the V-shape and went into a wobbly, veering glide, feet still spread wide.

"They're not actually butterflies," said Sam. "They're not insects. They don't have the right sort of legs—"

"Yeah, yeah, they're like, butterfly-shaped grace blobs, close enough. There's more, they're spreading out — look at those ones, we gotta get them," Dean frowned at a dozen or so butterflies that had drifted a little too far away. "Hey. I got an idea. Try praying."

Sam and Dean both focused on prayers, Dean working on the "flying-Impala" image again. At once all the butterflies began flapping excitedly, careening around Castiel in wild circles, and they all shone a little brighter. But Cas didn't seem reassured at all, and his wobbly, frightened glide didn't get
any steadier. And though Dean and Sam snatched up a few more butterflies, the ones they were 
already holding seemed to almost buzz with excitement - so much so that it was getting hard to hold 
them.

"Damn, I think the butterflies are picking up my prayers, but Cas isn't!" said Dean. "Stop praying. 
That's not helping. Dammit." Several of the butterflies were almost wriggling out of Dean's hands 
now, apparently so excited by the flying-Impala imagery that they couldn't keep still. Soon they were 
jumping out of his hands almost like popcorn. "They're getting loose!" Dean said, trying to keep hold 
of a dozen or so with one hand while snatching up the escapees with the other.

"I'm sticking them in the backpack," said Sam. There was some wriggling around behind Dean and a 
snick as Sam snapped open the clasp on the backpack's top flap. A moment later Sam shoved the 
backpack up to Dean's side, and Dean managed to stuff his handfuls of butterflies inside.

Soon they had the majority of the butterflies safely corralled in the backpack.

Dean inched the flap open to take a cautious peek inside. There were at least forty butterflies in there 
now. They were starting to calm down slightly since the Impala-prayer, and most were now 
clambering cheerily over each other, but a few overly enthusiastic ones were still bouncing around 
the inside of the pack like little ping-pong balls.

"What if their wings get squished?" said Dean, peering down inside with one eye.

"They don't squish very easy," reported Sam, taking the backpack back. "Like I was saying, they're 
not normal butterflies. I think we can stuff lots more in there actually. Here, wait, I got a few more, 
let me put them in." There was still a loose cloud of butterflies floating around Castiel, and Dean and 
Sam continued snatching more butterflies out of the air, dozens of them, and cramming them all in 
Sam's backpack.

Then a gold butterfly wobbled past.

"Shit!" Dean said, making such a lunge after it that he almost fell right off Cas's back. He couldn't 
reach it. Dean said, "We need the gold one!" He tried again, but missed.

"Why? What is it?"

"I don't know!" said Dean, eyeing the gold butterfly. It was drifting away now, off to the left. "I 
don't know, gold's important somehow, I think it came from his alulas or something. We gotta get it!"
It had never been clear what the golden alulas meant, but Dean felt certain that gold, whether for 
feathers or for grace-butterflies, must be important. But the golden butterfly was drifting farther out of 
reach. Cas gave an almost desperate moan as the golden butterfly fluttered farther away. "C'mere, 
buttery...." said Dean, stretching out one hand hopelessly. "Come to me."

To his surprise, the golden butterfly veered around in a neat circle and flew directly to Dean.

Dean snatched it up and stuffed it in the backpack.

They flew on, Sam clutching the backpack tightly while they both scooped up more butterflies out of 
the air, occasionally enticing them within reach with careful use of prayers or, for the gold ones, by 
means of Dean simply asking them to come closer. Soon they'd gotten virtually all of them (or all that
they could find). The whole backpack was shining with light now, with beams of silver light (and some shafts of gold) shining through the seams. The butterflies seemed safely contained, although they now seemed to be bouncing around so much in there that it was taking Sam some effort just to hold the backpack still.

"Backpack of grace," Dean said. "Do not drop that, Sam."

"Not planning on it," said Sam. "Unless it bounces me right off Cas's back."

Cas had been slowing further and further through the whole process. Sam and Dean had retrieved virtually all the butterflies now, but Cas still seemed unable to fly— or too disoriented or dizzy to attempt it, maybe. His wings had been stretched up in the stiff V-shape for a quite a while. And Dean could feel him shaking, trembling under their feet. He knew, somehow, that despite Sam and Dean grabbing all the butterflies, Cas was still totally disoriented and badly frightened.

And now Cas had slowed so much that he began losing altitude.

"We gotta get him moving," Sam said. "Cas? Cas, can you fly? Try flapping, can you flap?"

But Cas still did not respond. They sank lower.

*Disoriented, frightened, nearly powerless now...* Dean thought. Cas had never fully described what it felt like to lose one's grace, but from a few stray comments that he'd dropped here and there, Dean had gotten the impression that it was almost a paralyzing sensation. Terrifying and disorienting. *He can probably barely hear me,* thought Dean. *How can I get him to hear me? How can I calm him down?*

Cas continued to glide down, his feet splayed out again, his wings frozen. Treetops began to come into view below. They were descending fast. *He'll probably land fine,* thought Dean, *But then we'll never get out of there. We'll be stuck in the swamp on foot in the fog. And Cas'll never find his way out.*

*We have to get him flying again.*

"Sing to him," Sam suggested.

"What?"

"He said your singing helped him before, the one time he came here before, didn't he?"

"Oh, jeez, right!" said Dean. Of course! How had he forgotten this?

It was a great idea. Except that Dean suddenly couldn't seem to remember any songs at all.

"I can't remember anything!" he said, racking his brain to try to remember even one song. "What do I sing to a dragon?" But as he said the word "dragon," one song did pop to mind — and, in fact, it was even the song Cas had said he'd heard once before, when he'd been flying in the fog. Dean said, "Oh, wait. Okay. Don't laugh but —"

He cleared his throat.

"Puff, the magic ... uh... dragon..." began Dean, singing a little slowly, feeling very uncertain. It sounded absurd, and Dean broke it off almost instantly with "Oh, hell, I can't sing for shit, Sam. Without the guitar this isn't going to work—"
But one of Cas's ears began to swivel, till it was pointing back at Dean.

"Go on," hissed Sam. "Go on!"

Dean took a breath. "Um. Lived by the seaaaaa..."

The other ear swiveled back. Cas was still wobbling through his uneven, slow, paper-airplane glide, still gliding down and still tense and confused, but both his ears were now pointed back at Dean.

"It's working," Sam whispered. "Whole thing. Start over."

Dean took a bigger breath and started over:

"PUFF the magic draaaa-gooon," sang Dean, trying to ignore how bad he knew he must sound. He knew he was not really a good singer; would the song even be recognizable to Castiel? Dean went on, as loudly as he could. "Lived by the seaaaaaa. And frolicked in the autumn mist, in a land called Honaleeeeee...."

Dean couldn't remember the next verse, so he repeated the chorus again, nudging an elbow back at Sam for assistance. Thankfully, Sam joined in too, adding some welcome volume (and maybe a bit more singing quality, as well).

Their voices rang out over the silent dark treetops through the fog. The mist seemed to swallow up their little song completely; it might have been the only sound in the universe. But they sang with all their heart.

"Puff the magic draaaa-gon," Dean sang with Sam, "lived by the seeeeeee, And frolicked in the autumn mist— whoa!"

Cas's wings had done one slow flap.

"Don't stop," whispered Sam. "In a land called Ho-na-leeeee!"

Cas flapped his wings again.

"How does the first verse go?" whispered Sam.

This time the words floated up out of Dean's memory. Oh yeah... it was the verse about the little kid who had been Puff's friend.

"Little Jackie Paaaper," sang Dean, "loved that rascal Puff! And brought him stringgggs and sealing-wax, and other faaaa-cy stuff!" (That was all there was to the first verse — it really wasn't a very complex song.) "Oh, Puff the magic draaaa-gon, lived by the seeeeaaaaa..."

And now Cas was flapping more steadily, making slow but steady progress through the wispy white fog.

"Keep singing!" said Sam.

Dean sang the next verse:

"Together they would travel on a boat with billowed sail

Jackie kept a lookout perched on Puff's gigantic tail..."
could only hope that Cas somehow knew which direction to fly.

"Noble kings and princes would bow whene'r they came,"

"Pirate ships would lower their flag when Puff roared out his name! Oh! Chorus, Sam—"

They both belted out the next chorus at the top of their lungs: 

"Oh, Puff the magic draaaaa-gonnnn, lived by the seaaaaaaa...."

This time Castiel was definitely flapping in time with the song. Somehow it was working, Dean's familiar song holding Cas together, giving him "something to focus on," as Cas had put it once before.

They'd just about finished the chorus when Dean remembered that there was a problem with the next verse.

It was the sad verse.

It was the one that began "Dragons live forever, but not so little boys." The one where the boy in the song grew up, got tired of dragons, and abandoned his dear old dragon friend to go hang out with humans. The little boy stopped visiting, and Puff got so sad and lonely that all his green scales "fell like rain," and he went into a cave with his head bowed and never came out again.

Dean hissed back to Sam, "Chorus again."

"What?"

"Sing the chorus again. Skip the third verse."

"Oh, right..." said Sam, who'd heard the song quite a few times back at the bunker. "That verse. Gotcha. Back to the top! PUFF THE MAGIC DRAAAA-GOONNNN...."

They kept cycling the chorus over and over, with Dean now and then chiming in with the first and second verse.

Suddenly Sam whispered "I got it, I got it I got it!"

"Huh?"

"Dragons live forever...." sang Sam. It was the sad verse! Dean twisted around to give Sam an urgent head-shake — it really didn't seem like a good idea to sing a verse to poor confused dragon-Cas about a miserable lonely dragon crawling into a cave where all its scales fell off — but Sam sang on. But it turned out Sam had changed the words:

*Dragons live forever, and so do their favorite boys.*

*Painted wings and giant strings make way for better toys, like Impalas!* (It didn't really fit the rhythm, but Sam squeezed it in.)

*One fine day it happened, Dean Winchester found his Puff.*

*And Puff that mighty dragon, well, his feathers sure did fluff!*
It definitely had some rhythmic issues, but Cas seemed to like it; when Sam sang the "Dean Winchester" name, Cas gave a little snort that sounded almost like his old self. And it almost seemed his feathers did fluff, a little. Certainly his flapping seemed to get a bit stronger.

Sam sailed on into the chorus: "Oh, Puff the magic dragon, lived by the sea...."

Pretty soon Dean had started working on a new verse of his own. When the next verse rolled around, Dean tried it out, singing:

---

Puff's head was high in triumph, his wings were gold and black,

Puff went flying through the sky, his buddies on his back!

With his life-long friends beside him, they put the Darkness in its place,

And Puff that mighty dragon, well, he got back all his grace!

---

Cas was flapping pretty well by now, both ears practically glued backwards pointing to Sam and Dean, so they kept singing, hissing new lyric ideas to each other under their breath and adding new verses whenever inspiration struck.

Inevitably, within a few minutes the song acquired one final change in wording:

Cas, the magic dragon, lived by the sea...

---

They broke out of the fog quite suddenly, into bright daylight, just as they were going through maybe their thirtieth pass through the chorus. Dean had just been closing in mentally on a new verse involving some different rhymes for "Puff" and "fluff" (he'd been deciding between "buff" and "gruff") when Cas gave almost an electric jolt, a strong shudder rippling right down his spine. He seemed to snap awake, twisting his head to look at Sam and Dean with eyes that were, at last, wide-open and crystal clear. Sam and Dean both stopped singing.

"Cas?" said Dean.

Cas stared at them both for a moment, turned his head back to the front and went into a sudden, steep dive.

Dean almost yelped at how fast they were dropping, but soon realized it was a controlled landing, if a somewhat hurried one. Soon Cas had flared out both wings and was neatly touching down on one of the mossy ridges that ran through the seemingly endless swamp. He landed in a flurry of flaps and twisted his head over his shoulders, snuffling noisily at both Sam and Dean, licking them both on the face, and then craning his head around so far he almost pushed Sam and Dean right off their seats. Both wings were folding so far inward over his spine that soon there seemed to be wing feathers on both sides, nudging at Sam and Dean both from the left and the right, and then one of Cas's big hind feet was even shoving at Sam from behind. Cas had somehow hooked the hind foot up and forward over one wing, almost up to their feather-seats. It soon became clear that he was trying to hook one talon over one of the backpack straps.
"I think I should open the pack," said Sam. Cas let out a long "NNNNNNMmmm!" sound.

"I think you're right," said Dean.

They clambered down off Cas's back. Now Cas couldn't seem to stop from sniffing at the backpack, huffing great breaths of air, sniffing at the shafts of light that were seeping out of it, and raising one front foot to pluck at the pack delicately.

"It's like catnip," commented Dean.

"Dragon-nip, I guess," said Sam, unbuckling the top of the backpack. "Here you go, Cas. All the dragon-nip you want." He flipped back the top, and the silver butterflies burst out.

They poured out almost like a flood of glittering water and flowed directly to Cas, spreading out all over his body. Most of the silver butterflies gravitated to his flight feathers, some to the neck plumes and some smaller ones to the rest of his feathers, each silver butterfly perching neatly on a golden feather-tip. The rare all-gold butterflies, Dean noticed, went directly to Cas's golden alulas.

Soon Castiel had a layer of hundreds of shining little grace-butterflies sprinkled all over him.

"Just like when he was a baby," Dean said appreciatively. "He was so cute..." (Sam gave a little laugh at that, but made no comment.)

Slowly, as if afraid to disturb the butterflies, Cas crouched down on all fours with his wings half-spread. He lowered his head to the mossy ground and his eyes drifted shut. Then he gave a soft sigh, and Dean and Sam watched silently as each butterfly dissolved into a speck of light that seemed to soak into the feathers.

Cas was very still for a moment. A long shudder ran through his body. All his feathers puffed up, and then Castiel was shining with light.

Silver light, edged in gold. It was so bright that it was hard to look at him. It was hard even to make out his outline, and for a moment Dean almost thought he saw human-Castiel standing there, bathed in light, standing within the glowing outline of dragon-Cas. The circle of light expanded, glowing so brightly they both had to shield their eyes.

"A halo," murmured Sam. "It's his halo... I've never seen it before... I think it's his halo...."

Dean, for his part, was simply thinking, He's beautiful.

Slowly the bright glow faded.

The butterflies were gone. All Cas's feathers, which had fluffed out dramatically during the process, slowly un-fluffed. Cas gave a long sigh as the feathers sleeked back down to their normal contour.

Cas opened his eyes and lifted his head, looking at them. Sam and Dean looked back.

"Cas?" said Dean at last.

Cas stared at Dean for a long moment.

Then he got up on all fours, took a couple steps closer and crouched again. He gave them both a delicate lick on the forehead. Then he put his nose right down on the ground by Dean's feet, carefully angling his head perpendicular to the ground so that the long line of his head pressed directly to Dean's body.
Closest thing to a human hug that he can do, Dean thought. The most contact that he can get. Dean stretched both arms around Cas's broad forehead and reached a hand up to the neck-plumes. Both wings came forward, one wing wrapped over Sam, the other around Dean, and soon a golden alula-feather was stroking the back of Dean's neck.

"You back with us, Puff?" Dean said, stroking Cas's long, soft neck-plumes with one hand and a feathery ear with the other.

Dean felt him give a tiny nod.

More quietly, Dean said, "Don't do the dream-communication thing if it'll drain your power too much. But... you do remember us now?"

A whole series of eager little nods then. (It almost knocked Dean over.) Finally Cas lifted his head and gave them each another lick on the forehead, and finally Cas nodded to his back again.

"You're sure you're ready to go on?" Dean asked him. "You're good to fly?"

Cas gave a firm nod, and he lowered his head so they could scramble up his neck and back to the feather-seats.

They got settled, and Cas flew on.

Dean kept one hand down on Cas's warm skin, and kept humming the song. Just in case.

But it turned out they hardly had any more flying to do; just ahead of them the swamp stopped. The fog was well behind them now, forming a ghostly ring all around, and there in the middle of the fog-ring, in the exact center of the endless swamp, was a perfectly round hill of green grass.

No other angels were in sight; it seemed none of the others had managed to get through the fog on their own.

The grassy hill had a big clump of stones on top.

"The Stones," said Sam.

Cas nodded.

It seemed to be the same sort of stone ruins they'd been encountering throughout their entire journey — ancient tumbledown ruins, eroded and mossy with age. The last remnants of whatever great structure had once been here.

Cas banked in a wide circle around the hill, spiraling inward slowly. As they drew closer, it became clear that most of these stones had not fallen over like all the others that they'd passed. Most were still standing upright. In fact...

"I don't believe it," Dean said. "It's frickin' Stonehenge!"

It was a complete circle of standing stones.

"Sure looks like it," said Sam. Cas gave a little mm-hmm noise.
"I mean, it looks exactly like Stonehenge, doesn't it?" said Dean, peering down at the circle of stones. "Except bigger, I think."

"Or... what Stonehenge was built to look like, maybe?" said Sam, eyeing it as they circled around. "Lots of cultures used to build these rings of standing stones. What do you want to bet Stonehenge was patterned after it? Old magic, I bet."

"Wonder how old," said Dean. Cas made another of his grumbly noises, and Dean could've bet that he was saying, Very old, Dean.

Cas finished two circuits around the stones, and finally he ventured closer. He seemed pretty hesitant, slowing further and further as he came up to the edge of the stones. Flapping heavily in a semi-hover, Cas maneuvered very gradually over one edge of the standing stones till they were just barely inside the circle. He paused there, hovering (with a great deal of noisy flapping). He seemed very much on edge, ears flicking in all directions, snorting now and then, all his muscles tensed up again. He even had his front feet raised up with the talons spread, as if to try to protect Sam and Dean a little.

But nothing happened. Cas hovered for at least half a minute there, just inside the stones but not quite above the center of the circle, still not actually setting down. He kept scanning the ground, wings beating the air heavily.

The circle of standing stones was quiet and still.

"Good helicopter impression, Cas," Dean said at last. "Puff the Magic Helicopter. But you gotta land sooner or later."

A little moan of worry from Cas. Dean gave him a pat. "We gotta land, Cas. What else are we gonna do?"

Sam pointed out, "We haven't seen anything else unusual. This seems like the only place to check out."

Cas gave a frustrated-sounding sigh and began, reluctantly, to lower down, sinking barely an inch at a time, his feet stretched out toward the ground with all talons spread. Down... down... slowly... slowly.

Finally his feet made contact. Cas slowly settled his weight onto his feet and at last stopped flapping, wings still spread wide. He was obviously ready for instant takeoff if necessary.

But nothing happened.

Slowly Cas folded his wings in — but only halfway, leaving them partly spread just in case. Dean and Sam slid off his back to the ground, and the three of them stood together and looked around.

The stones were huge, bigger than Stonehenge back home. They reached well above Cas's shoulders, enclosing a broad circular space that had to be at least fifty yards across. They seemed arranged in pairs, each pair with a little cross-piece arranged horizontally across them. It looked all too much like a set of doorways.

"Could these be... gates, maybe?" suggested Sam, gazing around.

"No sign of Elegua, though," said Dean. "And no angels to open them either. And no signs of gate controls." He began walking across the middle of the circle to inspect one of the gate-like stones on the other side, but as soon as he started to head toward the middle of the circle, Cas snapped a wing out and grabbed Dean's shoulder with the alulas, yanking him back. Cas snorted, nodding his head.
toward something in the center of the circle, and only then did Dean see that there was something in
the middle, only about five yards away: a slender white thread that plunged straight down from the
sky, right between all the door-like stones, and straight down into the ground.

They all inched a little closer. Dean peered at the string from a few feet away (which turned out to be
as close as Cas would let him get — the alula-feathers kept tugging Dean back strongly by the
shoulder when he tried to walk closer). The thread was ridiculously slender, only a hair's-breadth
wide. Indeed, Dean had the oddest impression it had no width at all.

Cas had walked up next to him, his eyes very round and wide. Dean made another move toward the
mysterious little thread, but Cas yanked him back again with his wing and said, "I don't think you
should touch that."

Dean and Sam jumped in surprise. Cas looked at them curiously.

"Did you... talk?" said Sam.

"In English?" said Dean.

"I... what? I'm not speaking English," said Cas, who still seemed to be fully in his dragon-form.
Dean blinked at him, baffled; Cas's long black jaw was opening and closing as he spoke, and the
sounds that were coming out seemed as growly and alien as before, yet simultaneously the growly
sounds were somehow resolving into English words in Dean's ears. Cas added, "I'm speaking
Enochian, in dragon dialect. True-form Enochian. As usual. Are you..." Cas glanced back and forth
between them, his big sapphire eyes narrowing. "Wait. Are you both understanding me?"

"Yes," said Sam. "Is this a dream again? Did you put us into a dream?"

Cas shook his head, his wing slowly relaxing its hold on Dean. "This is no dream," he said. "We're
standing in a place of tremendous power. I think it's giving me some capabilities I don't usually have.
In fact... " He paused, thinking. "We archangels used to be able to do a sort of universal translation,
back before the Tower of Babel. I wonder if I could have gotten some of those old capabilities
back." He frowned at the faint silver thread. "I believe the power is primarily coming from that,
though. Not from me. There is extreme power emanating from that thread. And, to repeat, I don't
think you should touch it."

"What is it?" said Sam, moving a little closer.

"I don't know," said Cas. "I've never seen anything like this. But I think it's the source of what was
disorienting me before, the source of the white fog. It was almost... " Cas hesitated. "It was almost
pulling me apart. Like a magnet that was pulling apart magnetic pieces. I don't know why this center
area, this grassy hill, is more stable.... I don't know why I'm not just coming apart even more,
actually. There's something extremely odd about this. Let me just... Hold on a moment..."

Dean was trying his best to concentrate on what Cas was saying, yet was considerably distracted by
his voice. It was bizarre, and very wonderful, to be able to understand Castiel's speech while he was
in his true form. The growls still sounded deep and dragon-like; it wasn't exactly Cas's familiar
human voice (a voice that, truth be told, Dean was awfully fond of, and rather missed). Yet
somehow the phrases reminded Dean of that beloved human voice anyway. In some ineffable way it
sounded like Castiel. Something about the rumbly tone... and something about the way Cas chose his
words, his phrasing. Even the way he held himself, the way he turned his head as he spoke... the way he set his jaw... the way he widened or narrowed his eyes with certain phrases.

It was Castiel's voice. It was Castiel.

Dean found himself giving a long, slow sigh as he listened to Cas's voice, and he could not seem to tear his eyes away from Castiel's dark feathered face.

"I'm not going to touch it," Cas said, both ears pricked forward now, toward the thread. "But I just want to... um..." He stretched out his long neck and, very carefully, edged his long black snout closer to the silver thread. He huffed a bit of air at it.

The silver thread sparkled. Cas breathed on it a few more times and then withdrew his head, curling his neck in a little to consult with Sam and Dean.

"Okay, I just sniffed it," he reported. "It's almost like Elegua's threads but much more contorted. It's coiled up into a very narrow ribbon. And... how do I put this. It smells like a different dimension."

"It smells?" said Dean. "Like a different dimension?"

"Uh... what does a different dimension smell like?" said Sam

"Like..." said Cas. His wings folded in a little more tightly as he thought. "To be more precise, it smells like a lower dimension. Like the one that's underneath all the others. You know... it smells lower down? You know what I mean?"

"No," said Dean.

"It just has that lower-down sort of smell." Cas looked back and forth between Sam and Dean, taking in their blank expressions, and gave a little sigh. "Sorry. When I'm in this form it's a little difficult sometimes to remember the limits of human senses. Anyway, I think it might be a connection point between the Sun — Heaven, that is — and some other dimension."

"What other dimension?" asked Sam.

Cas shrugged. He settled down almost like a dog, sitting down on his hindquarters but still propped up by his front legs. His wings shuffled against his sides restlessly as he thought, and finally he confessed, "Honestly, I have no idea."

"And why shouldn't we touch it?" Dean said.

"You might die," said Cas, glancing at him.


Cas looked back at the silver thread. "I'm just guessing here. But... my guess is that if you touch it, you would, I believe, be shifted to that other dimension. Which for all we know will plunge you to the bottom of the ocean or into a black hole or out between the galaxies, or some other totally unsurvivable place."

"So it's, like, the Gate to end all Gates," said Sam.

Cas nodded. "As I said, I'm just guessing. But I suspect it may be the thing that connects all the other Gates, the thing that makes them possible. And I think we need to be very cautious. So..." He fell silent, gazing now at Dean. "I am so grateful that you insisted on coming with me. I can't tell you
how grateful I am. Your song...." He paused again, his eyes almost glittering now. "I will cherish the song about Puff," Castiel said solemnly. "I will cherish it always. But I fear that this is where we must part ways."

Something in his tone made clear that he meant not just now, but forever.

"No," said Dean flatly. "No. No way."

"You know what's at stake," Cas said to him, almost gently. "You saw the battle. You know what's happening." He crouched lower down, settling down on his chest and bringing his head down till he was right at eye level to Dean, on one side of his head, and Sam, on the other. "I'm the one who must continue on," said Cas. "I'm the one who must take that plunge. You two got me here. You got me across the fog... but, more than that, Dean, you put me back together, over the last several months. I can never explain..." (Cas's voice was getting even huskier.) "I can never explain what that means to me. But I don't want you to risk your lives any further. Either of you. I'll continue. I think you both will be able to get home if you hike back out through the fog. Gabriel and Elegua will find you, and they can get you home."

"No, Cas, no, I'm touching the thread," said Sam.

Dean spun on him. "What?"

"Sam, no, this isn't your battle—" began Cas.

"Hell it isn't," said Sam. "I'm the one who got you into this mess, Cas. I'm the one who pushed you to get that book and do that stupid spell."

"Sam, that's ridiculous, I—" said Cas.

"Don't try to argue," said Sam. "You know it was me that started all that. You know it was. The boy with the demon blood, remember? I'm the one who fucked everything up. This whole thing was my fault. It wasn't just this year, Cas, it goes back years, all of it, and I—"

"Sam—" Dean began.

Sam wouldn't even let him get a word in. "Dean, you think I was just coming along on this flight as your sidekick or something? Dean and Cas and their trusty back-seat sidekick? I had my own reasons. I had my own reasons for coming here. And this was what I was going to do. I decided on the drive to California. I decided that whenever we found the thing that needed to be done, I was going to be the one to do it." He glanced back and forth between Cas and Dean. "And also... I gotta be blunt here, I am not going to let either of you sacrifice yourself. You two need each other, and to be honest, you deserve some kind of a life together. It's, like, crystal clear that that's what needs to happen, and you both deserve that. But me.... it doesn't matter about me. Nobody's going to miss me—"

"THAT IS SUCH BULLSHIT," said Dean, hands on his hips now, suddenly beyond pissed off.

Sam went on, "Look, I'm the one who should've stayed in the Cage, who half-closed the gates of Hell and messed everything up, and—"

"But that didn't mess anything up," said Castiel. "It was me closed the gates of Heaven—"

"You were manipulated by Metatron, that wasn't your fault. What I did meant that, later, I —"

Cas had reoriented a little to stare right at him. "You're a good man, Sam, you had nothing to do with
I had one good day with Cas, Dean thought, as he watched them argue. I got my day. I slept in his feathers, I got to be with him for one day. I had one more good moment, too, flying over the flowers with them both, coming here.

I really can’t ask for more than that.

Cas was still trying to make his point, saying, "I'm the one who ruined Heaven, and besides, I got Rowena to do that spell—"

"I'm the one who went to talk to Rowena in the first place, Cas! That was me—"

Sam and Cas had gotten so involved in their argument that they'd both forgotten to keep an eye on Dean.

So Dean jumped forward to grab the silver thread on his own.

A/N - Dammit, Dean!

BTW, an early thought while starting this fic was to feature Puff The Magic Dragon as an important song that somehow would help connect Dean with Castiel. That motif already showed up earlier, but I couldn't resist featuring it again in this chapter. All along I wanted music to play a central role in this fic, and with songs that were sort of Cas-like songs rather than Dean's type of classic rock, and I thought Puff & Jackie Paper were a cool metaphor for the Dean-Cas friendship - especially now that Sam's rewritten the song with new happier verses. :) 

Next update unclear; I am traveling this week and next. I just got off the plane in San Francisco a few hours ago, for a big science meeting this week that will probably consume every speck of time from dawn to midnight for the whole week, and then I go straight to Chicago to cram into a house with 17 family members (all of whom I have to cook for). Writing time is going to be thin on the ground at both places! So I don't know when the next chapter will be done. Keep checking on Fridays. Hope to post at least one by Christmas!

Hope you liked this chapter. Please write and let me know what you thought! As always I love to hear if there was a particular thing that worked for you - a scene or an idea or a bit of dialogue.

Thanks for reading my story! And merry Christmas, everybody. :)
The world turned inside-out, and Dean fell to the end of time.

Once again Dean's sense of perspective seemed to have tricked him. The silver thread had seemed very slender and very close when he'd been standing a few feet away. But now that he'd put his hand around it, it turned out it was much, much bigger than he'd realized, and (bewilderingly) much farther away. In fact it seemed that Dean's hand wasn't "around" it, really. It was as if Dean had reached out his hand toward a star in the sky, thinking it was just a tiny dot that could fit comfortably between his thumb and forefinger, with no idea how large and distant the star really was.

And the thread seemed to have its own gravitational pull. It grabbed hold of him at once and Dean plummeted toward it at dizzying speed, across a much huger space than seemed possible, in a sickening free-fall. Behind him he heard a thunderous bellow that somehow sounded both desperate and furious — it had to be from Cas — but even in the first split-second Dean had already fallen such a long way toward the thread that Cas already sounded very far away, like a distant foghorn heard miles out at sea.

The thread grew larger and larger, till it loomed ahead of him like a vibrating white column a mile wide. The rest of the world seemed to have fallen away; there was no sign now of the green hill or the standing stones. Soon Dean was falling alongside the thread, parallel to it as it pulled him endlessly downward. The wall of the thread, right next to him now, seemed not to be solid at all. It looked almost watery, like a river composed of millions of floating specks, tiny oval and spiral-shaped blobs that swirled around like little minnows.

Transfixed, Dean reached out one hand to touch the wall. It was like putting his hand in a flowing stream as he sped alongside in a boat; his hand sank right into the wall, making a wake that trailed behind. The little minnows flowed around his hand, only mildly disturbed. His hand sank in farther, then his arm, and then Dean was inside the thread. It wrapped around him like a vast shining tunnel, and still he fell, plummeting down.

Lower down, Cas had said. Underneath all the others. You know what I mean?

Yes, Cas, Dean wanted to say now. Yes, I know what you mean. It was lower down, yes. It was below everything. It was the end of everything.

Dean fell down the infinite tunnel. Down. Down. Down.

Images began flickering past.

At first there were just vague impressions, like a hallucinatory dream of falling. Was he falling, really? Or was he swimming in water? Or high above the Earth, maybe, falling through clouds? Or flying over mountains, clutched tight in a huge feathered foot... or sitting in the Impala, driving through the night....
Or, maybe, racing down the stairs of the burning house in Lawrence, Kansas.

Dean wanted to take the stairs two at a time, for he was desperate for speed, but he couldn't see the edge of the top step over Sammy's little blanket, and didn't dare risk tripping and dropping little Sammy. The rule had always been that whenever four-year-old Dean was carrying Sammy, Dean wasn't allowed to take him up or down the stairs at all, for fear of dropping him. Yet now Dad had told him to take Sammy and go, so Dean ran, hurrying down the stairs as quick as he could, all the while trying not to think about what he'd seen in the nursery. *Don't drop Sammy, don't drop Sammy,* was all he thought. But he knew, as he fumbled the door open, as he heard the sirens already wailing in the distance, that Dad would never have asked Dean to carry Sammy out by himself if things weren't desperately wrong.

