Gospel

by NihilisticLinguistics

Summary

When Sam closed the Gates of Hell, Dean wasn't by his side. Maybe if he had been, this wouldn't have happened the way it did. But now Dean dreams of Sam trapped in a Heaven on the edge of disintegration, Castiel learns to live without wings as Earth is ripped apart by the Heavenly Host, and Crowley just hopes Dean doesn't shoot him before this is all over. The aftereffects of Metatron's spell must have a solution, right?

With a dangerously ambitious new enemy on the horizon, the boys must work together to protect not just Earth, but Heaven as well. Still, opponents are on every side, and none of them know where to turn, or where to begin fighting back. Their biggest concern is trying not to make things worse. And that's the gospel truth.
“SAM!” Dean fought against the church door, slamming it with tight-clenched fists. He could barely breathe, every second he wasted on this goddamn door meant Sam was one second closer to—

No. He wasn’t going to think about it, couldn’t let himself, no no NO. He didn’t know how much longer Sam had, but he couldn’t let his brother do this. If Sam cured Crowley now . . .

He jerked on the handle, but the door was locked tight. “Damn it, Sam,” Dean hissed as he backed up. He threw his body against the door with everything he had. It shook, but stayed resolutely shut. If Sam died trying to close the gates of Hell, it would be on his shoulders. Dean was meant to die for these trials, not his little brother. “I’m not gonna let you —” Dean slammed against the door again, “—die—” the door rattled on its hinges, one more shove and it was history, “—again!”

Dean burst into the church. “Sam, stop!” He was halfway in the room when he stopped dead. “Sam?” He realized with the feeling of being very far away how like a little kid he sounded, but he couldn’t process it.

No.

No, no, no. He snapped his eyes shut, trying to convince himself that the scene before him was a lie. Goddamn it, no. This was wrong. This wasn’t what was supposed to happen. His brother was there, sprawled across the cold floor of the church. Motionless.

“SAM!” he screamed hoarsely. He didn’t know when he’d gotten to his brother, only that he was on his knees shaking him and shouting. All he could hear was the blood rushing in his ears.

“Sam, come on, wake up. Wake up, wake up, wake up.” He saw wet spots appear on his brother’s clothes and felt the damp of tears on his cheeks. “Come on, Sammy, don’t die on me, not again, not today, I can’t . . .” He pressed his face into his brother’s chest. Sam still wasn’t moving. His face was slack and he was . . . God fucking damn it, he was as cold as ice.

Dean’s vision went blurry. Don’t cry, he ordered himself wildly. Do not fucking cry. He’s fine. He’s always fine. Come on Sammy, open your eyes, you’re fine.

He shook his head, trying to clear it. He couldn’t focus. Breathing. He needed to check if Sam was breathing. Of course Sam was breathing.

He put his hand in front of Sam’s mouth. His brother’s lips were barely parted and his eyes were closed. He waited for Sam to jerk awake, for even a tiny whisper of air to brush his hand.

Sammy didn’t move. He wasn’t moving and he wasn’t breathing. Dean pressed two fingers against Sam’s neck, trying to find his pulse. “Sammy . . .” he whispered. He could feel the tears on his face. “Sammy, wake up. Wake up, goddamn it, wake up . . .” No pulse.

Nothing.

Nothing.
Sam was gone. Dean was too late, and Sam was fucking gone. His breaths came in ragged gasps now, and his head buzzed. How the fuck was he supposed to fix this, to make this right? He was going to throw up, he could feel something heavy in the pit of his stomach that felt like hellhounds ripping him apart. Dean hadn’t felt like this in years, not since Sam said yes to the Devil. Hell, maybe not even since the first time Sam died, back when Dean sold his fucking soul.

No, no, it would be okay. He could still fix this, it wasn’t over yet. Not by a long shot. Dean could still make this right. Cas, Cas could bring Sam back. He’d brought them back from worse before. Easy as pie.

He was still on his knees, he realized. Dean forced himself to take a deep breath, pressing his hands together. “Cas?” he croaked. God, he sounded pathetic. Dean probably looked it, too, snot all over his face and his eyes red from crying. “Cas, I need you -” Dean choked off and shook his head, clearing his throat. He tried again. “I need you right now. Please, just get your ass down here and help me, God, Cas, it’s important.” He took another shaky breath, trying to pull himself together, when a boom like a bomb going off shook the decaying church.

“What the fuck . . .” He frowned and stood up. Dean felt dizzy as he went to the door, blood still rushing in his ears. He looked up at the sky and felt his stomach drop. The door bumped against his back, but he barely noticed. Dean couldn’t tear his eyes away.

The sky was lit up, bright spots bursting through the clouds as they glowed hotter than anything Dean had seen before. They shot towards the ground, like fucking comets crashing to Earth. Dean couldn’t tell what they were until one came closer, the flaring light smashing into the ground with a resounding boom. He could make out the figure wrapped in the fire and the shadowy shape of wings that ripped away as it fell. “Oh, Cas,” he whispered. “What did you do?”

A voice behind him made him jump. “What? What is it?”

Dean had his gun out and ready in less than half a second. His finger twitched on the trigger as he whipped around to see who spoke. When he saw who it was, he almost fired anyway before forcing himself to put the safety back on. “Crowley,” he growled. Crowley was handcuffed to a chair in the middle of the church, his face deathly pale.

“Is that any way to greet an old friend?” Crowley asked, but he didn’t sound like himself. He sounded on the verge of tears, shaky. “Your — your moose cured me, as you can see,” he added. “D’you mind letting me go now?”

“I’ve got a better idea,” Dean said, glancing over his shoulder as another crash rattled the roof. “How ‘bout you tell me why I shouldn’t just shoot you now?” He saw Crowley flinch, but the other man’s jaw tightened and a familiar spiteful smile played on his lips.

Crowley shrugged. “Say what you like about me, but I’m human now. You don’t kill humans.”

Even with your battered, unstable psyche, you won’t kill me. It was the only hope Crowley had left in his bones.

“I’ve got a better idea,” Dean said, glancing over his shoulder as another crash rattled the roof. “How ‘bout you tell me why I shouldn’t just shoot you now?” He saw Crowley flinch, but the other man’s jaw tightened and a familiar spiteful smile played on his lips.

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“Try me,” Dean said, his voice calm. He took another deep breath, trying to settle his nerves. His stomach dropped when his eyes fell on Sam’s limp body, spread-eagled before the chair where Crowley was bound.

“Give me the gun and I’ll do it myself,” Crowley said flatly. Dean felt the anger in his chest falter. For a few moments they were quiet, the only sound the crashing of angels falling to Earth. Finally
Dean spoke again.

“So that’s it? Hell’s under lockdown?”

“Unless this was all some sick joke,” Crowley said, his voice still soft and unsteady. “Now what say you uncuff me before I throw up all over myself?” He glared at Dean even as he gagged, but he knew his black heart wasn’t in it.

“You deserve it,” Dean said, even as his grip on his gun loosened.

Crowley looked at him with a face so serious Dean wasn’t sure how to react when he said, “I know.” What the fuck was he supposed to say to that?

“Yeah, well, don’t choke on it,” he finally said. Under his breath he added, “Come on, Cas, get your feathered ass down here quick. We have a situation.”

“If you’re ever planning on telling me what’s happening out there, now would be the time,” Crowley said, his voice tight. Dean could tell he was trying to hold back his vomit, but didn’t answer. The light show was starting to taper off, only a few more angels dropping from the sky. He didn’t even look back when Crowley retched, and he heard the sound of puke splattering on the floor.

“You still breathing?” he asked, keeping his eyes on the sky. *Don’t think about it.*

“Love you too,” Crowley said. His voice was still sort of choked off, like he was suppressing tears yet. “I’ll ask again. What’s going on out there?”

Dean still wouldn’t look back. His ears were ringing, and he was still dizzy. He felt like he might throw up, too. Sam was still lying on the floor of the church, and he wasn’t about to get up. “It’s the angels,” Dean answered, trying to keep his voice level. “They’re — they’re falling.”

“What, all of them?” Crowley said, actually sounding interested. “Even your boyfriend?”

He shook his head, ignoring the second pang of anxiety in his chest. Dean didn’t know if Cas was even still alive. Finally, his voice soft, he said, “I don’t know.”

Cas should have answered by now. He was falling, or else. . . Dean couldn’t let himself consider that. He had already lost Sam. He couldn’t lose Cas too.

All Dean wanted was his brother back. Nothing else was more important right now. Getting Sam back had to come first. “Crowley,” he said at last, turning back from the doorway and stepping closer. “I don’t care what the hell you want. I could not possibly care less than I already do. You’re gonna help me get Sam back.” His voice sounded cold and dangerous even to his own ears.

Crowley stared back at him flatly. There was puke on his suit, and on his chin. He swallowed back another round of vomit, then said, “Look. I’m sorry about your brother, really I am. But what do I have to do with this? I didn’t choose to be cured any more than I asked him to die. That’s on you.”

Dean grabbed Crowley by the collar, ignoring the slick of puke on the fabric. *You son of a bitch.* You think I wanted — don’t you dare, don’t you ever say I wanted this.” He let go and turned away.

Crowley considered mentioning the tears on Dean’s face, but he wisely chose not to say anything. Besides, Hadn’t he done enough?

“He’s not supposed to be dead,” Dean said insistently, more to himself than Crowley. “He was supposed to have a life, a normal life, and I keep taking that away from him — why do I keep taking
that away from him?"

There was silence for a few seconds before Crowley said, “You know, it’ll be a lot easier to help if I’m not cuffed to a chair.”

“Yeah, well, you can hold your fucking horses,” Dean said absently. He was standing over Sam, half-afraid to even touch him. And so what if there were a few tears on his cheeks?

Finally he worked up the courage to pick Sam up. Dean carried him out behind the church as carefully as he could. There was a shovel in the shed back there, behind the crumbling gravestones. He closed his eyes, gathering the will to just do this without thinking about it, and went to work.

* * *

Castiel let his eyes fall closed. He didn’t know where he was. All he knew was that he was wrong. Again, and again, Castiel was wrong about everything. His grace was gone. Just . . . gone. Like it had never existed. He must have a soul now, of course, but he couldn’t feel it, like he used to be able to feel the soul of Dean without even touching him. Castiel could hardly feel anything, now.

He stood up slowly, brushing wet leaves from his trenchcoat and struggling against the feeling of panic stirring inside him. He was in a forest. For a moment Castiel wondered if he was back in Purgatory, if this was punishment for his failures, and then he went pale. Because if this was Purgatory, Castiel wouldn’t be able to hear that.

The high-pitched ringing in his ears started out quiet, but within a few seconds it was deafening. He pressed his hands to his ears, gasping in pain as the sound intensified before dropping off completely. Castiel straightened his vessel — his body — and started running. He ran until he could see the sky, and . . . now he wished this was Purgatory.

He couldn’t speak, breath catching in a throat he’d never realized was so fragile. The angels were falling, and it was his fault. Castiel had just made the single worst mistake of his very long existence, and his grace was gone.

His vessel’s — no, his — lungs constricted. He shook his head, like he was trying to shake off the feeling of guilt, but he knew he deserved this.

Castiel had to suffer, to amend his sins, he knew that. But that wasn’t going to be enough, not for — not for this. How could he ever do enough to make up for this? He had declared himself God, killed half his family while drunk on power, unleashed Leviathans on Earth, and now this. No amount of time in Purgatory could begin to undo the damage Castiel had done.

His brothers and sisters were dying, and it was his fault.

And he still didn’t know where he was.

Just find Dean, he thought to himself. That was it. If Castiel could find Dean, Dean could help him. He wondered if Sam was alright, but he knew he couldn’t afford to worry about it now. He had to get to Dean, and the rest would follow.

He paused, stopping short without quite understanding why. Then he realized, with the awe of a child seeing snow for the first time, that his eyes were wet.
Of course, he’d seen humans cry before, but the tight sensation in his chest and throat came as a sharp surprise, and unbidden this body collapsed on itself, and he was on his knees, in the forest, as his own personal rain of fire and brimstone thundered down around his ears. The body he was confined to jerked and heaved with sloppy, disgusting sobs. Each time Castiel tried to rise, another wave of sickness and fear swamped him, and he fell back again.

When he could stand again, Castiel set off, walking blindly until he reached a road, just as the sun began to rise. He knew, or rather hoped, that he would be able to find a way to get to Dean if he just followed the hot summer asphalt, but within two hours of the sun rising, the black road was too warm to walk on.

Just find Dean.

He’ll know what to do.

Just get to Dean.

The mantra repeated over and over in his head, and Castiel had the strangest feeling that it was the only thing holding fresh tears at bay.

His throat felt strange, Castiel noticed anew, as if there were fabric lying on his tongue. The bright sunlight was suddenly harsh on Castiel’s eyes. He had never felt so limited. Maybe this was why Dean and Sam were so inefficient in fights — human senses were so weak and so powerful at the same time.

Castiel needed to know how to undo Metatron’s spell. Casting all the angels out of Heaven had to come with a weakness, a flaw in the design. Something to reverse it. There had to be one. He couldn’t allow himself to believe there wasn’t.

He heard voices. At first Castiel ignored them, but as the minutes passed, he couldn’t block them out. They were deafening, inhuman. Enochian words pierced his eardrums, they were screaming, terrible and loud and wrathful, but Castiel couldn’t understand them. He couldn’t — how could he not understand, he was an angel. He knew his brothers and sisters, he was one of them. This wasn’t right. The sick feeling that accompanied his sobs before rose up from within him again, and Castiel forced it down.

The whispers and screams of angel voices built up pressure in his ears, reverberating and growing louder with each second. Castiel slowed his pace as his head ached with the force behind the words. He thought for a second he caught a few phrases, but when he realized what they were saying he felt as if he were about to vomit. Kill Castiel. He closed his eyes, unwilling to believe it. No, no, it was an accident, Metatron was the one who cast them out, not him. Why would they want to kill him?

Just find Dean.

Dean will help me.

Would Dean help him?

A rumbling sound cut through the hot air, and he turned sharply just in time to see a large vehicle bearing down on him. Castiel threw himself out of the way and gasped as pain flooded through his hands. He heard the car come to a screeching halt.

Castiel stood up, his legs shaking. He stared at his left hand, confused. The skin was bloody and red, scraped raw. It didn’t make any sense, why did it hurt? He was an angel. He didn’t have his grace, but that didn’t, couldn’t stop him from being an angel.
If he believed in miracles, that the man who nearly hit him offered him a ride to the nearest town was one of them. Castiel hoped that he would be able to contact Dean, and find out where on the face of the earth he was. He couldn’t fly, not without his wings.

The silence in the car was unusually quiet. Castiel missed Dean’s habit of playing loud music while he drove, but this man kept the radio off and didn’t speak. Instead of making conversation, Castiel gazed out the window at the pine forest passing by. He jumped when the driver said he would be dropped off in Longmont, Colorado.

He clench a wad of bills tightly in one hand as he headed for the pay phone by the gas station. The man gave the money to him, saying he should buy something to eat, but Castiel had other priorities. He needed to speak with Dean. The sensation of hunger in his stomach was vaguely familiar, but he had to ignore it.

Castiel was consumed with uncertainty as he waited behind the man using the pay phone. He was so unfamiliar with everything human. He would need to sleep now, and drink, and he didn’t know what else.

All he knew was that he needed to get to Dean. Dean knew how to survive as a human, and Castiel needed his help if he wanted to stop Metatron and undo his spell. Besides . . . he would give anything to hear his voice right now.

The thought was a familiar one, but it still made him feel a little sick. He couldn’t do anything about how he felt, so what was the point in thinking about it at all?

Castiel tapped on the shoulder of the man in front of him, asking that he allow him to use the phone. He didn’t understand how urgent it was, instead telling Castiel he intended to stab him, but he wasn’t too worried about the threat. What was concerning was when Castiel attempted to knock him out, nothing happened.

He was useless, he realized as he backed away. His grace . . . it was gone, after all, but he hadn’t yet understood what that meant. He walked away quickly, trying to come to grips with the truth. This couldn’t be happening. Hadn’t it happened once already, hadn’t he been through this hell enough already? Castiel was an angel, he was an angel, this wasn’t really — he was just drained, that was all, he reassured himself, but he wasn’t convinced.

Castiel jumped. A woman’s hand rested on his shoulder. “I know you,” she said softly.

He shook his head. “I don’t think so,” Castiel said, pushing past her. “Castiel,” the woman said, and he paused. “It’s me. Hael.”

That made him turn. He didn’t recognize her vessel, but that didn’t matter. “Hael,” Castiel said, nodding. “I —” He paused. He wasn’t an angel, not anymore. No wings, no grace, no power. Nothing. “I can’t help you.”

“I don’t care,” Hael said, following him. “You know this world, you must understand, I am lost. I can hardly hear our brothers and sisters.” She grasped Castiel’s arm and started to pull him aside, but he tugged out of her reach.

“I’m sorry, but I’m —” He couldn’t say it. Maybe she could see that his grace was gone and didn’t care, or maybe — worse — she still believed he was an angel. “I can’t do anything to help.”

“But you . . .” Hael stopped, staring at him with wide eyes. “Your grace. It’s gone?”
Hearing it out loud was worse than thinking it to himself. “Metatron took it,” he said shortly. Castiel glanced away, at the now vacant pay phone. He needed to call Dean, and tell him he was alright. He needed to know Dean was alright.

“We’ve all been cast out,” Hael pressed, clasping Castiel’s sleeve. “Can you hear them? They’re screaming, Castiel.”

How could he admit he struggled to make out the sound of angelic voices, or that, that even then, Castiel could only just understand them? “I want to help,” he said at last. “I don’t know how. Without, without my grace I have no power, but I want to help,” he repeated. Castiel owed them that. It was his fault Metatron had cast the angels out. He was the only angel stupid enough to trust him.

Hael was shaking her head. “How can anyone help us? We’re alone.”

Cas closed his eyes. “I will do whatever needs to be done to make this right. But I have something else to do first.”

He ignored her protest and walked quickly to the phone. He pulled his money from his pocket and paid the fee. Castiel quickly dialed Dean’s number, hoping that he wouldn’t get his voicemail. The phone rang, once, twice. Please, God, let him answer, Castiel thought. What if something had happened, what if Dean was —

“Hello? Who is this?” Dean’s voice crackled through the receiver. His voice was strange and flat, emotionless. Empty.

“Dean,” Castiel said, his shoulders sagging with relief. His heartbeat didn’t slow, but the instant he heard Dean speak he began to calm down. Dean was safe.

“Cas, what the fuck is going on?”

“Metatron . . . tricked me,” Castiel said, lowering his voice so Hael wouldn’t overhear. “They weren’t angel trials, it was a spell. I need you to know I didn’t do this.”

“Yeah, yeah, okay.” There was a brief pause, then, “Are you alright? Where are you?”

“I’m fine. I’m in Longmont, Colorado,” he said. “Is Sam okay?”

There was no answer from the other end, and Castiel felt a sensation like his stomach had spontaneously vanished. “Dean? Dean, are you there?”

A harsh laugh broke the silence. “Sam’s dead, Cas. He finished the trials,” Dean said, his voice still flat and somehow still sounding choked. Castiel felt his human heart skip a beat. Sam was dead. Just like that. He felt sick, and tears — tears? — pricked at his eyes. How could this have happened, this wasn’t supposed to happen. They were supposed to fix this, not make it worse.

“Haven’t you heard my prayers?” Dean was saying. “I’ve been trying to get ahold of you all night.”

Right. Dean didn’t know. “Dean,” he started, surprised by how level his voice was. “Metatron, he . . . took my grace.”

“What?” That sounded like Dean. His voice wasn’t so empty.

“Don’t worry, I’m okay.” He wasn’t, not really, but Dean shouldn’t have to worry about him. “How are you . . . are you okay?”
“Me? Oh, I’m fine. Peachy keen. I just buried my brother, but yeah, Cas, I’m doing fantastic.”
Sarcasm. Castiel felt a pang in his gut when Dean spoke.

“Just,” Dean sighed. “Tell me where you are. I’ll be there. It’ll take a couple days, but I’ll come and get you, bring you back to the bunker. You shouldn’t have to do this alone.” Dammit, Dean, don’t take my problems on your shoulders, Castiel thought angrily. Dean had enough of his own.

“No. I can do this. There’s an angel here with me, and I can help her. I’ll get to the bunker when I have the chance.” Dean and Sam were more important, but he couldn’t just brush aside his family when they needed his aid.

“No. No, Cas. There are angels everywhere now, and who knows how many are gonna be out for your head. You can’t trust anyone, Cas. And you’re human. You can bleed, you need to eat, and sleep. Hold on, and I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

Castiel hated lying to himself and to Dean, but he couldn’t let Dean go out of his way for him. “I’ll be fine, Dean —”

“Stay put, and I will come and get you,” Dean said. “You hear me? Find someplace to stay, Cas.”

Castiel tried to call his name, but a click told him Dean had hung up. What am I supposed to do? he wanted desperately to yell at Dean, but it was too late now. He turned, and there was Hael, standing behind him with an eager light in her pale eyes. He steeled himself. It didn’t matter that she was his family. She could care for herself. Dean. . . Dean needed him far more than Hael did. Castiel needed Dean more than Hael needed him.

He faced her. Castiel already regretted that he had to do this. “Hael. . .” He stopped. She was staring at him with a look of utter betrayal.

She’d heard everything.

“After all this? Do you think Dean Winchester will be able to fix this?” she asked him. Castiel saw the glimmer of an angel blade in her hand but kept his eyes fixed on hers. “How can you trust him, Castiel? Your family falls, and your instinct is to call a Winchester? After everything he has done to you, to us, how dare you?”

He stepped back, nearly slipping on the curb. “I —”

“Let us go, Castiel. We must find a way to return to Heaven.” She gripped her blade tighter. “Without him.”

“I don’t want to hurt you, sister,” Castiel said, backing away again. They were near the edge of the pavement. “I want to help you, all of you.”

“It’s too late for that,” she snapped. “I can hear our brothers and sisters, and they are saying only one name — Castiel. You want to help us? After what you have done to us? You can’t redeem yourself now, Castiel. You’re a pathetic excuse for an angel.” She raised her blade.

He ducked, letting his own blade slide into his hand. Castiel stepped out of her reach. “Don’t do this.”

Hael shook her head. “You don’t understand, Castiel. Either you side with Heaven or you don’t. I don’t think you’ve been on Heaven’s side for a long time.”
Dean stared down at the ground. A crooked rectangle of fresh-turned dirt was all that marked Sam’s grave. Damn it, he couldn’t even think that without feeling sick.

What the hell was Dean going to do? Without his mojo, there was no way Cas could just zip upstairs and bring Sam home. And asking some other angel to do it wasn’t an option, not if they were gonna go all Warrior of God on the ass of anyone who so much as talked to Cas. He wasn’t sure yet what to do about Crowley, if he would drop him off at the bunker or kill him or let the worthless fucker go, he didn’t know.

Under the earth, Sam was buried in a crappy wooden box. Dean couldn’t cremate him, not if there was a breath of a chance of bringing him back. He couldn’t do it.

Dean stared at the gun still in his hand. When Cas called, he’d been seriously considering putting a bullet through his skull. He still wasn’t sure that was a bad idea. But he’d promised Cas they would meet at the bunker. Dean couldn’t just let him down, and maybe, maybe, somewhere in the Men of Letters archives there was a spell or ritual that could bring Sam back.