He rushed out onto the broad lawn, clutching his brother tight. Little Sammy wasn't crying anymore; he seemed to know, too, that something truly terrible was happening. The monsters from the fairytales were here, the beasts from under the bed, the nameless things that Dean had always known would come. *I should have put the angel in Sammy's room,* Dean thought, running across the lawn. The little ceramic angel, the one that Mom had always said would keep him safe — Sammy hadn't had one! Only Dean had had one! *I should have put it in Sammy's room,* he thought, over and over. *Sam's room didn't have an angel. Only mine did.*

Dean reached the street and stopped, unsure where to go next. He suspected already that something truly terrible had happened to Mom, something horrifying. But surely things would be okay, wouldn't they? Everything would be okay, right? Surely Mom was okay? Even when he turned and saw the horrific inferno that was engulfing their home, he still felt certain that Dad would somehow fix this. He still had faith.

Dad would rescue Mom, and Mom would be okay.

Everything was going to be all right.

Even later, when he was huddled on the bumper of the firetruck, still clutching Sam (the firemen kept trying to take Sam away, but Dean wouldn't let them), the faith was still strong: *Everything was going to be all right.*

It wasn't till he watched the firefighters hauling Dad out, with Dad swinging crazed punches at them, then screaming at them... then giving up and walking over to Dean, his steps slow... It wasn't till Dad sat down next to Dean, with such a quiet, stunned look on his face, that Dean's faith began to waver.

Maybe everything wasn't going to be all right.

Maybe Mom was never going to come out of the fire.

It was his first, and worst, taste of the sickening sensation that he would come to know all too well in later years: the realization that someone had left forever. The sheer confusion of it, at the beginning, was horrible enough, the disbelief, the almost nauseating sense of bewilderment. Later he would come to know the bitter ache that settled in afterwards, the long slow agony of having to carry on with life alone, but right now it was all shock and bewilderment. Where was Mom? How could she be gone? Mom couldn't be gone. Mom had always been here. Mom had *always* been here, every single day, every single hour; the constant, the touchstone, the center of his world.
The night wore on, but Mom did not return.

That was the first night that Dean slept in a motel bed. Everything seemed all wrong: the bed was too huge, the covers strange and stiff, the sheets cold, and Mom still did not return. He and little Sam slept side by side, Dean still half-guarding his brother, a hand wrapped tight around one of Sammy's little arms. Dad sat up all night in a wing-backed chair nearby, a shotgun across his legs, and Dean dropped in and out of nightmares all night.

Once or twice, toward dawn, he thought he heard the whisper of wings.

It almost sounded like they were right inside the room. Maybe it was some bird just outside, in the shrubs. And, once or twice, Dean dreamed that he heard a voice whispering to him *I'm sorry. I couldn't stop it. I tried.* He dreamed he felt a touch on his forehead.

The grief did not ease, but a measure of calmness came to him. He tightened his hold on little Sammy's wrist, thinking, *I've got Sam. I saved Sam. I'll take care of Sam.*

---

It was all a flickering snapshot of a memory, a moment in time. It whisked away, to be replaced by another: Now Dean was falling to quite a different place, torn limb from limb by hellhounds and falling from the cool of the Earth night to a fire worse even than that nursery-room inferno. He fell, and fell, till he was jerked to stillness, his motion arrested, suddenly blinking awake to discover that he was strung on *hooks*, on *chains*, like a piece of meat, over a cavernous pit of flickering flame.

Worse than the pain was the terror. It *was real.* It *was real.* He was really here, he was really trapped, and it was all real and the pain was blinding and he was *trapped forever.* Dean screamed for Sam; he knew it was useless but he couldn't help screaming anyway. He screamed till his voice failed, even though he knew nobody would ever help. Not Sam, not Bobby, nobody...

Nobody could help.

And later he fell in a different way, in a different direction.

He fell till he took the tools in his very own hands, till he watched other people's blood, other people's pain, blooming under his own hands. He fell, and fell, and fell; he said yes to Alistair, he picked up the tools, he turned them against others, and he fell. It seemed he would never stop falling, that he would fall forever.

Then, once again, came a day when a whisper of wings sounded behind him.

Dean turned from the rack to face a blaze of silver light so bright he could barely look at it. It seemed to wash away all the dark and all the flickering flame. All shadows were banished, the whole torture-chamber laid bare under that crystal-clear dazzle of white light. The light was streaming from a creature that had materialized behind him, a huge beast that was having to crouch just to fit into the room, and the beast was glowing with such radiance that Dean had to shield his eyes.

He thought at first that it was some awful creature that had come only to torment him further, maybe some overgrown hell-hound from the inner circles. Half-blinded, he couldn't even get a clear look at the thing; he had only an impression of immense size, vast wings, implacable strength. And great blue eyes that glittered with light, glowing, fixing him with a searing stare.
It saw right through him. Dean knew it at once. That blazing stare laid him bare. The beast saw every lie he’d ever said. Every broken promise, every failure. Every moment of weakness. And every horrible, terrible, unforgivable sin.

Dean cringed back, still shielding his eyes with one hand. With the other he flung his few puny weapons at it in desperation (a knife, a whip; they just bounced harmlessly off the shining feathers). The creature only moved its head closer, narrowing its eyes, tilting its head a little to inspect him further. Dean felt like an ant under a magnifying glass, about to be incinerated. He scuttled back farther, trying to find somewhere to hide, certain now that he would soon be seared to ash just by the direct gaze of those dazzling sapphire eyes. But the gigantic beast just reached out one huge limb and grabbed him, and it flew up. Straight up, clawing its way straight through the stone ceiling above him, its mighty wings powering them both straight through realms Dean had never seen before: lakes of lava, swirls of sulphur clouds, endless layers of poisonous gas.

The first arrows of the demons only clattered off its glossy feathers. Later, bolts of hellfire began to sear its shining wings black. Dean felt the beast flinch as the hellfire struck home, but it did not drop Dean. It only clutched him closer; in fact, it almost seemed to be shielding Dean, spinning in mid-air to take the brunt of hellfire on its own wings and spare Dean any direct hits, even though each demonic blast clearly caused it some pain.

On it flew, while Dean lay dizzy in its grasp, so dizzy he couldn't tell if he was actually ascending, or just falling in a totally new, creative way.

That dizzy sensation became a familiar companion. Dizzy, disoriented, confused, unsure whether he was falling or flying.... Like now, as he stood in a parking lot in Oregon watching Sam move all their gear from the beat-up maroon Buick Special Deluxe (which Dean had stolen a few weeks back) to a slightly less crappy Riviera (which Dean had stolen just a few hours ago, at a bar nearby, just outside Corvallis). They’d been hopping from one stolen car to another for months, after having to hide the Impala from the Leviathans. This was the third stolen car — or was it the fourth? It was getting a little hard to keep track, actually, now that Cas was gone, swallowed up by the Leviathans in that awful lake... and Bobby was gone too now, and of course the Roadhouse and Jo and Ellen and pretty much everybody and everything.

Dean was no stranger to the nomad life by now, of course. The nursery fire had only been the beginning. Family didn't last; he knew that now. Friends didn't stay either. He knew that too. Everybody died, sooner or later. Mom, Dad, Jo, Ellen, Bobby...and even Castiel. Even his one angel friend, the one friend he’d thought was invincible, had died and left him, too.

Sam was the only exception, the only constant, the touchstone. Everybody and everything else was just a constant series of letting go, of loss after loss, of failure added to failure.

For a while there the Impala had at least been another little thread of continuity. It had carried a bit of that feeling of "home,” as much as Dean even understood the term. But these days even the Impala was gone too.

It was long past midnight. They’d pulled up both cars side-by-side in a dark corner of the lot, right behind a big dumpster, in order to shift everything to the new car. Dean had just tossed a little armful of trash into the dumpster — a litter of empty fast-food bags and beer cans from the newly stolen car — and he was now supposed to be helping Sam shift everything to the new car. All the guns and
ammo had to be moved, along with their duffel bags of clothes, the cooler, all the spare knives and extra pistols that were hidden here and there, the iron crowbar and the machetes, the bag of rock salt... all of it. And then there was a little work to do as well, to put some protective runes on the new car and paint a devil's-trap on the inside of the trunk lid. Dean was supposed to be helping. Actually Dean would have preferred to do it all himself. (Sam sometimes got these cockamamie ideas in his head to organize the whole armory a little differently.) But somehow Sam was doing all the work (yet again, just like last time) while Dean (yet again, just like last time) was standing by the dumpster staring down at the one piece of trash he'd been unable to throw away: a wad of cloth in his hand.

It was a coat.

A tan-colored trenchcoat, rumpled and stained, rolled up roughly in an untidy bundle. Dean had fished it out of a lake some months ago, and somehow he still seemed to be carrying it around, everywhere he went, moving it from stolen car to stolen car.

They were supposed to be traveling light; they were supposed to only be bringing the essentials. It was just a ruined coat. He didn't need it. It was just a coat. It was no use to them. In fact, Dean knew he should've ditched it the last several times they'd shifted cars. It was totally pointless to keep dragging the thing around. He'd sworn to himself that this time he'd throw it out.

But every time Dean tried to throw the coat in the dumpster, his arm simply did not move, and his hand simply would not let go of the coat. Instead he stood there in the chilly air, in this desolate parking lot in Nowheresville, Oregon, about to start another endless long road trip battling the never-ending series of monsters and Leviathans, gazing down at a useless coat that was no help at all.

It was still covered with bloodstains, streaks that were still an oddly bright red even after all this time, as if some faint spark of life still clung to the fabric somehow. Bloodstained, wrinkled... It even smelled a little musty from the dried lakewater. *I should've at least cleaned it*, thought Dean. *I should've cleaned it.*

But why? What was the point? Why clean it?

*I should throw it away.*

*Gotta travel light,* Dean reminded himself. *Nomad life, remember. Motel life. Stolen car to stolen car. We don't have a home base anymore. There's nobody like Bobby who we can leave stuff with. Everything's gotta fit in the trunk. Gotta be able to run at any second. You can't keep extra stuff when you're on the run.*

*I gotta throw it away.*

Sam was suddenly next to him, flipping the dumpster lid closed with a loud BANG. Dean jumped, turning to look at the cars to discover that somehow Sam had finished doing everything already. The devil's-trap had been painted, the runes were all done, the gear had all been shifted over, and Dean was still holding on to the coat, both hands on it now, almost stroking it. He looked up at Sam to say *I'm gonna throw it away now* but then Sam took it right out of his hands.

Dean watched, mute, as Sam shook out the coat. Sam was quiet a moment, holding it up in front of him at arm's-length. It looked sad and rumpled in the dim light of the faint streetlight. It looked so small... had Cas really fit into it? Cas had somehow seemed so much larger than that, when he'd been here. He'd seemed....

He'd been....
You can throw it away, Dean tried to say. His mouth opened, but no sound came out but a soft sigh. Sam's eyes darted over to him briefly.

Sam rolled up the coat again, walked to the new car and rummaged around in the still-open trunk. Soon he'd wedged the coat in a little spot in the back.

"It goes here," Sam explained over his shoulder. "Behind the machetes, on the left side in the back. That's its spot. That's where it goes. That's where I put it in the last two cars."

"But we gotta travel light," said Dean.

"We got room, Dean," said Sam, slamming the trunk lid shut. He got in the driver's seat and nodded to the passenger side.

"We got room," said Sam again. "C'mon. Get in and get some sleep. I'll drive first shift."

Next the endless forests of Purgatory stretched around him once again. Dean hiked onward, following a faint track in the brush, Benny trudging along behind. How many days had Dean been here, lost in Purgatory? How many days, weeks, months? Where's the angel? Dean asked every monster he'd found. Where's the angel? Where's the angel? The same question a thousand times, asked to everybody they met.

Benny sometimes rolled his eyes a little about it. Benny's initial puzzlement had given way to impatience, and then to resignation, and now to the occasional eye-rolls (sometimes accompanied by a soft, long-suffering sigh). He rarely spoke about it anymore. But now, as Dean came to a fork in the trail, hesitating a moment to get his bearings, Benny said:

"Left is faster."

Dean glanced back at him. "Last monster we talked to said to go right."

"Left is where the portal is. The way out," said Benny. He added mildly, "I'm telling you the truth."

Dean nodded. Of course Benny was telling the truth. That wasn't the issue. "The angel's to the right," Dean explained. "That's what the last guy said."

"We're wasting time," said Benny, still in that same mildly resigned tone. He seemed to regard the whole find-the-angel thing as something like a pointless side-quest in a video game. He didn't understand; it wasn't the side quest. It had become the main mission.

But Benny only gave a little sigh, and said, his soft Southern drawl making the question seem deceptively casual, "Why do you need to find this angel, anyway?"

It was a question Benny rarely bothered asking anymore. Maybe because Dean had never been able to give him an answer.

Dean stared at him a moment, and turned and marched down the path to the right. After a few seconds he heard Benny's footsteps trudging after him.
The warehouse, next, was a much more familiar nightmare.

One Dean had had a thousand times already.

The familiarity made it no less horrific. For a while he tried, fruitlessly, to steer the dream in some other direction. But the dream could not be steered; it could not be changed. It was like trying to make an old movie have another plot, or trying to steer a runaway train that was shooting along a single track. Dean shot Cas in the leg; Dean wrestled him and won, Dean bled out Cas's grace and choked him unconscious; Dean carried him to the cross.... Nauseated, shaking, weeping, begging Cas to forgive him, Dean nailed Castiel to the cross nonetheless.

*I know this is just a dream*, thought Dean. *I know it. I know it.* But how could he break out of it? He could not seem to stop the dream, but at last he managed to lie down right in the middle of it, lie down and curl up right there on the concrete warehouse floor. He clapped both hands over his ears to try to block out the terrible sound of Cas's moans, chanting to himself, *It's only a dream, it's only a dream.*

*Only a dream, only a dream, only a dream,* Dean repeated, curled up on the floor with his eyes shut. *Think of something else. Think of something else. Think of Cas being happy and safe. Think of both of us somewhere happy and safe.*

Miraculously, it worked. He fell into a different dream. One that he recognized.

Dean was really not the fantasy-prone type. But sometimes... when he lay awake at night in the bunker, alone in a cold and empty bed, holding nothing but a little black feather.... or when he was trapped in a particularly bad set of Cas-nightmares... sometimes he had to use every tool he had.

Even the slightly embarrassing tools.

Even the wistfully hopeful sorts of fantasies that it was really best not to think about too much.

This particular one was the most dangerous to think about, so he only very rarely used it.

Summoning up this particular fantasy always felt something like handling an unstable explosive or a highly addictive drug, something that might destroy him or take him over somehow if he did it too often. So he kept it hidden very deep.

But he looked at it now.

He looked, and saw Castiel lying next to him in bed.

Dean let out a slow breath. It had worked! He wasn't in the warehouse anymore; he was in a soft, warm bed, and Cas's arms were around him. Cas had come to him in the night, at last, after all these lonely months, and was mantling him. Maybe Cas's wings would be around him too... why not? Cas mantling Dean with both arms and wings at once. Dean imagined every detail: Cas in human form, but with his physical wings manifest (sized to match the human vessel, of course). One wing would be stretching under Dean in a sheet of soft feathers, the other draped over them both like a blanket. Dean could almost feel the silky touch of the feathers against his skin, and Cas's breath warm on the back of Dean's neck. One of Cas's arms would be under Dean's neck, so that Dean's head was
comfortably pillowed on Cas's warm shoulder. Cas's other arm would be looped over Dean's torso, a reassuring weight across his ribs.

And Cas wouldn't be in his full suit-and-trenchcoat outfit this time. Because this was the private dream, the secret dream, the addictive and dangerous dream, and here Dean could do the forbidden: He could imagine them both naked, or nearly so. Sometimes he put them both in t-shirts and boxers, sometimes just the t-shirts, and sometimes, like now, in nothing at all. It wasn't going to be that sort of dream anyway, no need for further detail really other than just to think of Cas lying pressed up against Dean's back, skin-to-skin, the two of them fitted together like long-lost puzzle pieces that had at last found each other. Cas was not dead or dying in the warehouse, no, no, no, never, not at all; he was warm and alive against Dean's back, breathing softly.

In theory Cas shouldn't need to sleep, or breathe actually, but in this dream he was doing both. Maybe he'd fallen into the habit of it after the years of spending nights with Dean. Maybe it was a side effect of how he'd chosen to root into his vessel more deeply than he once had; maybe he'd slid into a half-mortal, half-angel way of using his vessel, a way that allowed Castiel to experience sleeping, and eating, and various other physical sensations (many of which he — and Dean — quite enjoyed). So, Cas shouldn't need to breathe, and shouldn't need to sleep, but these days he chose to do both anyway.

His breathing was still slower than a human's, though. And his sleep was quieter, more peaceful, almost like a meditation.

Dean hated the nightmares, but there was at least this one good thing about them: coming awake in the night, feeling Cas's slow soothing breaths against his skin, and realizing Castiel was warm and alive and at his side.

Dean lifted one hand and, very gently, stroked the edge of Cas's upper wing, tracing his fingers across the golden alulas. It was the very softest possible touch, for Dean wasn't intending to wake Cas, but there was a sudden pause in Cas's breathing anyway. And then a soft nuzzle at Dean's neck.

"Bad dreams?" Cas said, whispering at Dean's ear.

"Just the usual," Dean whispered back.

"Then I'll do the usual," said Cas, and he raised his arm to run his hand through Dean's hair.

He started at Dean's forehead and stroked his fingers all the way along Dean's scalp, ending at the nape of Dean's neck. Over and over Cas did it, running his fingers slowly through Dean's hair, nuzzling and nibbling softly at the back of Dean's neck all the while. It felt incredibly soothing, and Dean let his eyes slide shut.

It was Cas's version of neck-feather preening, of course. And though it had been years since Dean had learned what neck-feather preening actually meant, it still made his breath nearly catch in his throat to think of it. It caused such a rush of gratitude that it seemed he could barely breathe, and it dawned on him, then, that everything actually was all right.

At last.

Everything was all right.

Sometimes the "preening" led to other activities (well, okay, most times) but tonight Dean felt pretty rattled after all the weird dreams of falling. Cas seemed to sense it and he just kept up the "preening," on and on, till Dean finally began to relax, all the tension draining out of his muscles.
"You should sleep in tomorrow morning," Cas suggested, after a while. "You haven't slept well. You seem very..." He hesitated. "Very drained. I think you need to rest."

"But," Dean said, "but... I have to get up." For he'd faintly remembered that there was some reason that he was supposed to be getting up the next morning.

"I already made the pies, remember?" said Cas, still nuzzling at Dean's neck. "Balthazar and Anna won't show up till noon anyway. Sam'll want to sleep in too, I bet, and if Gabriel's up early I'll just start feeding him mimosas. The kids'll be fine; Claire can have them open one present each and that'll keep them okay. You should sleep in. Sleep as long as you can."

Dean opened his eyes, then, and started to roll over to look at Cas. (Cas, puzzled, lifted his upper wing to let Dean shift position.) But halfway through rolling over Dean realized that they weren't in the bunker at all, but in a different room entirely. Not in a motel, either... in a house, it looked like. Some kind of house. Dean lifted his head a little, staring around. It was a big room, with a few of Dean's favorite guns mounted on the walls, and not one but three guitars propped in different corners of the room (one on a stand in the corner, two others hanging from wall-brackets). A closet door hung open, with a glimpse of a whole wardrobe inside, far more than they could possibly be traveling with. Two wide windows in the far wall framed snow-covered tree branches outside, bathed in moonlight. A little string of Christmas lights had been arranged around the window, glowing softly in blue and silver.

"It's... Christmas?" muttered Dean.

Dean turned to look at Cas, who was staring at him intently now with a puzzled frown. Cas pulled him back down, closing the upper wing back down over Dean to mantle him more securely, both sets of flight feathers folding down Dean's back.

"Dean?" Cas asked. "Are you feeling okay?"

Dean raised one hand to touch Cas's face in the moonlight, tracing the crow's-feet at the corners of Cas's eyes... the lines on his forehead... the gray hair at his temples.

"You're going gray," Dean said, wonderingly. "You're going gray?"

Cas narrowed his eyes. "We've talked about this," he said. "I want to age with you, Dean. It's a journey I want us to do together. We go through this every year—" And as Dean stared back at him, Cas's eyes widened. Dean felt the feathers tighten around him as Cas's wings stiffened.

"Dean!" said Cas, his eyes searching Dean's intently now. "This is it! Isn't it? This is it!"

"W-what?" Dean stuttered back at him. "This is what?"

"This is the moment!" Cas said, putting one hand on Dean's cheek. "This is the moment you saw. I saw it too, remember? I didn't recognize it till now. I only saw a fragment of it, of you turning around in the moonlight and asking about my hair." Cas leaned closer. He cupped Dean's face in both his hands, his wings wrapping even more tightly around Dean now as he said, his voice intent, "Dean. Wake up. You have to wake up and grab my wing."

Dean blinked at him. "What?" He glanced down at Cas's wing. "But your wing's right here. Both of them."

Wake up, Cas repeated. His voice had changed.

Wake up. Cas's voice was a roar. A distant roar, at first, and then closer and closer — Wake up and
grab my wing. Wake up.

WAKE UP!

It was a thunderous roar, all around, shaking Dean's very bones. Dean blinked his eyes open, to find that he was falling still, back in the silver tunnel where he had been all along. But a huge feathered shape was nearing him, a wing stretching out, closer and closer... Dean reached out a hand. Golden feathers clamped down on his fingers and yanked him closer. Then Sam was grabbing onto Dean's arm and pulling him closer still, Cas's front feet wrapping around them both and tucking them into his white belly feathers. Sam and Dean clung there together in a jumble of limbs, half-surrounded by white feathers, panting in the strange thin air. It was immediately clear that Cas was unable to fly normally here, for no matter how he stretched his wings, there seemed to be nothing for him to beat his wings against and no point even to holding the wings out. Soon he'd given up and wrapped his wings tightly around his own belly, both wings enfolding Sam and Dean completely.

Together they fell.

Not a bad way to go, thought Dean.

And then they landed.

A/N - A definite future, a possible future, a dream, or just a hallucination? And why is Dean seeing different points in time in the first place, and where is the white thread taking them? Only time (and the next chapter) will tell.

And yes, the "falling" that Dean was doing in some of those memories was, of course, falling in love. (Or realizing that he had already fallen, might be a better way to put it.)

Another chapter may be coming later this weekend (I should get some writing time on my next plane flight, on Saturday), definitely one by New Year's. Just a few left now. This one was really just half a chapter, all I could get done in the holiday chaos, but I hope you liked it anyway - just my little Christmas present to you all. :) Please drop a comment if you'd like to give me a little Christmas present of your own! Happy holidays everyone!
"Landing" was a generous term. "Crash" might have been more accurate, or maybe "skidding to a messy stop."

First the tunnel walls began to wobble a little. Sam just had time to say "Uh-oh" when the tunnel abruptly narrowed, compressing around them with such suddenness that Dean and Sam both yelled. Cas tossed both brothers into his left front foot (flinging Dean on top of Sam, fairly roughly) so he could get the right front foot free to claw at the wall. He flared his wings out too, trying to fight his way back through the wall — into the river of little minnows, that is. The tunnel wall seemed to resist him. And it was still shrinking. Cas went into a sort of overdrive then, flailing his wings wildly and scrabbling roughly at the wall with his silver talons. Minnows flew in all directions but at last Cas burst through.

They seemed to almost pop outside of the tunnel, the wall sealing seamlessly behind them. Dean fought for a view (accidentally elbowing Sam in the ribs) and managed to get a glimpse through Cas's belly feathers, only to find that they were still falling, though now with the glowing white thread (or tunnel, or river, or whatever it was) on their right side. It had already gotten much smaller — whether it was just another trick of perspective was impossible to say, but the huge shining tunnel they’d been falling down seemed to have shrunk down to just a thin stream only about a yard across. The minnows had gotten much smaller too, but Dean could still see swirls of what looked like millions of tiny glowing dots.

All at once another glowing stream hove into view on Cas's left side, then another below him, another above, and dozens more beyond that. Soon they were surrounded by hundreds of the glowing streams, all parallel, all of which were narrowing down and pressing together, still shrinking, till they were all the diameter of fat ropes. In fact... the parallel ropes were closing in on Cas pretty tightly, from all sides, like a net. Dean cringed, overcome suddenly with an awful certainty that they would be caught and crushed in a vise of the thousands of ropes that seemed almost to be compressing down to a single point.

"Cas!" he yelled. "You've gotta stop!"

"I know!" Cas shouted back in a rough grumbly dragon-roar. "Hang on!"

"What's happening?" Sam called out, from somewhere under Dean's feet. "I can't see anything. What's—"

A roar from just behind them drowned him out, and there was a huge blaze of light. Dean looked back to see that Cas had grabbed two ropes with his hind feet, the talons of each foot wrapped tight around a silvery rope. Would the ropes just whisk Cas to some other dimension? Apparently not; Cas hung on, silver talons skidding along the shining silver ropes. Huge sprays of light flew up off each rope like dazzling rooster tails as Cas slid along, braking himself as best he could. It was working,
somewhat; he was decelerating. But it wasn't enough — the ropes were still closing in too fast. Cas caught a third rope with his free front foot, and he stretched out both wings too, pressing them hard against the nearest ropes. He even wrapped his feathered tail around a rope, too, and grabbed a clump of others with his teeth.

Dean cringed to see the ropes racing along Cas's wings, great blazes of light shooting up wherever Cas was in contact with the ropes. It seemed Cas's wings must be about to burn off entirely just from the friction, and Dean yelled "CAS! Let us help!" starting to reach out through the talons to grab another rope himself. Cas only shoved Dean and Sam farther into his belly feathers, and then Dean couldn't see anything at all. All he could do was grab tight to Sam's arm with one hand and hang on to one of Cas's feathered toes with the other.

They slowed... slowed...

And stopped.

"Cas?" said Dean, fighting his way through talons, toes and white belly feathers to try to see what was going on. The talons of the left front foot were still closed snugly around both him and Sam; hopefully that meant Cas was still alive.

"Cas?" called Dean again. "You okay?"

"Mmph," said Castiel.

Dean finally managed to stick his head out through Cas's foot and past some feathers, but at first he couldn't figure out what he was looking at. A thick maze of brightly colored lines was all around — along with a heaving field of white and the edge of one dark wing.

Then Dean realized he was upside-down, looking back along Cas's belly feathers as Cas panted for breath. There seemed to be air here, at least. Cas (along with Dean and Sam) was suspended in a thick band of thousands of parallel shining ropes that were each now only a few inches across. The ropes were of all different colors; many a shining white, lots of yellows and oranges, and here and there a lovely blue or purple.

"We stopped!" Dean said, looking around. "We made it!"

Whatever "it" was.

Then Dean felt a surprisingly hard blow on his bicep.

"Ow!" Dean yelped. He wriggled around to discover that Sam had just punched him, though they were both so tangled up together that Dean was unsure where Sam's fist even was. "What was that for?"

"That's for leaving Cas behind," said Sam. He punched Dean again. "And that's for leaving me behind, too. Don't you ever pull that shit again on us, Dean, on me or Cas, ever." An extremely low, angry-sounding growl from Castiel punctuated the comment.

"Oh... right," said Dean, who was still so dizzy from the journey, and from the astonishing series of visions he'd just had, that he'd almost forgotten about how he'd grabbed the white thread all on his own, back on the green hill with the Stonehenge stones. "Sorry about that. I was just hoping to spare you both all this."

"We're in this together, you moron," said Sam. He still sounded a little pissed. There was another hard shove, this time at Dean's leg, and Sam added, "Also, get your frickin' knee off my head."
"Sorry," said Dean again, trying to wriggle off of Sam, but he only succeeded in sticking an elbow into Sam's stomach.

"Get OFF," said Sam.

"Cas, could you open your foot?" Dean said. There was an unwilling whine from ahead, and only then did Dean realize that Castiel hadn't really spoken yet. Dean craned his head past Cas's talons (and past one of Sam's knees) to get a look at Cas.

Cas had his head twisted sideways, with his jaws still clamped tight on a clump of several dozen lines. He seemed unwilling to let go.

Cas rolled one big blue eye back at him and gave another whine.

"Good braking job, buddy," said Dean. "But I think we've stopped now. You get any friction burns or anything?" Cas shook his head, but the movement made the whole net of threads wobble, and Cas froze again, still gripping a set of ropes tight in his mouth. "I think it's okay," said Dean. "It wobbles, sure, but nothing's breaking. Just... don't bite down too hard, okay? I think we don't want to snap those ropes. Hold on, I'll climb out and get a look around." He reached out one arm through Cas's talons to grab one shining rope, this one a dark red. The red rope was cool to the touch, and it seemed firm under his hands (no longer anything like a watery river). This rope, like most of the others here, was just a couple inches wide. When Dean leaned very close to peer at it, he could still just make out tiny, dark-red, specks of light — likely the little "minnows" he'd seen earlier, though now they seemed almost microscopic.

Dean pulled on the rope experimentally. It seemed fairly firm. He took hold of another one with another hand and leaned on them both. They gave a little bit, rather like climbing on a rope-net at a jungle gym, but he was able to put most of his weight on them.

"I think these will hold our weight, Cas," said Dean. "Open your foot. I think Sam and me can climb out."

Cas gave another reluctant-sounding whine, but finally opened his foot.

Dean carefully crawled out of Cas's foot, keeping one hand tight around a clump of Cas's belly-feathers just in case. Sam crawled out too. Bit by bit, keeping one hand on Cas's feathers at all times, they worked their way up to Cas's back.

In all directions were millions of the ropes, all parallel, all glowing slightly. A lot of them were twisted slightly out of position by Castiel (who was wedged in pretty tightly) but it looked like none had broken. There was a faint musical-sounding hum sounding almost constantly in the distance, as if somewhere were playing a long chord on a church organ. A shining glow spread in all directions, emanating from the ropes.

"Where the hell are we?" said Sam quietly, looking around.

"Damn if I know," said Dean. One thing was clear, though; Castiel had gotten pretty tangled up. When the two brothers finally convinced Cas to let go of the the ropes he'd been holding onto with his feet (he still wouldn't let go of the ones in his jaws), not only did Cas not fall through, it actually turned out that he was thoroughly stuck, wedged tightly into the converging ropes. All his feet, his wings and even his tail had ropes tangled around them.

"How about you check out Cas's feet and tail," suggested Dean to Sam. "See if you can get the tail untangled. I'll check the wings."
Sam nodded and started crawling back to Cas's long tail, while Dean began climbing up to the left wing, which was stuck up high overhead.

Dean was relieved to find, as he climbed through the maze of shining ropes, that Cas's wing looked okay. It wasn't broken and the feathers all looked intact; it was just stuck, with a dozen or so ropes drawn taut around it from all sides. Dean patted the wing in a few places; it felt warm and healthy, and there was no blood. He asked Cas to move his alulas, and they moved fine; apparently the wing was really okay. And then Dean climbed higher still, trying to reach the end of the wingtip.

As he climbed, following the leading edge of the wing, he realized the glow from the ropes seemed to lessen overhead. Were there fewer ropes up there? The musical hum was getting louder, too. (It now sounded more like a choir singing, waxing and waning occasionally. The chord sometimes changed, too, as if it were an extremely slow piece of music.)

And then Dean stuck his head up between a last pair of ropes to discover that there were no more ropes overhead at all. He'd poked his head out above them all. A vast flat plain of the shining ropes spread out on all sides in an endless sheet, millions upon millions of ropes, all parallel (or nearly so), all converging from the horizon. Cas's left wingtip was sticking up just a few feet away, looking oddly like a black shark-fin sticking out of a rainbow ocean. A stiff wind was blowing by, and the top layer of ropes was vibrating lightly in the breeze. This was the source of the musical-sounding hum; whenever the wind changed direction or speed, the chord changed.

The wind bore with it a faint scent of ozone, as if there were lightning and storms somewhere out there. It seemed to be coming from overhead, slanting down from above, but when Dean looked up he saw only an eerie flat blackness overhead. There was no ceiling visible, and no stars. It almost seemed there was no sky at all. There was nothing but a completely empty darkness.

It made him dizzy, almost as if he might fall right up into the darkness if he didn't hang on very tight. Dean gulped and looked back down, tightening his grip on the nearby ropes till he got the vertigo under control.