It was pointless. He knew that. What the hell were the odds the Men of Letters knew jack about bringing people back from the dead? Pretty damn close to zero. But Dean couldn’t give up, he owed it to Sam. This was his fault. He shouldn’t have let him take on the trials. He shouldn’t have pulled him back into hunting in the first place. Sam would be happy with Jess, he would be a lawyer and have his own life, if Dean hadn’t been so damn desperate to have him back in his.

This was Dean’s fault, so he had to fix it.

In the silence, he heard the snap of a twig underfoot. Dean spun around. A man was standing behind him, a shining silver blade in his hand. “Goddamn it,” he said under his breath.

“Where is Castiel?” the angel asked, raising the weapon. “Tell me where the traitor is.”

“No way I’m telling you,” Dean said, raising his hands slowly.

“Do you think I don’t know he is with you?” the angel said. “Wherever you are, he is not far behind.”

“Well, guess again, douchebag.”

The angel lunged. Dean threw himself to the side, and the angel’s momentum carried him past. His foot caught on a gravestone clumsily, and he hit the ground hard. Dean wrenched the weapon from his grip and stabbed him in the throat. He closed his eyes as a light flared and went out, and the angel lay still.

He was surprised the angel had been so easy to take down. Usually they were a hell of a lot better at fighting. Maybe falling was harder on the God Squad than he’d thought.

That wasn’t the problem right now. Either Cas’s angel-proofing was gone now that he went mortal or someone tipped off the angels. Dean was betting on the latter.

He stormed into the church, the angel blade held tight in his hand. “Crowley!” he yelled.

“What?” the demon — the human, he was human now — asked irritably. “I’ve been tied to this
flipping chair for absolute ages, besides which, I’m starving and need a piss. Not to mention I’ve got puke all over my shirt and I used to be a fucking demon. Would it kill you to show a little sympathy?"

That was it. “So you set the fucking hounds of heaven on me? Yeah, Crowley, solid plan. And what exactly do you think he was gonna do to you the second he was through with me?” Dean pressed the sharp edge of the blade to his throat.

“Well, you weren’t exactly paying attention to my well-being, were you? So I did a little praying, so what? It’s not a sin, is it?” He snorted, but stopped when Dean pressed down harder, almost breaking the skin. “Alright, alright. Now what say we talk about letting me loose?”

“How about we talk about me maybe not killing you?” Dean countered. “You help me and Cas bring Sam back, and don’t sell me out to every angel on the goddamn planet, and in exchange, I don’t run you through with this pigsticker.”

Crowley managed a nervous smile, leaning away from the blade. “Sounds like you’ve got yourself a deal,” he said.

“No kissing,” Dean said before Crowley could mock him by suggesting it. “I have better taste than that.” He pulled my gun out and cocked it. “I’m gonna let you out, but if you try to run, you will get shot.” The far-away, detached part of himself noted that his voice sounded dead and cold.

“Won’t be much use to you if I’m dead, you bloody moron,” Crowley said sullenly. For a centuries-old ex-demon, Crowley had mastered the expression of a four-year-old who couldn’t have dessert.

Dean fumbled with the keys to the cuffs, telling Crowley they could stop off for something to eat at a gas station. He rolled his eyes but followed him to the Impala. Dean swung open the door and shoved Crowley roughly into the backseat.

“Hey, now, you’re going to shove me in the backseat like I’m some bratty six-year-old?” he asked indignantly as Dean sat down and turned the key in the ignition.

“Well, you’re sure as hell acting like some bratty six-year-old. I only let people I trust ride up front.”

Crowley put on a look of mock offense. “What, now you don’t trust me? Oh, good thing you’re taking me to help save your brother and for all I know, the entire fucking world. Again.” Crowley tilted his head to the side. “So Castiel’s still alive, then. Pity about that.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t be so sure. See, Cas and you aren’t all that different nowadays.” Crowley didn’t ask what he meant.

As they drove, it was harder for Dean to focus on anything except the image of Sam’s grave burned into his eyelids. His gun was in the passenger seat next to him, and he couldn’t pretend he didn’t want to press it against his temple again. Dean gripped the steering wheel and forced himself to ignore the gun in Sam’s seat. He could still save him. And he couldn’t leave Cas, not when he was human and vulnerable.

The sound of a can of beer opening in the backseat made him jump, but he settled when he remembered that he wasn’t alone. He almost told Crowley to stuff it and find his own alcohol, but Dean bit his tongue and kept quiet.

They’d been on the road about an hour when they finally hit a town. Dean pulled up to a gas station and parked his baby right in front before turning back to Crowley. “Go to the bathroom, pick out something to eat, and meet me at the register in five minutes.”
Crowley looked around, apparently just watching the people who drove and walked past, completely oblivious to an entire world of angels and monsters that lived among them. Then he grinned. “See you around, Squirrel,” he said cheerfully, and took off running.

He was barely a block away when he slowed down, panting. Dean caught up with him easily, his gun still in the car. Crowley wheezed, barely even walking anymore, obviously unused to the limitations of human bodies.

“You’ve got two options here.” Dean’s voice had gone low and dangerous. “You can suck it up and help me bring Sam back, or I will put a bullet in your brain.” Dean tightened his hold on Crowley, watching the color drain out of his face. He almost laughed.

“You can’t be serious,” Crowley laughed nervously. “You really thought you could take me to a crowded public place, where someone might notice if you shot me, and I wouldn’t run? I’ve come to expect more of you, Dean.”

“Oh, you won’t be running,” Dean said coolly. “See, you used to be King of Hell. And I figure any angel who knows anything will recognize you the second they saw your scruffy-ass face. And what do you think they’ll do to you?” He smirked hollowly when Crowley paled. “Cas and I ain’t the only ones with a bounty on our heads. You’re in the same boat as us, so buckle up.”

* * *

“I don’t want to kill you,” Castiel insisted, but he didn’t sound threatening, even to himself.

She laughed, circling him so he couldn’t run off into the woods behind the gas station. “You can’t hear them, can you, Castiel? We’re dying, and you did this to us.” Her lip curled derisively. “You understand I can’t allow you to leave, Castiel. Especially not for a Winchester.” She spit the name like it tasted sour, and Castiel flinched.

Someone leaving the store shrieked upon seeing them, weapons raised but he couldn’t allow that to distract me.

“Hael,” he began, but she cut him off.

“Either you die, Castiel, or you surrender. Let me in, give me your body as a vessel, and you will not be killed. I guarantee it.”

“No.” Castiel couldn’t keep her talking for much longer. Either he killed her or she would kill him. He could hear the blood rushing in his head, a strange feeling that made him feel like he was about to fall unconscious. What would she do to him, if he fainted here?

“You will give consent, or I will end you. It’s your choice.”

“Never.”

She lunged for him, her blade slicing at his chest, but Castiel blocked her forcefully. The clash of weapons reverberated through his hand, and he almost dropped his blade as his hand stung. Castiel dropped to the ground when she swung for him again, and as she caught her balance he swung out, slashing the tendon in her leg.
Hael collapsed with a gasp. Quickly Castiel took her blade and tossed it aside, losing sight of it as it skittered across the pavement.

Her wound was already beginning to heal, but Castiel paused before speaking. “I don’t want to do this, Hael,” he said, his grip on the blade going slack.

“You should,” she spat.

“I don't want to hurt any of you, I want to help,” he insisted. “I will do whatever it takes – I will spend my life trying to repair the damage I have done.” Wasn't that strange. Spending his life. He had a life. He was human, he was *mortal*. It was almost funny.

Hael stared up at him, her cold blue eyes looking hollow. “You really are as insane as they say,” she said. “You want to help, after everything you've done? You couldn't possibly help us. The only thing we will do to you is kill you. You aren't even an angel anymore, Castiel. I look at you and I see a traitor. Scum. A Winchester’s lapdog.”

Castiel flinched. “You don't understand. I- I'm one of you. I just made a mistake . . .” He almost crouched down by her, but he didn't. If he got too close she would attack him, even unarmed. How could she not see that the only difference between them was that Castiel had no grace?

“I hope you die bloody,” Hael said. “I hope you die slowly, I hope that when you die you die like you deserve. And make no mistake, our brothers and sisters will find you and kill you. You will be hunted, like your filthy Winchesters have hunted us.” She was shaking with anger, and she started to get to her feet.

“Stop,” Castiel said, but he didn't know anymore if he was warning her or begging her.

“We will destroy you,” she continued, “No power on this Earth will protect you —”

Castiel couldn't do it anymore. He couldn't listen to this, couldn’t hear the truth in her words. “I'm sorry,” he whispered, and drove his blade through her chest.

She jerked backwards, her body lighting with the burning grace of an angel. Finally the light dimmed and went out. Castiel pulled the blade from her vacant body, closing his eyes as she collapsed onto the warm asphalt. When he opened them again, his sight had blurred, and his cheeks felt suddenly wet with something that wasn't blood. The tightness in his throat returned, and he sank to meet the pavement almost gratefully.

Castiel looked at the body of the sister he had killed, and he wondered if he should have let her kill him.

A moment later, he jumped as a roaring voice reverberated in his ears. “PUT YOUR WEAPON DOWN AND GET YOUR HANDS IN THE AIR!”

He hadn’t noticed the screaming and panicking people around him, hadn’t noticed the sirens wailing. Stupid, stupid. Castiel should have started running the second she was dead. Now he let the blade fall to the pavement, listened as it clattered on the ground. Within seconds his hands were being pulled behind his back and chained together. Someone’s hands began to check for other weapons on his body.

Castiel didn’t listen as one of them began to say something. They were the police, he guessed, they must be. They shoved him into the back of their car as others stayed behind to examine Hael’s vessel.
He stayed quiet. He wasn’t sure what to do now. They’d seen him kill Hael. There wasn’t much to defend him. Escape was the only option, but Castiel didn’t have the power of an angel and killing innocent humans was out of the question. Maybe Dean could break him out, but the odds didn’t seem very likely.

Castiel stared out the window, not knowing what the fuck to do.

* * *

Dean pulled off the road in the hot midday sun. There was barely any traffic, and the out-of-the-way location would make this easier. It would be better to do it at night, but he couldn’t wait that long. His hands had started twitching on the steering wheel and it was getting harder not to think about the gun in the passenger seat.

Crowley reminded him over and over that this was pointless, once the door was closed there wasn’t any getting in or out. Dean didn’t care. Goddamn it, he had to try whether it should be possible or not.

“So this is how you do it?” Crowley asked, leaning out of the car window and watching as Dean sprayed paint across the dusty ground. “Scrawling your sigils on the ground?”

Dean ignored him, just sticking up his middle finger and staring blankly at the devil’s trap inscribed on the ground.

He glanced around. The dirt road was empty, no traffic from any direction. Dean scraped a hole out in the center of the crossroads and placed a small metal box in the center. When he stood up, the hole was filled in with dirt.

For a good hour and a half, he leaned up against his car, waiting. “I need to get him back,” he kept whispering under his breath, ignoring how his cheeks were now streaked with tears and sweat alike, ignoring how every second he felt more and more like he was gonna throw up.

This was his fault, damn it, and he was going to make it right.

But after two hours went by, Dean had to give in. He’d gone through three bottles of beer and was midway through a fourth, and nothing had happened. Hell wasn’t dealing and the demons were gone. He should have been thrilled, but all he could think about was Sam, cold in the ground, because they did their damn job too well.

“Told you so,” Crowley muttered.

Dean almost answered him, but before he could speak, his phone rang. “Hold on.” He grabbed it and answered. “Hello?”

The line crackled. “Dean.”

***
“Cas?” Dean sounded better than he did last time. Castiel would have breathed a sigh of relief if he weren’t being monitored by a wary police officer. “Where are you?”

“Jail.”

Castiel heard Dean wince. “What the fuck happened?”

“Hael was less trustworthy than I believed.” He was shaking, was that normal? He couldn’t remember if Dean and Sam ever did that, if that was something he had to get used to.

“So what, now you’ve gotta escape from Alcatraz?”

“Dean, I’m serious. I don’t —” He lowered his voice. “I don’t know what to do.” He glanced back at the officer, who was looking slightly impatient. He knew he was lucky to be allowed to speak to Dean at all.

“Hold on, Cas, buddy, I’ll be there soon as I can. We’ll, uh, we’ll figure something out.”

“Just hurry, Dean.” Castiel closed his eyes as Dean hung up. He stood up and allowed the officer to guide him back to a holding cell. He didn’t know what to do. He couldn’t fly, couldn’t do anything to protect himself. He was useless.

On the bed in his cell, he tucked his knees to his chest, wrapping his coat around himself tightly. He didn’t know how long he would be here, or what it would take to get out. All this because he was still too naïve to realize he couldn’t trust anyone.

Castiel still wasn’t sure he could trust Dean, he didn’t know what would happen once Dean found him. Probably Dean would realize he was a liability, a hazard instead of an asset, and would either leave him there to rot or break him out and then tell him to find his own way on Earth. He deserved it. He couldn’t help bring Sam back, not anymore, so what was the point in keeping him around when he destroyed everything he touched?

He leaned against the cold wall, staring between the bars of the cell without really looking. Dean would be here as soon as possible, he reminded himself weakly. After that, well, they’d figure it out.
“Come on, Dean-O, can’t we quit driving for ten minutes? I need to stretch my legs.”

“Dean, you haven’t said a word in over two hours. If you don’t at least try to make conversation, I swear I’m going to jump out of this car.”

“Squirrel, if this is revenge for the time I blackmailed you into catching monsters for me, it’s a good three years too late.”

Crowley just went on and on and on, and all Dean wanted was for him to shut the hell up. His brother was in the ground, and his head was trapped in a broken record of save Sam, help Cas, shoot yourself and end it.

And it wasn’t like he could ditch the bastard. Crowley might still be able to help bring Sam back, Dean didn’t know what but maybe, maybe they had a better shot with him. He didn’t want to dump him on the side of the road, or put a bullet through him, if it turned out they needed him.

Still, every few minutes of silence brought another complaint. Dean had to bite his tongue to keep from snapping at him. At least it was a clear night for driving. At least Kevin was probably still okay, safe in the bunker. At least Cas was alive, even if he was in lockup. At least Dean was alive and fighting. Crowley might be a douchebag, but at least Dean was still alive.

“Turn off this bloody music, it’s almost as bad as listening to you refuse to talk. Cruel and unusual punishment, Dean. I thought you were above this kind of torture.”

Dean spun the steering wheel hard, pulling over at a rest stop. “You wanna stretch your legs? Fine. You want me to shut off my music? Fine. You wanna hear me talk? Fine.” His voice was dangerously soft, and he met Crowley’s eyes in the rearview mirror evenly.

Crowley shook his head nervously. “After some consideration, I’ve decided to stay in the car.”

“You wanna stretch your legs? Fine. You want me to shut off my music? Fine. You wanna hear me talk? Fine.” His voice was dangerously soft, and he met Crowley’s eyes in the rearview mirror evenly.

Crowley shook his head nervously. “After some consideration, I’ve decided to stay in the car.”

“Out.” Crowley quickly slid out of the car and sat down on top of a picnic table under the trees. Dean kept his eyes fixed on Crowley as he followed.

“You wanted to hear me talk, so now you get to listen to me bitch and whine.” He held his gun loosely in his right hand, an unspoken but pretty damn obvious warning.

“My brother is dead,” he began. His voice cracked. “And all you do is sit around in the back of my car complaining about the air conditioning. My best friend is in jail and helpless and alone, and you’re lounging around pissing and moaning about wanting to stretch your goddamn legs. I have seriously considered pulling the trigger of this gun eight times in the last half hour and only two of those times did I plan to shoot you, so shut up or you won’t be walking into the bunker. We’ll need to get you a goddamn wheelchair.”

Dean realized too late how very still and cold he was, but at least it was working. Crowley didn’t have any sarcastic response to spout off, and the color had drained from his face. Even in the limited light from the Impala’s headlights, Dean could see real fear in Crowley’s eyes, and maybe he should have been worried, but fuck, it was worth it. Even feeling numb and half-dead had its perks.
He turned away from Crowley and paced toward his car. Sam should be here. Sam was gone, Sammy was dead and it was his fault. He couldn’t save him this time. It was all Dean’s fault, just like everything else.

He was so wrapped up in his thoughts that he didn’t hear Crowley speak at first.

“I really am sorry about — about him,” Crowley said, hesitant to say Sam’s name when Dean was still gripping a gun. The words felt stiff and awkward in his mouth.

Crowley ignored the insistent ‘I’m fine’ that Dean said — it had to be a reflex at this point — and continued, “I am. I’m not — I’m not a demon anymore. It feels wrong, alright? I’m not used to all this . . .” He couldn’t say emotion. It made him feel ill even thinking about it.

Instead he put his hand on his chest. “You can’t hear it, can you? I can hear my heart beating. It’s . . . it’s louder than I remember. When it beats, my whole body moves.”

Dean didn’t respond. He wasn’t convinced Crowley wasn’t trying to mess with him.

Crowley kept talking. “When I was the king of Hell, my heart was beating, but it wasn’t really beating, if you can understand. Everything about me that was human was so quiet. I was stronger as a demon, smarter, in control. You can’t even imagine how much control a demon has. Not just over a meatsuit — over everything.”

Dean finally looked at him. Crowley’s eyes were closed, his fingers pressed against his wrist like he was taking his pulse. “So? What difference does it make?” Dean ran a hand through his hair, exhaling slowly. It felt weird, chatting with Crowley. He had to remind himself that there was nothing wrong with two humans talking. He drummed his fingers on the Impala’s hood.

Crowley laughed a little. “They must be stewing in their juices downstairs. What I wouldn’t give to see Abaddon’s face right now. How did Starsky and Hutch outgame a Knight of Hell?” He let go of his wrist and started picking at splinters on the table. Where had all this chatter come from? He’d only wanted Dean to turn that godawful music off. Maybe it was the humanity in his veins.

Fucking wonderful.

“Overconfidence, if you ask me. I’ve said it before, I’m the only one who never underestimated you. Demons and angels, even the devil, and who lasted the longest? A tailor who sold his soul for an extra few inches in his pants.” Crowley laughed again, except now it was bitter and mirthless. “Look how that ended.” He straightened up, looking over at Dean. “So are we going to keep going, or d’you want to stay with me beneath the stars all night?”

“We’d better get moving,” Dean said, sliding off the car. “Kevin’s probably having a fit in the bunker by himself.”

*   *   *

Castiel’s dreams were filled with strange, unfamiliar, and nonsensical visions. Demon faces warped into human ones and angels chased him through endless corridors that all looked exactly alike. And Dean. Dean was in every one.

When he woke up, his eyes opened on harsh lights that made him flinch. For a moment he was
confused — how did he get here?

Then he remembered.

His throat seized up without permission. Heaven was locked. Sam was dead. He was human.

*You’re human.*

Castiel was in jail, he remembered it now. He had killed Hael, and humans had caught him. He was stupid, he should have started running the moment she came after him.

When he closed his eyes, the image of the trees above him when he first woke up a human flashed on his eyelids. *Human.* Even during the Apocalypse when he first fell, he still had the feeling of grace burning within him. The absence ached in him in a way he couldn’t explain beyond complex equations and science that was far ahead of human advancements in the field.

Dean is coming to get you, he reminded himself. You’ll be fine once he’s here, it’ll be okay and you’ll figure out how to get free. Castiel wasn’t sure when he decided he needed rescuing at all, but he didn’t know how this process worked, he never needed to know these little details and suddenly they were so important. He was just lucky the only living friend he had knew what to do.

“James Novak?” came a voice from past the bars of his cell. At first he barely glanced up at the woman, before he realized she meant him. It had been easier to give his vessel’s name when they asked. Jimmy was in Heaven, anyway; Castiel was sure he wouldn’t be bothered by his name being borrowed.

“Yes?” He asked, looking at the wall of his cell.

“I’m your attorney. Rachel Albricci.”

“Mmm.”

The woman continued to stand there, like she was expecting him to speak. He sighed. Couldn’t she just leave him alone? He didn’t need her help. She couldn’t do anything for him.

She cleared her throat. “I’m here to talk about your case.”

His case. Castiel was sure he’d been caught on cameras even without the witnesses and police officers at the scene. As if there was a case to be had. “Why?” he asked. “What’s the point?”

Ms. Albricci looked disconcerted, and she ran her hand through her curly brown hair, her fingers brushing silver cross earrings. “Are you saying you don’t want representation? This is a murder investigation, Mr. Novak, and I’m sure you—”

“What’s the point?” Castiel asked again, still avoiding eye contact. “I’m human. I’ll still be human when this is over. I can’t change what happened.” He went back to staring at the wall. This was all his fault, it was his duty to repair the damage. He killed hundreds of angels, his family, and because of his mistakes many more must be dead now. All that, for nothing.

What good could he do from a cell?

He heard her move, as if she were about to walk away. “Wait.”

The footsteps paused. “Mr. Novak?”

“What would you do if everything you are was taken away from you?” He stood up and went to the
bars. “If your family betrayed you, and you lost everything, what you were, what you cared about?”

She stared at him, dark eyes cool. “Well, I don’t think I’d commit murder, if that’s what you mean.” She turned on her heel and walked quickly away, leaving him completely, utterly alone.

Castiel sagged back against the wall, letting his eyes fall closed. Waste of energy, he thought. No point in discussing anything when he would be out in a short time. No point, even if he was trapped in their custody for the rest of his life.

Instead he sat with his back against the cold wall of his cell, thinking. He lost track of time as it passed, barely noticing when he was provided with food. This was his doing, so it was his to undo.

*      *      *

“Kevin’s gonna be pissed I’m bringing you here,” Dean pointed out. “You have done some pretty messed-up shit to his life, so if he doesn’t try to kill you at least once I’ll be fucking amazed.”

Crowley sighed, trying to look like he wasn’t paying attention, but he was more worried than he’d like to admit.

“So just — try not to make it worse,” Dean said. “Understand?”

Crowley rolled his eyes. Dean grabbed him by the arm and squeezed hard. “Understand?”

He sighed. “Yes, sir, Dean, sir,” he answered, pretending to snap to attention.

“Good,” Dean said, ignoring the attitude. “Now you wait here until I’ve explained everything to Kevin. You run, and you get a bullet up your ass.” With that last warning, Dean opened up the door to the bunker and pushed it open.

The door creaked on its hinges. “Kevin?” Dean called out. “You in here?”

“Dean?” Kevin’s head popped up over the edge of a table turned on its side. “You’re alive!” He stood up, a crossbow in his hand.

“Yeah,” Dean said, scanning the chaos of the room as he headed down the stairs. “Dude, what the hell happened here?” There were papers scattered all over, and Kevin had apparently stockpiled weapons and food and was camping out.

“It’s been kinda rough,” Kevin said in an attempt at explanation. “I haven’t slept, I’ve been freaking out. Where’s Sam?”

“Sam’s —” Dean’s voice caught in his throat. When he spoke again, his voice was hoarse and quiet. “He’s dead, Kevin. He finished the trials. And they killed him.”


“It was the trials. When they were over, Sam . . . Sam died.” Dean swallowed hard, letting out a hard breath and turning away. “Can we not talk about this? I don’t think I can, um,” he hesitated. “I can’t do this right now.”
“So all the demons are gone? Is that why the bunker went crazy?” Kevin pointed at a couple machines. “Middle of the night, everything in this place went nuts, alarms ringing, everything lit up. I couldn’t leave, I thought the world was ending or something.”