Once he felt more settled, he tried to do a little recon, wriggling around to look in the direction where all the threads converged. A few dozen yards away, it looked like the ropes narrowed even more to become skinny threads, and beyond that the threads wove together to form a solid carpet that looked almost as firm as a floor. And about a hundred yards away was a bizarre sight. Some of the threads swooped up to form a cute little canopy that was maybe two dozen yards across, complete with tassels on the corners. And sitting incongruously on the carpet-floor, under the tasseled canopy, only a hundred yards away, was an easy chair.

Dean blinked at it. It was a La-Z-Boy recliner.

"What the..." muttered Dean.

It was definitely a La-Z-Boy. In fact it looked like the fancy kind, with the extra-soft suede and the built-in 6-speed massager and heat function — Dean could even make out the massager's little remote control tucked into a handy pocket on the side. The chair had been left in the reclining position, tipped back with its comfy footrest up. There was a paperback book propped open on the arm, and a black footstool a few feet away. Next to the recliner was a softly glowing reading lamp, which was casting a circle of welcoming golden light around the chair. There was even a little oval braided rug nearby, sitting neatly atop the woven carpet-floor.

There was nobody in sight.
Dean stared at it all for a moment, and then worked himself back down a few feet to report down to Sam and Cas, "It's flat up here. And there's a La-Z-Boy recliner ahead."

At that Cas finally opened his jaws to release his mouthful of ropes, which all sprang back into position with a **twang**. "A **what**?" he said, his growly dragon voice echoing through the ropes.

"A La-Z-Boy," Dean repeated. "It's a kind of chair. It's the only thing around; I think we should go to it. Can you two climb up here? Cas, can you move?"

After some discussion, Dean and Sam coaxed Castiel to wriggle backwards, hoping to back him up in the direction where the ropes spread out a little. But on the very first step, Cas laid his ears back and let out a very annoyed-sounding hiss.

"It's bending my feathers all **backwards**," he complained.

"Does it hurt?" asked Dean.

"No, but it feels **awful**," complained Cas. "My feathers are just... they're..." He thrashed around a little, setting the whole net of ropes wobbling around them. "They're all **crooked**!" Something about his frustrated tone soon had both Dean and Sam struggling not to burst into giggles as they worked on freeing his wings.

"I shouldn't be laughing," whispered Sam to Dean. "They're all crooked."

"Feathers being bent backwards is **serious business**, Sam," Dean hissed. (He was still so relieved that Cas didn't have any friction burns, and hadn't broken his wings, that the crooked-feathers issue seemed relatively minor.) "Crooked feathers are a **crisis**."

"You both know I can hear you, right?" said Cas, a little sourly.

Sam and Dean did their best to not laugh too much more, and then spent another fifteen minutes freeing Cas's wings. It took some doing, both brothers working together to free one flight-feather and then the next, trying to get the wings to fold up through the tangled web of ropes. At last the wings tucked up on Cas's back, and Cas finally managed to wiggle his way backwards along the ropes, till the ropes widened out just enough for him to clamber upwards.

Dean and Sam got up on the top level, sitting safely out of the way, as Cas pushed his way up. He surged upwards, climbing with all four feet and snorting with effort, and burst dramatically out onto the top level, looking rather like a feathered whale breaching out of the ocean. The ropes below him all sprang back into place with another **twang**, the whole area vibrating (Sam and Dean bobbed up and down a little).

Castiel shook his wings out with a relieved sigh. "That's better," he said.

Dean grinned at him. He stood up, planning to check Cas's wings over one more time, but Cas wheeled on Dean with a ferocious growl and shoved Dean back with his snout. Dean fell flat on his back, bouncing a little on the upper level of threads.

"What was **that** for?" said Dean, staring up at him.
"For leaving us," said Cas, ears flattened, glaring down at Dean.

"Sam already punched me!" said Dean. "Twice!"

"Well, you needed a third time," said Cas, still scowling down at him, his long black nose now pressed right onto Dean's chest so that Dean couldn't even get up.

"Okay, okay," said Dean, patting Cas's nose. "I get it, okay? I'm sorry." Cas's big blue eyes softened a little, the scowl began to fade, a moment later he was licking Dean on the nose.

"Seriously," Cas said, in between licks. "Don't ever do that again."

"I won't. Seriously, I get it, I won't," Dean said, levering himself up into a cross-legged sitting position. It was easier to sit than to stand, here on the top layer of the ropes; the ropes were just far enough apart that it was easy for a foot to slide through unexpectedly. Sam was still sitting too, and Cas soon flopped out on his belly, the ropes sinking under him like a hammock. He was still nosing at Dean, and sniffing Sam over too, apparently checking that they were both all right. He still looked worried, and Dean began to feel a little bad. "Cas, look, I'm sorry I did that," said Dean. "It was, I don't know, a crazy impulse. I just wanted to... well, save the universe for both of you." Cas began to look a little more mollified, and Dean said, "Anyway, we're all here now, so look, we gotta check out that La-Z-Boy. But first — can I ask you something?"

Here Dean hesitated. He was thinking of the dream he'd had, of waking next to Cas in the night with the Christmas lights around the window. What had it actually meant?

Could it possibly have been real?

Could it have been a glimpse of the future? Or of a future, at least?

"Did you... did you see anything?" Dean asked, looking up at Cas. "While we were falling?"

Cas reared his head back, gazing down at Dean with a contemplative expression. One front foot flexed, then the other. "I saw quite a lot," said Castiel. "A lot of different things. Scenes from my life, primarily. All the way back to the Paleozoic. And..." He paused, still looking at Dean. His feet flexed again; it was the same move that he'd done back on the lakeshore, when Dean had been preening his neck-feathers.

And what? Dean thought.

Did you see me turning around in the moonlight, and asking about your hair?

"Me too," said Sam, unexpectedly. "And some things that were, um, not from my life. Definitely not from my life." Dean glanced over at him to see that Sam was blushing.

Dean studied Sam a moment, thinking What would make Sam blush? Then he turned back to Cas and started to say, "Cas, did you see..."

But now Cas was looking toward the chair, his eyes narrowing, and Cas said:

"That's not a chair."
Dean scrambled up to his feet, wobbling a little as he tried to balance on the skinny ropes. Cas helpfully stuck a wing out toward him, and Dean grabbed onto the wing for support, looking over at the chair and the softly glowing lamp. It was definitely a chair. And it was definitely a La-Z-Boy.

"Well, it's a chair but it's not a La-Z-Boy," said Sam, getting to his feet too and bracing himself against Cas's other wing.

"Sure it is," said Dean, studying the chair. "It's a La-Z-Boy. It's the fancy kind, is all. Also it's reclined back right now, Cas. The footrest goes down and the back part tilts back up. It might look weird but it's a type of chair—"

Cas shook his head. "That's not a chair at all. That's a nest."

Dean and Sam looked at him, and then all three of them looked at the chair again.

Sam said, "Cas... what do you see exactly?"

"A silken nest," reported Castiel, looking directly at the La-Z-Boy. "The old traditional style: woven walls, runes of protection woven into the sides, about fifteen feet in diameter. It looks like it's sized for an angel who is using a human vessel, but it's definitely a nest. There's some scrolls sitting on the edge."

Dean and Sam stared at him again, and then back at the chair. Which was definitely a chair. With a book on the arm, not scrolls.

"You seeing a chair or a nest?" Dean asked Sam.

"A chair," said Sam, "but, like I said before, what I'm looking at isn't a La-Z-Boy. It's one of those Ikea chairs with the footstool, and there's an iPad on it."

"Well... what I'm looking at is definitely a La-Z-Boy," said Dean. "With a paperback book on the arm."

Cas gave a sort of contemplative dragon-grumble, tipping one of his ears back in thought. After a moment he said, "It seems we each are seeing something different. But in each case it's a comfortable resting spot, along with the form of written communication that we're each most used to; or most comfortable with, maybe. But the specifics are different for each of us. I'm guessing it's the most desirable resting spot we can each imagine, individually." He gave a little sigh, and added, "Because that nest really looks quite appealing, to be honest."

"Ikea, Sam?" Dean said, giving Sam a narrow glance.

"Hey, those are great," Sam objected. "Jessica had one. Don't knock it till you try it."

"No way is it better than a La-Z-Boy," Dean said, shaking his head.

"A silken nest is distinctly superior to either," said Cas. He started to walk forward, and Dean and Sam followed.

---

At first it was like trying to walk on a rope hammock. Cas had to take each step carefully, spreading his talons wide across several ropes with each step. Each of his feet pushed the somewhat-elastic
ropes pretty far down, so that he was almost wading across the ropes. Dean and Sam stayed far to
either side to avoid falling down toward Cas's feet, and had to hold onto his spread wings for support
as they inched their way along the still-too-far-apart ropes.

They slowly made their way closer to the chair and its tasseled canopy. Soon, though, it got much
easier to walk, for the closer they got to the canopy, the more the ropes shrank and tightened up. The
last fifty yards was easy; they were now walking comfortably over a thick weave of much smaller
threads that formed a solid carpet, and though it was still something like walking on a broad
trampoline, it seemed to bear even Cas's weight easily. As they drew within a few feet of the edge of
the canopy, the carpet grew firmer still, and began to take on colors and patterns, the colored threads
weaving together into an intricate tapestry underfoot.

They paused about twenty feet away from the canopy. It was already clear that there was nobody
here. There was just the chair (a shape-changing chair, apparently, but a chair), the footrest, the lamp
on its little end-table, the book, and the little throw rug, which was off on its own, off to the side a
bit. That was it.

"This is so frickin' weird," said Sam, staring at the little scene with his hands on his hips.

"Weird doesn't even come close to covering it," said Dean, studying the tapestry picture underfoot.
"Jeez. Look at these pictures. This could be in a museum." The tapestry was woven into amazingly
realistic pictures — fantastic pictures of animals and landscapes, stars and cities. Under Dean's feet
right now was a gorgeous tapestry-image of a redwood tree with some kind of gigantic chicken next
to it.

"Jurassic Chicken," said Dean, pointing down. Cas bent his head down to inspect the picture,
nuffling curiously at the threads.

"This is amazing," said Sam. "Look at the resolution over here! The threads are so tiny!" Cas and
Dean walked over to look; Sam was standing a little closer to the chair, and here the carpet-threads
were so tiny that they seemed practically pixel-size. The tapestry images were now photographic in
quality. All around Sam's feet were amazing renditions of colorful tropical fish, fantastic balloon-
creatures, and squid-like animals that seemed to be swathed in colorful fabrics and holding tiny
semaphore-like flags with their multiple arms.

"It's a high-resolution carpet, can you believe it?" said Sam. "Look at this one. Cas, is that Saturn?"
He pointed to an image of an extraordinarily beautiful ringed planet with an Earth-like moon
hovering in front of it.

"No," said Cas, his big dark head lowered to inspect the picture. "That's not Saturn. That's not one of
Saturn's moons. And I have never seen these creatures before, these squids with the flags. But look at
this picture here." With one talon he tapped a portion of the tapestry near his own feet. It showed a
walled city high on a hill, decorated with tiers of lovely little gardens, with flowering vines cascading
from one terrace to the next. "This is from Earth," Cas said. "This is — or was — Babylon."

"Like... hanging gardens of Babylon?" said Sam. "That Babylon?"

"Yes. It was in ancient Mesopotamia," said Cas. "It was the largest city on Earth for quite some time.
About twenty-five hundred years ago. It was exceptionally beautiful." He raised his head and looked
around. "And that Jurassic Chicken over there, Dean, is also an image of Earth. That is a
Tyrannosaurus rex."

Dean and Sam stared over at the gigantic chicken.
"T-rex was a *chicken*?" said Dean.

"T-rex was a T-rex," said Cas, "and T-rex was feathered, and that's what it looked like. Your scientists are still unaware of its feathers, but whoever built this place knew what a T-rex really looked like. These pictures..." Cas was scanning around a wide area of carpet now. "I wonder if these are particularly beautiful spots, from different times and places around the universe."

"Greatest hits?" suggested Dean.

Sam said slowly, "Okay... then... if this is like, the greatest hits of Creation..." He paused. "Who made this carpet?"

"And whose chair is that?" said Castiel, and they all looked over at the La-Z-Boy.

They inched over to the furniture. A solemn air had settled over the three of them now, and without any discussion they all bunched up a little closer together, Sam and Dean on either side of Castiel, and they had also slowed down, walking very slowly and approaching the chair area with great caution. The ghostly musical chords that were still echoing through the wind added an eerie, ethereal atmosphere.

But the closer they got the more ordinary it all looked. A little oval-shaped braided throw rug (laid, oddly, right on top of the existing tapestry), a chair, a lamp (still shining cheerily despite having no apparent source of power), the footstool and the book.

They discussed the chair for a while, comparing what they each were seeing. It was a definite mystery; Dean was still seeing a La-Z-Boy, Sam an Ikea chair, and Castiel a silken nest.

After a lot of hesitation, they inched closer and discovered the chair could be safely touched. Even odder, when Sam touched the chair, it suddenly looked like an Ikea chair to both Dean and Cas as well. (Sam had insisted on being the one to touch first, after some intense negotiation with Castiel — apparently Sam and Castiel were determined to not let Dean do any more risky moves on his own.) It finally turned out, after more cautious testing, that they could even sit in the chair with no ill effects. When Sam sat in it, the chair took on its Ikea appearance for everyone. When Dean took it over, it took on a La-Z-Boy appearance to everybody.

Cas got in the chair next. It looked like a disastrous move at first, Cas's huge feathered foot coming down on the La-Z-Boy and apparently obliterating it, but all at once Sam and Dean saw not a chair, but a gigantic silken nest, complete with several dozen silken pillows (most of which completely disappeared under Castiel as he happily settled down on top of them). Despite the nest's large size, though, as Cas had said earlier, it was really sized for a human vessel. Cas in his dragon form didn't quite fit into it. But he tried anyway, tucking his front feet under him neatly. "See," he said. "It's a nest."

"Only your front half fits," pointed out Dean, laughing a little, for Cas looked like an overgrown dog that was still trying to fit into a dog-bed that he'd once used as a puppy.

"I don't care," Cas said, wriggling in a little farther. One side of the nest almost collapsed under his weight, his huge hind legs and long tail sprawling out behind. Nonetheless Cas seemed pleased with just his front half in the nest. His huge front feet were soon kneading at a hapless little silk pillow, his
eyes half-closing contentedly and his wings fluffing up a bit. "It's quite comfortable," he reported. "I know it's too small, but it's comfortable anyway. I used to have a nest like this, in Heaven, where I would rest when I had my human vessel." He gave a wistful little sigh, closing his eyes. "See," he said, "if I were in my old human vessel, I would fit just fine—"

Dean blinked. Castiel was, suddenly, in human form.

The dragon form was gone, and Cas was in his old human vessel. It had happened in a single split second, without any apparent transition. All at once Castiel was in the form of his Jimmy vessel, wearing the trenchcoat outfit — though with two big black wings added, which were sticking out through slits in the back of the trenchcoat.

At first Castiel didn't even seem to realize he had changed. He was flopped forward onto his stomach, snuggled into the silken coverlet of the nest, both arms wrapped around the silk pillow, with the trenchcoat spread out across his back and hips and his blue tie dangling down over his hands. Both wings were fluffed out around him. He blinked up at them happily.

"Oh..." Cas said slowly, as they stared down at him. "My neck feels short... and... you both look tall. Did I...." He looked back at himself, froze for a moment, and then scrambled up to his knees, staring at his hands, his wings tensely half-lifted to either side.

"Oh," he said. "My vessel! I'm in my vessel!"

"Cas?" whispered Dean, his breath almost catching in his throat. That face, it was Castiel, it was the old face that Dean loved so well; it was Castiel.

Cas stared up at him, his eyes wide. A moment later Dean was down on his knees in the nest, grabbing Cas and holding him close. It was a little awkward — the wings were in the way, and Cas really wasn't quite in the right position to be hugged. His face ended up smushed sideways onto Dean's chest. But Dean grabbed onto him just the same, wings and all. Sam was laughing now, too, reaching over the nest wall to give Cas several welcoming thumps on the shoulder.

"Welcome back, human-Cas," said Sam.

"How'd you do that?" asked Dean, finally releasing him. Cas scrambled to his feet, looking down at himself.

"I don't know," said Cas, flaring both wings out experimentally and tucking them in again. "It just happened." He looked around at the nest and then glanced at them. "Do you both remember when I got my translation abilities back? Back at the green hill?"

Sam nodded. (Dean seemed unable to do anything else other than stare at Cas.)

"Well," Cas went on, "that was with just one thread nearby. Here there are millions, at least, possibly billions if I'm not mistaken. The power here is so far off the charts I can't even really grasp it. I usually can sense power, but there's so much power in all directions that it's sort of... I can't... I can't even assess... I don't even know how much more there is, than the maximum I can detect, I mean—"

"It's pegging your meter," provided Dean.

"And it's a whole lot of power," summarized Sam.

Cas nodded. "Yes. And apparently this place has the ability to make thoughts into reality — that's what just happened. It is... uh..." He hesitated, looking down at his body again. "It is a god-like power."
Sam said, slowly, "So... I'll say it. We're all thinking the same thing, aren't we? That this is... this is where God hung out? That this chair, this nest or whatever, is God's throne? And, Cas, you were just sitting in God's throne when you had that thought, about you being human. Right?"

Dean and Cas glanced down at the nest.

"So, should we, um, step out of God's throne?" suggested Dean. "Before we have any more... thoughts?"

"Ah, I think so, yes," said Cas, and they both scrambled out of the nest, hand in hand.

"It's a very nice nest," said Cas wistfully, looking back at the silken pillows. His hand tightened a little on Dean's, and Dean thought, Castiel's ideal nest took the form of a nest sized for a human. Interesting....

"Okay, so, if we're right that is where God hangs out," said Sam, oblivious to Dean's wandering thoughts. "Then where's God? Also, are these all of God's things? Is this all he's got?"

They all looked around again, this time walking all around the other pieces of furniture and inspecting them closely. The chair had reverted to its variable appearance. The lamp turned out to have a variable appearance too; Castiel turned out to be seeing it as an old-style candelabra, Sam as a modern blown-glass lamp that was shaped, he said, like a jellyfish (apparently he'd once seen something like it in a modern-art museum), while Dean saw it as a classic, fat-bellied living-room style '70s lamp, complete with lampshade. Dean realized, after a little thought, that it was the exact kind of lamp that Mom and Dad had once had at the old house in Lawrence.

Cas then picked up the paperback book, which instantly changed form to a papyrus scroll as soon as he put his hand on it. He unrolled the scroll and read the title out loud: "The Angel Whisperer: A Compassionate, Nonviolent Approach to Retraining Your Rebellious Angel."

There was a little silence.

"Let me see that," said Dean. Cas handed him the papyrus scroll with a heavy sigh (the title seemed to have rubbed him a little wrong). The scroll immediately changed into a thick, dog-eared paperback manual when Dean took hold of it, and Dean and Cas both jumped. They looked at each other a moment. Dean glanced down at the title. It had changed too:

The Fix-It Manual: How To Repair, Clean, and Maintain Everything* In Your Universe (*black holes excluded)

Dean showed it to the others. Cas commented, "That doesn't exactly engender confidence."

"No shit," said Dean, turning the book over to look at the back cover ("Is your universe's gravity too strong? Are all your stars collapsing before they even get started? Trouble evolving opposable thumbs and tool use? Find out how to fix these common problems, and many more!"). Dean frowned down at the book, saying, "Was this a starter home for him? A fixer-upper? Maybe he upgraded to a bigger universe and just moved out." He held the book out to Sam, saying, "You want to give it a try?"

Sam took hold of the book, and immediately it was an iPad.

"It's old," Sam reported, looking it over. "For an iPad, I mean. First generation."

"Guess God hasn't upgraded recently," said Dean.
Sam switched it on. It activated with a soft click. "There's wi-fi here," reported Sam, peering at the screen.

"You're frickin' kidding me," said Dean.

"Network name is Universe," said Sam, tapping a few keys. "I don't know the password."

"Um... 'hallelujah'?" said Dean. Sam tried that; it didn't work. They then tried "Amen," and "God," with no success.

"Try Fiat lux," suggested Cas, leaning over Sam's shoulder. Sam raised an eyebrow, and tapped it in.

Dean, peering over Sam's other shoulder, saw that Sam had actually managed to log in.

"Holy shit, it worked," said Dean. "What's Fiat lux?"

"Let there be light," said Cas drily.

Dean laughed. Sam just said, "Crappy security. Way too guessable. Look—" He pointed down to a Gmail app at the bottom, which had an incredibly long red number at the top of its little icon. "Looks like God has over three trillion unread emails," said Sam, and suddenly Dean and Sam couldn't stop laughing. Cas squinted at them curiously.

"He's never gonna catch up!" said Sam.

"Just imagine the spam!" said Dean. "What a nightmare!"

"New ones are coming in right now," said Sam, still chuckling. He'd opened the mail app, and they watched as emails flooded in, the page refreshing every second to show thousands more. "Wow, tons every second."

"Prayers," guessed Cas. "Prayers he never heard."

"Prayers he won't ever hear," said Dean, a little softly, and the laughter began to die.

A message popped up on the screen: This iPad has not been backed up for 542 million years. Back up to the Cloud now?

"Don't back it up, it'll take forever," suggested Dean. "And get out of this email app, it's just getting depressing. What else does it have?"

The iTunes library turned to be enormous. The first several playlists turned out to include Gregorian chants, a collection of Native American pow-wow drumming, the complete Handel's Messiah, and a playlist titled "Frog Calls of South America" that turned to be, exactly as advertised, recordings of over 367 different species of frogs from South America. "I'm gonna bet he's got everything," said Dean. "See what else is in the other apps." Sam switched over to a Kindle app and opened it up.

A book launched immediately, presumably the one God had been in the middle of reading: The Complete Guide to Locks and Locksmithing.

"Jeez," said Dean. "Were people trying to break into the universe? Thieves?" He had a thought. "The Darkness?"

"And he was reading up on it on an iPad?" said Sam, a little doubtfully.

"It's not really an iPad, you know," said Cas. "It's just that an iPad is a familiar form of information-
retrieval for you, Sam. One that your brain defaulted to."

"Yeah, I get that," said Sam, closing the Kindle app. "Okay. We could spend all day poking around in this, but, are we learning anything useful?"

"Well..." said Dean, "God hasn't been checking his email for a while. And he was reading up on locks and repairs, and dealing with rebellious angels." Cas's eyes dropped a little at that, and Dean (who just happened to be standing right next to him) said, "Cas, it can't have been you he was reading up on, back then. It had to have been Lucifer who was causing him trouble, right?"

Cas gave him a rather grim look. "I had my moments," he said. "Even back then. That's why they stripped me of my archangel status." Dean and Sam exchanged a silent look.

"Well, look, I'm sure you had your reasons," said Dean, clapping Cas on the shoulder. "And it was a long time ago." Cas gave him a little smile, and Dean left his hand on Cas's shoulder, giving it a reassuring squeeze. There was something really wonderful about being able to just reach out and clap him on the shoulder again; something marvelous about having him so close and so... well, so human-sized. Because, as impressive and gorgeous as Cas's dragon form was, as much as Dean loved helping Cas take care of his feathers, there was something wonderful about being able to stand right next to Castiel and look over at his blue eyes from just a foot away.

And there was also something wonderful about knowing he was in the same kind of body that Dean was in. It made Cas seem more... accessible.

It caused Dean a warm little thrill — a sense of real delight that seemed to run right through his body. Cas raised his eyes and looked back at him, and then Castiel took Dean's hand in his own, and for a long moment Dean could only grin at him stupidly.

"You know," Sam said, oblivious to this silent exchange (he was still looking down at the iPad in his hands), "this is all fascinating, but I'm starting to wonder if we're actually going to be able to do anything useful here."

"And if we'll ever get home," added Cas softly, breaking eye contact with Dean to look around at the millions of glowing threads. Dean, following his gaze, realized Cas was right; for where was the thread they'd rode in on? They would never find it again. Even when Cas had first skidded to a stop, they'd already lost track of which thread was which.

They all began inspecting the objects again, hoping to learn something more. Cas went over to examine the lamp (which became a candelabra, of course, as soon as he touched it). Sam continued poking through the iPad. Dean took a few steps back to survey the whole scene, wondering if there was something he'd missed. Chair, iPad, lamp, footstool, and...

And the oval-shaped throw rug. On top of a tapestry-carpet. Dean frowned at it. "Why'd God put a rug on top of a rug, anyway?" he said. "And why way over there?" The throw rug wasn't in a logical place near the chair; it was off on its own, about forty feet away.

Also, it was sagging a little. Dean walked up to its edge and flipped it back, and nearly fell into a bottomless pit.

There was a gigantic gaping hole under the oval rug. Dean wobbled on the edge for a terrifying
second. The oval rug, disturbed from its delicate position, slithered inside and was gone in a flash, vanishing into darkness.

A second later Cas's talons closed around Dean and yanked him back from the edge. Cas had somehow popped back into dragon form.

Cas dragged Dean safely back from the bottomless pit and dropped him in a heap by Cas's side. "STOP DOING THAT," snapped Castiel, his fangs bared, glaring down at Dean with his ears pinned. "Stop falling into bottomless pits. Please."

"I really did not mean to do that this time," said Dean, scrambling to his feet. "I swear." He actually felt a little shaky; something about that black pit had been much more unsettling than the white thread. He felt so shaky, in fact, that it took him a moment to process that Cas was no longer human. "Cas!" Dean said, putting a hand on Cas's broad black nose. "How are you a dragon again?"

"I think I did that," said Sam, and Dean looked over to see that Sam was getting out of the Ikea chair. "I realized I wasn't close enough to grab you," said Sam. "This seemed quicker. Sorry, I didn't mean to play God or anything, but—"

"Jesus christ," Dean muttered. "We can't be here two seconds without mucking up the universe, can we? I lost God's throw-rug, too." He peered over at the hole, trying to edge around Cas's huge glaring face (Cas was totally blocking his way) to get a peek at the bottomless pit. "Should we take a look, though?"


He began pushing Dean back with his nose, relentlessly. Dean stumbled backwards under the gentle assault; Cas didn't stop till he had pushed Dean all the way back to the area with the chair and the lamp and footstool. "Now just stay here by God's throne and don't do anything stupid," ordered Cas. "You too, Sam," he added, turning toward Sam with a glare. "Stand here by Dean. And neither of you play God, either."

"Look who's talking," Dean couldn't resist saying.

Cas rolled his eyes. "Yes, yes, very funny. But just stay out of God's throne, would you? Just STAY PUT. And DO NOT DESTROY THE UNIVERSE. For an entire minute. Got it?"

"Okay, okay," Sam said, hands up. "Got it. We'll both just sit down."

"We're sitting" added Dean, sitting on the black footstool. "See? Sitting. Not moving." Sam sat down at his side; the footstool was just wide enough for both of them. Castiel looked somewhat mollified (though his ears were still pinned back) and he finally turned away from them and crept toward the hole in the carpet, wings wide, stretching his long neck out. Sam and Dean sat and watched, both of them itching to get closer.

Even from here they could see that a whole section of carpet had come loose, the beautiful pictures undone to form a ragged hole about eight by four feet. Long sections of loose thread were waving at the edges in the ever-present wind. It seemed the braided throw-rug had been shielding the edges from the wind, and now many of the loose threads were lifting up in the breeze. The damage was already pretty bad, some of the loose ends forming long waving strands that were ten or even fifteen feet long. And already they were fraying further; the wind seemed to be getting stronger even as they looked.

Cas crept cautiously closer to the pit, spreading his wings stiffly upward in his most cautious "ready-
for-emergency-takeoff” position. He stretched his long neck out as far as he could, till he could peer down the fraying hole. "Careful, Cas!” said Dean, worried already. He and Sam both sprang to their feet (twenty seconds of staying put seemed to be about their limit).

For a long moment Cas stared down into the hole.

Nothing happened.

Then something seemed to catch Cas's attention near the edge of the hole. Cas turned his head to the border of the ragged carpet and delicately plucked up something small and shining with his teeth. He retreated then, backing rapidly to rejoin Sam and Dean, wings still flared out tensely. Something was glinting between his teeth. One of the longest threads still seemed stuck to it, and it trailed all the way over from the bottomless pit. Cas brought it over to them, huffing a little in excitement, like a gigantic black retriever who'd found a particularly interesting stick.

"What is it?” asked Sam.

"Ring of power or something?” asked Dean. "What was down the hole? Did you see Mordor?"

Cas spat the thing out at their feet. "Not a ring," he said. "I think it's a paper clip."

"You found a... paper clip?” said Dean, squinting down at it.

Cas amended, "Well, something like a paper clip."

Sam and Dean squatted down to study the little thing, and Cas lowered his head between Sam and Dean, turning his snout a little to the side so that he could squint at the object with one big blue eye. All three of them stared at the "paper clip," which turned out to be an ornately coiled bit of silver-colored metal that was some two inches long, inscribed with mysterious little runes. The end of one long frayed thread was still stuck in one end of the clip.

"Sorta like a hair clip, I think?” said Sam, poking at it cautiously with his little finger. Nothing happened when he touched it, and he gently picked it up, turning it over in his hand. Dean touched the end of the frayed thread, and they all jumped when the fragile thread disintegrated into a tiny shower of little silver minnow-blobs. The minnow-blobs wafted loose in the air and evaporated.

The thread had lost some six inches of its length.

"Uh,” said Dean. "I hope that wasn't bad."

"I think it was already about to disintegrate," Cas said. "It's been lying in the wind for some time. The clip was a few feet away from the edge of the hole. I think it was outside the rug, exposed to the wind. It's the wind that's fraying the threads."

"It's broken,” said Sam, fiddling with the little clip. "Look, it's supposed to close, like a hair clip, but it can't anymore. The bottom half's gone."

"Yes,” agreed Cas, "My guess is that was holding all the loose threads together and stopping the hole from getting bigger, but it broke. And, to answer your other question, Dean, there is nothing down the hole. And I do mean, nothing. There's just darkness. Emptiness. There's nothing else. And—" Cas paused, lifting his head to look back over at the hole. "The threads are still unraveling. Quite rapidly, actually. I think even if you hadn't touched the rug, Dean, it would all be unraveling anyway. It's the wind, unravelling everything. It was unraveling right as I looked at it. And the more it unravels, the larger the hole gets and then the wind gets stronger and it all unravels even faster."
"It's the wind that's unraveling it?" repeated Sam slowly. He looked up at the black sky overhead. "The wind. And the wind's coming from..."

Dean looked up too, at the blackness that was visible around the edges of the little canopy, and at last he understood.

"The wind is from the Darkness," Dean said, standing up slowly, looking up at the eerily empty black sky. "That's not just dark," he said. "That's the Darkness. Isn't it. The canopy was here to protect the tapestry from the wind... but it's not enough protection."

They all looked up. And now they noticed that parts of the canopy were fraying, too, more loose threads whipping in the wind.

Something else clicked into place. "The wind is the Darkness," said Dean. He felt sure.

It was all coming clear now. Sam looked down at the clip again, flipping it around in his hand. The clip was shaped something like a toothed jaw. But, as Sam had pointed out, the lower part was gone.

Then Sam's eyes shifted, and soon he was staring at Dean's arm. So was Cas. Dean looked down slowly, too. At his right arm, where once there had been a brand in the shape of a lower jaw. A shape, it was suddenly clear, that was awfully like the lower half of the strange little clip.

"The clip is the Mark of Cain," said Castiel.

For a long moment, the only sound was the ghostly humming of the threads in the wind.

"The Mark of Cain is a cosmic paper clip?" Dean said, turning the broken clip around in his hands. They'd been discussing it for a few minutes, each of them taking turns inspecting the broken clip, hoping to see some way they could repair it. But it was irreparably shattered; the whole lower half was definitely missing.

"Well, more like a binder clip, maybe?" suggested Sam. "Or a barrette, really. A hair barrette. see, because, it fastens here at the end—"

"Okay, the Mark of Cain is a cosmic hair barrette," said Dean. "Not much better." He gave a heavy sigh, handing the clip back to Sam for further inspection. "I guess it makes a weird kind of sense. The clip was holding frayed bits of, what, the, the Earth together? Is that what all the threads are?" He gestured around at the vast plain of shining threads that stretched out to the horizon in all directions. "Souls, maybe? Or, parts of the Earth? Continents? Planets? What is all this?"

"I don't know," said Cas, gazing around. "But clearly it needs to stay together. The Darkness is simply unraveling it all. Blowing it all apart. And the Mark was holding the frayed parts together. I suspect the Mark was multi-dimensional." He nosed at the clip in Sam's hand, adding, "The brand on your arm, Dean, was likely a dimensional extension of the clip. A projection of it into your home dimension — into the material plane, I mean. And, often with multidimensional objects, affecting them in one dimension affects them in all the other dimensions as well. So..." He sighed. "When we removed the mark from your arm, we not only removed the Darkness's effect on you, we also broke the clip itself, back in this dimension."

"But... why?" said Dean. The frustration and the guilt were building all over again just thinking
about it. That hellish year with the Mark... and then letting the Darkness out. What had it all been for? "What was the point?" Dean demanded. "It's such a stupid design! Why?"

"Chill," said Sam, reaching out to give Dean a little touch on the shoulder. "We all did our best."

"I can't chill when the universe is falling apart!" said Dean, spinning on him. He grabbed the broken clip again and held it up. "I'm serious! Look at this thing! It was such a stupid design! Why have it on my arm at all?"

"It's a fair question," said Cas, his big black head tipped as he studied the broken clip in Dean's hand. "It could have been a way for the person bearing the mark to monitor the well-being of the clip. Monitoring it remotely, so to speak. The idea may have been, originally, that whoever wore the Mark would be able to tell if the clip was still okay."

"Hasn't God ever heard of a frickin' security camera?" said Dean, who was getting angrier and angrier the more he thought about it. "Or, you know, maybe just at least TELLING the person who has the Mark not to take the frigging thing OFF? And, let me get one more thing straight here, God just made the clip and just left? He was hanging out here in his recliner, saw the entire friggin' universe fraying to pieces, thought, oh, I'll just slap a paper clip on that and give it to my buddy Lucifer, hey! All set! Now I'll go on vacation for the next billion years! And he just walked off? And left the universe hanging together by a frickin' paper clip? I mean, what the fuck?" His voice was getting louder, and Sam and Cas were both just gazing at him silently, but Dean couldn't seem to stop. "The whole universe is depending on this friggin' paper clip and he ties it to a tattoo and flings it on some jerk like me who doesn't even know what it is? And he doesn't TELL us that? If we had just known, maybe we wouldn't have doomed the entire friggin' universe!"

There was an awkward little silence.

"Well, yes," said Cas, with a little nod. "Yes. There is that."

"I didn't know what it was!" said Dean. "I didn't know it was holding the universe together...."

"None of us did," said Sam, quietly.

"Ever heard of redundancy, God?" Dean yelled up to the canopy, and to the black sky beyond. "Ever think of, I don't know, two paper clips instead of one? Just in case? God frigging damn it all —" Nearly seething with frustration now, Dean pulled back one foot to kick the recliner.

"Whoa, whoa, Dean," said Castiel, one wing shifting to block Dean's foot. "Don't kick God's La-Z-Boy. I don't know, it doesn't seem like a good move."

Dean let out an aggrieved sigh. Okay, maybe wasn't the best idea to kick God's La-Z-Boy.

So he spun to kick the black footrest instead.

"Maybe don't kick God's footrest either?" suggested Sam.

"God doesn't need a footrest!" said Dean. "God has a La-Z-Boy! It's got a built-in footrest! He doesn't need this one!" And with that he kicked the black leather footrest, hard.

"Owww," he said a second later, clutching at his foot. The black footrest was much heavier than it looked, and it hadn't budged at all when Dean kicked it.

Dean began to feel a little silly, the anger draining away as he bent over, rubbing his sore foot. He started to say, "That thing must be frickin' titanium—" when the black footrest shivered, all on its
own, and bounced a couple inches away.

A/N - oooo! More soon. :)

About that clip: So as soon as S10 ended I was consumed with the puzzle of why removing a tattoo from Dean’s arm would unleash an ancient evil. How, exactly, could the Mark be a “lock”? How could it be holding something like the Darkness back? I tried to think multi-dimensionally and I came up with this image of the Darkness as something that was simply fraying Creation apart, like a wind fraying the edges of a flag. And then I thought: suppose the Darkness was already fraying Creation - suppose some damage had already been underway? What if the Mark of Cain was a sort of device that was holding all the fraying pieces together? A multidimensional hair barrette, to use Sam’s analogy. (Again, this is all totally A/U - I’m going with an idea of the Darkness that is sort of an implacable cosmic force, not a single human-sized being). Then maybe removing the Mark from Dean’s arm broke the device, and let the fraying start up again. Twined through all this is one of my favorite metaphors for Creation, the idea that God “wove” Creation together, like a cloth woven out of threads - making beautiful patterns that only he can see.

And Dean’s definitely got a point that the Mark was a sort of half-assed solution. Another big puzzle about the S10 finale, for me anyway, was that it seems like making all of Creation dependent on a single tattoo on a single man is, a removable tattoo at that, is... a bit of a poorly planned solution. A bit risky. Hmm.

And.... what about that black footrest? And what are the colored threads, anyway?

More soon! I fly crosscountry again tomorrow but will try to post the 2nd half before I fly. Hope you’re enjoying this. :) Please let me know if there was something in particular that you liked!
A Minor Mistake

They all froze, staring at the black footrest. It was still now.

"It moved," said Sam. "You all saw that, right? It moved."

"It did move," said Castiel slowly. "And... Dean... you may have a point. God doesn't need another footrest. So why is this one here? And, now that I think about it, why is this the only object that looks identical to all of us?" He lowered his head and sniffed it experimentally. An odd look came into his eye.

"I should have sniffed this before..." he said softly. He lifted one talon and tugged at the box. "It's very heavy," he reported, but he managed to shift it around in a little circle, turning it so that he could inspect all sides. It had brass hasps, and was covered with shining black leather; it was about two feet wide, a foot across, and maybe a foot and a half tall, and it sat on four squat little wooden feet.

"This isn't a footrest at all," Sam said, bending over to peer at it. "It's a box. Look, see, there's a little clasp there." He pointed, and Dean and Castiel drew closer to look at the tiny clasp that Sam had noticed. It was just a simple hook-and-eye latch on the side of the box, the hook nestled snugly in the eye.

"So... do we open it?" said Sam.

They all looked at each other.

Dean said, "What if it's like Pandora's box? What if we let all the sins of the world out?"

"Pandora's box was constructed after sin was in the world," said Castiel. "This is much older. I believe it pre-dates sin. It pre-dates Lucifer's fall, at least."

"Besides, we already ruined the universe," pointed out Sam. "What else can go wrong?"

Then the footrest shivered again. It shuddered all over, just like a little animal. They all jumped back a little, but then the footrest let out a little sound: a soft, low, cooing sound. Cas's eyes went very round, and all his feathers stood up at once, so much so that he looked like a huge pin-cushion. He slowly extended his long neck toward the box, holding his head very low to the ground, his feathers slowly sleeking down again.

Castiel made a very odd sound: a tiny little high-pitched eep noise, almost a peeping sound. It sounded almost like a mouse's squeak, or a newborn kitten's meow. It seemed totally incongruous coming from such a large creature.

I've heard that sound before, thought Dean. After a moment he placed it: He'd heard it when he first met the baby parrot (baby Cas, that is). He'd heard it, faintly, when baby-Cas had been crawling over to him on those stubby little wings, and he'd heard it again when he'd picked up baby-Cas and nestled him in his hands.

Dean had wondered, since, if it might be an instinctive sound, for angels. Maybe it was the sound that a newly hatched angel might make to call to its caretaker.

Or to its parent.

The footrest cooed again.
Dean reached out and flipped the latch open, and Sam gently lifted the lid.

The lid flipped back to reveal only a dim gray space that seemed impenetrable to sight, like a box of gray cloud. But a human foot emerged... followed by a knee, and an entire leg.

It was such a bizarre sight that Dean, Castiel, and Sam all scrambled a couple steps backwards, Cas raising his head while Dean and Sam backed up under his chin. It seemed impossible for a whole leg to come out of such a small space, and it was definitely impossible that an entire person could be inside there. But a whole leg was extending out.

It stayed there for a moment. The toes wiggled, but there was no other movement.

Next came an elbow, squeezing out next to the leg. "An arm," muttered Sam. "It's a wing," whispered Cas. Dean gave Cas a quick glance; were they all seeing different things, as they had with the chair?

Attached to the elbow was a fairly normal-looking forearm (at least, from Dean's perspective; who knew what Cas was seeing). Finally the hand emerged. Another leg emerged next, then the rest of the upper arm and even a shoulder, then a second arm squeezed out next to the shoulder. There was something very peculiar and unsettling about the entire process, as if the human who was now emerging from the box had been made of rubber and had been packed into an impossibly small shape, with all the limbs dislocated. Whoever he was, he seemed to be expanding to normal size and assembling his joints together even as he climbed out of the box.

Both legs were out now, then a pair of hips (it was a man, wearing a bright blue Speedo swim trunks of all things), a ribcage, and finally the head.

The man stood, slowly, his back to them and his head down, looking very crooked and misshapen at first. But he straightened gradually, with some fairly nauseating cracking noises as the joints assembled.

"Shoulder's still not together," the man commented; indeed, he was alarmingly hunch-backed with one arm sticking out in entirely the wrong way, and both feet seemed to be upside-down. They still couldn't see his face, because his head was hanging down at a horrible angle, as if his neck were broken. "Spine needs some reassembly too," the man said, sounding perfectly cheerful about it. "Ah, the feet are wrong, aren't they? Apologies, I'm a little out of shape at this taking-a-familiar-form act; haven't been able to really stretch out for a while, you know. Hope I'm getting your language right, is this making sense? You humans, you're Americans, right? Twenty-first century Earth?"

"Uh," said Dean.

"Y-yes," said Sam.

Dean and Cas and Sam all stared as the crooked man gave a few more jumps and shuffles, shoulders and hips clicking into place. At last he put both hands on his head, fixed his broken neck with a squishy-sounding SHK noise, lifted his head, and turned around to face them with a smile.

"Chuck?" said Sam and Dean simultaneously. Cas let out a very surprised-sounding snort, crouching down as low as he could, with his head right between Sam and Dean.
It sure looked like Chuck. (Not that they'd ever seen Chuck clad only in a bright blue Speedo.) But
the man smiled more broadly and said, "Not exactly. You're seeing me in the form you were
expecting, the form you're most used to. I'd hazard a guess that my feathered child here is seeing me
in quite another form. A feathery form, Cassiel? Dozens of shining wings, beams of radiant light all
around, all that?"

Cas gave a slow nod.

"Oh," the man said, peering into Cas's eyes. "No longer an archangel? What on Earth happened,
child?"

Castiel cleared his throat. He had hunched his back a little, and now his wings tucked in tight. "It's...
a long story," he said, his rumbly voice uneven.

The man stepped closer and put his hand on Cas's snout. Cas flinched, closing his eyes, and a shiver
ran through his body. The man was silent a long moment, staring steadily at Cas, one hand still on
Cas's long black nose.

"I see," said the Chuck-like man quietly. "I see. I have been gone a long time, haven't I, Cassiel—
or, Castiel, is it, now? The truth is, I made a... well, a minor mistake. And you were one of many
who have paid the price. I'm sorry, child."

"Is this a dream?" said Dean, suddenly a little doubtful. "Sorry, but this, ah, this benevolent-
returning-father act seems a little too good to be true. This some kind of vision or something?"

"Ah, a skeptic!" said the man, giving a little chuckle as he withdrew his hand. "I do love a good
skeptic. I mean, why would I build such an interesting brain if I didn't want you to use it? No, this is
all real. You're all really here. Though..." He waved a hand around at the vast field of shining threads
that was spreading out in all directions. "Though there's little distinction here between thought and
reality, as I'm sure you've noticed. We're just outside the universe, on the lowest plane of all, the
foundation, you see, and here, what you think you are is what you are. You're all seeing me, and
shaping me — and each other —" (a glance at Castiel here) "— the way you are accustomed to
seeing each other. So 'real' is rather a matter of opinion here, but, yes, you're really here... and so am
I."

Dean said, "And... just to clarify... you're... um..." He paused. It was unexpectedly hard to get the
name out. There was a little hush, Sam and Cas waiting expectantly as Dean gathered up his
courage.

"You're... God?" Dean at last finally managed to say.

It was partly the shock of it all, the eeriness of the place and the strangeness of the man, that made it
so hard to speak. But it was also partly that of all the ways Dean had imagined finding God (there'd
been a variety of little fantasies, most of which involved Dean giving God a good talking-to)... an
image of chatting with a nearly-naked Chuck who was clad only in a bright blue Speedo, with a five-
speed plush suede La-Z-Boy recliner at his side, had not really been at the top of the list.

The man shrugged... and nodded. "You could call me that."

Castiel added a long, complex series of growl-rumbles. This time it wasn't English; he seemed to be
saying a word that had no English translation.

"Yes, you could call me that, too," the man said to Cas.

Dean swallowed, thinking, God. This is God. It still didn't seem believable.
"But why do you look like Chuck?" pointed out Sam. "Chuck was a prophet, not a god."

Dean had to add, "And not all that impressive a prophet, to be perfectly honest."

"Your 'Chuck' is not God, exactly, no," said God. "Though he might believe he is. He is ... related to me. If you ever met him, likely you now sense some similarity, which is why you've subconsciously assigned me his face."

"But then... okay, why the hell are you in a blue Speedo?" demanded Dean.

"You are each are seeing me in clothing of your own devising," said God. He glanced down at his Speedo-clad hips. "Maybe you — Dean, right? — maybe you, Dean, like to see men in these little blue bits of fabric. And if that's what you like, who am I to complain?" He winked at Dean, who fell completely silent, with a nervous glance over at Sam and Cas. It was true that he'd kind of had a bit of a thing for the Australian Olympic men's swim team that one year, but... God knew about that?

"Don't worry about any of that, Dean," continued God. (Dean felt a hot blush flood over his cheeks. God was hearing his thoughts??) God grinned at him. "It's all part of what makes your species so very entertaining!" went on God, and then he began looking around at their surroundings. He smiled when he saw the La-Z-Boy. "Nice shape you put on the throne. Six speeds? I'll have to try it. But... drat. Will you look at that." Now he'd turned around enough to survey the bottomless pit. "Look at the damage. That's really spreading!" Dean, Sam and Cas all flinched when they looked over the hole; it had already gotten much larger, just in the short time that they'd been focused on God's emergence from the black leather footrest.

"The wind's picking up," commented God. "Look at it just tearing everything apart. The whole place'll be gone in hours."

"Did we do that?" said Dean, a sinking feeling in his stomach. "Did I? When I pulled the rug back?"

But God shook his head. "No. Well, sort of. Well, yes, a bit, but it's not your fault. What I mean is, it was already in motion; it was bound to happen." He walked right over to the hole, and then on to the hole, without falling, gazing down at the blackness below. "Once the clip failed it was inevitable," he said, bending over to inspect the fraying edge of the hole. "It's accelerated a bit now that you three are walking around on the carpet — your weight is pulling at the threads — but you had to come here anyway to set me free, and it was all starting to fray apart anyway. Look, up overhead, even the canopy's going. Hold on, I've really got to get hold of all these loose threads or it'll all come undone —" and then he was dashing around the tapestry-carpet, picking up the ends of dozens of the loose, long threads that were waving around in the breeze, and gathering them together in a bundle. He moved astonishingly fast, in almost a blur, and as soon as he got a good bunch together he ran over to Cas, poked at his nose and said, "Open up. Hold this, will you?" Cas, startled, opened his mouth, and God stuffed a bundle of threads right into Cas's mouth, and pushed Cas's jaw closed again. Cas sat there frozen, mouth obediently closed, his wide eyes tracking God's movements as God dashed away again.

"Oh and, Castiel," God called back over his shoulder as he sprinted back over to the fraying hole, "Don't bite on them, there's a good boy. Each of those threads is a galaxy, you know. We don't want to chop them short. Well, not if we don't have to."

"A galaxy?" muttered Dean. Sam seemed too stunned to even say anything, and Castiel just flattened his ears.

God was buzzing around the room quite fast now, moving with amazing speed and gathering up more threads, which he seemed to be collecting in a certain order and putting into precise little
bundles according to some unknowable pattern. Soon he gave Dean a bundle of threads to hold, and continued his work, running around the room. "Hold this one, too," he said to Sam, stuffing yet another bundle into Sam's hands. "And this and this and this — (Cas soon had a bundle under each front foot, and one tucked under an alula) " — and try not to drop any of them. Drat, everything's really on the point of unraveling completely... and look, another whole different hole starting over there... " He zipped over to the far side of the carpet, where indeed another little fraying spot had started. "Likely because of the loss of tension when my clip broke."

"These are galaxies?" said Sam at last, staring down at his own bundle of shining threads. "Those little dots... are they stars?"

"Yes," said God, hard at work now at the fraying edge of the largest hole, his arms a blur as he wove threads back together. "This reweaving probably won't work, I've tried it before, but I'll give it one more try... Yes, Sam, the threads are actually timelines of galaxies, with all the planes folded up into one thread. A single cross-section would be the galaxy at a single point in time. An entire thread is the galaxy at all points in time, at all the points in its life, and so, if you travel down the thread you're going forward in time. Technically, if you really want to know, it's the gravitational outflow string from the giant black hole at the center of each galaxy, which tugs on every star in the galaxy and holds it all together, and it's all anchored here. Or —" he sighed, reaching up overhead to grab a long loose thread that had just blown loose in the breeze, trying work it into the weaving that he was doing — "they're supposed to be anchored here. This wind has really gotten stronger."

"The Darkness," said Dean. "The Darkness is trying to tear it all apart."

God nodded, as he wove knots rapidly into the edge of the hole. "The Darkness is actually fairly mindless. It's just what was here before I wove all this. Wind and dark. Chaos. It's like the wind fraying a flag apart, to pick an analogy you may understand. The wind is not actually evil, you know. That is, it's not consciously trying to destroy the flag. It can't help doing it; it's just a natural force."

"If you don't mind me saying so," said Sam, rather cautiously, "This whole, um, fabric tapestry thing does not seem to be... very..." he hesitated, ".... well built."

"Yup," agreed God, apparently unfazed at the criticism. "Bit of a shoddy job, to be honest. Actually I'll let you in a secret," he added, and he jumped up to Cas's shoulder in a single smooth bound. Cas flinched, but held his ground, rolling his eyes slightly so that he could keep God in view while still holding the threads in his mouth. God said, "Stick out your right wing, Castiel, there's a good fellow," and he began scampering up the leading edge of Cas's wing with all four limbs, as nimbly as a lemur. "Angle it up, up, yes, right up to the canopy there, thanks." He was soon sitting way up on Cas's broad black flight feathers, near the tip of the wing. "Nice gold on those alulas, by the way!" he said appreciatively. "Lift me up even higher, would you? I need to re-knot that section overhead." Cas lifted the wing higher, till God could reach the frayed canopy edge. There he set to work in a strangely blurry motion, a section of torn tapestry re-weaving itself almost before their eyes. "I didn't mean to be God," he called down from Cas's wing, as he worked away. (Dean, watching open-mouthed from below, had the distinct impression that God had somehow sprouted several dozen accessory arms that were all moving slightly too fast to be seen.) "What I mean is," God called down, "I didn't know my creation would start to house so much life. Or any life at all. Took me entirely by surprise, to be honest." He paused in his ceaseless blur of activity briefly to glance down at them (yes, he definitely had too many arms. Eight? Twelve? They seemed impossible to count, blurring even when he was holding them still). "Imagine you have been sent to jail for a week," he continued gaily, returning to his hyper-speed canopy-weaving. "Say there's some mud in your cell. To entertain yourself you make a little sculpture. You decorate it. Imagine then you notice that little creatures have colonized your sculpture. Tiny ants, say."
"Yeah, I can see already where this is going," said Dean, "and could you pick something else than ants?" (He'd always disliked it when powerful entities insisted on comparing humans to insects.)

"Well, okay, bunny rabbits then," said God, working away. "Tiny bunny rabbits colonize your sculpture. They set up a home there. But you didn't make it sturdy enough to last very long. You didn't bother to put together a permanent foundation, and the whole thing starts to fall apart. And the poor bunnies are all going to die. And the thing is... it really wasn't in your original plan anyway, from an aesthetic sense that is, to have miniature rabbits all over your sculpture. You hadn't really planned on the miniature-rabbit thing at all. It's like if you were painting the Mona Lisa and suddenly there are thousands of little bunnies in the painting. But you take a closer look and it turns out the bunnies are really, well..."

He paused, smiling down at them.

"They're marvelous! They're intricate. They're beautiful! They have incredible little lives, brilliant little glowing souls, and the most amusing little thoughts of their own. And cute ears, and they're, y'know, so fluffy, and they're just wonderful little things! Flawed, of course, and terribly foolish, but so endearing. You get fond of the bunnies and you try to tweak the sculpture to accommodate them. But it wasn't designed for that and it still has this flaw at the base... and one day the base cracks, and —" He stopped, looking down at them.

"The Darkness," said Dean, slowly.

God nodded. He turned back to his work, his dozens (hundreds?) of arms whirling away again. "The flaw at the base of the sculpture," he said. "The crack in the foundation. Or, as you're seeing it now, the wind at the edge of the tapestry. It just started to happen, just automatically, just because I hadn't built the thing well enough. So... I found a quick way to grab the loose threads that were about to unravel, and slapped a clip on them, a clip that pinned them all together and to an anchor point." He glanced at Dean. "The anchor point was in your dimension, since one of my strongest children was there. Lucifer. I gave it to him to guard — to monitor, really. The anchor point was very small. From your perspective it would have looked like a little shape, sort of a hook, actually, but —"

"The Mark of Cain," said Dean.

"Yes. It was a quick fix, you understand, not perfect at all. For one thing, it tugs constantly at that one point. The chaos of the unraveling threads leaks through. Later, while I was thinking about it in my lockbox — I had quite a lot of millennia to think about what I'd done wrong, you see — I realized it probably would have conveyed a deep sense of wrongness, I think, to the bearer."

"That's one way to put it," Dean said. "It really kind of sucks if you want to know the truth." Sam elbowed him sharply.

"I would imagine so," God said, heaving a tired sigh. "Sorry about that. Castiel, my good child, could you bring me back down. Thanks so much. Your wings look quite lovely with the gold on them, you know. That's how you got through, isn't it? How you got through to the green hill? Because you love him?" Here God, still seated on Cas's wing, looked over at Dean for a long a moment. Dean, startled, stared first at God and then at Castiel, who just gave Dean a slow blink, a hint of a smile curling up the edge of his wide mouth.

God glanced over at Sam next, and then looked back at Cas. "Ah. Both of them. You love both of them. In different ways. Love, and trust?"

Cas still couldn't speak, for his mouth was still full of galaxy-threads, but he gave God a firm nod. (Dean found himself almost choking up.)
A smile spread over God's face. He hopped off Cas's wing and put his hands on his hips, beaming at Sam, Dean and Castiel (who all were still clinging to their bundles of stray threads). "At last," God said appreciatively. "At last. An angel who loves mortal beings, mortal beings who love an angel. A family that contains both forms of life, both types of spirit. I knew, when I was sitting in that box for all those eons, I knew it would happen sooner or later. Well... actually, I didn't know, but I hoped." He turned back to the frayed edges of the hole, working away. "You see, I had this clever idea when I was first making the clip. It was clear the clip was not going to be enough. There needed to be a better fix. I had an idea for a better fix but it was a bit of a delicate job. In the meantime the clip was going to hold everything together. Just temporarily, of course. So then—"

"I have a question," said Dean loudly.

God stopped and turned to look at him.

"So you just made all of Creation dependent on one tattoo on one guy," said Dean, "and you didn't think to tell anybody why it was so important? Tell them to, y'know, not remove it?"

"Dean!" Sam hissed at his side.

"What?" Dean snapped at Sam, a little irritated.

"Don't interrupt God," Sam hissed in a stage-whisper. "You already kicked his foot-stool. When he was inside it."

"Well, you used his Ikea chair," Dean hissed back, "and hacked into his email—"

"It's okay," said God. "You're quite right, Dean. The clip was only a stopgap. I never meant for it to last more than a day. The plan, originally, was for Lucifer to hold the clip for one day while I built a much sturdier solution, a much better way of stabilizing Creation against the Darkness. But I knew the construction of the permanent solution would be dangerous." He stopped his endless motion and looked at Castiel. "So I forbade any angels to follow me here. I wanted to keep the angels away — sorry, Castiel, forgive me, but it became clear quite early on that certain of the angels would come here and mill about and have lots of opinions and just get in the way. You know how toddlers are when you're trying to get any work done. Imagine ten thousand toddlers with wings and you get the picture. Anyway, I told them to stay away while I was working on the better fix. I put up a barrier."

"That white fog," guessed Sam, as God whisked Sam's bundle of galaxy-threads out of his hands. "The fog around the hill."

God nodded, back at work on the weaving again. "It shreds etheric beings. The only way for an angel to get through would be if they had the help of a mortal species that they trusted enough to hold them together. I figured it would take several million years for that to happen, so that I thought it would keep the angels away for a bit. Traversing that fog requires the joint efforts of mortal beings — you guys, it turned out — (here he gestured to Sam and Dean) — and etheric beings too, angels, like Castiel here. I thought that was pretty good way to keep the angels out. Just temporarily, at least till they'd grown up a bit. Ah, hmmm...." He paused, his hands still full of galaxy-threads, studying the area of the rug that he'd just reweoven. "We may have a problem."

The side of the hole was fraying again.

God turned back to them.

"The problem," God said, "is that I can't fix it. I can't reweave it."

They all stared at him.
"But you're God," said Sam. "You **have** to be able to fix it." Cas added a mumbled assent, his mouth still clamped tight around the fat wad of galaxy-threads.

"I can't, it appears." God was striding around now, studying the tapestry under his feet. He walked all the way to the edge of the canopy and back again, staring down at the tapestry the whole time. "Well, okay, the truth is that I **can** fix it," he reported as he walked back. "But I'll have to disassemble the entire rest of the tapestry, back it up to where the hole is, and then reweave it from there. Essentially that means unwinding time to a point approximately half a billion years after the Big Bang, and starting over then. The future path of all the threads would likely take a different course." He glanced back at Dean and Sam. "Not sure if your species would evolve at all, actually. I mean, a tail-less biped? How weird is that? You guys were rather a lucky strike."

Once again Dean and Sam could only stare at him. Cas made a sad little *mmm* noise, his wings sagging.

"I don't really want to unweave everything," said God, "It took so long, for one thing. And I kind of liked the design..." He paused, hands on hips again (all his hands, from all his arms, were on his hips), as he gazed down at the lovely pictures at his feet. Planets... species... the hanging gardens of Babylon, the feathery T-rex... God's eyes passed over all of his greatest hits.

"I **could** re-do it all," he said, "but it would be such a hassle."

"Don't forget the bunnies," pointed out Sam.

"And the tail-less bipeds," added Dean. "Call me biased, here, but I think we came out kind of cool." Cas nodded eagerly.

"Yes," agreed God, glancing up at Dean with a grin. "You did. I got whispers, you know. I could hear the chords, the melodies the threads were singing... I heard something of your story...." He looked down at the picture of the festively decorated squids waving their little squid-flags. "The bunnies, in all their various shapes. Right. Back to my original plan. No more weaving. Reweaving is not going to work." His extra arms abruptly disappeared, and he strode over to Castiel and grabbed hold of the threads that Cas still had in his mouth and his alulas. "You can let go now," he said to Cas, and Cas opened his jaws and lifted the alula-feathers, just enough to let God take hold of the bundles of threads. God said, studying the bundles, "I can't **repair** the hole, but I can stabilize it. I can stop the damage from spreading. My plan, originally, was quite simple: capture the loose ends so that they can't fray further. Just as the clip did. But there's too many now for the clip to hold. I need, essentially, a bigger, better clip."

"Can't you just knot them together?" Dean suggested. It seemed an obvious solution, but God shook his head.

"Galaxy timelines are just awful at holding knots, as you just saw," he said, gesturing over to the refraying edge of the hole. "They're amazingly slippery. I tried it, several hundred thousand different times actually, back about a billion years ago. It never holds. They unknot themselves. But, what I can do instead is put all the loose ends inside that lockbox there—" And at last he pointed to the black footstool. "That's what I built it for. It holds a pocket-dimension. The idea was, I can put the loose ends in the pocket-dimension and close the lid. And that will hold them. Anchored in another dimension."

"But... didn't you already try that?" said Dean.

God hesitated. "Not exactly. I was testing the box, but it... didn't go according to plan."
"The Darkness attacked you?" guessed Sam. "It got through somehow? It pushed you in?"

God looked a little evasive. "Not... quite," he said.

"Then what?" asked Dean. "Lucifer? The Leviathans?"

"The other archangels?" suggested Castiel. "Raphael? Or Michael?"

"Um... well... None of them, actually."

"Who, then?" said Castiel.

Now God looked a bit embarrassed. He scuffed one bare foot along the T-rex design, and finally said, "I may have been a bit hasty in the testing of my device. I was just testing it out, just a little trial run was the plan, and, um... well, put it this way, I really should have thought through more clearly about the way the latch worked."

They stared at him.

"I was just going to look around inside," said God. "I wanted to see how the pocket dimension looked from the inside, to make sure it could hold all the threads. I was just testing it. As I said earlier, I made a... um... minor mistake."

"Are you saying," said Dean, "that you accidentally locked yourself in?"

God shuffled his feet. "Well, it's not that simple," he said. "You see, there's a principle in which, since I am God, I should be able to break anything, to bend anything to my will. But I was trying so hard to make a perfect container that I subverted my own will and cancelled out the omnipotence principle and... The mathematics are rather complex, actually, and...." He petered into silence.

They were still staring him. God sighed and said, "Yes, okay, I locked myself in."

"For how long?" said Sam at last.

"Well, time is really rather elastic here, more a suggestion than a necessity, but..." God hesitated, taking in their expressions. "It was only a quarter billion years," he said.

There was a little pause.

"Not long, really," God added. "It wasn't too bad. It was a little boring at first but I started up another universe in there. Just to keep myself entertained. That one's coming along nicely. I had this idea to invert the rules of this universe and make a universe where there is no god or angels, sort of a mirror but without myself — I watch it but I can't interfere. It's like the most ingenious clockwork toy, and it's turned out most fascinating, and—" He stopped at their appalled expressions. "Look, I did try to send out a call for help," he said. "I managed to squeeze a few fragments of myself out through the gaps in the hinges. I sent them out with little missions. But..." He sighed. "I'm afraid they were very small and they couldn't quite remember who they really were or what they were supposed to be doing. They were all sucked into one thread or another and they all just got whisked away. I couldn't
even get them to stay put long enough to try to open the latch; they weren't able to stay in this plane. It was maddening! They sort of remembered who they were later — I still catch glimpses of their thoughts — but not really."

"Chuck," said Dean, his shoulders sagging. "Let me guess. Chuck was one of those fragments."

"Basically," God said, nodding in agreement. "Chuck, and quite a few others. Pieces of me. Small fragments. They all ended up thinking they were each the one and only true God. But they were always just pieces. But... many of them retained a bit of the original mission I'd tried to instill inside them. Several of them kept hold of the idea to raise up a mortal species that has a material soul — you humans, that is — and several also had the idea of bringing the angels and the mortal beings together, to get them to search for me. They all had a fuzzy memory of that concept: a combination of angels and mortal souls, working together. The true mission, of course, was quite specifically to send a team of angels and mortal souls here, to break me out of here... None of them quite remembered the real purpose. But they kept trying to bring angels and mortal souls together."