Dean laughed harshly. “Yeah, close enough. The angels fell.”

Kevin didn’t seem to know how to respond. “What? How?”

Dean shook his head. “I don’t really know, okay? But Cas is human and we’ve got a lot of shit coming for us.”

“Dean.” When he turned, Kevin was looking at him with concern. “Are you okay? I . . . I know how it is, to lose your family like that. You know I’m here if you need to talk, right?”

“I’m fine!” Dean yelled. Kevin flinched.

“I’m fine,” he said again, his voice even this time. Cas was human and alone and Sam was dead, but Dean was just fine.

The door upstairs creaked and opened. “Damn it, Crowley,” Dean said under his breath.

Kevin looked up. “Who’s —” He stopped short. Then he lunged for the pile of weapons on the floor. Dean grabbed the back of his shirt and pulled him back. “What’s Crowley doing here?” Kevin yelled. “How did he get in? Why isn’t he dead?”

“Okay, Kevin, just calm down,” Dean said, but Kevin was swinging his fists at him. “Kevin!”

Kevin stopped.

“Hello, Kev,” Crowley drawled, leaning against the railing at the top of the stairs. “You look like you’ve lost weight.” As Kevin started to back away, he snorted. “You haven’t got anything to worry about, Kevin darling. I’ve . . . lost my bite, as it were.”

Kevin looked at Dean in panic. Dean sighed. “Sam finished the trials, Kevin. Crowley’s cured. He’s not a demon anymore.”

“Why isn’t he dead?”

“‘Why isn’t he dead?’ Really, Kev, thought we’d gotten past this,” Crowley said, sitting on a table.

Kevin struggled against Dean’s grip. “He still killed my mom!”

Crowley huffed. “Listen, brat, your mum’s fine.”

Kevin stopped fighting, staring at Crowley warily. “She’s alive?”

Crowley swung his legs around. “She was being held hostage by a few of my lower-level mooks, but since Moose took care of them, she’s just locked in a storage unit. The people my boys were riding around probably already let her out.” He looked over his shoulder at the prophet. “Mummy Tran is fine.”

Kevin braced himself against the wall with one hand, whispering, “My mom’s alive. She’s alive.” He paused, eyes still on Crowley. “Where is she?”

“Wichita,” Crowley said. He slid off the table. “Where the hell do you keep your alcohol in this place?”
Kevin was already halfway up the stairs. “Dean, can I borrow your car?”

“What? No! Dude, take one from the garage. Don’t touch my car.”

Kevin made a face at him, but turned around. “Whatever. See you in a couple days, I guess.”

So Sam was dead, but Mrs. Tran was alive. His fingers found his gun again, tucked into the waistband of his jeans.

Crowley came out of the kitchen holding a bottle of Jack Daniels. “Not the most refined tastes, you boys?”

Dean glared at him. “If you’re bringing it along, bring it along. We’re just stopping for some badges and things. Don’t get too excited about setting up shop.”

“Are you joking? I haven’t slept in thirty hours, and I’m betting you’ve been up longer. I’m getting some sleep and I hope you do the same, I’m not getting in that car if you’re running on empty yourself. Castiel will still be in jail when you wake up.”

Dean pointedly refused to take Crowley’s advice. He started calling other hunters, telling them that the demons were back in Hell, permanently, but there was something bigger on their hands. One of them flatly informed him that she was wondering when the other shoe would drop, ever since those cussed Leviathans stopped showing up.

Finally he got up and plunked his third bottle of beer down on the table. There was time for maybe four hours of shuteye if he wanted to get to Colorado before dark, but then he thought of Cas and went in for a quick two and a half.

Crowley locked himself in the bathroom, his knuckles white against the sink as he faced himself in the mirror. He looked like hell.

That almost made him laugh, in a dry, pathetic sort of way. There was a ring of red around his eyes that hadn’t yet faded.

Inside this body, he was totally alone. The poor bastard he’d possessed had always been a screamer; always cringing and sobbing in the back of his mind. But his head was quiet now.

Crowley supposed this was just one more name to add to the list.

He didn’t know how long he stood there, only that the tear-tracks on his face were already drying when he shook himself out of his stupor and retreated to an empty bedroom.

When Dean woke up, Sam’s name spilled past his lips without meaning to say it. He tightened his jaw hard and got up. He’d get Crowley up and then they’d hit the road.

Dean wasn’t sure why he was bringing Crowley; he only knew he didn’t trust him alone in the bunker either. Better they stay together, where Dean could keep an eye on him.

He opened Crowley’s door slowly. The former demon was snoring like a fucking buzzsaw.

It was weird, but Crowley looked more human when he was asleep. Dean would have to make fun of him for the snoring later. But that wasn’t all, either. His face seemed more relaxed, without all the anger of a demon. Crowley had never looked content in all the time Dean knew the jackass. And it wasn’t like he was more moral as a human, either, but Dean figured that wasn’t gonna change.
Crowley shifted on the bed. His eyes opened slowly, then fixed on Dean. “Were you watching me sleep? Oh, Dean, you do care,” he said. He was trying for sarcasm, but the yawn that interrupted him threw him off. “Bollocks,” he muttered. “Alright, what do you want?” He stretched and pushed away the blankets, revealing he was sleeping in just boxers.

Dean snapped his eyes shut. “Okay. First rule of the bunker, wear something else when you go to bed. That right there is too much information.”

Crowley smirked. “Oh, come on, you know you love it,” he said mock-flirtatiously.

Dean kept his eyes closed tightly. “I’m not looking ‘til you’ve covered yourself up,” he said. “We’re leaving as soon as you’re decent.” He pressed his fingertips to his temples. “You good yet?”

Crowley sighed and said, “Yes, I’m good.”

Dean allowed himself to open his eyes. Crowley was sitting on the bed, fully dressed.

“Well, then, what’s the second rule?”

“Second rule is you do what I tell you,” Dean said. “I won’t put up with you doing whatever the fuck you feel like. Third rule, no calling the angels down on us. You know they’ll smite you as soon as look at you.” Dean turned to go, then thought of something else. “Fourth rule, you help us save the world. Again.”

*      *      *

Hours had passed, but Castiel was still seated on the cool floor of his cell, back to the wall with his eyes closed. He’d eaten, reluctantly reminding himself again that human bodies required food to survive, but he hated the taste and how completely dependent he felt, that his vessel could make demands of him.

Dean still wasn’t here. Not that Castiel could blame him. He deserved a lot more than a long wait in a human prison. But he’d still hoped that Dean would . . . miss him enough, maybe, want him around and do whatever possible to get to him. He knew it was a stupid, utterly human fantasy to think that way, but at the back of his mind was the reminder that he’d felt this way about Dean long before he lost his grace. Love was by no means a new sensation.

But it didn’t matter. And there was no point in thinking about something he could do nothing about. And for all the dullness of the jail, he had patience. Dean would come to get him eventually, and Castiel could wait.

The day slipped away rapidly. Castiel began repeating Enochian phrases under his breath, little reassurances and questions like he was afraid he’d forget them if he never spoke the words. Then he started listing angels he knew were dead because of him, but that put a sick feeling in his stomach, so he stopped after Balthazar. He couldn’t list all the angels he’d killed when he declared himself God. He couldn’t do it.

He continued to pass the time with pointless little things, tapping out rhythms on the floor with fingers that were entirely too his.

Castiel glanced around. There was a faint ringing noise in his ears, a sound that sent the hairs on the
back of his neck prickling.

Suddenly he heard a shout, and the station exploded with sounds. Without a thought, Castiel ran to the bars, trying to get a look at what was happening.

The door was closed, but the screams of pain were proof Castiel couldn’t doubt.

This was it. He was going to die. Here. Now. This time he was sure he wouldn’t be coming back.

With a crash the door flew off its hinges and skidded across the floor, slamming into the bars of another cell. There was a man drying out after too many drinks inside, who jerked awake and began to shriek, still intoxicated. Castiel kept his eyes on the doorway.

Ms. Albricci stood there, her heels clicking as she walked past him. She moved past the broken cell bars and placed one hand on the man’s face. Castiel shouted at her to stop, slamming his fists on the bars of his cell.

When she turned, the man had stopped screaming. He’d also stopped moving.

“Hello, Castiel,” the angel said, walking toward him. Castiel didn’t recognize her, but he could barely make out angelic faces anymore. “I have been looking for you.”

“I — I don’t know who you’re talking about,” Castiel lied. “Who are you?”

The angel laughed. Rachel Albricci’s messy hair stood up as if she’d been electrified, and there was an eerie glow to her dark brown skin. “Does it matter?” She stepped forward. “I am here to warn you, Castiel. You stay out of this. If you try to interfere, you will be killed. I know you are human. You have no business in the affairs of angels, Castiel. If I meet you again, if I hear of your interference, I will kill you.”

Castiel backed up a step. “I can’t make any promises,” he said, his voice shaking. So she wasn’t going to kill him. But she was very willing to murder humans who had nothing to do with this. For what? To get his attention?

“One warning.” The angel smiled at him. “I trust that is all you will need.”

A man in uniform suddenly appeared behind her, a gun in his hand. Before Castiel could warn him, the man pulled the trigger and the angel swayed as a bullet embedded itself in her back.

Castiel stayed frozen in place as the angel turned around, her dark hair swinging. Without a word, the angel stabbed the officer through the neck with her blade, pulling it loose quickly. She tugged a set of keys free from his belt and unlocked Castiel’s cell, opening the door.

“We are done here,” she said, sheathing her blade.

Castiel hesitated. He could attack her. He could throw his life away trying to protect who knew how many others. The angel watched him, like she was waiting to see if he would try to stop her.

*   *   *

Dean drove until he couldn’t force his eyes to stay open. They were less than an hour away from
where Cas called him, but he’d be useless trying to break him out if he could barely walk. And Crowley was barely keeping awake in the backseat even though it was just after three.

He gave in and pulled into a motel parking lot, refusing to pay good money for less than a night when he just needed a catnap to get himself back together. He bought them some food from a fast-food joint and collapsed after just a few bites, curling up in his seat and letting his eyes close.

A poke in his side forced him awake. “Are you going to finish that?” Crowley asked. His food was already gone. Dean handed his burger and fries over without a word. He didn’t feel like talking. Fuck, Dean didn’t feel like doing much of anything. He felt sick all the time. Sam was dead and buried, his body cold. He was up in the Matrix. Really, all Dean wanted to do was sleep or hit something. Crowley was an appealing target, but Dean restrained himself. If he attacked Crowley the man would be out of the car and into the fire before you could say ‘angels.’

Dean finally let his eyes fall shut again. He was asleep in five minutes.

He was sitting across the table from Sammy. His brother was younger – a lot younger, maybe twelve or thirteen. Dean was still himself. It was weird, seeing Sam so young and innocent. Relatively innocent, at least. He knew the kid could still throw a mean punch and fire a shotgun easy, even though he was barely in his teens.

They were in a diner somewhere. The table had a stupid pattern on it, and the chairs were chrome with red vinyl cushions. A waitress brought them their food, but everything above her chest was kind of blurry in Dean's sight.

"Dean," said Sam. Dean stared at him. His voice sounded like Sam did before he – before the trials, not like he did twenty or so years ago. "Dean, come on, talk to me." He leaned in confidentially. "Is it a girl?" he asked. He always sounded like he was trying to be Dean's therapist, even when they were kids.

"No," Dean answered finally. "It's . . . well, it's you. You're dead. And Cas is human, and we're going to break him out of jail, Crowley and me.”

"What makes you think he wants your help? How can you help anyone?" Sam asked, but now he didn't sound like Sam. He sounded like Lucifer. The diner around them vanished, leaving Dean in blurred blackness. He started to run, but he felt like he was going nowhere, his feet weren't even touching the ground. He struggled, but Sam was there, holding him back with a smile dripping condescension. Dean tried to yell but his voice wasn't working, it wasn't working.

“Dean!” Sam’s voice was far away, barely audible, but the Sam holding him wasn’t speaking.

He woke up sweating, feeling like his stomach had just dropped out of his body. He stayed very still, reminding himself he was in his car, he was okay. How the hell was he supposed to sleep when Sam fucking hijacked his dreams?

Dean curled up again, staring at the roof of his Baby. There was so much for him to worry about, why couldn't he have one night of dream-strippers? He sat up restlessly and put the car into gear, backing her up and pulling back out onto the highway. That was enough rest for now.

Hopefully, they would get Cas out of jail without a lot of problems. Never mind that without his grace, Cas was about as powerful as a newborn kitten; Dean missed him. As soon as Cas was safe in the bunker, things would start to feel okay again, Dean was sure of it. Like the team was coming back together. Together they could find a way to get Sam home and safe. Together they could fix Heaven and get the angels out of their hair.
Together, Dean thought, they could finally be happy.

* * *

Castiel didn’t know how long he’d been running. He’d taken the keys and car of one of the victims in the station, but the car stopped suddenly around dusk. He’d walked the last several miles to the nearest town.

The town was small. He wasn’t sure precisely where he was, but the sign reading Wray when he got into town was at least a little helpful. Castiel was lucky there was a food bank for people who had nothing. Like him.

He wished he had taken more than just enough money to find a place to stay when he left the police station in Longmont. He wished he had been less of a coward, he wished that he’d at least tried to fight instead of running. The angel was still loose, probably killing more innocents.

This was his fault. If the angels hadn’t fallen, if he hadn’t been so stupid and naïve.

The problem now was that he had nowhere to sleep. Sleeping on a cot in a jail cell had been uncomfortable, but Castiel was sure sleeping in the open would be worse. He wished that Dean had come for him, that he didn’t have to figure out all of these human things on his own.

At last he found a place to stay the night. It wasn’t ideal, but sleeping in a church was better than outside, with only trees to shelter him from the misty rain coming down.

And churches were supposed to be the houses of his father, weren’t they? Just because God had abandoned him, his family, even humanity — these churches still existed. Humans still prayed and had faith.

He sat down silently, his every step echoing in the empty space. Castiel shrugged off his coat and folded it into a pillow. Before he lay down, he paused, looking up at the crucifix hanging at the front of the church.

Could the people who came here feel how empty Heaven was? Did they know that no one was listening to their prayers? Not his father, not any angel worthy of the name — to be honest, not even the demons were listening anymore.

Maybe it just made humans feel better to tell someone the truth.

Castiel wondered if it would help him.

He closed his eyes. He would try it their way, even though he knew there was no one to hear him. It wasn’t as if he had anything else to do.

“Father,” he began. He felt his stomach twist in discomfort, but he kept going. “Father, please. We, we need you. We’re lost without you. Your children are destroying one another. Please, father, just help us. Help me.” He was whispering now. “I need you. Humanity needs you, and the angels need you, and I need you to come back. Please, father. For us, your children, your creations. You loved us once, I know that. Why don’t you care anymore? What made you stop caring?

He looked back up toward the crucifix. The figure on the cross stared blankly down at him. Empty,
Uncaring. Castiel felt anger burn hot in his chest. “How could you leave us like this?” he demanded. “How could you abandon your children when they needed you most? How could you care so little for the ones you created? Were we so unworthy of your love? Was I so . . .”

He stopped. God wasn’t listening. He never had been, and he never would be. *He just doesn’t think it’s his problem.*

Castiel noticed the wet feeling of tears in his eyes and on his face. Strange. He took deep breaths until the tears subsided. Slowly, he calmed down.

If God wasn’t listening, Castiel would just pray to someone else. The only one who had ever been there and actively tried to make the world better, tried to help Castiel and save lives whenever possible.

If God wasn’t listening, Castiel decided, he would pray to the only person who always came through.

Castiel folded his hands and settled his mind. If he was going to do this, he would do it right. Slowly he took a breath.

“Dean,” he said. “I know you can’t hear me. I know you’re miles away from me, and you’re probably asleep and safe and not looking for me. I know I’ve ruined everything, I know it’s my fault, and you might not want anything to do with me, but . . . please. If you care, if you care about me at all, even if it’s next to nothing, come and find me. Dean, I don’t . . . I don’t know what else to do.”
Confession

Confession: a statement of wrongdoing

Castiel hadn’t had a full night of sleep in days. He was exhausted, but he had to keep moving. He was taking no chances. Being on the run was by no means new to him, but it had never been like this. When it was Raphael at his back, he’d always kept one step ahead. Naomi couldn’t catch him until she resorted to brutality. But that was when he had wings.

He’d learned, in the last five days. Castiel kept to himself, avoiding any contact and staying in back alleys. Even with a gash over his eyebrow bleeding into his vision, he wouldn’t ask for help. Castiel couldn’t risk that.

He was still heading toward the bunker. Not because he thought Dean would want him around; he needed Dean’s help, to fix what he’d done. His no-interaction policy was a pain in his all-too-human ass. He couldn’t borrow a phone to tell Dean he was safe and on his way. Dean had no way of knowing what happened at the police station. Cas had been running ever since, trying to stay a step ahead of any angel who wanted to see him dead.

Castiel wiped the blood out of his eyes with an irritable sigh.

There’d been a car on the side of the road two days back. Castiel jumpstarted the rusted, crumbling car and managed to get thirty miles before the damn thing wore out. When he was walking into the nearest town, Farley, a woman with sharp eyebrows and prying eyes called the cops on him. Jimmy Novak was infamous now, wanted for the murders of everyone in the Longmont police department that night.

He’d been arrested before he had a chance to think. Of course, the tiny little town jail was no Guantanamo, as Dean might have put it. He’d escaped, slipping cuffs and hurting as few as possible.

The wound across his forehead came from crashing into a goddamn shelf, of all things, when he cut and ran. Maybe, he thought, the scar it would leave would warn people off of fucking with him.

He exhaled and leaned against a wall. He’d gotten to a big city after the incident in the police station, figuring that he might be able to blend in. His feet ached. Since he lost his grace, this body had become his in ways Castiel never imagined. The most discomfiting sensations plagued him and became a part of him. Wounds were nothing; bug bites and gnawing hunger in his stomach, on the other hand... This was his body, not a borrowed casing he would one day return. And without Jimmy Novak sharing the space, it was more Castiel’s than it had ever been.

A rattling from behind him stirred Castiel from his thoughts. It was dark and foggy, the heat of summer relaxing into night. He glanced back into the darkness of the alley. There was still nowhere to sleep, but he hoped he wouldn’t have to resort to another night on pavement, surrounded by garbage.

The noise came again, louder. Castiel edged away; if it was an animal, it wouldn’t like his intervention, and if it was a human he would rather not worry.

As he stepped away from the damp wall and toward the foggy main street, he heard a click. The cold metal of a gun pressed against the back of his neck.
There was a feeling as if his lungs just dropped out of his body. Castiel paused, trying to formulate a plan while fighting new human instincts to run, scream for help, fight back. It was no angel blade, but that didn’t matter; death at the hands of a human wasn’t any better.

“Gimme your wallet,” a low voice demanded. Wonderful.

“I don’t have any money,” Castiel began, but the gun jammed against his neck forcefully.

“You heard me,” the man said, voice tight with tension and anxiety.

Castiel thought quickly.

“Hurry up!”

Slowly, slowly, he reached into the pocket of his coat, making as if he were grabbing for a wallet though he had no money to speak of. He turned sharply, his other hand coming up to wrench the gun away. Before the man could even react, Castiel punched him hard in the jaw.

He stumbled backward as Castiel wrested the gun from his hand and clicked the safety on, tucking it into his waistband.

The man came at him again. Silver metal flashed in the light of the streetlamps. Castiel put up a hand to defend himself, but the knife slashed through his shirtsleeve and cut his forearm. He gasped with pain, blood from his head wound obscuring his vision.

The man went for Castiel again, but Cas kneeled him in the groin and punched him in the stomach. He collapsed instantly.

Castiel removed the knife from his hand and wiped it on his shirtsleeve. “Don’t try that again.”

He stowed the knife in his pocket, hissing in a breath as he brushed his wounded wrist against the fabric of his coat. These weapons were something, at least; they were no defense against angels, but he should be able to warn off other humans.

Castiel kept walking until the pain, and the blood loss, became impossible to ignore. He broke into a small, well-kept house with all the lights off. He had to hope there would be bandages. Castiel didn’t need many, the cuts were shallow and would heal in a few days. Until then, he needed to cover them and ward off infection.

He winced as he forced the door open, knowing the owners would return home to a damaged house. At least all he was stealing was medical supplies.

Washing his cuts out with warm water, Castiel took inventory of his injuries. The scrapes on his hands from when he was nearly run over had almost healed. There were bruises and scratches from his escape from Farley. His feet were blistered from walking and his neck was developing a mild sunburn. And of course his forehead and wrist were still dripping sluggishly.

He missed his wings more than anything.

In the medicine cabinet, Castiel discovered a stock of pills and bandages. After a brief hesitation, Castiel pocketed a bottle of pills. He was growing used to the heavy weight of guilt. He shouldn’t have to steal for what he needed.

He tended to the damage to his body mechanically, his thoughts elsewhere. He noted, with mild distaste, that his facial hair had grown considerably. He looked strange and not at all like himself.
Though, with police on the lookout for him, perhaps that was good.

Most of his injuries weren’t painful, but Castiel could still sense a dull metaphysical ache; his grace’s absence. It didn’t hurt, precisely. More like a phantom limb sensation. It should be there, within easy reach.

He met his eyes in the mirror. His skin was streaked with dirt and his face was hollow. The beard refused to compensate for the weight he’d lost, instead making him look even scrawnier. Nothing like himself, he thought again.

A few days later, he found himself doing the same thing in a motel somewhere in western Kansas. He was a ways from the bunker yet, but he’d scraped up enough money to pay for one night in this shoddy place. The wounds on his arm and face were mostly healed, white scars.

Everything he’d seen in the annihilated police station still haunted him ten days later. Burnt-out eyes, faces frozen in terror, and broken bodies had struck something in him. He was a human now. He was vulnerable to disease, starvation, pain. One day, he would die. One day, he would be just like them, cold and motionless and gone. He never imagine he would die — not that kind of death, anyway. The thought left a sick feeling in his stomach. Maybe that was the hunger.

Castiel wondered who would bury him.

The motel phone didn’t work. Castiel his his head against the wall in frustration. It was just his luck. He wanted more than anything to call Dean, even just to say he was safe and alive. Dean worried about him, he knew, even though Castiel didn’t deserve it.

It took too long to fall asleep. Sometimes he was afraid to. Dreams were strange, and confused, and he often woke up screaming. He didn’t think he’d ever screamed before losing his grace. But he had to sleep eventually.

When he did, he dreamed of Sam and Dean. They were lounging in the bunker, unconcerned by his absence. Sam mentioned looking for him, but Dean rolled his eyes dismissively.

“Why bother? He’s not worth it.” The words stung, even in a dream. Castiel wasn’t worth their time, not really.

Sam tried to argue, but the older Winchester snapped, “It’s not like he’ll be useful, Sam. It’s his fault we’re in this mess. What’s the point?”

Suddenly Dean turned to Cas. “You’re just as bad as the rest of them.” Dean’s eyes were cold as he pulled an angel blade out of nowhere and stabbed him in the stomach.

Castiel woke abruptly, his body shaking uncontrollably. He stumbled, still half-asleep, to the moldy bathroom sink and splashed water on his face.