"Angels bringing humans to Heaven," Castiel whispered. "Our mission. All these years. All these eons. The purpose all along was to free you, wasn't it? Not to reward humans with eternal life... not to bring them to Heaven, exactly. The point was really just to get through that white fog, wasn't it?"

God nodded. "Even Lucifer retained a fragment of the original mission. I sometimes hear his thoughts too, you know, even now... He still is trying to collect human souls and bring them to him. Unifying human souls with his own." His eyes flicked to Sam, here, and Sam looked away.

After a moment God went on, "He's even still trying to ignite another sun — another Heaven, in essence. He has dreams of invading the original Heaven. After all this time he still has that impulse: bond to a human, travel to Heaven." God added, a little sadly, "He just doesn't remember why."

For several moments, the only sound was the whisper of the wind, and the ghostly melodic humming of the vibrating threads out at the horizon.

"Ever since, I've been trying to free myself," said God. "I actually could have done so; I could have done a powerful enough explosion. But I was afraid I'd completely rip the tapestry apart. I was worried for my little creatures... my rabbits... so I just bounced the box around from time to time, hoping the latch would swing free. And so, I stayed where I was."

God then picked up the last few bundles of galaxy-threads that Cas was still holding with his front feet. He rapidly braided all the bundles together into one thick rope. "And you've done it," said God, as he finished, looking at the thick bundle of shining multicolored lines in his hands (containing, Dean slowly realized, every living thing in the universe). "You finally came. You freed me, and I've collected all the threads, and here they all are. All the threads. All the galaxies. I just need to anchor them."

God turned his head, slowly, and looked at them. "There's just one problem," he said.

Dean muttered to Sam, "Oh, that doesn't sound good at all."

"What's the problem?" said Cas.

"Someone has to stay in the lockbox forever with the loose ends," said God.

There was another stiff silence.

God tried to explain. "Now that I've seen the inside — and believe me, I spent a long time inspecting everything in there — I realized the thread-ends won't stay put on their own. As I said, they're
slippery. They all need anchoring, on the other side, individually. And they will all need constant checking and tightening."

"Can't you just tie them to something?" suggested Dean.

"I told you already, they're slippery."

"Throw them into the box and slam the lid really quick?" suggested Sam. "Clamp it down on them?"

God gave him a smile. "I tried that with a few thousand other types of lockboxes first. This wasn't my first model, you know. A thread always tugs loose, and then others come loose. Someone's got to go down there with them and tie each thread individually to his own self. To his own mind. As I told you before, this place is as much mental as it is material. Someone must be there to will the threads to stay put."


How many stars? How many planets? How many species?

How many innocent lives?

"One of... us?" Dean said, his throat tightening. "One of us has got to go? Cause I'll—"

Cas swung and growled at him then, cutting him off.

"See, your souls are so fluffy," God said, grinning at them. "Yes, your soul, Dean, and your essence too, Castiel, and you too, Sam. This is exactly what I mean. The Mona Lisa with bunnies in it is actually so much more interesting than the Mona Lisa without bunnies. But you don't have to go, Dean. None of you are going to go. I'll go." God smiled at them. "I have my new universe to attend to, after all. And this one, here..." He glanced around, surveying the lovely tapestry, the infinite threads stretching off into the distance, the haunting sound of the melodic chords in the wind. "This one is doing rather well on its own." His eyes lingered on Sam, and Dean, and Castiel, in turn. "As I said, I heard part of the story, in the music of the threads. I know you have each made your own choices, and if my opinion counts for anything, I thought you all did rather well. And there are others like you, in other galaxies. I believe this universe is in good hands. Besides..." (here he glanced over at the fraying hole, and at the bundle of threads in his hands) "...it's not like there's any choice, is there?"

Dean's head was so crowded with questions he didn't even know what to say. How can you just walk away again? What about Lucifer and Hell? What about the demons, what about evil, what about Heaven?

And those images that we saw... Dean knew it was selfish to keep thinking about this, but he couldn't help wanting to know, Was that a possible future? A real one?

Or was it just a ghost of a future that has frayed away?

It was Cas who finally asked, "And what should we do? Can we return to our home galaxy?"

"I'll get you back to your homes," God said. "There's a lot of bunnies out there but I should at least try to take care of the ones who've come so far, and tried so hard, and especially the ones who at last opened that blasted little latch. I can get you back to your home planet. At approximately the right time. Oh, and..." He walked over to the La-Z-Boy, pulling the bundle of threads behind him. "I could really use a nice comfy chair in there," he said, tapping the La-Z-Boy with one finger. It instantly shrank down to a miniature version of itself, till it was just two inches high. God bent over
and picked it up. "I really got tired of sitting on supernovas. They're okay, you know, but they're so prickly."

With that he tucked the miniature La-Z-Boy into a fanny pack that had just appeared on his waist, right above his blue Speedo. Then God stepped into the open lockbox and began to work his way into it, in the same way he'd appeared, squeezing down into the hole like a man made of rubber. He wriggled his way in, feet-first, disarticulating his knees and hips as he went, holding the big bundle of loose threads in one hand.

When he was almost all the way in, with just his arms and his head sticking out, he said to Castiel, "Do you wish to be an archangel again? I can't fix everything, but I could do that much for you."

Castiel shook his big dark head.

"You're certain?" said God.

"I don't want that much power," said Cas, softly. "Not any more."

"As you wish," said God. "Though, for the record, you did not do as badly as you think." Cas blinked at that.

God then looked at all three of them. It was a very odd sight, just Chuck's head and two hands sticking up out of the little black box, one of the hands holding a huge bundle of the loose strings. He lifted his free hand to his mouth then, and spoke something softly into his own hand. When he drew his hand down from his mouth, it held a gleaming golden marble. He handed it to Sam, who reached out a little nervously to take it. God looked at them all and said:

"It's been such a nice chat, but I must be off. Wish me luck!"

He wriggled his free hand down into the box, somehow squeezing it down into the tiny box. His head went next: Chuck's familiar face, smiling at them, gliding downwards. Then there was just one hand left, pulling the fat rope of strings along with it.

The hand disappeared. The lockbox's lid swung shut. The bundle of colored threads flattened out neatly into a paper-thin sheaf that spread out all along the long side of the box. The latch fell into place with tiny clink, the hook sliding neatly into the eye.

The little box sat silent in the middle of the tapestry. A huge sheet of threads emerged from one side of the box, all the threads pulled taut. The wind was still blowing, and it gave a particularly strong gust. The threads all vibrated, humming with an astonishingly lovely sound that was just like a harp, but none of the threads pulled free.

"Is that... it?" said Sam. "Just like that? He's gone again?"

"Apparently so," said Castiel, sniffing at the box cautiously. "I can't smell anything anymore, and I can't hear him. I think it's well sealed."

"But I had so many more questions!" said Dean. "There's so much stuff we didn't get to ask."

"Apparently, securing the universe from its imminent unraveling took priority, for some inexplicable
reason," said Castiel, with a dry glance at Dean. Dean sighed; Cas was right, of course.

Sam said, "Is this seriously going to get us home?" He was looking at the golden ball in his hand. "What is it?"

"It's the Word of God," said Castiel softly.

"So what do we do with it?" said Dean. "Click our heels together and say, there's no place like home?"

"We break it," said Cas. "I've seen those before. Back in the old days. Breaking the sphere releases the Word."

Dean looked around. "Break it with what?" There were only the threads all around, the carpet below. There were no tools, and nothing hard. Dean felt at his pockets; nothing.

"Hammer it with the iPad against the box lid?" suggested Sam, picking up God's iPad. (God had left behind; it was sitting on the tapestry-carpet.) "Or... something?"

Cas considered that, looking over at the lockbox. "I think we shouldn't be banging things on that box," he suggested. "That sort of error is how this whole thing started. But there's always been another way to release the word of God. Angels have that ability." He reached his big black snout out to Sam's hand, stuck his huge pink tongue out, and licked up the golden ball.

Dean thought, at first, that Cas was going to bite down on it, or maybe even swallow it. But instead Cas tossed it into the air. They all watched it soared up toward the canopy, and headed back down. When it was exactly level with their heads, Cas incinerated it with a perfectly timed, narrowly focused burst of flame that completely incinerated the golden ball.

There was a massive explosion of light.

Dean heard one word, and the word was:

Home.

Dean plunged into hot water. Literally — warm water was on all sides. He thrashed, fighting for the surface, totally disoriented. He whacked an elbow hard against a rock and then had kicked his toes painfully into some gravel. It hurt, but it also oriented him, and soon he was flailing to the surface of a warm stream that turned out to be only hip-deep. Dark trees stood all around; overhead, the stars shown.

"SAM!" Dean bellowed. "CAS!"

"Over here!" hollered Sam's voice, from a shore very nearby. A Sam-like shape came blundering out of the line of dark trees, almost falling into the water. Dean splashed his way over to him.

"Is Cas with you?" said Dean, panting, as Sam grabbed his arm and pulled him to shore. Dean added, "Where are we?"

"Shasta Hot Springs, I think," said Sam, pointing at some dark teepee shapes nearby. "Back on Earth. I hope. But — Cas isn't with me. I was hoping he was with you."
"Cas?" Dean yelled, spinning around to search the starlit stream, and the dark woods beyond. "Cas? CASTIEL!" He turned around and around, looking for a big dark feathered shape, or maybe a man in a familiar trenchcoat. But there wasn't a single other living thing in sight.

Castiel was nowhere to be found.

A/N -

And there you have it. My stupidly grandiose crazy idea. All along, from the dawn of life on Earth, God has been stuck in that little pocket-universe (just a "minor mistake"), the Darkness held back only by that little clip; and then the clip failed. But Dean and Cas and Sam have finally, at last, put everything right. Except that now they have to go on with no God... but they're used to that, that's business as usual, right?

(and I got irrationally fond of the idea that Chuck was a PART of God, but not all of God.)

Just one more chapter to go. I'm not sure when I will get it done since I am about to start another week-long conference tomorrow morning, but I am aiming for sometime next weekend. If you don't see it then, then the weekend after.

I really hope you all liked this chapter! Thank so much for reading my story and being part of my world. Hugs to all of you (yes, you too, you ESPECIALLY).
They embarked next on a stumbling, confused journey through the dark, tripping over stones and bumping into trees.

"CAS! CAS?!” Dean yelled, over and over, as they scrambled through the streamside bushes and into the woods. It was amazingly dark once they got into the trees; Dean walked straight into tree trunks a couple times. But he kept yelling for Castiel. "CAS! Can you hear me? CAS!"

"He's gonna be okay, Dean,” Sam said, crashing his way through a hapless little bush a few feet to Dean's left. "He's got to be. I mean, God wouldn't have just...."

"Lost him?” Dean said, shoving past a stiff set of tree branches toward a little clearing just ahead. "God wouldn't have just lost him, is that what you were gonna say? Well, God didn't seem to exactly know what he was doing, did you notice? Locked himself into a box for a quarter billion years like a complete idi— ow!" As he'd come into the clearing he'd whacked his toes on something hard, some sort of big, dark diagonal shape off to the side. Dean bent over to rub his toe, cursing under his breath.

"Could you keep it down!” snapped an annoyed voice from very close by. From the dark diagonal shape, actually. The voice continued, "It's one in the morning! This is supposed to be a spiritual retreat!"

Oh. They were standing next to one of the rental teepees. Dean had just tripped over one of the slanting poles at its base. And apparently someone was sleeping inside (or, had been sleeping, anyway).

"You wanted a spiritual retreat, did you?” snapped Dean back, rubbing his sore toe. "Well, retreat all you want, we're the guys who just saved the whole friggin' spiritual universe for your sorry spiritual ass. We let goddam spiritual God out of his stupid little spiritual box, ok? And now I'm gonna find my friend." He straightened up, took another big breath and yelled, "CAS?! CAS, CAN YOU HEAR ME??"

With some difficulty Sam managed to pull Dean away from the teepee, saying, "Let the guy sleep, Dean. I hate to say it, but I don't think Cas is nearby."

Dean stared around at the dark woods, his heart sinking.

Sam was right. Cas would have answered by now, if he'd been anywhere in earshot.
Sam went on, "He probably just landed somewhere else. He's probably fine." Around that point, Dean finally recognized Sam's tone of voice: it was the cheer up Dean voice. The take care of Dean voice.

The Sam has to be the big brother now, because Dean is a complete wreck voice.

Dean took a long, slow breath and said, forcing himself to sound more optimistic than he felt, "You're right. He's probably fine." He clapped Sam on the shoulder and said, "I'm sure he's fine. C'mon, let's ask at the office if they've seen anything unusual."

Dean could almost hear the relief in Sam's voice as he said, "Unusual like a huge feathery dragon? With black wings?"

"Yeah, exactly," said Dean, trying to remind himself, Keep it together. Sam still needs you. "Here, gimme that pack, I'll carry it a while. You've had it long enough."

Sam somehow still had the tattered backpack, the one he'd been carrying through the whole adventure; Dean had noticed the strap when he'd clapped Sam on the shoulder. Sam shrugged it off to hand it over. Sam's half-burned shirt, which was only an assemblage of tatters at this point, finally fell apart completely as the pack came off. Several of the charred remnants fluttered to the ground, including most of the front, all that was left of the back, and an entire shirt-sleeve. It left Sam wearing only his hiking boots, a pair of jeans that had been burned into something like shorts, and nothing else but half of a flannel shirt-sleeve on one arm and a charred shirt-collar around his neck, the shirt-collar only held on by a single button at the front.

Sam pulled the sleeve off his arm, stared at it in some confusion, and finally let it flutter to the ground.

"Jeez, Sam, we gotta get you some clothes. You look like a redneck Conan the Barbarian," said Dean, hoisting the pack onto one shoulder. "The collar's a nice touch. C'mon, I think the road is this way."

Soon they emerged from the bushes to a little gravel road that was faintly lit by moonlight. They followed it up the hill, listening to the night sounds around them — crickets droning in the bushes, frogs peeping somewhere nearby — and soon came to a dimly visible log cabin where some lights were flicking on even now. It was the office cabin where they'd checked in just a few days ago.

"Maybe Cas got sent back to Heaven," Sam said, as they walked toward the cabin. "Maybe that's his default home location."

"Could be..." said Dean, thinking. Home. The word-of-God thing had said Home.

Where was "home" for Castiel, anyway?

A thought struck him, and Dean stopped still, grabbing Sam's arm to say, "Or, wait, maybe he's back on the surface of the Sun! Just outside of Heaven, like before! Flying around with Gabe and the others. We have to go back through the Fire Gate, Sam! We should go back—" Dean was already spinning around, looking into the dark woods on either side, trying to figure out which way to go.

He realized immediately that he had no idea which direction to even look in. Sam must have been
thinking the same thing, for he said, "You know as well as I do that we'll never find that gate again without the wolves. We hiked miles, for hours, through pitch-dark woods —" Sam made a wide gesture with one arm, encompassing all the dark trees around them— "with no trail, to get there. Maybe you remember the way, but I sure don't. Let's figure out where we are and get the car and take a good look around the mountain before we go running out into the woods to get lost."

Dean heaved a sigh.

*Keep it together...*

Dean nodded, and started walking toward the cabin again, Sam at his side.

They crossed the cabin's little front yard to find a sleepy-looking Shasta Hot Springs employee shuffling to the cabin's front door to see what the commotion was. As they drew a little closer Dean recognized him: it was the guy who'd checked them in last week, an aging hippie-type named Brian.

Brian pushed open a creaky screen door to look at them. He was still dressed in his pajamas (a flannel set, it turned out, with a cheerful printed pattern of tiny bluebirds), his long greying hair still tousled from sleep. "What the royal heck is going on?" he said, running one hand through his hair. He clicked on the porch light, peering out at them past the half-open screen door.

"Hi, I'm Arnold, and this is my brother Conan—" Dean began.

"Dean," said Sam. Dean glanced over to see Sam gesturing toward the bushes on either side of the cabin's front porch. Now that the porch light was on, it was suddenly obvious that both bushes were totally covered with big purple flowers. As were quite a lot of the bushes that they'd been walking past.

Sam reached out slowly and touched one of the showy blooms.

It took a moment for Dean to register what was wrong. The bushes had *flowers*.

Which seemed a little odd for late November.

In fact... it was pretty warm for late November. Dean's clothes were still wet from his dousing in the stream, and he should have been near hypothermia by now. But he felt fine. Maybe a touch chilly, but fine really. And as he looked around more, he saw daffodils blooming at the bases of the bushes.

*Daffodils bloom in the spring,* thought Dean. *I know that much.*

The lawn around them was covered with bright green grass, new-grown. There was even a flowering cherry tree nearby. Dean turned in a little circle to take it in, remembering the brown dried grasses of autumn that had been here just a few days ago.

"It's spring," Dean concluded, finishing his circle and looking up at Brian.

"Well, obviously," said Brian, stifling a yawn. "You been on another planet or something?"

Sam said, "Sort of."

Brian gave a little laugh and scratched his head. "Look, I know it's the spring equinox and that's, like, a big pagan holiday deal, I know all about that," he said. "And maybe you've been celebrating with a platter of homemade edibles, huh? Cause it's still with you hours later, right? Look, I got no problem with you doing whatever feels right to you on the spring equinox, but you gotta let the other people sleep."
"Spring equinox," Sam said slowly. "You mean, March twenty-first?"

Dean said, "Um... what year?"

Brian gave them a very steady look for a moment.

"You know what I recommend?" Brian said at last. "With edibles, you really have to be sure not to eat too much, because there's a delayed effect, you know. I always say, have just half a brownie and then wait a full hour before eating any more. Also, you gotta not lick your fingers when you're making the batter—"

"What year is it?" demanded Dean. "Just answer the question."

Brian rolled his eyes. But he finally said, enunciating very clearly and carefully, "Today is March twenty-first, 2016."

2016.

It had been fall of 2015 when they'd passed through the Fire Gate. Just a few short days ago. Or so it had seemed.

"Five months," said Sam, softly. "We landed five months off. It was November."

Brian frowned, looking at them both. "Wait a sec..." he said slowly. "Did you say November? Wait — you're —" Now he was leaning far off the porch, peering at them, and looking them both up and down. He seemed to finally notice Sam's half-burned jeans for the first time. "Wait!" he said, eyes lighting up. "You're those guys! The Winchesters, right? Who just up and disappeared last fall? On that super freaky night with the smoke! And who left that awesome car! Jeez, fellas, we searched everywhere for you. We did a whole search-and-rescue! Where you been?"

Dean gave a nonchalant shrug. "Got a little lost," he said. "But we're back now. So where's our car? And, by the way, you seen any UFOs zooming around recently? Like, with big wings?"

Nobody had seen any UFOs. And nobody had seen a man in a trenchcoat, either. And the Impala, it turned out, was long gone.

"That lady came and picked it up," said Brian. They were back in the office now, where Brian was pouring two mugs of freshly-brewed coffee for them. He was all smiles now, thrilled by the reappearance of the two brothers who'd disappeared so many months ago on the “freaky night with the smoke.” He'd even already offered them some water bottles and potato chips. (Dean and Sam slugged down a bottle of water each and tore into the chips, both suddenly ravenous.)

"Your sheriff lady friend, I mean," Brian explained, as he finished pouring the second mug of coffee. He slid both mugs across his desk at Sam and Dean. "She came to get the car. She said she was supposed to take it into custody, or put it in storage, that you'd arranged that? Or something? Man, she looked broken up, too. Pretty obvious she was thinking she wasn't going to see you guys again. Her girls were pretty wrecked too. They all came. They all helped in the search, all week. We looked all week for you guys. Wait a sec, she left a number—" He leaned over to a corner of his desk and riffled through a messy stack of pages till he finally pulled out a crumpled business card from near the bottom. He held it up.
"Here ya go," Brian said, waving the card at them. "Here's her number."

"Can I borrow your phone?" said Dean. He plunked down his coffee, grabbed the card with one hand and reached for Brian's office phone with the other, before even waiting for Brian to say yes. But once he had the phone receiver in his hand, about to punch in Jody's number, a new thought struck him:

*What if Cas had landed somewhere else?*

What if he'd landed on Earth, but somewhere other than Mount Shasta?

Say, in a certain bunker in Kansas.

Or up on top of a certain hill, near a certain bunker.

"Maybe Cas is already back in the bunker!" Dean whispered to Sam. Sam stared at him, and Dean hissed, "Maybe he ended up on... the hill, you know. The ground. He'd be fine, right? It's spring now! He'd go to the bunker!"

It was pretty warm now, after all; it was spring, so *the ground on the hill wouldn't be frozen*. That meant Cas would be fine. He'd be able to scramble right out of that grave no problem, now that it was spring. He'd find that little backpack, with the note and the bunker key.

He was probably in the bunker *right now*.

After some mental struggle, Dean finally managed to remember the number of the little cell phone that he'd left, long ago, in the backpack on the hill. He punched in the number eagerly, Sam watching quietly by his side.

The call went straight to voicemail.

"Battery must be dead..." said Dean to Sam. "Course the battery's dead. It's been months." He paused a moment, the phone receiver still in his hand, thinking, as he stared across Brian's desk at the rustic wooden wall of the little cabin. "Maybe he can't find the phone charger," Dean said slowly. "Maybe it's still charging up. It's only been an hour or so. Or, actually maybe he's still walking down the hill. Or maybe..."

Sam hadn't said anything. He was just watching Dean silently. (As was Brian, who had also fallen silent, though he was obviously burning with curiosity.) Dean paused, closing his eyes, the phone receiver still in his hand.

*Here we go again,* he realized.

The endless guesses about where Cas might be. Cycling through one possible explanation after another for why Cas couldn't be reached... coming up with one theory after another....

"Actually you're probably right," said Sam unexpectedly, plucking the phone out of Dean's hands. Dean opened his eyes, hand still in the air, blinking at Sam. "We gotta get back to Kansas," said Sam, and he punched in the number from Jody's card.

Brian pointed out, "It's one-thirty in the morning."
"Two-thirty in South Dakota," Sam agreed cheerily, as he listened to the ringing on the other end. "But she won't mind. I hope." To Dean he added, "We gotta just get back to Kansas and see for ourselves. Then we can figure out what to do next."

A moment later Sam's face brightened. Somebody had picked up. Sam said into the phone, "Yeah, Jody, sorry to call so late, it's me, Sam. Sam Winchester."

There was a tinny explosion of noise through the phone.

Sam was smiling now. "Yes, really. Yep. Dean's here too. Yep, we're fine. Aw, jeez, Jody, that's... aw. That's... Thanks, yeah, us too. Thanks for looking for us, by the way. Sorry you had to do that.... Look, Jody, we're in Shasta, kinda stranded here without any of our gear or anything, it's a long story, but, we really need to get back to Kansas pronto. Like, immediately asap pronto. Do you have our car? The Impala?"

Dean inched his chair closer, leaning over toward Sam till he managed to catch a bit of Jody's voice through the old hand-held receiver. Brian was leaning close too, fascinated.

Jody was saying, "Absolutely! I'll be on my way first thing in the morning." There was a querulous commotion in the background, and Dean heard a few words of a rather familiar voice, though a sleepy one. Claire. Dean and Sam glanced at each other over the handset. After some excited-sounding, though muffled, noises (Jody seemed to have her hand over her phone now), Jody came back on the line to say, "We'll be there tomorrow, Dean. Quick as we can. Claire wants to leave right away, actually. I think we'll leave at dawn. Should we come to California? To Shasta?"

"No, not Shasta," said Dean, for he'd just realized that waiting here for the Impala to be delivered would actually slow them down.

"Dean? Is that you?" Jody said, sounding excited and teary all over again. "Claire, it's Dean! Dean, my god, is it ever good to hear your voice!"

"Likewise," said Dean, grinning. "Look, how about you meet us in Nebraska. We can get a car here and meet you there, just before we take the turnoff down to Kansas. Tomorrow, in Hastings maybe? And then we can swap cars. Nebraska's a straight shot south for you and that way we can get back to Kansas as fast as possible with our... gear." Weapons, was what he was thinking. Who knew what they might need. "Could you meet us in Hastings at, let me think..." He paused, trying to remember how long the drive would be.

"Um, is four in the morning too awful?" he asked.

"We'll be there," said Jody, without even hesitating. "Four a.m. We'll drive down tomorrow and get a motel and meet you at four. How about at that minimart just off of I-80, right at the exit? Oh, man, Dean, I gotta tell you, we really thought you two might be gone for good."

Sam and Dean glanced at each other over the phone receiver, Brian watching quietly from his desk.

"Yeah," said Sam into the receiver. "So did we."

"Where were you, anyway?" said Jody.

Sam hesitated, looking at Dean.

"The bottom of the universe," said Dean, leaning closer to the phone. "The throne of God, if you really want to know." He glanced at Brian, who was leaning even closer now, his eyes wide, and Dean added, "Or it felt like that! Ha... heh. Really we just got a little lost. Fill you in later."
"I feel a little bad," Dean said, as he jimmed a door open on a vintage '87 Buick GNX. "Brian's gonna be so confused." They'd snuck away from the hot springs while Brian had been calling up the police to report that the "missing hikers" had reappeared. Sam and Dean had asked for directions to the restrooms and had then just faded away. They'd soon managed to hitchhike to a small town farther down the mountain, where they had then found the Buick in a deserted-looking garage by an equally deserted-looking summer cabin, a cabin that (fortunately) looked like it hadn't even been opened yet for the season.

"It'll just give him an even more fun story to tell," said Sam, as Dean got the door open, swung the backpack inside and sprang the locks. Sam added, as they settled into the front seats, "The mysterious reappearing hikers disappear again, right on the equinox. He'll love it! It'll become the local ghost story. Anyway, we gotta find Cas, and we both know the bunker's our best bet. And we should get there fast."

"Hey, the car's got gas!" Dean said, checking the fuel gauge. "And, ha, look, key under the visor, I don't even have to hotwire it. Maybe we're finally catching a break." Key in hand, he glanced over at Sam, eyeing him up and down. "Cause, I know how fond you are of that fashionable Conan look, but it kinda keeps reminding me that we don't really have that much. No clothes, no gear, no cash, no credit."

"Actually I still have a credit card in the pack," said Sam. He zipped open a side pocket of the backpack and pulled out a Mastercard, waving it cheerfully at Dean. "Carried this thing all over the Sun and to the end of time! Hopefully it still works. And... we got this, too." Now Sam was digging out something else from the backpack. A large-ish, flat, rectangular thing.

Sam held it up; it was an iPad.

"You stole God's iPad?" Dean said, slightly appalled.

Sam gave an embarrassed shrug. "I wasn't trying to. But I was holding onto it when God sent us back, remember? I landed in those bushes by the stream still holding it. I wasn't about to just leave it there in the bushes, was I? So I stuffed it in the pack. Maybe an iPad will come in handy. Though... I wonder...." Tentatively, Sam held it out to Dean.

Dean took hold of it gently.

But nothing happened; it remained an iPad.

"No more switcheroos," said Dean, handing it back. "And no more universe fix-it manual, I guess."

"I guess it's stuck in iPad form now," said Sam. He flipped it over and back, inspecting both sides. "Anyway, I figure he wouldn't have let us keep it if he didn't want us to. I bet he doesn't mind. Or, um..." he paused, giving Dean a slightly uncertain glance. "I hope he doesn't mind."

Dean shrugged, said, "God's stuck in a box anyway," and put the key in the ignition.

It took a few tries to get the Buick started; its battery had almost died over the winter. But after some careful coaxing it at last coughed to life. Soon Dean and Sam were roaring their way back down Mount Shasta to the highway, with nothing to their names but a single Mastercard that had been to the end of time and back, a stolen Buick, and God's iPad.
California to Kansas was a brutally long drive even on a good day. It was usually a 25-hour drive, even in a fast car like the Impala. Dean kept the Buick floored almost the whole time, barely willing to stop at all.

He sent out silent prayers as he went, every hour.

*Cas, we ended up in Shasta again, near the Fire Gate. I figure you probably ended up in Kansas. We're on our way. We'll see you soon. Hope you're hearing me.*

*Cas, another prayer for you! Hope you can get some power from this. If you need any feathers re-grown or anything, well, here's a mental image of all your feathers! Gold tips and everything. Blue neck plumes, the works. Best biggest strongest feathers there are, you hear me? Grow yourself some nice feathers now, okay?*

*Cas, hang in there, wherever you are. You're the fastest flyer in the universe, remember? Super-speed flyer! The fastest and the strongest. Can't wait to see you again.*

Dean found himself humming "Puff the Magic Dragon" a few times, under his breath, just in case it might help.

Sam sent out a few prayers too, and also passed some time fiddling with God's iPad. They were both fascinated to discover that the iPad turned out to still be picking up the "Universe" wi-fi network no matter where they were. It also became clear that the iPad seemed to have infinite battery life. Dean was soon wondering if they should be looking at the iPad at all (it was a little unsettling to have access to God's universal wi-fi), but Sam seemed unfazed and kept right on investigating it, opening one app after another.

The iPad had hundreds and hundreds of apps. Most of them were totally mysterious, though, consisting of odd glyphs and strange Enochian symbology that neither Sam nor Dean could figure out. But Sam eventually found his way to a perfectly ordinary-looking web app that opened a very ordinary-looking CNN website. Sam then spent most of the next hour trying to catch up on everything that had been happening on Earth in the last five months, relaying it all to Dean.

"Okay, looks like it was business as usual till just yesterday," Sam said. "Business as usual meaning, lots of weird sinkholes and weird black smoke and weird black spheres that were gobbling up things. That was all still happening right up till yesterday. But as of yesterday, big NASA announcement saying the huge sunspots on the Sun have all disappeared. I guess there's some bitty ones left, but the really big weird sunspots, at least, are all gone. Back to normal sunspots. Also the rash of earthquakes here on Earth all suddenly stopped too. And, get this, all the black smoke and spheres and sinkholes and stuff that were all over the place are all popping and dissipating. Kind of dramatically sometimes."

"Dramatically?" asked Dean.

Sam tapped to another page. "Like, in Seattle last night, a dark blob that had been hovering over Mount Rainier just exploded all of a sudden and sent bits of black goo everywhere. Didn't hurt anybody though and the black goo kind of evaporated away. Also, in Japan, a volcano imploded and black smoke came bubbling out of it and it all dribbled down into the sea and vanished. Another black blob popped apart right in downtown Manhattan, another fell into the Great Lakes and kicked
up a flash flood and started a forest fire.... bunch of sinkholes collapsed in California...." Sam tapped through a few more pages. "Lot of stories like that, all from last night. Oh hey, listen to this, the president even had a press conference late last night. He had a whole speech: Our nation's top scientists now report that the mysterious Doom Spheres—"

"Doom Spheres?" Dean echoed, rolling his eyes. "Is that the best they could come up with?"

"The mysterious Doom Spheres," Sam continued, "that have plagued our nation, and the entire planet, for months on end, appear to have disappeared as quickly and as mysteriously as they arrived.... Hm, he went on for a while... thought to be a previously unknown form of cosmic antimatter passing through our solar system, hopefully it will never return.... blah blah blah... calls for more science funding, blah blah. Oh, here's a new press release from NASA: Saturn's rings are stabilizing — guess that means Oz is okay! Mars has straightened out too. So Purgatory's good too. And... Jupiter's Great Red Spot has stopped shrinking."

Sam went silent then, looking up from the iPad to the dark road outside.

For a few moments the only sound was the grumble of the Buick's motor.

After a moment Dean said, "Pity God didn't stick around long enough to wipe Hell off the map, huh. Guess he forgot about that."

"Maybe he couldn't," said Sam, a little quiet now. "He said he couldn't fix everything, remember?"

Dean said, "Well, look on the bright side. At least we're not out of a job." Sam gave a tired little laugh.

Sam then paged his way quietly through the news reports for a few more minutes, somewhat subdued now. "Oh, check this out," he said a little later, perking up. "Wolves have been reported in northern California for the first time in nearly a century. Two black wolves! Heh. Oh, Dean, hey, they're breeding. The two black wolves. They have puppies."

Dean glanced over at him, and suddenly they were both smiling.

"Well, ain't that downright romantic," said Dean. "I guess one of them was a girl. Who knew."

Sam said, "If they've already got a den and puppies, they must've gotten back a few months ago." He studied the article a little longer. "Says here they started denning up in early December. That's when the wildlife biologists found the den. So... maybe that whole tapestry-place is what took up the extra months for us." Sam stared out the window for a minute, and said, "I'm thinking that the whole battle on the Sun was probably in late November. And it was only when we fell down that thread that we popped forward in time. Don't you think?"

"Hell if I know," said Dean. "I really don't have too much experience with falling down galactic timelines."

He thought, once again, then, of that dream-like room he'd seen, the bed in the moonlight with the Christmas lights. With Cas lying close behind him, his wings wrapped snugly around Dean.

Please be real, Dean thought, his hands tightening on the steering wheel.

Cas... if you can hear me... I want that dream to be real. You and me in the bed, in the moonlight, with the Christmas lights. All of it.

"Well, the wolves are okay, anyway," Sam said. "And maybe that means Oshossi's okay, and the
other orishas are okay, and the angels who were helping them. Like Gabriel...."

Sam paused for a very long moment. Dean stole a glance at him to find that Sam's lips were moving silently. Was he sending out a prayer?

"And all the other angels too," Sam added a moment later. (Dean decided not to pry.) "Balthazar and Anna. All of them." Sam clicked the iPad off. He was silent a little while longer, and finally said, a little softly, "Maybe it's really over."

"Ain't over till we find Cas," Dean said. He pressed the gas pedal down harder, trying to coax a bit more speed out of the old Buick.

They drove straight through the night, and all the next day, and into the next night, swapping driving shifts every few hours. They stopped only for gas and snacks.

_Cas'll be in the bunker, waiting for us_, Dean thought to himself, over and over. _Cas'll be in the bunker._

He kept praying, as he drove. He prayed at sunrise, and at noon, and at sunset, and every hour in between. He kept Cas updated on where they were, and tried to keep sending him mental images of strength and power and speed.

And Dean kept telling him, _Meet us at the bunker, okay, buddy? You better be there._

The next night, at four in the morning, they rendezvoused with Jody and the Impala. She was waiting for them at the Hastings mini-mart just as promised — along with Claire, and Anne too, it turned out. They'd all come along for the trip; Dean was somewhat amazed that the two teenagers had actually managed to haul themselves out of their motel beds so early in the morning, just to come meet Sam and Dean.

But there were no complaints at all about the late hour; instead there was a _huge_ amount of hugging from Jody, Claire, and even Anne. They all came dashing over as soon as the Buick made the turn into the parking lot. Dean was a little taken aback by how excited, and even teary, they all seemed to see him and Sam again, and he began to feel almost apologetic for having disappeared for so long. While Sam grabbed a change of clothes from the Impala trunk, Dean gave them all an extremely sketchy one-sentence summary of their adventure, which came out as: "We got taken... somewhere, and met... somebody, and, the main thing is, the Darkness is taken care of." (He couldn't even mention Castiel. Not till they found him again.)

Jody gave him a narrow-eyed look — it was clear she could see there was much more to the story — but she didn't press. "I can see you boys need to get going," was all she said. "We'll get the story later, when you're ready to tell it. C'mon, Sam, you go change into those clothes, and we'll buy you some food for the road. And Dean, by the way, I have your bunker key." She held it up, explaining that Jason had loaned it to her when she'd been searching for Sam and Dean, so that she could check the bunker periodically for any signs of their return. (Jason had apparently been borrowing it from time to time to use the bunker's library, but he hadn't really moved in.)

Jody, Anne and Sam soon disappeared into the minimart. Claire, though, stayed behind, apparently just to watch Dean check out the Impala.
Dean walked all around the Impala, inspecting it from all angles. It was in great shape. Some road
dust from the trip from South Dakota, of course, but it was clear it had been cared for during the
winter; it'd been washed and buffed recently, and the inside was spotless. Dean grinned when he
found that the oil had even been changed, and the tires were perfectly inflated. "Awesome, Jody," he
muttered.

The trunk was next. Sam had already pulled his duffel out, but Dean took a moment to check the
armory too. Everything was still there. Jody had even cleaned the guns.

During the entire Impala-inspection, Claire stood a few feet off to the side, arms crossed over her
chest, watching Dean silently.

"It's all in great shape," Dean commented, as he finally closed the trunk lid.

"I got his car," Claire announced. "It's in great shape too. I'm taking care of it."

"What?" Dean said, turning to look at her.

"I got his car," she repeated. "The gold car. The Continental. We picked it up from the bunker
garage. I'm taking care of it. You said I could have it, right? I've been using it to drive me and Anne
to school. I'm taking care of it." Her voice got a little faint as she added, "He wouldn't mind, would
he? That I have it?"

Dean looked at her. She was still standing a few feet away, both arms wrapped tightly around
herself.

"Claire," Dean said, taking a couple steps closer. He opened his mouth to say, Castiel is alive, and
suddenly was paralyzed, standing there with his mouth half-open, totally unsure whether it was still
true.

Was Castiel alive?

Claire gazed back at him levelly. Her expression firmed a little. Dean watched as she raised her chin
slightly, squaring her shoulders. She was obviously bracing herself to ask something difficult.

"How did he die?" she said at last.

Dean could only give a soft sigh. Somewhat to his shame, he realized that he still didn't want to tell
Claire exactly what had happened. Even now, even knowing Castiel had managed to resurrect after
that horrible night, even knowing that Cas had forgiven him, and was (very likely) alive (definitely,
absolutely, he had to be, he was alive)....

Even after all that, it still was completely impossible to say to Claire, I killed him.

Claire was still looking at him. A single streetlight shone down on her from nearby, casting half her
face into shadow. Other than Dean and Claire, and the Buick and the Impala, the minimart's parking
lot was completely deserted; nobody else was on the road this late at night. The little circle of light
from the streetlight seemed all there was in the world. They could have been alone on the surface of
the moon.

Claire swallowed and said, her voice quiet, "I think I deserve to know."

"Claire... " Dean said. Since it was obviously impossible to tell her about what had happened in
Ohio, he switched back to trying to tell her that Cas might not be dead after all. But this was turning
out to be almost as difficult. Dean said, "I think that maybe he's..." He hesitated. Maybe Cas is alive.
"There's a chance that..." He stopped again. *There's a chance that Cas is alive.*

Claire looked at him a long moment, but Dean could not continue.

"Dean?" she said at last.

*It's just gonna hurt her all over again,* thought Dean.

*It's just gonna get her hopes up.*

*But is it so bad to get your hopes up if it might be true?*

Dean finally took a step closer and put one hand on her shoulder. "Just, keep praying to him, would you?" Dean said. "Keep praying to him."

Claire peered up at him, frowning. She said slowly, "How would you know that I've *been* praying to him? I didn't even tell Jody or Anne about that. I didn't tell anybody...." She fell silent, searching Dean's eyes.

Dean, who still had his hand on her shoulder, could see the exact moment when she understood. He could *feel* it, even, from how her shoulder stiffened under his hand. Her eyes grew round, and she drew in a tiny, rough gasp of air.

It was both wonderful, and awful, to see the hope dawning in her eyes.

Claire said, slowly, staring up at him, "Dean... is Castiel... *alive?*

"I don't know," Dean said, pulling his hand back, suddenly wishing he hadn't said anything. "I don't know right now. I really don't. But I will tell you one thing: that angel is tough as nails. He's been all over Creation and then some, and he's survived things that you wouldn't even believe. I'm not sure of anything, Claire, but, just, keep praying to him, would you? If he can hear you, it might give him some energy."

She nodded, her eyes wide.

Jody, Sam and Anne rounded the corner of the minimart then, loaded with snacks, still chattering about the Impala and the bunker. Dean took the opportunity to step away from Claire. He tossed the Buick's car keys to Jody in a showy overhand pass (she caught the keys neatly in one hand) and called out, "Don't get caught with any stolen cars, now!"

This successfully changed the topic. Jody said, twirling the Buick keys in her hand, "Hey, I found it abandoned by the side of the road. I'm just getting it back to my office to put in the right paperwork. One Buick BMX, stolen in California, found in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Apparently the thieves took quite a joyride."

"I can bring the other car back," Claire blurted out. "The gold car, I mean. If he ever—" She faltered. "I could bring it back," she said.

Jody and Anne both turned to stare at her, and Jody said, "Claire, what on Earth are you talking about? You love that car. That was Castiel's car." Jody turned then to Dean, and gave him a very sharp look. "What's going on?"

"Nothing," said Dean. "Just a dumb idea I had. Probably nothing." Turning away from Claire, he pulled the Impala's door open and swung himself inside, calling over his shoulder, "You guys take care, okay? We'll be in touch. And thanks for taking care of my baby."
Sam got into the passenger seat, laden with snacks and bottles of water from Jody. Dean gunned the engine, trying to focus just on the thrill of the engine roar, and the familiar feel of the Impala steering wheel under his hands — and trying his best to ignore Claire. But she jumped forward at the last second to reach through the Impala's open window and squeeze Dean's shoulder.

"You pray too," she said under her breath, just loud enough for Dean to hear. "You pray too. And don't give up." She squeezed his shoulder one more time. Dean nodded, not daring to look up at her. She pulled her hand back; one more rev of the motor and they were off, roaring away out of the mini-mart's parking lot back into the night. Dean risked a glance in the rearview mirror and saw that Jody, Anne and Claire had all moved to the shoulder of the road to watch them drive away. Jody and Anne were standing under the little streetlight waving wildly, but Claire wasn't waving; she was standing still, her arms wrapped around herself again. But even from this far away Dean could somehow feel her eyes zeroing in on his on the rearview mirror. It was hard to make out her expression from so far away, but it looked awfully like sympathy.

It was past five in the morning when they finally reached Lebanon. Sam had fallen asleep soon after they'd left Hastings, slouched against his door. Dean had been praying silently to Cas since Sam had nodded off, touching the bedraggled alula-feather in his pocket now and then.

Sam woke as they came through Lebanon, in the dark spring night. They passed through the little town in silence, and drove south down the familiar county road that led to Lebanon's outskirts. Dark hills were silhouetted on the horizon against a starry sky; muddy fields spread away from the road on either side, faint in the starlight, with a few last patches of winter snow visible here and there.

They came to the long rutted bunker driveway, and as Dean took the turn, slowing the car for the last hundred yards, he glanced out the window at one particular dark hill.

He began to feel a little nauseous.

*Cas'll be at the bunker. Cas'll be at the bunker.* He'd been saying it to himself for the entire drive. For over twenty-four hours, now.

*Cas'll be at the bunker. He will.*

The car purred its way up to the front door. Dean cut the motor and stepped out, moving as stiffly as a mannequin. His mind seemed completely blank.

"I can't take this," he said to Sam.

"Let's look inside," Sam said. "Just stay cool." But he didn't seem all that calm himself, and as Sam was fumbling the bunker key out of his pocket, he dropped it into the dirt. And then he dropped his flashlight while trying to find the key.

"Stay cool yourself," said Dean, trying to relieve the tension a little. Sam just gave him a nervous laugh, but did finally manage to retrieve the key.

At last they got inside.

Dean could tell right away that Cas wasn't there.
Cas would have heard them coming. Cas would have been up in his attic room and he would have heard the Impala coming, and he would have come running down the stairs to greet them. He would have been in the map-room by now, looking up at them.

But the map-room was empty, and the bunker was silent.

Dean walked down the iron staircase and moved slowly through the library, listening to Sam bellowing out Cas's name. Dean, however, wasn't calling Cas's name at all.... because Cas wasn't there. He already knew.

They checked everywhere, just the same. They checked all the bedrooms first. When Dean got to his own bedroom he gazed for a while at his own bed. An image came to mind, then, of Cas in the silken nest, in that strangely changeable Throne of God. Human-Cas with big black wings, snuggled into the silken nest looking up at Dean. He'd looked so comfortable and happy, with his arms wrapped around the pillows and his wings fluffed out....

*He'd fit on my bed,* Dean thought, assessing the width of the mattress. It was a roomy king-size that Dean had invested in when they'd first moved in. *Even with the wings he'd fit. I could get some pillows for him. I could build one of those nest things....*

*And in the meantime, he'd fit right here, and he could put his wings around me—*

Dean turned away, strode out of the room and pulled the bedroom door shut behind him.

Sam had gone to check the downstairs levels, so Dean dutifully checked the upstairs. He knew already what he'd find, but worked his way carefully through every room, floor by floor, just the same. Sure enough Castiel was nowhere to be found, and when Dean got up to the attic, Cas's little cot was silent and still in its dark corner by the windows. The bedding was still undisturbed, still neatly made from when Dean had made his last pass through the room to pack up Cas's guitar.

A few of Cas's old clothes were still on the bookshelf. Including some of the jeans Dean had picked out for him at the thrift store. Dean reached out one hand and touched the denim.

On his way back toward the stairs, he let one hand trail across the table where Cas had always spread out his sheet music.

His hand came away dusty. The whole table had a fine layer of dust.

Dean wandered back downstairs to find Sam sitting glumly in the library.

"No sign of him," Sam said. "Guitar's right where you left it, too. Still in its case down in the archives."

Dean nodded. "I'm going up the hill," he said. Sam hoisted himself up out of his chair and tossed a flashlight to Dean. "Figured as much," Sam said, pulling a second flashlight out of his own pocket for himself.

They trudged up the hill, Dean leading and Sam right on his heels. It was nearly dawn now, but still just dim enough that they needed the flashlights. Dean's flashlight cast a glowing cone of light ahead. All the trees were covered with tiny new green leaves that were still unfurling, and the flashlight
made the little leaves shine, like a glowing green tunnel that was leading Dean right up the hill. It should have been lovely, but Dean just trudged along, batting the new growth out of the way.

He felt almost too tired to think. They'd been driving for over twenty-four hours — on top of all the crazy adventures before that. Dean felt stiff and sore with exhaustion, his whole body almost burning with the fatigue. Yet his mind kept racing. And as they drew closer to the gravesite, Dean found himself consumed by one repeating thought, a new thought and a horrible one: *What if Cas woke up in the grave and couldn't get out?*

*What if Cas woke and couldn't get out?*

*What if he's been trapped there for over twenty-four hours... with nobody to check? What if it's too late?*

*I should have called the local chief of police. I shouldn't have assumed he'd be able to dig out... I should have told Jody to come directly here.... I should've called Jason....*

But when they finally made it to the top, huffing and puffing in the grey light of early dawn, the grave was undisturbed.

Dean and Sam walked silently up to the foot of the grave. A faint lemon-colored light was now spreading over the eastern sky; without speaking they each clicked off their flashlights, and they stood side-by-side, looking at the grave.

It was clear the grave hadn't been disturbed for months. The dirt had the flattened look of earth that had gone through an entire winter without being touched, freezing and melting and compacting into a roughened, slightly sunken surface. A fringe of new grass had even started to close in around the grave, growing inward from the outer borders. A few ambitious little weeds had even sprouted right in the middle of the grave, sending up bright tendrils of green.

The plank was still there, browned and cracked and weathered now. The little white chair stood nearby, the chair where Dean had said his last painful goodbyes, those long months ago.

The winged grave marker was there as well, looking more or less intact, though it had tilted a little during the winter. A dark lump of plastic a few feet away, covered over in half-decayed leaves, was all that was visible of the backpack.

And all around, blooming in almost crazy profusion, were flowers.

There were hundreds of them, bursting with color in the brightening light of dawn. The daffodils had all come up, great cheerful blossoms of yellow, dozens and dozens of them in clumps all around. The crocuses made cheerful, bright little dots of blue that ringed the grave, and the hyacinths had come up too, a set of elegant purple curlicues near the head of the grave. And right at the foot of the grave, near Sam's and Dean's feet, were tulips standing tall and proud, their cup-like flowers a bright bold red.

Dean reached down and touched one of the tulips. Its broad red petals felt like silk.

"They're beautiful," said Sam.

Dean said nothing.

After a minute Dean shifted over to kneel at the side of the grave. Trying to not crush the little crocuses, he dug through the dirt, brushing leaves out of the way and pulling up some of the weeds. Things had changed a little, dirt had shifted around, and of course the flowers had emerged, but
Dean knew what he was looking for, and soon he found it. The little pebble.

And under it, the end of the string.

The string was almost invisible now, stained a muddy brown from all the rain and snow, and a crocus was peeping up on one side, but the string hadn't budged.

"He's not here," said Dean at last, sitting back on his heels. "The vessel's still here but Cas isn't. He never came here at all."

It should have been a relief, really. It should have been a huge relief to realize that Cas hadn't been trapped in the grave after all.

Sam said, "That's good, right?"

"Yeah," said Dean, standing up and brushing the dirt from his knees. "Sure."

"It just means he's somewhere else," Sam said. "You know, I'm really thinking he's probably in Heaven."

Dean brushed some dew-dampened leaves off the white chair and sat down, staring at the glow in the eastern horizon.

"I mean, that would make the most sense," said Sam. "Heaven was his home, originally. So if God's word, that gold sphere thing, said 'Home', then Cas could easily have gone there."

What Sam was saying made a lot of sense. But something else had been nagging at Dean during the entire drive, something he hadn't mentioned to Sam:

What if Cas didn't make it back to 2016?

What if he landed a thousand years off? A million years off? What if he's lost somewhere in the timeline and we're never going to see him again? He'll never see the flowers.... Cas'll never see the flowers....

Dean looked all around at the daffodils and the tulips and all the other flowers. Sam was right; they were beautiful.

*He'll never see the flowers.*

"And you had a point before about how he could be on the surface of the Sun," went on Sam. "That could totally be it. He resurrected there, last summer I mean, after Ohio, so that might count as 'Home' now. He might just have popped right back there and be stuck there again. I mean, we popped back to where we were the night before we went through the Fire Gate, and maybe he popped back to right where he was on that same night...." Sam paused. "Maybe you were right about that... maybe we need to go check out the Fire Gate again."

"What if he's a million years off," said Dean. He slumped down a little in the chair, the exhaustion suddenly overwhelming him. "He could have landed in the wrong time."

"Yeah... I've been trying to avoid thinking about that," confessed Sam. He was silent a moment, looking down at the grave, his shoulders drooping a little as his forced-optimism started to fade.

"Yeah...." Sam repeated, slowly. "That's possible." He took a few steps closer to the white chair where Dean was sitting, turning so that he could look toward the eastern horizon too, by Dean's side.
Sam crouched then, on his heels next to the white chair. He dangled his hands between his knees and laced his fingers together, and stared out at the eastern horizon with Dean.

Together they watched the brightening sky.

After a long moment, Sam said, "We found him before. We'll find him again. And, Dean... " He glanced up at Dean. "At least we got to see him again, right? And we got to see his true form."

Dean let out a ragged laugh. "Hell of a true form, isn't it."

"Pretty incredible," Sam said, with a smile.

"It was all real, right?" Dean said. "The sun? God? .... Cas?"

Sam nodded. "I think it was. We've got the iPad to show for it, at least."

A bright golden sunbeam peeked over the horizon; the light of Heaven itself, Dean now knew. But it only reminded him of what he'd seen when he'd been on Heaven, on the surface of the Sun itself. That indescribably vast landscape, the huge mountains, the gigantic silver flares... but most of all Dean thought of Castiel himself, in his magnificent true form. Dean could picture every detail: the glossy wings with the golden feather-tips... Cas's glittering blue eyes, his tawny shoulders and white belly and dark feet, the long blue-black plumes of his neck ruff, his silver talons, his long black tail....

The way he'd purred.

Sam said, "We did save the universe, you know."

Dean had to laugh at that. "I guess so. That's something, huh?"

"We finally did it," said Sam. "You know what, we really ought to be celebrating."

"Yeah, we should have a party," said Dean.

They sat quietly after that, watching the golden sunbeam grow, and grow, till it was blindingly bright. All around them, on the hill, birds were stirring, twittering in the bushes. First one and then another began to sing, and then more and more, till it seemed the whole hill was singing.

"You know what we should really do?" said Dean.

Sam looked up at him.

"Pray," Dean said. "It's dawn. It'll give him strength. Wherever he is. Besides, I promised Claire."

Sam gave a little smile.

Sam settled down then, sitting cross-legged in the daffodils, apparently oblivious to the chilly dew. Dean stayed in Cas's little white folding chair. They sat side-by-side, silently watching the sun rise, watching the world around them brighten to a beautiful spring morning. And while the birds sang around them, they prayed.

Dean didn't know what Sam's prayer was about. Dean's own prayer was very simple:

_Cas, if you can hear me, please come home._

_Please come home._
Both brothers staggered back down to the bunker a half hour later, and fell into an exhausted sleep that lasted most of the day.

Dean probably would have slept on deep into the night, except that he'd set his phone alarm for late afternoon. The idea was to get up in time to take a shower and grab a bite to eat before Cas's sunset prayer. (Dean had already decided to return to the seven-prayers-a-day schedule, as soon as they'd recovered a little from the long drive.)

But when his phone began beeping, he was so deep into sleep, so far down, in such a colorful dream, that he didn't wake at once.

In the dream, Castiel (in dragon form) and Dean and Sam were all seated together on a huge magical carpet that was flying them all around the world. The massive carpet was large enough to completely accommodate even Castiel's enormous dragon form. Cas was resting on the flying carpet on his belly, sphinx-like, with his feet tucked neatly under him. Dean was positioned between the two front feet, leaning back on Cas's feathery chest, while they both watched Sam, who was standing nearby fussing with God's iPad.

"The flight controls definitely aren't working," reported Sam. "Not enough power. Dammit.... The compression isn't working." He was trying to control the carpet via some app called "iFlight" that he'd found on God's iPad, but something had apparently gone wrong. Soon the iPad gave up entirely, beeping in protest, while the carpet zigzagged them wildly all over the Midwest.

"Jeez, we're going everywhere," commented Dean. "Where were we trying to go again?"

"From Lake Erie to Kansas," said Cas, his huge black head tilting a little as he glanced sideways down at Dean. "That's not even all that far, but it's proving to be difficult. Sorry."

"Not your fault, Cas," said Dean, reaching up behind his head to give Cas a friendly little scratch through the neck-plumes.

"Still, it's taking too long," said Cas, "and though I'd love to stay, I should get back to work. I've still got a long way to go." He bent his head down to give Dean a quick lick on the forehead. Then he stood, so suddenly that Dean nearly fell over backwards, and then Cas just stepped over Dean and dove right off the edge of the magic carpet.

"Cas!" Dean yelled. "Wait!" He lurched to his feet and stretched out a hand in an instinctive, and totally hopeless, effort to try to grab hold of Cas somehow. But his outstretched hand only brushed the very end of Cas's long black tail. Dean and Sam both ran to the fringed border of the carpet to look over the edge, but Cas was gone, swallowed up by the clouds below.

God's iPad was still beeping.

Dean woke, then, to find himself alone, in his darkened bedroom, with his hand on nothing more than a pillow. His phone was beeping nearby on the bedstand.

It took Dean a surprisingly long time to surface from the dream. Even just remembering how to turn the phone off took a while; the dream seemed to still be keeping such a hold on Dean's brain that he
had to stare blankly at the beeping phone for quite a long time before he finally deduced that he should swipe a finger over its face. At last the beeping stopped.

By then he'd mostly forgotten the dream.

He stumbled out of bed on autopilot, feeling as exhausted as if he'd never slept at all. The days of non-stop journeying on the surface of the Sun (and to the end of time) seemed to be taking their toll; all Dean really wanted to do was go straight back to bed. But I gotta do the sunset prayer, he thought, staggering to the bathroom. Got a couple hours still, but I can't miss the sunset prayer.

He took a quick shower, got some clothes on, and shuffled to the kitchen to make coffee.

Where he then sat for a long time, at the kitchen table, cradling the warm coffee mug in his hands without even drinking any of the coffee.

He closed his eyes, summoning up the images in his mind. The immense dragon who had rescued him and Sam, healing Sam from his terrible burns.... The glossy black wings, spreading like huge sails out to either side, every feather tipped in shining gold....

The memories were as sharp as if it had happened just moments ago. How they'd flown over that vast landscape to that infinite horizon. The escape from Gog and Magog, the wild flight into the flare, the long struggle to cross the endless sea. Crash-landing through the waves, surfing to shore. Sleeping in Cas's feathers on the shore. Catching all the silver butterflies, singing Cas to safety.

Cas's rumbly dragon voice, and his beautiful glittering blue eyes.

The way he'd stretched out his neck on the sand, purring in delight, when Dean had straightened out the glossy blue neck-plumes.

Cas at the green hill; Cas roaring "GRAB MY WING!", somehow reaching Dean even when Dean had been falling to the end of time. Cas struggling free of the web of galaxy-threads; Cas, as a dragon, settling into the silken nest, and then, as a human, curling up with the silken pillows; Cas watching wide-eyed as God climbed over his wings...

Castiel incinerating the Word of God with a single spear of glowing flame.

Home.

And then there was that mysterious image that Dean could not stop thinking about, the one of human-Cas folding his wings around Dean in the moonlight, in a soft warm bed, in a room with Christmas lights.

With one hand Dean felt for the alula-feather in his shirt pocket. (He'd already fallen back into the habit of always putting the feather in his pocket whenever he woke and got dressed.) Dean drew it out slowly. It was looking a little battered after all the adventures they'd had, so Dean spent some time smoothing it out, running his fingers along its silken surface till it was shining and straight.

"You were real," he said to Cas, both his hands folding around the feather. "You were real and you were alive. You are alive. I know you are."

He sat a long time, holding the little feather.
Dean wandered into the library eventually. God's iPad was sitting out on one of the wooden tables — Sam had left it out — and eventually Dean sat down into a chair, pulled it over and switched it on. Sam had checked out a lot of the apps by now, but hadn't fully investigated all of them; in fact, he'd estimated it would take years to go through the entire iPad. (He'd even spent some time in the car yesterday trying to see if the iPad had any kind of angel-tracking app, but so far with no luck.)

Dean opened up the Kindle app this time. To his surprise a different book showed up than the one Dean had seen before. This time it was showing a color illustration that looked awfully familiar, a lovely hand-drawn diagram of the different types of feathers on an angel wing. Dean tapped his way back to the Table of Contents to find that he was looking at a digital edition of *The Physiology of Angels*.

"I'll be damned," Dean said, starting to page through it. It looked like a full version of the gorgeous old book that they had in the library. Except all digital. It seemed more or less the same as the physical copy, except...

*Except searchable,* thought Dean. That was one of the great advantages, of course, of digital books.

After a little thought Dean tapped on the search box, and entered "Neck feathers."

The Kindle jumped to a page from Chapter 6, "Wings, Feathers and Flight."

Angels, like all flying creatures, must keep their flight surfaces — that is to say, their feathers — in excellent condition at all times. This requires daily preening, which is a careful process of straightening, combing and smoothing all the feathers, and occasionally treating them lightly with holy-oil. Preening is the very first ability mastered by a fledgling angel (fledglings preen even before they fly). Any healthy, adult angel will normally be able to preen almost all of its own feathers by itself. However, an area of particular difficulty is the feathers of the head, and especially the back of the head, including the long neck-plumes. Angels, like birds, preen with their mouths, using the fine teeth at the corners of the jaw to comb out the feathers. But due to the anatomy of the neck and head they cannot easily preen the feathers that are rooted at the back of the head.

Thus, a tradition has arisen wherein angels assist each other with this area. Only angels who are close companions will preen each other in this way. It is a significant act, indicative of deep affection, respect, and trust.

An angel preened in this way, by a cherished companion whom he trusts and respects, will give every indication of pleasure and of relaxation. In such moments, an angel may even produce an audible purr, rather like that of a cat. The purr is a rare and precious sound, indicative of an angel who is thoroughly contented and at peace.

Dean sat a long while thinking.
Then he called up the search box again, and this time he entered: "Gold feathers."

A new page leapt to the foreground, this one from Chapter 11, "Behavior And The Expression Of Emotion":

Angelically tradition contends that new feathers can acquire particular colors while growing, according to the nature of the angel's grace and the environment that the new feathers experience while they grow. Thus, if an angel experiences some marked change in its circumstances or in its inner emotional life, and if this change is maintained during feather-molt, the angel's feather color can change. For example, feathers can change to white to represent purity, or can be darkened to jet-black by contact with hell-fire. As a third example, a glossy blue on the wings often indicates the angel has spent a great deal of time in Heaven, with the feathers in prolonged, direct contact with the power-imbued ether of Heaven.

The rarest of the feather-colors is a metallic gold. Gold feathers indicate an angel has experienced a very strong affection during the time of feather-molt, whether as the recipient or the giver. In short, gold indicates love. That this color is rare is perhaps some indication of the typical conditions under which angels are forced to live and work while in the service of Heaven.

Gold can occur on part or all of the feathers. Gold that is restricted to the feather-tips typically indicates that the angel loves somebody else; that is, this color appears due to the internal emotional state of the angel and does not require proximity of the loved one. Feathers can also acquire golden shafts if the feather is touched with love while the feather grows, i.e. if the angel is the recipient of love and not just the giver. However, the loved one must be physically present to assist the angel during molt for the color to fully penetrate the feather-shafts.

In rare cases it has been reported that the alulas can become fully golden even if the object of affection is not physically present, but if instead there is some form of magical or spiritual contact with the angel during the time of feather-growth. This likely occurs because the alula-feathers have a direct connection to the deepest core of the angel's self. In essence, golden alulas indicate that the loved one was sending a strong signal of love from a remote distance, while the alula-feathers grew.

It was not a surprise, of course.

Sam had seen it. God had seen it. Hell, even Gabriel had seen it. The only puzzle was why it had taken so long for Dean to see it.

In fact it seemed incredibly clear now, so much so that Dean found himself actually getting angry at himself, furious almost, as he looked back on the past several years. He set the iPad down, gritting his teeth as he thought about it.

It wasn't even just the awful memories of the torture in Ohio, or even the library fight before that, that were gnawing at him now. (Though those were certainly bad enough to think about.) It was everything else, too. The subtle things... the way Dean had cut Cas down, over and over. The way Dean had forced him away. The way he had kept his distance.
Why had Dean held back? Why had he put those walls up? Why on Earth had he fought it?

Why had he even thought it was something to resist?

And as for Castiel... his stance had been clear for years. It had been clear since the beginning, of course. It had been clear since the very first day.

Once again Dean remembered that night in the hospital in Idaho, when Cas, half-stoned from the pain drugs, had finally blurted out exactly what he'd felt. And Dean had just shut him down.

"You fucking moron," Dean muttered to himself, his face in his hands.

"Hey," Sam said, from only about a foot away. Dean jumped, looking up at him. Sam was fully dressed, hair still damp from a shower, and he was holding two mugs of coffee. He held one out to Dean. "Coffee was old so I made some fresh," Sam said. "Want some?"

Dean nodded mutely and took a mug.

"How long you been sitting here?" said Sam.

"A while," said Dean, avoiding Sam's eyes. It was safer to look at the coffee. Dean took a sip.

"Thought you might've gone up the hill," said Sam.

Dean checked the time on his phone. Still an hour to spare. "I will," he said. "Still some time till sunset, so... I was just doing some reading."

Sam glanced down at God's iPad, where *The Physiology of Angels* was still displayed. He picked it up. Dean watched his eyes flick over the page about the gold feathers.

"I read that part last night in the car," was all Sam said.

Dean stared at him. "Why didn't you say anything?"

Sam gave him a dry glance. "It was obvious," he said. He set down his coffee mug and tapped at the iPad thoughtfully, closing the Kindle app. "Dean..." Sam started to say, but Dean was sitting up straight now, staring at Sam.

The sight of Sam standing there, tapping away at the iPad, had suddenly brought the dream flooding back.

Castiel and Sam and Dean, on that magic carpet. Sam standing there with the iPad, tapping at the iFlight app, saying, "Not enough power. The flight controls aren't working."

And *what had Castiel said?* Dean struggled to remember. Something about...

Lake Erie? Had Cas mentioned *Lake Erie?*

"Sam!" said Dean. "I think I might have a clue about Cas!"