It was only a dream, but Castiel couldn’t shake the feeling that Dean was right. Cas was just as at fault as Metatron. No. He was worse. He’d allowed this to happen because he foolishly trusted the family that consistently stabbed him in the back. Dean wouldn’t want him around anyway, and Castiel posed a danger. He was practically a magnet for angels.

Four angels had attacked him in the last few days, not to mention Hael and the angel who destroyed the Longmont police. There was a reason he’d stolen a can of spray paint and vandalized this motel room. Two of the more recent attackers had been lower-tiers, secretaries. They couldn’t handle a blade or tracking spell to save their lives. He didn’t have anything he could use against them, but he didn’t need holy oil to slip a rope knot and run hard and fast.
Castiel couldn’t bring that danger down on Dean. It was bad enough his friend had lost his brother, he didn’t need to live in fear of angel attacks. And then, after everything he’d done to Dean — his attack in Lucifer’s Crypts, abandoning him and taking the angel tablet, leaving him in Purgatory, shit, even swallowing the Purgatory souls and unleashing the Leviathan; Dean couldn’t possibly want him to stay in the bunker, not really. He needed him to help bring Sam back. That was it.

Dean couldn’t trust him to make the right choices. Castiel didn’t think he could trust himself. Better to, to stay away. It had to be. It didn’t matter how he felt. He should get as far from Dean as he could.

The next morning, Castiel bought a bus ticket. He didn’t care where he was going as long as it was away.

While he waited on the bus, he picked up a discarded newspaper and stowed it in an inner pocket of his coat with the vague idea of finding out what went on in the world at large.

He took a seat down at the back of the bus, feeling every eye on him. He knew he looked homeless. Castiel wore clothes that fit badly in place of his usual suit and coat. They were stiflingly hot when he walked, and besides, the blood and dirt that stained them, and the tears and holes in the fabric would give off a worse impression. Those clothes were tucked away in his backpack with his other meager possessions, consisting mostly of what he got away with stealing.

Staring out the bus window was his best alternative to meeting the gaze of anyone near him. If he dared, they might realize he was the ‘dangerous murderer’ on the news and call the police. Castiel was more than thankful of that scruffy beard now. It disguised him better than ill-fitting clothing.

Looking around discreetly, Castiel pulled a small bottle from his coat pocket, uncapped it, and swallowed a pill dry. The pain of his most recent injuries had long since faded. This was to forget the loss of his wings.

He smiled a little vaguely, feeling the newly familiar haze sink down on him.

At the next stop, an hour later, a young woman sat next to him. Castiel was instantly alert in spite of the medicine.

“I’m Nicole,” the girl said.

“Cas—” He stopped. No, using his own name would be too recognizable, and Jimmy Novak was now out of the question. He couldn’t do that. “Clarence,” he said instead. “My name is Clarence.”

Rather than start a conversation, Castiel turned to the neglected newspaper. Instantly he felt bile rise in his throat. Seventeen disappearances in the local counties alone, part of a larger pattern spanning hundreds, if not thousands, of similar vanishings across the globe. Account after account of tearful families begging their loved ones to come home. People of all faiths, all types. Even children.

He couldn’t read it any longer. Castiel threw it aside and stared blankly out the window. He wondered for the first time if Jimmy Novak’s family had done the same for him.

It was about five hours from there to where the bus was headed. It turned out to be a town called Rapid City in South Dakota. Good. It was a good way away from Dean, although he’d need to go further eventually.

When the bus halted and he stood, the first thing he saw was a pay phone. Like it knew what he needed. And he had just enough money for a call, if he didn’t eat much tonight.
Before he could think twice, he shoved change into the slot and dialed Dean’s number.

Castiel held his breath as the phone rang, once, twice.

“Hey, this is Dean’s other, other cell, so you must know what to do.”

Castiel closed his eyes. It was better like this, he told himself. He didn’t have to think about hearing Dean’s voice for possibly the last time.

The phone beeped. “Dean. It’s Castiel. I’m alive. I’m in Rapid City, South Dakota. I’m safe. I know you must be worried, but I’m okay. There was — an angel, she found me at the police station and killed everyone there, I wouldn’t have left but I didn’t have a choice. Just, I want you to understand that I didn’t just leave you behind. I swear I didn’t abandon you. Don’t come after me.” He hung up, feeling the sick sensation of guilt in his chest. The bottle of pills felt heavy in his pocket.

He was certain that this didn’t need to be so difficult.

* * *

Dean paced the room. Back and forth and back and forth. He wished he’d made Cas get a cell phone weeks ago, when they first got out of Purgatory. He couldn’t call, he had no fucking idea if he was even. . . no. He wasn’t going to think about that.

When he and Crowley showed up at the Longmont police station, the place was surrounded with cop cars and swarming with Feds and officers and any other government official they would scrounge up. Bodies were being hauled off to the morgue, all with the same injuries; burnt-out eyes and stab wounds. An angel had been there, and fear that they got to Cas plagued him until he learned that Cas wasn’t one of the bodies.

That meant either Cas was captured, or he’d somehow gotten out alive. Dean and Crowley searched Longmont for hours, trying to find some evidence that Cas was alive and safe and hiding out close by. Then the police were blaming the whole fucking thing on Jimmy Novak and plastering Cas’s face on every news station in the goddamn country. That wasn’t easing Dean’s nerves.

Kevin was busy getting his mom settled down somewhere in Pennsylvania. Dean offered a room in the bunker, but Linda was sick of living underground, both literally and figuratively. So a quiet, out-of-the-way town with no history of pretty much anything was the next best thing. Kevin checked in every day, always beginning with the same question. “Is he gone yet?”

Dean glared at his alarm clock. The red numbers reminded him that he should be asleep, that staying until one a.m. was a shitty idea unless he was actually doing something, but he couldn’t help it. When he tried to sleep, he could only see Sam’s body, slack and cold and unmoving, and goddammit he shouldn’t be crying, why the fuck was he crying?

And Cas was in the wind, which made it worse, because now he was seeing two bodies next to each other and he was definitely losing it and just thinking about it, even awake with the lights on, made his body feel numb.

He needed a fucking drink. Yeah, that was better than sleep anyhow.

Yawning, Dean stumbled down to the pantry and hooked himself up with a bottle of rum, and on
second thought, decided to brew up a cup of coffee. He couldn’t sleep, so he might as well actually try to get some work done. Minor miracles were popping up all over the world in the wake of the Fall, and he wanted to work out a way to track them.

To his surprise, Crowley was in the kitchen. There were dark circles under the ex-demon’s eyes to match the ones under Dean’s. For a second he wondered if Crowley was having nightmares, but the smell of bacon banished the thought.

“What the hell are you doing up? It’s like one in the fucking morning!”

Crowley shrugged. “Making something to eat. Your idiot box was tuned to cooking show reruns and I... got hungry.” He plucked the bacon out of the pan. “Haven’t done a breakfast in ages, really. Last time there was more whipped cream and chocolate syrup and nudity than bacon —”

“— gross —”

“— but I doubt you’ll mind the change,” he continued smoothly.

Dean settled down at a table in the war room with his coffee, pouring in a liberal dose of rum and taking a long drink. His cell was lying on the table amid about thirty pages of phone numbers, names, and addresses. Since the angels fell, he’d been trying to get in touch with as many hunters as possible and spread the word. He wondered if he’d stop feeling like Bobby once hunters got used to ganking God’s messengers.

Crowley joined him a few minutes later, carrying a tray. The oven mitts he wore were slightly charred. “Voila!” he said, plunking the tray on the table. Bacon, eggs, chocolate chip pancakes.” He stabbed a blackened pancake with a fork and tasted it, making a face. “Alright, so you shouldn’t use demonic recipes unless you’re using the right ingredients. Texture’s all wrong. D’you think buttermilk would make a better substitute for dog’s blood?” He frowned and pulled a handwritten recipe out of his front pocket.

Dean wasn’t going to ask. Hell, he didn’t even want to know.

“So the search for a way to bring back Sam is going nowhere, we’ve got zilch on Metatron’s spell, and you’re shooting the be the next Rachael Ray. But it’s been days since the angels fell, and I gotta talk to you.”

“Listening.” Crowley scooped up the eggs and tasted them, promptly coughing them out.

“I’m worried about Cas. Don’t turn this into a fight,” he warned when Crowley opened his mouth. “Cas is defenseless out there. He could be dead for all I know.” The thought made him feel sick. Cas wasn’t dead, he wasn’t.

“All I’m saying is, we need to get to him before the angels can. Or the police.”

“Come on, Dean, your sparrow will find his way here eventually,” Crowley said, splashing scotch into a glass. “No point wasting energy on him.”

“If you don’t shut up I am locking you in the dungeon,” Dean warned him. He sat tensely on the edge of the table and sipped his coffee.

“You’ve got a dungeon down here? Sexy,” Crowley muttered.

Suddenly Dean’s phone buzzed, vibrating on the table. Dean grabbed it. “Dean here.”

“Hey, Dean, glad you’re awake. It’s Tracey. There’s been some weirdo deaths in Wyoming. What do you have on djinn?” Dean held back a sigh of disappointment and started filling her in. It was
one-thirty when they were through, and by then his coffee was cold.

Dean started going through his messages, playing them pack. Some were vague, others he decided he’d have to call back for.

He played the next one.

“Dean.”

He almost dropped his phone.

“It’s Castiel. I’m alive. I’m in Rapid City, South Dakota. . .” Dean was on his feet and heading for his room before he realized what he was doing. By the end of his message, his duffel bag was slung over his shoulder and he had his keys in hand. He didn’t even notice Cas’s voice telling him not to follow.

Dean finally had a lead on something. Being in the bunker for several days going nowhere had him climbing the walls, and at last there was something to work with, and Cas was alive. He stopped at the bottom of the stairs, glancing back at Crowley. “Come on. Grab a knife or something, get ready. You’re coming. It’s just a couple hours’ drive, but I ain’t leaving you here alone.”

Crowley frowned, disbelieving. “Really. You want me at your back.” That was unfamiliar territory for him. Giving the Winchesters a little help was one thing, but support was entirely different.

“More like I don’t trust you any further than I can throw you.” Dean tossed Crowley a knife.

“You trust me enough to give me a weapon.”

“You’re gonna need it,” Dean pointed out. “And get yourself a holy oil cocktail if you don’t wanna get iced by an angel.”

Five minutes later, Crowley met him back at the bottom of the stairs and followed Dean up to the Impala. The night was hot and dark, stars twinkling up in the distant sky.

As Dean tossed his bag in the trunk of the car, Crowley went over to the passenger side and waited for Dean to unlock her.

Dean felt something catch in throat. He felt like he might throw up. The idea of Crowley in shotgun seat. . . no. He forced a smile. “Nope Backseat for you. No one gets to ride shotgun unless they’ve earned it.”

“Oh come on, you won’t let me sit there because that’s where Sam sits,” Crowley snapped without thinking.

In one motion Dean slammed Crowley against the Impala, pressing his forearm against his throat. “Don’t you dare,” he said, his voice breaking. “Don’t you dare talk about Sam. You don’t get a say in this. You don’t get to talk about him, you don’t deserve to sit in his place and you sure as hell don’t deserve what hospitality I’m giving you. It’s your fault he’s gone, don’t you dare — don’t you dare —” Dean cut himself off. “Don’t you. . .”

His breath caught in his chest. He ignored the pricking at the corners of his eyes, he was not going to cry. “If you talk to me about him again, I will break your nose.”

After that, Crowley kept quiet.
Once they were on the highway, Dean pulled out his phone and made a call.

“Hey, this is Jody Mills, leave a message after the beep.”

Dean made a face. “Hey, Jody, it’s Dean. Listen, I’ve got a problem. There’s, uh, this friend of mine, and he’s kinda missing, but he’s definitely somewhere in Rapid City, so if you can get there before us will you check it out? Call me back. Thanks.” He ended the call.