Sam jerked his head up from the iPad, staring at him.
"It might be nothing," Dean started to say, clutching his coffee mug tight, "but I had another weird dream—"

Just then a a soft **click** from the front door sounded through the library.

---

*A/N - The next part, which is the end of the fic, posts tomorrow.*

*I hope you enjoyed this! If there was something in particular that you liked, please let me know what it was. :)*
The Beginning

A/N - And here's the last part.

Later I'll post the Materials & Methods, with some author's notes. This chapter will have no author's notes at the end, so as to let it close in peace. Please do send me comments though - I so want to hear what you think.

Thank you so much for coming with me on this long journey.

The click from the front door was as electrifying as a bullet shot. Dean gave such a violent flinch he spilled hot coffee all over his hand. He exchanged a shocked look with Sam.

"Front door," Dean said, pushing his chair back. "That's the front door. That's the front door. That's the sound of a key in the front door."

"I know," said Sam, who had already shoved the iPad onto the table and was striding rapidly toward the map-room, where the wrought-iron staircase wound its way up to the front door, only a scant dozen yards away. Dean plunked his own mug down in a hurry (spilling yet more of the coffee in the process) and scurried after Sam.

There were only two keys to the front door. There was the original key, the one that had gone to Jason, and which Jason had then sent to Jody, and which was now in Sam's possession.

And there was another key. A copy that Dean had made himself, machining it painstakingly in the bunker's little woodshop till it worked perfectly. That key had been put in a ziploc bag, months ago, along with a cell phone and a little note, and the ziploc bag had been placed in a backpack, and the backpack had been placed....

It only took maybe two seconds to cross the library and reach the map-room, but the two seconds seemed to stretch out into an eternity, till Dean felt he was moving almost in slow motion. Every sound seemed to echo through the bunker, each little sound ringing as clear as a bell: the click-thunk of the front door's lock unlocking, the distinctive scrape of the front door swinging wide, then the snick of someone removing the key from the lock. Then, the soft creaking sound that the wrought-iron landing always made when someone stepped onto it.

Sam was running for his last three steps, looking up as he entered the map-room. Dean was still a few feet behind and couldn't see anything. But he knew what Sam was seeing. Just by the way Sam's head lifted, just from the little gasp that Sam let out, just by the way his shoulders lifted; just from that, Dean knew. Before he even heard the "Hello, Sam."

"Hello, Sam." The distinctive gravelly voice seemed to ring through the bunker.

It seemed to Dean then that the map-room expanded somehow. In one of those strange tricks of perception, the little room seemed to grow, as if it contained an entire galaxy of its own, complete with planets and stars; as if the map-room was all that really mattered in the world. It contained Dean,
and Sam, and it also contained the most important thing in the entire galaxy, for there was Castiel, standing there on the wrought-iron landing above them. Sam's delighted cry of "Cas! You're here!" barely even registered, for there was such a roar in Dean's ears that all he seemed able to hear was the sound of his own heart thumping.

Dean stood there almost stunned, gaping up at the sight of Castiel gazing down at them. Cas was even wearing his old outfit. The trenchcoat, white shirt, blue tie and black slacks were all in impeccable condition, clean and pressed. In one hand Cas held the front-door bunker key, the one that had been in the backpack on the hill for so long. He had the backpack itself slung over one of his shoulders.

Cas swung the door closed and raised his other hand to the railing, and Dean saw a blur of red and yellow color in Cas's hand. He didn't really notice any other details, though, for now Cas was staring right at Dean.

One of those endearing lopsided smiles came across Cas's face, a corner of his mouth crooking sharply upwards as if he just couldn't contain his smile. It seemed the whole universe held its breath then, as Castiel said, his rough voice echoing through the room, "Hello, Dean."

Sam charged right up the stairs like a big galumphing moose, grabbed Cas in a tight bearhug, and said, "You made it! You made it back!"

"Yes, I—" Cas tried to say, before being smothered face-first into Sam's flannel shirt. He managed to catch Dean's eye around Sam's shoulder (Dean was still standing below by the map-table, staring up in shock). But Sam didn't give Cas even a second to breathe. Or to speak. "I can't believe you made it!" Sam said, pushing Cas back to arm's length to look at him for a second. "You're in your old vessel!" He had both hands on Cas's shoulders now, looking him up and down. "You got your old vessel. You healed it up!"

"Yes, I—" Cas began again.

"You look fantastic! Do you feel okay? What about your true form, can you still switch into that when you want?"

"I think so, yes, I—"

"Oh my god, you have the backpack!" Sam said, whisking the backpack off Cas's shoulder. "It worked! Did it work? Dean kept re-stocking that thing for ages. Was it useful?"

"Very," said Cas, patting Sam's arm and finally pulling free of him just enough to start taking a few steps down the stairs toward Dean. Dean, still transfixed at the bottom of the stairs, stood blinking, watching almost numbly as Cas began walking down the stairs toward him. Cas said as he descended, talking over his shoulder to Sam (who was now trotting eagerly behind Cas, still clutching the backpack), "I was incredibly thirsty, actually, so the water bottles were especially wonderful. Also the food. I ate some right away. I guess I shouldn't be hungry, or thirsty, as an angel; but I've had very little power available since I've gotten back. The power flow from Heaven's been almost nonexistent—" Cas had finally reached the bottom step and he paused in mid-sentence, looking at Dean.

Dean stared back at him, unable even to speak.
"You're okay," Dean said at last.

Cas smiled.

"We were worried," Sam added, totally unnecessarily. He scuttled around to Cas's side, where he hovered for a moment, glancing back and forth between Cas and Dean.

Sam almost visibly pulled himself together. "Ah, right, you two probably need to... " He hesitated. "Uh. I'll... I'll just... I'll just go put this pack down. Cas, you want any coffee?" Cas nodded, and Sam disappeared toward the kitchen, leaving Cas and Dean still standing just a few feet apart, looking at each other.

Cas slowly stepped off the last stair, down to the floor, so that he was standing level with Dean. Just two feet away now.

Dean felt completely paralyzed. After all the days with dragon-Cas, it seemed unbelievable to have human-Cas right here in front of him like this. Sure, he'd seen human-Cas briefly in that strange silken nest, and in a dream here and there. But everything in that eerie place had seemed so hallucinatory that it had hardly seemed real.

Dean raised one hand, feeling extraordinarily tentative, and set it on Cas's shoulder. Cas watched him silently, a soft expression in his blue eyes.

Dean dared to lift his hand, then, to cup Cas's cheek, and he even ran his thumb lightly over the stubble on Cas's cheek. Cas's cheek was warm under Dean's touch, and his eyes were alert and bright. He looked alive. He felt alive. He was alive.

Cas said nothing as Dean gently touched his cheek. But he was watching Dean very closely, obviously waiting for Dean to make the next move.

Yet Dean felt totally unable to do anything at all. He couldn't even seem to speak. *I really, really want to hug him*, Dean thought, but somehow he didn't dare. Mostly due to an intensely panicky sensation that if he took hold of Cas now, he would burst into huge wracking sobs immediately and would never be able to let go.

Dean took a shaky breath and made himself drop his hand. "This is really you? This is real?" he asked.

"We went through this on the Sun," Cas pointed out, the smile creeping onto his face again. "We did all the *is-this-really-real* discussions. Several times."

"I guess I need to go through it again," Dean said, only half-joking.

"I can see that," Cas said, smiling openly now. "Yes, it's really me, and this is really real. By the way, Dean..." Here Cas raised the bundle of colorful things that Dean had half-noticed earlier. Flowers. Cas was holding flowers. Two red tulips, surrounded by a bunch of yellow daffodils.

Cas said, glancing down at them, "I did get to see the flowers after all." He looked up at Dean and added, "The flowers on the hill. I did get to see them! I didn't know if I ever would. They're beautiful, Dean." He held Dean's eyes for a long moment. "I want to thank you for planting them. It was such a very lovely sight to emerge to."

"Emerge to..." said Dean slowly. "You... crawled out of the grave? For real?"

Cas nodded. "I had help. Hannah and Gabriel. They helped me clean up and put the vessel back
together. We've been working on it all the last hour."

"But where have you been?" said Sam, reappearing suddenly at Dean's shoulder with a mug of coffee for Cas. Cas stuck the flowers in Dean's hands (he took them numbly), accepted the mug and took a swallow before he answered. Dean realized, then, that Cas actually looked a little tired, and even slightly shaky.

A caretaker sort of urge swept over Dean then, and the next thing he knew he was steering Cas to the nearest library table, guiding Cas very carefully with a hand on the back and even pulling out a chair for him, even though Cas obviously wasn't that shaky. But Dean couldn't help it, hovering over him till Cas got safely settled in the chair. They all sat down together then, Cas sitting at the end of the table cradling his coffee mug in both hands, with Dean and Sam seated on either side, Dean still clutching the flowers.

"It was a strange journey back," Cas said at last, looking back and forth between them. "I'd been low on power all along, you might remember, while in the Crown — in the corona, I mean, on the Sun. I was holding together fairly well — except for the white fog, obviously — but the moment we were sent back to Earth I had absolutely no power at all. Drained right down to zero. In retrospect I think that trip along the galaxy-threads, when I dove after you, Dean, drained the very last of my power stores. It took quite a lot to catch up to you and hold onto you, you know, and to get out of the galaxy-thread before it compressed on us. I think I was only able to keep going after that, in God's throne-room, because of the inherent power that permeates that whole dimension anyway. But I didn't seem able to store up any of it. So once I was back on Earth I had nothing."

"You'd think God could've charged you up or something," said Dean, suddenly feeling a little annoyed at God.

Cas just shrugged. "He had more important things to worry about. Anyway, when we got back to Earth we were snapped to different locations, as you know. I realized you two had ended up on Mount Shasta — I heard your prayers, Dean — but I wound up plunging into Lake Erie. In my true form, in the Earthly plane, and with absolutely no power left at all." He took another sip of coffee, a contemplative expression coming over his face. "It's interesting, really.... I think it implies that my true home is here on Earth, and in the material plane, even. Yet also that I am supposed to maintain my angelic nature here, too, somehow."

"Lake Erie..." said Dean, remembering the scene from his dream. "So you did get back to Earth yesterday, but you went to Lake Erie?"

Sam swore under his breath. "Dammit, Dean, we heard it on the news! The dark blob that fell into the Great Lakes and caused the flash flood! That wasn't a Darkness-blob at all, that was you, Cas, right?"

Dean stared at him. Of course. The Great Lakes. The flash flood and the forest fire.

"Oh, someone saw me?" said Cas, looking at Sam. "I suppose I shouldn't be too surprised. I was, um... growling a lot. I was taken by surprise. Yes, that was me. And as you saw on the Sun, I'm really not all that nimble at swimming, when I'm in my true form. My feathers get waterlogged. I mean, I can swim somewhat, I got to shore, but I was exhausted."

"But why Lake Erie?" Sam said.

Dean suddenly knew why. "Ohio," he said, rubbing his forehead. The realization settled on him like a heavy weight. "You were on the lakeshore of Ohio. Near the warehouse."
Cas nodded.

"Oh..." said Sam.

A slightly awkward moment passed, and then Sam said, slowly, "I think I might know what that means. It's not that Ohio is 'home' for you, Cas — I think the whole Earth is home. It's just that we each returned to Earth right near where we were last on Earth. Dean and I ended up near the Fire Gate, cause the Fire Gate was where we left Earth. And you reappeared right near where..." Sam stopped, glancing at Dean.

"...near where I died," said Cas calmly. "It was the last place that my grace remembered." He reached one hand out to grasp Dean's shoulder, squeezing it firmly. "It's okay, Dean." Removing his hand slowly (his hand drifted a bit down Dean's sleeve, with a few more half-pats along the way), Cas went on, "Anyway, there I was in the earthly plane, swimming in earthly water, and I was so low on power that I couldn't seem to snap into the form I would usually take here. The compressed form."

"Compressed form..." Sam echoed. "What, the swirl of light, you mean? That glowy veily thing that you angels do?"

Cas let out a short laugh. "The glowy veily thing, exactly. We usually compress into that form when we're in the material plane and haven't found a human vessel yet — it takes some effort to do, actually, but it's easier to move around that way, and easier to enter a vessel, and certainly less terrifying to the general populace. It can be helpful when, for some reason or other, we haven't got enough energy to simply transition to the etheric plane and move around that way." He gave a little sigh. "But I couldn't manage to do it. I was still in true form — in dragon form, as you've been calling it. I tried to contact Hannah and Gabriel over angel-radio to see if they could help, but they didn't answer. And so I scuttled into the woods and started a fire with a fallen tree and rested a while, just to try to dry my feathers off." He took another sip of coffee and said, "The fire turned out well, actually. I was rather pleased with it. Though..." He frowned, and added, "Well, the fire department came, and right around then I forgot myself — I was listening to your prayers by then and trying to think of a way to contact you... and... well, maybe I got a little overeager about trying to fly to Mount Shasta right away. I really didn't get very far." He paused, and said, now looking slightly embarrassed. "I only got about fifty feet, to be honest. I probably shouldn't have tried to fly over the fire trucks while my feathers were still so wet." He glanced at Sam. "I was wondering, do fire trucks cost very much?"

Sam was chuckling now. "I'm guessing this explains that firetrucks-mysteriously-crushed story I just saw on the news. I was thinking maybe we had a case."

"No case, I'm afraid," said Cas with a sigh. "Just me. Thank goodness all the firemen were out of the trucks, at least."

"But we were praying to you!" Dean finally burst out. "Couldn't you get any power from that?"

Cas nodded emphatically. "Oh, yes. Yes, absolutely. That's what finally gave me the strength to get back here. I still was terrifically low on power, but your prayers fueled me up a bit and helped me sort of hopscotch my way back here, one little flight at a time. I had to stay out of view during the day, though, so I didn't get very far. And each little flight was taking so much power! But I got most of the way across Indiana. Then the next night, very late last night, Claire joined in and sent me a huge burst of prayers all of a sudden, and that, combined with your prayers, got me across Missouri. And then your sunrise prayers helped me hop over the Mississippi River, and by then I was so close I started just flying very low over the fields, earlier today, even though it was still daytime." He paused. "I'm afraid I may have frightened some cattle. Ah... maybe a lot of cattle."
"There was a stampede story too..." muttered Sam, across the table, to Dean. "Just saw it on my phone when I got up just now. Lots of stampedes."

"I told them I wasn't going to eat them," said Cas, sounding a little frustrated. "Anyway I finally got here about noon today." He shook his head. "It was exhausting, to be honest. I've never flown that far in my true form in the material plane; I have to say, it's a very strange feeling. I have to counteract gravity constantly so I was incredibly drained again by the time I arrived, despite all the prayers. Then I almost blundered right through the door — I was so tired I actually forgot what size I was! I almost came crashing right on in. But Hannah and Gabriel intercepted me just in time, just outside. Turned out they'd been pretty busy dealing with the disappearance of the Darkness — the whole surface of the Sun was disrupted for a while. Thought I guess there's all sorts of portals now from the inside to the outside, so that's good, at least. Anyway, apparently they'd finally got Heaven under control enough to come down and help me get back into, um, the glowy veil form. And then they helped me put the vessel back together so that I could en-vessel myself again."

"Gabriel's okay?" said Sam.

"He's fine. He might drop down later to say hi."

"Oh, that's awesome," said Sam. "Cool. That's, um, that's great."

Dean looked at him curiously; Sam had started blushing a little, for some reason. Sam turned aside with a little cough, and Dean turned his attention back to Cas and asked, "And the others? Balthazar and Anna? And Oshossi?"

Cas smiled. "They all survived. Balthazar, Anna, the other angels and the orishas. Some injuries, but apparently after we went down the thread, the Darkness-smoke gave up the battle almost immediately. That particular battle, at least. Apparently we were gone for many months after that, and the Darkness-spheres kept causing trouble the whole time, though never with quite such a dramatic battle. But then two days ago..." He paused. "The Darkness simply disappeared. Completely. Hannah said she had the impression that the whole firmament of Heaven tightened up somehow. That's how she put it: tightened up. And the Darkness sort of lost its hold and simply... blew away."

They all looked at each other.

"When God sealed the lockbox," Sam said.

Cas nodded. "That's what I suspect. The anchoring of the galaxy-threads must have happened right then. Though... I suppose the concept of when exactly that happened is a little hard to apply, given that we were technically outside of time entirely while we were at God's throne. But anyway, the Darkness is gone, and... here I am!" He set his coffee mug down, spreading his hands, glancing down at himself. "Hannah and Gabriel did a good job on my vessel, don't you think? I was so grateful. Gabriel was particularly careful about erasing all the... ah, the scars. He kept insisting that was important, for... some reasons." Cas's eyes flicked to Dean as he said this. And then Cas pushed his sleeves up slightly, glancing at one wrist and then the other. "He did such a good job, don't you think?" Cas added, and all at once Dean suddenly realized what Cas was looking for.

The knife-wounds on his wrists. They were gone.

Cas's wrists had no scars at all.

Everything was healed.
But now that Dean had remembered the knife-wounds, it was suddenly all he could think about. There might be no visible scars on Cas's skin, not anymore, but Dean could still remember, **vividly**, exactly what the wounds had looked like. How difficult it had been to bind them up afterwards, to put in the stitches and bandage the wounds....

Cas glanced at Dean, and rapidly pulled his sleeves back down over both wrists. "So, back to normal!" he announced brightly.

"Back to normal!" agreed Sam, also with a slightly artificial tone in his voice. "You look great! He looks great, Dean, doesn't he?"

"Uh," was all Dean could say. "Yeah."

Cas was looking a little worried now. Dean swallowed and said, trying to sound more convincing, "You do. You look awesome. You really do. I mean it."

Cas gave him a quick smile. He stood then, nonchalantly clasping his hands behind his back (which just happened to take both his wrists out of Dean's line of sight), and said to Sam, "This may seem an odd request, but, do you have anything to eat?"

It may have been just an attempt to change the subject, but it also turned out that Cas actually was hungry. He'd ended up famished from his low-powered cross-country flight, apparently driven into an almost human-like state of hunger by trying to fly so far in such a low-powered state. Sam rustled up some frozen pizza, which only took about ten minutes to heat up. Soon they were sitting around the kitchen table together, Dean and Cas side-by-side and Sam on the other side of the table.

Dean still felt oddly shaky. (Cas was devouring slice after slice of pizza, as was Sam, but Dean had barely touched his own slice.) But now that Cas was right at his side, Dean found he could let one knee press a little sideways against Cas's. Cas immediately leaned his own leg more firmly against Dean's, and even reached one hand down to pat Dean's thigh. The contact felt tremendously reassuring; Castiel was really, **physically**, here.

Dean heaved a sigh, thinking, *I really got him back. He's really back.* As the reality of it began to settle in, Dean soon began to feel almost giddy. The little kitchen seemed almost to brighten, the bunker somehow becoming warmer, the light more golden. Soon Dean felt as light as a balloon, almost drunk with the relief of it. He even finally got a few bites of pizza down, but eventually set down the half-eaten slice, finding he still didn't really have much appetite. But he stayed right where he was, one knee still pressed against Cas's, studying Cas's profile as Cas chatted with Sam. (Cas was quizzing Sam now about the iPad, and soon Sam had fetched it to show Cas a few of the apps.)

Dean knew he wasn't contributing much to the conversation, but somehow he didn't even need to. It seemed enough just to have Cas by his side, just to be sitting there with him, watching Cas and Sam chatting together.

*Both of them,* Dean realized. *Both of them survived. All three of us. We all got through it.*

*We all made it.*

*It's over. It's finally over.*
"Look at all the prayers coming in..." Cas was saying. He had the iPad in both hands now, and was studying the email app. He sighed. "I suppose my own prayers are in here somewhere. I've sent out quite a lot of them, actually, over the years."

"Me too," said Sam. "It seems a little sad, doesn't it?" Cas glanced up at him, and Sam said, "None of those people will ever know whether or not their prayers were heard."

"Oh," Dean said, a thought striking him. "Jeez. That reminds me. Cas, I think there's somebody you should talk to." He pulled out his phone, punched in Claire's number from memory, and handed the phone to Cas.

Cas set down the iPad and took the phone, watching Dean curiously as he put the phone to his ear. For a long moment his expression didn't change; he held Dean's eyes, his blue eyes fixed on Dean's, as he listened to the ringing on the other end. But then his eyes widened.

"Claire?" he said, turning to stare down at his plate, gripping the phone now with both hands.

Dean got up then and began to put the leftover pizza away. Sam got up, too, dumping the empty plates in the sink and whispering a quick "Good idea," to Dean. They could only hear Cas's side of the conversation, of course, which rapidly progressed to an urgent, "No, I'm okay, really, it's me, it's really me, this is Castiel, I swear — I'm all right, Claire. Please don't cry. I'm fine... Well, Dean was right about that, actually, I did die. It's a long story. I was stuck on the Sun in another plane. What? Yes, I said the Sun. In another plane. Not an airplane, no, I wouldn't have fit, I'm far too large — well anyway, I'm fine, I'm back now — Claire, I have to tell you something, your prayers were incredibly helpful. I'm so grateful — Is that — what are you — are you crying again? Please don't cry, Claire, I swear I'm fine— "

It went on like that for a while. Cas eventually had to disappear into the library to concentrate on the phone call. He returned some fifteen minutes later, looking somewhat wrung out but happy.

"Claire wants to see my true form," he announced, handing the phone back to Dean. "She's curious about how big I am."

Sam and Dean let out almost simultaneous snorts of laughter.

"Is that legal, Cas?" Sam said, still laughing. "Isn't she underage?"

"Also she's your daughter," said Dean. "Well, kind of."

Cas frowned at him. "What do you mean?" he demanded. "What's wrong with her seeing how big I am? I thought I might let her ride me, actually."

"You're really back," said Dean, unable to keep the smile off his face. "I believe it now. This is definitely you."

"It's a joke, Cas," Sam finally had to explain, still laughing a little. "Just a bad joke. About... how... big... something is. Or, um, might be. Not that I would know."

Cas got it then. "Oh... you mean..." he said slowly. Then he rolled his eyes and said, "Seriously now. We travel to the end of time and free God and save the universe, for this?"

"But this is what we saved it for!" said Sam. "Crappy jokes. That's what it's all about, right?"

Now Cas looked even more puzzled. "We saved the universe for crappy jokes?"
"We saved the universe to be able to do whatever we want," Dean clarified. "Crappy jokes... or whatever else. We saved the universe to be able to live our lives. To be free."

Sam gave a very unconvincing yawn shortly after that, along with an exaggerated, "Man, I'm beat!" and soon he announced he was heading to bed. He gave one more long bear-hug to Castiel before he left, whispering something in Cas's ear as he did so (whatever it was, Cas nodded). Then Sam made a brief detour over to Dean, who had finally gotten around to rinsing off the pizza pan and washing the three plates. Sam clapped him on the shoulder and whispered into Dean's ear too: "Do not leave him alone tonight. Don't you dare."

Dean, startled, looked up at him, but Sam was already walking away down the hall, and soon they heard the click of Sam's bedroom door closing.

Dean glanced at Castiel, who was still seated at the table. And who turned out to be looking back at him.

*What do I say?* Dean wondered, setting the last plate in the dishrack and turning to face him fully. *Do I just... invite him to my room? Would he even want that right now? Do I let him go his own room to rest?*

*Do I say, "Wanna come mantle me?"*

*Or, "I'd really like to preen your neck-feathers, baby?" Or, "Nice gold you got there on your feather-tips, bucko! Is that about anybody in particular?"

"This was easier when you were a dragon," Dean said at last.

Cas stood and held out his hand, saying, "Come upstairs with me."

"Oh..." said Dean. Before he even knew what he was doing, he'd walked over and taken Cas's hand, and then Cas was leading him down the hallway.

"That was easier than I thought," confessed Dean. Cas just gave a dry laugh.

Cas seemed completely at ease. His hand was comfortably wrapped around Dean's, and he said, as they walked together, "Your bed is bigger, but actually I've always wanted to share that little cot with you, upstairs. I know it's small, but you can see the stars out the windows. I thought we could just spend a little time up there. At least for a little bit. If it turns out it's too small, we can shift to your room."

"Okay," was all Dean said, as he followed along by Cas's side. The bubbly, giddy feeling seemed to have come over Dean again, and he realized, then, as they walked along, that it didn't even matter what room they went to, or what precisely Dean said. It didn't even seem to matter what they did — or didn't — do. It already seemed to be more than enough just to be walking along next to Cas, holding his hand.

They began to climb the stairs; Cas kept hold of Dean's hand, and they went up the stairs side-by-side. "I know you must be tired from your journey," said Cas. "I'm quite tired myself, to be honest, from that flight. But I just wanted to see the stars with you, before you fall asleep."
"Okay, um..." said Dean. "I was, uh, I was actually wondering whether to offer to preen your feathers... or something? But... I guess you don't have any feathers now."

Cas glanced sideways at him, his eyes crinkling in a smile. "There are no feathers on this vessel, true; but I could bring my wings over. I've got them tucked in the ethereal plane, you know. It only takes a little bit of power to bring them over."

"I thought you were out of power."

"The pizza has revived me."

"Pizza-powered wings?" Dean said, grinning now.

Cas smiled. "Yes, believe it or not. Enough to bring my wings over, at least. Later, when I've recovered a little more, I could change back into my true form too." They'd reached the top landing, and Cas paused there, giving another sidelong glance at Dean, this time looking a little less confident. He added, "I mean.... if you'd ever like to see it again? My true form?"

"I'd definitely like that," said Dean.

"You, um... you like my true form?" said Cas. The sun had set while they'd been eating the pizza, and the attic was rather dark now — Cas hadn't turned on the light — but Dean could make out the look on his face in the moonlight from the high windows. *Yup, he's worried*, thought Dean.

"I love your true form," said Dean, squeezing his hand.

Cas relaxed for about a microsecond but then stiffened, looking worried all over again. "You don't mind the vessel though?" he said. "It was a difficult decision whether to come to you first in this form or in my true form. Actually I wasn't sure which you'd prefer." He dropped Dean's hand then, glancing down at himself in the moonlight. Cas happened to be standing right in a shaft of moonlight that was slanting down from one of the high windows, and he looked almost ridiculously handsome and dramatic, as if posed for a movie poster. Dean gazed at him, drinking in the site: Castiel himself, with that beloved human face, with the wonderful old trenchcoat outfit, standing there bathed in a slanting shaft of silver moonlight.

Dean closed the remaining distance between them in one quick step, wrapping Castiel in a tight hug. Cas grabbed on at once, and Dean buried his face in Cas's neck and just held on.

After a few moments Dean said, still holding on tight, "We hadn't actually had the hello hug yet."

"I noticed that," said Cas. "I didn't know what it meant."

"It meant I wasn't sure I'd ever be able to let go," Dean said. He closed his eyes and hung on.

They stood there a long moment, just leaning on each other.

"So you like the vessel?" Cas said eventually.

"I love the vessel," Dean said. "And the true form too. Both." Then Dean added, his voice going a little husky, "You're not going to disappear, are you? Not going to poof into some other shape, or another plane? Zip to Heaven or just vanish or pop over to the Great Lakes suddenly?"

"I sincerely hope not," said Cas. His arms tightened around Dean's shoulders. "I certainly don't plan to."
Dean finally managed to loosen his hold and step back a little.

"Hope that answers the question," said Dean. "I love this form too. I love 'em both, Cas. But... now I'm wondering, which one do you want?"

Cas considered that, cocking his head a little and glancing over toward the cot... and toward the starry sky outside. "They both have their advantages." he said at last. He began to stroll over to the cot, and Dean walked by his side. As they walked together Cas said, one hand patting the lapels of his trenchcoat, "This vessel has become... dearly familiar. I'm very happy to be in it again. I missed it, you know. It was wonderful to be in my true form too, but of course I've had months now to enjoy flying around, and I was starting to miss being back on Earth. It's like... " They'd reached the little nook with the cot, and Cas paused there, slanting a look at Dean. "It's like having different instruments you can play. They can all play the same song, but they each have their characteristics."

"Like... Puff the Magic Dragon on guitar," said Dean, "and Puff the Magic Dragon just with a voice? Still Puff either way?" Dean raised one hand to stroke Cas's hair, somewhat astonished that it felt so easy to do so.

"It's like stroking his feathers, Dean realized, and I've been doing that for days and days anyway.

It simply felt natural now to reach out and caress him.

It felt easy.

Cas smiled at the touch, and even leaned into it a little, closing his eyes. Once Dean finally dropped his hand, Cas opened his eyes and nodded, saying, "Something like that, yes — it's Puff either way, whatever instrument you play it on. It's like... when I'm in my true form, I do so love flying. It's what that body is built for. When I'm in that form, that's what I long to do. And, Dean, it's what I longed to share with you."

"Flying?" said Dean softly.

Cas nodded. "I loved flying with you, these past days. I've always wanted to do that, to be honest."

He smiled again. "To show you my wings. To show you my true form. Spreading my wings wide for you, taking you into the clouds, flying as high and as fast as I could; it was wonderful. And, having you stroke my feathers... was..." (He stopped here, and cleared his throat.) "Very nice. Very nice. But now that I'm in this form..." He paused, looking down at his own body, and then he raised one hand to brush his blue tie, running his fingertips lightly down the soft silk of the tie. Dean watched, mesmerized, as Cas's fingers traced their way all the way down the tie, very slowly, stopping just at the very end. Cas stood there silent for a moment, still gazing down at his own body, his hand still on the very tip of his tie.

His fingers began to drift ever so slightly farther down. Onto his white shirt... Toward his belt...

Dean's mouth had gone almost dry. He felt a hot flush running through his body.

Cas's hand stopped at his beltline. "This form has other benefits," he said, looking up and dropping his hand to his side. "Different abilities."

Dean let out a gasp of air that was half a laugh and half a sigh. "Jesus, Cas," he said.

A tiny glint in Cas's eye, and a hint of a satisfied smile, were the only signs that he had, in fact, known precisely what he'd been doing. "Also this body's more your size," Cas went on blandly. "You seem... larger to me when I'm in this body. Bigger. I like how we... fit together. I like your... size."
"Okay, you can drop that innocent act," said Dean, half-flushed again but laughing just the same. "You just brought me up here for more crappy jokes, didn't you?"

Cas gave him a wide grin. "Actually I had some other plans," he said easily. "Anyway, this body may not be able to fly in the same way, but it can do other things. As for now, though... I actually am rather tired." Looking over at the cot, he said, "This is going to sound like a flirtation," he said, "and maybe it is. I rather suspect we're both so tired we'll just fall asleep, but..." He looked back at Dean. "Would you like to lie down and look at the stars with me?"

Dean couldn't help laughing again.

Cas grimaced. "I haven't had much practice at flirting. I was hoping you might help me out."

"Actually that was damn smooth," Dean said. "'Let's just lie down and look at the stars'... that's actually a killer line, Cas. I gotta remember that one. And yes, Cas, to answer the question, I'd like to lie down and look at the stars with you." He kicked his shoes off, adding, "Besides, Sam ordered me not to leave you alone tonight."

Cas glanced up in the middle of sliding his trenchcoat off. "That's funny," he commented, as he folded the trenchcoat neatly and set it on the little bookshelf. "That's exactly what he said to me, too."

"Sly dog, Sammy..." Dean muttered.

And, as simple as that, they both began to take off their clothes.

Dean shucked off his jeans, and then his shirt. He had thought he'd feel embarrassed, but there was no embarrassment at all. Cas knew him too well; Cas had seen him in a hundred different states of half-undress, in the bunker and in the motel rooms, over the years. There was no embarrassment. There was a tinge of nervousness, yes, but in a good way, in that fizzy excited way... and with almost a sense of inevitability, as if what was happening was very right.

Dean stripped right down to his boxers and t-shirt and stopped there, watching Cas strip down too. Cas had gotten his suit-jacket, shoes and pants off and was down to his shirt now, rapidly unbuttoning it and shrugging it off. He started to pull his undershirt off.

Dean watched, drinking in the sight of Cas's bare torso, a sight he had rarely ever had a chance to see before. Cas looked so... delicious. So strong and muscled, and yet lean, and tanned, and alive, and—

But then, as Cas peeled his undershirt over his head, for a split second his head was hidden in white. Hidden in white as if he were partially wrapped in a sheet.

His eyes were not visible, and he seemed wrapped in a white sheet; and all at once Dean saw him lying in a white sheet on the floor of the garage.

Dean had waited all night, by his side, that night, waiting for him to wake; and Cas had never awakened.

All at once Dean saw every single place on Cas's torso where his skin had once been flayed to strips. Where Dean had flayed him to strips.

It was far worse than that brief glimpse of Cas's wrists down in the library. This time Dean could see every place where Cas had been wounded, every place where Dean had had to sew him back together. There was the chest that Dean had stripped to pieces, and had had to try to sew back together, working with needle and suture till late into the night, poor Sam shuttling bucket after
bucket of bloody water to the drain in the back.... There was the jaw that had been so bruised, and so bloody; there was the knee that Dean had mangled so horrifically (till Cas had screamed in agony. *Screamed*) — and that Dean had so desperately tried to splint together afterwards. There, the lip that had been split, that Dean had tried to patch together with the butterfly band-aids. But Dean hadn't been able to get the bruises off, no matter how carefully he washed Cas's face—

"Dean, Dean—" Cas was saying, quickly moving closer to him, clad now only his boxers and socks. "Dean. Look at me. Dean." But now Dean could only see the stitches, and the bruises, and the wounds, and the blood. There was a rumble of thunder, a flicker of lightning outside in the starry sky, and then Cas's dark feathery wings were wrapping around him. "Dean. Shh. I'm here. It's okay," Cas said, holding him close, his wings and arms wrapping around Dean tightly. Dean came to himself at last, mortified to find that he was shaking like a leaf.

"I'm sorry," gasped Dean. "Really sorry, I didn't mean to do this—" He couldn't stop shaking. "It's just, Cas, I just kinda remembered it all suddenly, when you took your shirt off, I'm sorry, I just saw it all again — that was the last time I saw you without your, without your clothes, and, and, Cas, I *hurt* you, I *hurt* you, I hurt you so much—"

"Come," Cas said, and he flipped the covers back and drew Dean into bed. Then they were lying together, Cas pulling the covers up around them. Cas wrapped his wings and arms again around Dean, while Dean hid his face in Cas's chest, terrifically embarrassed by the whole thing but totally unable to stop shaking.

"It's okay. It's okay," Cas kept saying, stroking Dean's hair now with one hand, while still holding him tight with the other hand and with both wings. "I'm here. I'm here. It's over. Everything's okay."

Cas's feathers were all around.

The warmth began to sink in.

Slowly the panic began to ease.

"Sorry," Dean muttered into Cas's chest. "Jesus. Sorry for all the drama. I can't believe this."

"I should have realized," Cas said. He sounded almost angry at himself. "I should have *thought*. I *should* have thought. Especially after the way you looked at my wrists, downstairs. That night was actually the *only* time you've seen this vessel without clothes, isn't it? Well, not counting the time with the bees, but I don't even have the bees now. I'm so sorry, Dean. This was my fault. I've just been... so *eager* to get back here to see you. I moved far too fast."

As he spoke, he kept running his hand through Dean's hair, slowly, stroking his fingers gently along Dean's scalp. Dean gave a shaky breath, shifting even closer. They were pressed together so closely now that the little cot fit them both easily; it seemed almost spacious, in fact. Cas's wings shuffled against Dean's back, and Dean felt the feathers rearrange a little, folding gently all down his back, and then he felt an alula-feather begin stroking the back of his neck with a velvet-soft touch. Cas continued stroking his hair with one hand. *Preening my head-feathers*, thought Dean, drawing a slow, ragged breath.

"For me it was so brief, you know... " said Cas, slowly. "It was over so fast. That whole night really was just a single instant, for me. And it was never you that did it at all, you know. It was the Darkness all along. That was always extremely clear to me, even while it was happening. It was the Darkness, entirely, one hundred percent. You know... I suspect it's been working on you for years. I've wondered if it was trying to keep us apart."
Dean pulled his head back a little, then, staring at him in the dark. "What?" he said hoarsely. "What do you mean?"

"I think it was protecting itself," said Cas, looking back at him. "I've been thinking about it. I think it knew all along that you were the one who had the best chance to get me to the throne of God. Well, Sam might have been able to do it too, of course, but you had the best chance. Sam needed you... and I needed you. You were critical. You were essential. What happened in Ohio just shifted me to another location, really, but what it did to you, Dean... Dear Lord. It tortured you for months." Cas fell silent a moment, still stroking Dean's hair. Their faces were only a few inches apart now, Cas's eyes still searching Dean's. "I could hear it happening," he said, very softly. "I heard it in your prayers. I was deeply frightened for you, Dean. I feared it was going to cripple you entirely. Cripple your soul, I mean. And, I realized, the whole thing seemed calculated to do just that. Calculated to cripple you so much that you would never be able to focus on the mission again... never get to Heaven, never find me again, never get to the Crown, never get to the Throne. And Sam, too, was consumed with caring for you, and so he couldn't get to me either. I don't think any of it was coincidence. I think the whole thing was planned, in some way. Whether it was conscious or not I don't know, but I think it was trying to keep us separated." Cas paused a moment and added, "You were wounded far worse than I ever was, Dean. You were tortured far longer. You have to understand that."

Cas stopped there. He traced his hand, slowly, across Dean's head one more time, ending with his fingers gently scratching at the soft hairs at the back of Dean's neck. It felt extremely soothing, and Dean began to relax, his breaths finally coming slow and even.

Then Cas took hold of one of Dean's hands. Very slowly Castiel set the palm of Dean's hand to his own face, holding it there.

"No wounds, see?" said Cas. "No bruises on my face." He shifted Dean's hand down to his own chest, saying, gently, "No wounds. No stitches. None at all. Feel it..." He fell silent, still holding Dean's hand to his chest. Dean lay there, taking slow deep breaths, and he concentrated on what he could feel through his hand: Cas's smooth, unscarred skin, and his slow breathing, and his warmth, and his heartbeat underneath.

"Can you feel my heart beating?" asked Cas.

"Yes..." said Dean.

"You feel me breathing?" Cas whispered.

"Yes," said Dean. Cas let go of Dean's hand then, and Dean began sliding his hand across Cas's chest, and down to Cas's stomach.

It could have been a sexual move; and maybe on some other night it would be. But tonight, somehow, it felt like something very different. It felt like a form of prayer.

Slowly, reverently, Dean slid his hand very gently over Cas's skin.

Cas's skin was smooth, the muscles underneath strong and toned.

Cas was, in fact, completely fine. There were no wounds at all.

For a long time Dean traced his hands over Cas's skin, exploring every place where Cas had had the injuries: his chest, his knee, his wrists, his face and neck. Then Dean began kissing him. He kissed Cas's wrists; he kissed Cas's chest, he kissed Cas's cheek. He kissed everywhere the bruises and the
wounds had been, and again it seemed like a prayer, and with every kiss the horrific old images began to fade.

He kissed Cas's lips — Cas stirred against him then, his wings tightening on Dean's back. Cas kissed back, gently, but with a barely restrained eagerness underneath.

They kissed again, longer this time.

The awful images from the warehouse had faded almost entirely. They were not completely gone, maybe. Not yet. But they had faded far into the distance, and Dean knew, now, that everything was going to be okay. He and Cas were going to be okay. More than okay; they were going to be good, together. It was going to be really good. Dean knew it, all at once. He felt sure.

Dean began running his hands over Cas's feathers then, smiling when he felt Cas start to relax under his touch, and felt his wings soften. Dean smiled even wider when he heard Cas let out a very soft, slightly rumbly mmm sound that sounded awfully like a purr.

"You like this," Dean whispered.

"I do," Cas murmured back, his eyes starting to slide closed.

There suddenly seemed to be some potential to take this whole thing in quite another direction.

A direction that Dean very much wanted.

But all at once Dean knew that there were enough shaky afterthoughts still rattling around in his head that he wasn't actually sure if he was going to be able to perform. The fatigue and exhaustion, the panic and the fear, were still too near. "I, um..." Dean said, suddenly feeling a bit embarrassed. "I don't know how much I can do tonight... I mean, physically, I, um... I can take care of you, but, um, I don't know if I can...."

Cas's eyes opened lazily. "What?" he muttered.

"I want to make you feel good," Dean whispered. "I made you feel so bad, before. Now I want to make you feel good. Like... really good."

"This.... is... good," Cas said, his eyes drifting shut again as Dean stroked his wings.

"Yeah, but, I want to do more," said Dean.

"Oh, you mean sex," Cas said, eyes still closed. "That can wait."

"But I want to. But I don't know if I can—"

Cas opened his eyes and looked at him. "Dean, there's no rush," he said. "I want it too. More than you know. But Dean... we have all the time in the world." Cas glanced up at the window. Dean followed his gaze; bright stars were scattered all through the sky outside, dozens and dozens of stars shining through both the high windows, on either side of the cot. A crescent moon shone on one side. "We can just lie here tonight and watch the stars," said Cas. "It wasn't just a line, Dean; I meant it. I want to lie here with you and watch the stars. We could do that for years, only that, and I'd be happy. I'm serious."

"Yeah, but—"

"You asked me if I saw anything when we fell down the galaxy-thread," said Cas, shifting his gaze
to look right at Dean. Dean fell silent, looking back at him. Cas said, "I never had a chance to answer, but, Dean, I did. I did see something."

He paused. Dean waited, almost holding his breath.

"I saw us in bed together," Cas said. "It was just a very brief glimpse, but I saw you turning around in the moonlight, and asking something about my hair. We'd been together for years."

Cas was also in the moonlight right now, of course. Dean studied him, comparing his appearance now with what he'd seen in that strange future-dream. There was no grey in Cas's hair; not yet. There were only faint lines at the corners of his eyes. But Dean could see, even now, how Cas would look in the moonlight, years from now. The grey would appear, slowly, in Cas's hair, and in Dean's hair too; the lines on their faces would appear, too. New friends would appear... maybe a family, maybe a whole different life. The years would slip by, one by one, decade upon decade.

And it would be wonderful. It would all be wonderful.

Just to get to see him in the moonlight at all, year after year after year, would be wonderful.

"It was real?" Dean whispered. "What we saw? It was real?"

"You ask that question more than you need to, you know," said Cas. "It can be real if we want it to be." Cas kissed Dean again, on the lips; a soft, slow kiss, this time, and a long one, with Cas even starting to nibble gently at Dean's lips. This kiss began to spread warmth all through Dean's body, and Dean soon snaked an arm around Cas's waist, under his wings, drawing him even closer.

When the kiss ended, Cas said, "My point is, there's no rush." He rearranged his wings a little, snuggling them more tightly around Dean, and as they lay together under the stars, Castiel said, "This is not the end of the story, Dean. This is not the end of the story at all. This is only the beginning."
MATERIALS & METHODS (not a chapter)

Being a scientist I always feel compelled to add a Materials & Methods section to my fics (or at least, my longer fics), so here goes! It's just some notes about where the ideas came from, in case anybody's interested.

edit: omg I can't believe I forgot to say this first off: Thanks to my awesome beta Monijune! For her super-helpful edits, lightning-quick turnarounds, wonderful support and general all-around awesomeness. :)

THE IDEA - Into The Fire sprang out of an epic fic idea I had after the S8 finale, the finale where the angels fell from Heaven and Castiel was stripped of his grace and sent to Earth by Metatron. I had a whole story idea then of human-Cas searching out Sam & Dean (Sam still being in the hospital with Trials Sickness), and Dean still being pissed at Cas; and they'd have a falling out culminating with Dean accidentally killing him and then being wracked with grief and guilt. This story appealed to me greatly because, as you all know, I am a hopeless Cas-Angst-Addict and Guilty-Dean-Addict.

And then I got really taken with the idea that somehow Cas's death would set in motion a journey that would culminate in not only finding Cas again and seeing his true form, but also ultimately solving the biggest mystery in Supernatural: Where's God, and why did he disappear? Basically I wanted to devise a story that started very focused and personal, and went huge; a story where Cas's death would set in motion the biggest journey of all. Something that eventually went far beyond Earth to a scale that encompassed the entire universe.

It wasn't till S11 rolled around with the Darkness that I saw a way to make this work, with the Darkness being not only the root cause of Cas's death but also the root cause behind God's disappearance. It was a huge challenge to write it though because the fic does a drastic change in tone & genre partway through, from an introspective emotional journey of grief to a very plotty, external, epic journey (essentially a road trip, but flying) over a huge landscape. I wasn't at all sure I could pull it off, and still am not sure that I did, but it was such a great challenge to take on.

WHY HAVE DEAN KILL CAS? - There's many ways Castiel could have died, and many ways he could have been separated from the boys and sent to the surface of the Sun. I can't exactly pin down why it seemed to me that it had to happen in such a horrible, horrible way... it just did. It had to tear Dean apart; it had to gut him, it had to take him back to his worst memories of being in Hell and take all his guilt and magnify it. So... Cas had to die at Dean's hand, by torture.

One element that I never managed to fit into the fic was Cas's experience of the death. He talks about it a little in the last chapter, but one thing that didn't fit was him describing the moment of his death. The truth is that Castiel actually had a moment of real peace at the very end, when he woke up to find himself dying in Dean's arms. He knew then that Dean had survived. He also
realized that he had managed to last long enough to save Sam's life. At the very end he was thinking how much he loved Dean, and he thought: "I always knew I was going to die someday, but I never dreamed I would be lucky enough to get to die in Dean's arms."

DEAN'S GRIEF - Many of you noticed Dean going through the stages of grief and asked if I was taking him through the classic stages. My own experience has actually been that those "stages" don't always play out as they are supposed to, and that often you keep circling back to some of the earlier stages, sometimes bouncing all the way back to stage 1. It can be repeatedly cyclical. And sometimes it never does resolve; sometimes the acceptance never comes. So... it occurred to me that when grieving for someone who actually HAS resurrected before, it would be almost impossible to get out of this cycle of endless grief, because you'd never fully be able to give up hope and accept it. I thought it would be interesting (ok, in a sadistic way) to explore what the grieving process would be like then.

MULTIPLE DIMENSIONS - My favorite headcanon for where Cas's wings are, and how he flies, and how he disappears, has always centered on the wings being "next door" in an adjacent dimension. It just makes sense given the way he disappears. While writing Flight I put that together with two other elements, (a) angels being "hot" in some way such that they can burn people's eyes out, and (b) ghosts being "cold", and came up with the idea that there is a temperature gradient across at least 3 dimensions. In Flight I called these 3 dimensions the "etheric" dimension (hotter, where Cas keeps his wings, full of Heavenly power), the "earthly" dimension (where we are), and the "ghostly" dimension (colder, where ghosts are; aka "the veil"). While plotting out Into The Fire I began to toy with the idea of expanding this to many more dimensions. My influences here include a brilliant little book about "the fourth dimension" that I read way back in high school, and also Zelazny's classic old "Nine Princes in Amber" series (involving princes who can step across dimensions), and more recently the "Long Earth" books that involve many different versions of Earth that are all side-by-side in an endless series of neighboring dimensions. Pullman's His Dark Materials has a similar concept top. I looooove stuff like this! Around when I was reading through some of those multi-dimension stories, NASA started coming with hints of water on Mars and I got to thinking "What if Mars is habitable in a neighboring dimension" and boom, it came together:

HEAVEN IS THE SUN - It started here. I've long wanted to give Heaven a physical location but kept running into the problem that there's not enough "sky" above the Earth for Heaven to be parked right above the Earth in the clouds the way it's usually envisioned. Also, Supernatural's idea of millions of individual little Heaven-lets, one per soul, seems to demand an extremely large location. One can of course envision all the Heaven-lets overlapping somehow, or being very tiny or folded into pocket dimensions or being purely metaphysical or something, but I started to like the idea of Heaven being somewhere that is quite literally a vast physical space. But I kept coming back to how Heavenly power sometimes seems to stream down from the sky and how the angels fell from the sky, and kept thinking "Heaven should be up there in the sky somehow... just... farther away... Farther away than the clouds. What's farther away than the clouds?" One day I was thinking about how many human cultures have thought the sun itself was a god. Apollo, Ra. It came to me: What if Heaven itself is the actual sun? With the heaven-lets and the angels in a nearby dimension where the sun is more habitable?
HELL IS JUPITER - As soon as I thought of the Sun as Heaven, POW, it was suddenly so obvious that Hell could then be Jupiter! And then, POW, obviously the Great Red Spot is the Gate to Hell. Piece by piece fell into place. The Sun is in one direction from Earth, Jupiter in the other - perfect for Heaven and Hell. Jupiter is the biggest planet and the only one that can challenge the sun for dominance, and the only one of planets that ever had a serious chance of igniting and becoming its own star - again, perfect for Hell. Mars (between Earth and Jupiter) is then perfectly situated to be Purgatory. Then obviously the asteroid belt (between Mars and Jupiter) is the River Styx!

I began dropping paired references into the fic, always pairing a mention of Heaven or Hell with a corresponding NASA announcement. Hannah says the Darkness is attacking the Sun, and NASA says there are a lot of sunspots on the Sun. Later, Hannah mentions the Darkness has been "confined to the interior of Heaven", and right after that there's another NASA announcement that "the sun has gone blank" and all the sunspots have disappeared. Crowley mentions that the River Styx is draining, and in that same chapter there's a NASA announcement that the asteroids in the asteroid belt are starting to vanish; Crowley says the Gate of Hell is collapsing and NASA says the Great Red Spot is shrinking. (Side note: The Great Red Spot actually IS shrinking, and the sunspot cycle has gone really wonky recently.) Finally, all the little mini-realms like Oz and Faerie, which had always kind of bothered me about Supernatural's cosmos (they don't seem to fit well into the Heaven-Hell mythos) can then be assigned to various little moons and asteroids. This gives a lot of room for interesting little mini-realms without challenging the dominance of Heaven. I won't go further into my mapping of realms onto planets because it's a relatively minor part of the fic, but imagine my delight this week when the discovery of a new Planet X was announced! :)

SOULS AS POWER: An element that is also skipped over in the fic rather rapidly, but that I love, is that Heaven and Hell fight over human souls not from any sense of rightness or justice, but simply because souls provide power. Nuclear fusion, specifically.

CLUES TO CAS BEING ON HEAVEN - The Heaven=Sun, and the Crown=Corona, ideas were established in my mind very early on and there are a lot of clues dropped about this. Particularly, every time Dean has one of his strange dreams, he sees "loops in the sky". These are solar flares. Also sky is always "glowing," there is never any sun visible in the sky, the ground often seems to be glowing. Even the silver grasses ripple and shine "almost like flames" (they actually are flames, in a nearby dimension). Finally Dean constantly gets confused about the distance to the horizon - seeing endless ranks of mountains that seem to go infinitely far away. (The mountains are really waves of superheated plasma, in a nearby dimension). This holds true even for the strangest dream he has, the one where Castiel hands him two red tulips in the warehouse; even then, the warehouse is covered with jumbled pallets that are "almost like an endless series of mountain ranges", there are "loops" of dust in the air again and a sensation of being a vast space. Those themes are hit over and over again to try to convey idea that Dean's dreams are taking him some vast, somewhere that glows, somewhere that has literal "loops" overhead... the Sun.

THE ORISHAS - I won't say too much about this other than to mention I've spent a lot of time in Brazil and for several years I played candomble music for candomble dancers (dances derived from ceremonies where people become possessed by the orishas). There is something incredibly powerful there. It's not that I literally believe it, exactly, but there is something there; an air of antiquity, alienness and prehistoric power in those rhythms and dances. It is something that has to be felt firsthand. I include the orishas in this fic in order to try to honor both them and the Brazilian culture that helps
ANGELS AS DRAGONS - I was captivated when Castiel dropped that comment one day about his true form being "the size of the Chrysler building." Immediately I couldn't stop thinking about what his true form might really be. I have many different ideas about this, but in this fic I decided to go for a form that is quite physical and literal, that literally has feathered wings. (and similarly I decided to stay with, and further develop, all the angel-wings headcanon from Flight, including another appearance of good ol' Schmidt-Nielsen.)

Separately from my SPN life I've been toying with the idea of feathered dragons - because, the discovery that most dinosaurs were feathered seems to demand that we fantasy readers should consider the idea that dragons might have feathers too, doesn't it? I've been following the discoveries of the feathered dinosaurs in the paleontology literature, and more and more it looks like even good ol' T rex might have been feathered. (I put this in the tapestry!) So one day I started picturing an enormous dragon the size of the Chrysler Building, who is FEATHERED just like the angel wings we've seen on the show, just larger... who shoots out holy fire. With silver claws that could be carved into angel-blades... and there you go, angels as dragons! Then that clicked into place with all sorts of ancient legends about gigantic flying creatures - dragons, griffins, rocs, even the sphinx. My original conception was really something a bit closer to griffins, especially since they have such a lore of being guardians of the divine, but people are so familiar with dragons that I eventually had Sam & Dean latch onto the word "dragon" throughout.

I had a long struggle about whether Cas was going to have an eagle beak like a griffin, or soft muzzle like Toothless (from "How To Train Your Dragon.") I compromised and he ended up with a beak-like egg-tooth when he was a baby that later fell off; in his adult form he has a soft, strokeable velvety muzzle. The better to lick Dean with. :) His "glittering" eyes were somewhat influenced by Robin Hobb's "Rain Wilds" dragon series, in which dragons have magical-looking eyes that can hypnotize people. And I loved the idea that angels select human clothing to match their natural plumage coloration. :)

I struggled with Cas's size, though; in early drafts of this fic I was fixated on the fact that Castiel had to be the size of the Chrysler Building, but this ended up with Castiel being almost a quarter-mile long and Dean and Sam just bitty little specks on his back. But this made it very difficult to have intimate moments between Cas & the boys. Eventually I landed on the idea that angels grow as they age, so that an angel who has been "reborn" on the surface of the Sun starts all over again, very small. This brought Cas down to a manageable size, while also allowing more ancient angels like Gog and Magog to be terrifyingly huge.

CAS'S SONGS - I've always loved the idea that Cas would turn out to be musical but that rather than liking Dean's brand of classic rock, he would gravitate toward old folk songs - songs that Dean at first thinks are hokey and later comes to love. I play a lot of folk music myself. Folk songs are undeniably sort of cheesy and old-fashioned yet none heless they have their own deep wisdom, and a sense of timelessness, and a real beauty. That blend of naivete + wisdom just screams "Castiel" to me! For his songs I drew on a list of 100 classic American folk songs that I found online, and scanned the whole list for any songs that had elements of flight, wings, or Heaven. "Puff the Magic Dragon" jumped out instantly, of course, and that became one of the main thematic elements of the fic.

Re Dean playing guitar: In this fic he is a complete beginner. Someone pointed out in a
comment that Dean was already shown to play guitar (back in one of the Ben & Lisa episodes) but I am cheerfully ignoring that and decided that he must have been pretty bad at it in that episode. Jensen Ackles long ago decided that canon-Dean should be a poor singer (Jensen always has Dean sing slightly off key - which is surprisingly hard to do on purpose, so kudos to Jensen). Kind of to go along with that, I really like the idea of Dean being much, MUCH less good on guitar than Jensen, too!

THE TITLE - The title has several meanings. The first layer had to do, pretty obviously, with Dean going into a sort of hell of grief and guilt - the fire of despair, a new hell all over again for him. But it had a literal meaning as well, that the boys would be walking literally into the fire of the Sun. Through the Fire Gate and right into the fire of the corona (though, safely, in another dimension). When they are walking through the silver grasses they are walking through actual flames. And third of course, there's the terrible fire of the celestial dragons too. Throughout the fic fire is a constant theme.

THE MARK OF CAIN AS A TEMPORARY STOPGAP - So there's a weird flaw in canon in that God seems to have put a critically important lock, all that is keeping the Darkness confined, into the form of a simple tattoo that is removable by a witch. (A strong witch, granted, but still.) This seems like a really big oversight on the part of God. It only made sense to me if I consider it as just a temporary quick fix that ended up lasting way longer than it was originally designed to do. When considered in this light a couple things become apparent: (1) something went wrong with God while he was making the permanent fix; (2) This could in fact end up being one reason why Lucifer went so far down the dark side - maybe he was carrying the Mark far, far longer than God meant him to. Finally I stumbled across the idea that, if the Mark was a "lock," maybe God was making a better "lock" and accidentally locked himself up.

THE DARKNESS KEEPING CAS AND DEAN APART - Later I re-cast the God-stuck-in-a-box problem in terms of "only an angel+human combo team can free God". If you look close at this idea you will discover that the entire point of the evolution of humans was to get some humans who would team up with an angel and go free God... yes, Sam and Dean were the entire purpose of a quarter billion years of evolution on Earth, lol.

Also the idea popped into my head that the Darkness may in fact have been trying to keep Cas & Dean (& Sam too) apart for quite a long time simply as a form of self-preservation. This would certainly explain why Cas & Dean's relationship got so distant during S10 when Dean was actually carrying the Mark. One can imagine scenarios where the Darkness was influencing Dean long before that, all the way back to S4, subtly pushing him and Castiel apart from each other, for years. Yeah, it's super hokey, I know ("they're DESTINED to be together but a malevolent force is pushing them apart!") but I love it. And it helps me make peace with canon. :)

THE THRONE ROOM: So there's a grand old Twilight Zone episode where a person accidentally goes "backstage" and sees Creation being all moved around and set up. A great cult movie called "Dark City" explores the same concept. Lev Grossman's "The Magicians" series (which, heads-up, is now a tv show run by Supernatural's Sera Gamble) has an incredible glimpse of a "behind Creation" place; so does Philip Pullman's "His Dark Materials" series. All of these things were percolating around in my head when I was thinking about taking the fic to "find God." Pretty early
on I envisioned the backstage area as being like the back side of an embroidered tapestry. This particular image actually came to me from a demonstration I saw ages ago, at the Boston Museum of Science some 35 years ago, of a traditional Chinese method of making extraordinarily detailed tapestries. The tapestry-maker was weaving all these bewildering little patterns that lookd like nothing at all, in this big loom, and then she flipped it over and VOILA, it was a gorgeous piece of art all done in gleaming fine silk colored threads. I was totally entranced! I sat there for like a half an hour just watching her weave this amazing silk tapestry. So that's where God's throne room came from, from a Chinese silk weaver. :) 

The only thing I hadn't decided was what the threads were, specifically. Souls? Stars? Solar systems? Then I thought of the famous Hubble Space Telescope "Deep Field" image, when NASA focused the telescope on an apparently empty patch of sky for a long time, long enough to capture even the faintest, rarest photons. Google "Hubble Deep Field" to see the result... a seemingly infinite array of galaxies, as far off into space as we can see. (Puts things in perspective. Seriously.) Once I remembered that image, it was clear the threads were galaxies.

By the way, when dragon-Cas is scrabbling his way out of the galaxy thread and kicks the little "minnows" every which way, those minnows were actually solar systems (the elongated "minnow" appearance was the streak of the solar system moving around, over time, through the galaxy). He actually did some significant damage to an entire arm of the Milky Way galaxy. However, he did that four billion years in the future, so he's got plenty of time to figure out a way to correct the damage. :) 

GOD LOCKING HIMSELF IN A BOX - There are a lot of old heresies that involve God either being crazy or simply being an imperfect creator, one who makes mistakes. In the SPN universe, the disappearance of God has never fully been explained. There's clearly merit to the Chuck-is-God idea (which we know that Kripke planned, but which has not [yet?] actually been made canon)... yet... to me, something in the Chuck-as-God idea still seems incomplete. There has to be more to the story. Chuck-as-God results in a God who is either quite incompetent, or quite capricious (apparently playing chess with his helpless little pawns just for his own amusement). I eventually grew fond of an idea that Chuck is a partial God, or an unaware God, a God whose memories have been blocked somehow, and who isn't quite clear on what he is trying to accomplish. Eventually this all dovetailed into idea in which there are little God-fragments wandering around, one of whom is Chuck, while God himself (most of God, at least) is stuck somewhere. 

God actually ended up much more benevolent than I was originally planning, fond of his Creation and the "bunny rabbits" that invaded his Mona Lisa. I was originally thinking he'd be more standoff-ish and distant, unconcerned with humanity, but he turned out to be pretty friendly, didn't he? 

BTW God's emergence from the box is based on an amazing contortionist I once saw at Halloween night rave in Seattle one year long ago. 

God makes one stray comment btw: "Imagine you're in jail and you're bored...." This was significant. God was actually sent to this universe as a form of punishment or confinement, by his own kind. What his crime was, I haven't figured out; where he came from is also not clear to me; I just know that our universe is his jail cell. Maybe it was an unjust imprisonment; I'm not sure. 

TWO TIMES OF SIGNIFICANCE - 1. God's iPad has not been backed up for 542 million years because that was the time of the Cambrian explosion, and after that he got so busy with his new
multicellular life forms that he forgot to back up. 2. God mentions he was locked up for quarter billion years. A quarter billion years ago, 252 million years ago to be exact, was the end-Permian extinction, the worst mass extinction that has ever happened on our planet and one that nearly extinguished life on Earth. My thinking here was that prior to the end-Permian, God had been steering evolution on Earth personally, and when he suddenly disappeared life on Earth was not yet self-sufficient. The atmosphere on Earth went haywire as soon as he disappeared and life nearly ended. Then the archangels stepped in and rescued everything, and they've been semi-steering things since then. Only the archangels knew that God had disappeared.

CASTIEL AS A DEMOTED ARCHANGEL - please, show, please make this come true! It fits so perfectly, in so many ways!

LAST LINES & SYMMETRY - Those who've been in my silly fic world with me for a while will know that I often have a last line in mind before I even start writing. When starting Forgotten I already knew the last line would be "Castiel smiled," and when starting Room Of One's Own" I already the last phrase would be "a room of their own" (THEIR own now, not ONE'S own, get it get it, oooo so significant! lol). In this fic I knew the last line would be "This is not the end of the story. This is just the beginning," and that the last chapter would be titled "The Beginning." So then obviously the first chapter had to be "The End." For symmetry, y'know. :)

There's a lot of stuff I know I'm forgetting, but that's some of it.

One question for you all: Now that the fic is done, should I add more tags? Especially... should the tags give away that Castiel returns? (The possible tags are: Major Character Death - Temporary; Angel True Form; Dragon!Castiel; Eventual Destiel; Angst With A Happy Ending.) A lot of readers avoid Major Character Death... but my instinct is not to add additional tags. What do you think?

And one last personal update: During the writing of this fic my personal and professional life imploded, and (not coincidentally) my health went to hell too. The update: This Wednesday I gave notice at my workplace. This is huge for me - I'm an older scientist running a major research program at a highly regarded institution. Positions like that are extremely rare, competition is intense and younger scientists have a huge advantage, so it is not at all clear that I'll be able to find any sort of comparable position anywhere else. I don't have another job lined up, I don't have any kind of safety net (I don't have a partner, I don't have anybody else's income to rely on). I have 1 year of savings, but that's it. But I just couldn't stand it anymore! (my ex-boss, even though she is now no longer my boss, is still controlling my lab, my lab tech, my postdoc, and which research I can do.) I just can't stand it anymore. I had to get out. I gave notice to the CEO on Wed and then had about 4 hrs of panic and then had the most intense wave of elation I've probably had in my whole life. FREEDOM. It's worth the risk. I won't wrap everything up at my old place for about 6 months yet, but after that I'm going to take an entire year off. I hope I can coast on savings for long enough to give a real try at writing professionally - I will still do research if I can but I want to write too, even if it's just on a small scale, for just a bitty side stream of self-publishing income or something. I have so many story ideas!! I hope some of you might be interested in my other stories, even if they're not about Supernatural... and if any stories happen to involve a supernatural entity who falls to Earth, and who meets a pair of travelers criss-crossing the world together, you'll know who it's really about. :)

Thanks so much for all your support. It means more than you know.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!