If they pushed it, they could get to Rapid City before nine a.m., Dean figured. What the hell was Cas doing in South Dakota? He’d missed Kansas by a lot more than a wrong turn.

Something was wrong. Dean didn’t know what, but there was no way Cas would just ditch him like that and go in the absolute wrong direction.

He pushed down harder on the gas. If he ignored the speed limit, they could make it by eight.

Ten minutes later, Dean heard the wail of sirens and swore. He knew he wasn’t over the drinking limit, but there was no way he was gonna get let off with a warning, driving when his breath smelled like rum, in the middle of the night, twenty miles over the speed limit.

Dean swore again as an officer came up to his car and started writing him up, asking the usual questions. He was hoping the cop didn’t know who he was. On these roads, he could have been caught by the same guy before. Thankfully, though, the officer didn’t recognize him.

A solid half hour delayed, they headed out at the legal speed. Dean kept a sharper eye out for cops after that, just glad the cop didn’t notice his tags were expired on top of it.

* * *

Warm sunlight fell on Castiel’s face. He blinked awake, realizing that he was comfortable for once. He remembered drowsily how he’d gotten here; after calling Dean, he’d found his way to a motel and figured it was better to sleep here for a night than keep moving. Maybe he could find work here, and earn enough money to get far enough from Dean to keep him safe.

On the other hand, he recalled that Dean had a hunter friend who lived in the area, and as much as he hated the idea of walking another day, it wasn’t sensible to stay even close by when Dean knew exactly where to find him.

He grabbed his backpack and left quietly, wondering how long it would take for the angels to forget what he’d done. He was lying to himself; no angel would be able to forget a betrayal like his, accident or no.

He paused on the street, feeling a cold shiver run down his spine. It was unusual, considering the heat of midday in the summer, but when he stopped walking, nothing happened. Castiel waited there as people driving past gave him odd looks. The cold passed. Maybe it was just the wind, he thought uneasily. He couldn’t hear the ringing of angel voices accusing him, but that meant nothing.

The smell of cooking food wafted through the air, and Castiel realized much too late that it was stupid of him to waste the last of what he had on one night in a low-quality motel. Now his stomach felt pointedly empty, trying to convince him to eat something, anything.
Human bodies were very demanding.

An hour or two passed as he wandered aimlessly through the town, unsure of what exactly he was looking for. Cas sat beneath a tree to escape the suffocating heat of day. The thick dark clouds overhead muffled the sunlight, but not the temperature. Whose idea was that, to make clouds so useless for blocking out heat? He needed to have a word with them.

He looked up suddenly. Someone, a woman, stood over him. Castiel forced himself to keep hold of his wits and stood, bracing himself against the rough bark of the tree.

“I heard you call the Winchester yesterday,” the woman before him said coolly. She held a silver blade openly. Castiel felt the cold again sharply. “Stupid human, using radio waves to contact him? You should have known we’d find you eventually.”

Castiel stiffened, glaring. “Bite me.” He took inventory rapidly. No weapons worth a damn; he hadn’t eaten, so running was out of the question; and a distraction would buy him time but nowhere near enough. If she smote him, he didn’t stand a chance. Dean would never know what happened to him.

“Oh, there will be plenty of time for that.”

He slipped his hand into the pocket of jeans that were too loose, grabbing the knife he’d taken off his attacker in the alley a week ago. Had it really only been a week?

“You’ll have to catch me first,” Castiel said, but his voice was drowned out by the rumble of thunder. He flicked the knife over and stabbed her in the throat.

She stared at him in shock, but he didn’t stick around to watch. The second the knife was buried in her neck Castiel took off running. He was a block away when the thunder boomed again, louder and deeper, and rain came down from the sky in fat drops, slicking the asphalt beneath his feet.

He slipped when he moved onto grass, tumbling and hitting the ground hard. He felt strong hands grasping him by the back of the shirt as the rain came down harder, faster, and then everything went black.

When his eyes opened, Castiel was tied to a chair. There were large shelves on every side, some stocked with a few dusty novels. An old bookstore, probably. The place was covered in a layer of grime thick enough that it wasn’t used recently. He tested his hands and found that they were bound in addition to the gag in his mouth. His shirt had been cut away and his backpack lay a few feet away with the contents spilling out.

He noticed all of this very quickly, then took stock of his condition. His head ached, probably from the blow that knocked him out. No wounds, though his pride was injured by the streaks of mud coating his skin.

It would have been extremely stupid to hope his family would just leave him the fuck alone; he’d just fantasized that he’d last last longer. He wasn’t trying to hurt them, he just wanted to go on in peace.

A figure appeared from behind a shelf, holding an angel blade loosely in one hand. It wasn’t the same angel that had come after him. He untied Castiel’s gag without a word and straightened up.

“What do you want?” Castiel asked immediately. The shelves obscured the windows of the shop, but he guessed they were in the same city. Without a direct line to Heaven, they didn’t have the power to fly him elsewhere.
“Information,” the angel said cheerfully. “We’ll see about letting you go once we know what you know.” He leaned forward. “My name is Kushiel. We haven’t met, but I followed you against Raphael.”

Castiel nodded. Of course. He destroyed his own supporters when he proclaimed himself God as much as he destroyed his opposition. And now they wanted information, presumably about how to return to Heaven. Castiel wished he had the answers, but he didn’t. “There’s nothing to tell. Metatron told me we were going to fix Heaven, not tear it apart. If I had known —” He stopped. If he had known, none of this would have happened. If he hadn’t been so blind, so trusting.

Kushiel smiled, shaking his head. “That’s not what I want to hear, Castiel. Tell me how you did it.”

Castiel remained silent.

“Do you need anything? Food? Water?”

“My wings would be nice,” Castiel growled.

The point of the angel blade pressed against his chest and Castiel went still. “Tell me how to reverse this, Castiel. Or you’ll find it’s much harder to talk back with several new holes in your lungs.”

He refused to answer, closing his eyes tightly as the blade was forced harder against his skin.

“Tell me how you did it, Castiel,” Kushiel insisted.

“I didn’t do anything! Metatron —” He gasped as the blade opened a thin line in his chest.

“Don’t lie, Castiel. You’re only making it harder on yourself.”

Castiel closed his eyes. He knew it was stupid to hope that Dean would appear, break down the door, and if he wasn’t so . . . human, he could have fought back. But he couldn’t. And he hoped to whatever God might be listening that Dean would be there.

He shouted again, trying to hold his body steady when pain wracked it. Kushiel was still holding the blade to his chest. Castiel bit down on his lip until it bled. He was a soldier. He’d survive this.

“How can our fall be undone?” Kushiel asked him the same question, over and over again as if he believed Castiel would suddenly be inclined to answer. Castiel lost track of time, the only thing marking the passing of seconds, minutes, maybe even hours was the slice of the blade on his skin.

*      *      *

They pulled into Rapid City around ten, a good hour later than Dean planned thanks to the fucking cop and the thunderstorm slowing down traffic. The rain almost made Dean hopeful; maybe Cas was stuck here because of the weather. But then, the city wasn’t exactly small, there were hundreds of places Cas could be hiding out.

Lightning flashed across the sky again as they cruised through the streets. Couldn’t have picked a small town, could you, Cas? Dean thought to himself.

After maybe two hours of searching for anything that could lead them to Cas, Dean yawned and
pulled up to a gas station. “You stay in, I’m gonna load up on fuel.”

Once out of the tight space he shared with a very bored and loud Crowley, he breathed a sigh of relief. It was killing him, trying to breathe. Every word out of Crowley’s mouth just made it worse, and anyway, if anyone deserved getting shot in the head it was him, right?

Dean barely kept himself from kicking the Impala, trying to get himself under control. He turned, gritting his teeth as he picked up the gas nozzle and shoved it into the filler neck. Where the fuck was Cas?

A sound echoed across the lot, making Dean glance up. Some lady leaned up against the convenience store, whistling noticeably.

He replaced the gas nozzle slowly, keeping eyes on her. There was no way that was normal, not in a storm like this.

Dean was half expecting it when the woman moved just slightly to the side, enough for him to see the glint of light catching on an angel’s blade. That, and her conspicuous whistling, was enough of a warning for Dean.

The angel set off at a brisk pace, away from the center of the town. Dean jumped in the Impala and followed. Please don’t let them have Cas, he thought in a vague panic.

No element of surprise, since that angel had definitely seen him. Maybe she was keeping watch, or maybe she was trying to draw him into a trap. If it was a trap, he would be ready.

Crowley acted oblivious to Dean’s urgency, frowning at a can of beer and muttering about ‘mass-produced drivel.’

Shushing him, Dean kept his eyes on the angel. She walked purposefully, ignoring the drenching rain. She turned down a side street, more of an alleyway, really. Dean exhaled slowly and eased the car down the otherwise empty street. Just as he crept into the alley, a door swung closed behind her.

“He’s in there,” Dean said, his heart hopeful and sinking at the same time. If this angel had Cas, then for all he knew he was already dead. It wouldn’t take much to kill Cas anymore.

Crowley didn’t move as Dean grabbed an angel blade and got out of the car. Glaring, he gestured for the jackass to follow. “Get out here. I’m not leaving you alone with my car, dude, demon or not.”

“Hold on,” Crowley said, “you think I’ll put my ass on the line for him? You don’t know how many are in there.”

“That’s why you go first, asshat.”

Crowley huffed. “And here I thought you didn’t trust me.”

“It’s not about trust. I need the goddamn backup. Get out of my fucking car,” Dean demanded. “I won’t ask again.”

Crowley’s eyes flicked from side to side like he was searching for an escape route. He got out of the car.

They faced the door, about to shove it in, when Dean froze. The sharp edge of a blade pressed against the small of his back. Slowly he twisted to see the angel they’d followed.
So it was definitely a trap. Shocker.

The angel smiled thinly. “Dean Winchester. Intruding on things that don’t concern us, as always.”

“Well, you know me, sweetheart.” He sounded as calm as ever, but he was holding back a flood of curses. They were so close, Cas had to be close. “Why are you here?”

“Again, things that don’t concern us.”

“Call me interested. What’s with the pigsticker?” he asked. “Got somewhere to be?”

“Like with Castiel?” she asked. A superior smile crossed her face as Dean’s breath caught. “He knows Metatron’s plans. We must find out what they are.”

“He was a pawn, you sodding worm —” Crowley was cut off.

“Castiel is no fool, though he is very close to one, trusting his life to a demon and a Winchester.”

Crowley stepped out of the angel’s range quickly. Dean wanted to kick him, but he couldn’t with the blade at his back.

“Crowley,” the angel said, sounding as surprised as if she’d just noticed him. She lowered her blade. “Interesting choice of company for the king of . . .” She paused, eyes going wide. “You’re not a demon.”

For a few seconds, Crowley stood frozen, but he recovered his wits. “Yeah, darling, but at least it’s not your choice of company.”

“Regardless,” she continued smoothly, “Am I ever glad to see you.” Her vessel’s green eyes sparkled coldly.

“Told you so,” Dean muttered.

Crowley huffed irritably. “Give the man a cigar.” He hadn’t been dragged all over this waste of a nation by Dean fucking Winchester to get killed but the first angel they had the misfortune of meeting. The irony of it would kill him before the angel did.

The angel stepped closer. “Don’t worry. It’ll be painless. I hear it’s like falling asleep.”

“Oh, shut up, when has that ever happened?” Crowley rolled his eyes. Sarcasm would be the death of him.

“Unless you have some use to us, demon, your death will not be a pleasant one.”

Dean smiled tightly. “Yeah, I don’t think so. See I hear you got a friend of mine, and —”

“Ask him about the angel tablet,” Crowley interrupted. He held his hands up defensively. “He’s the prat who took it and trusted Metatron with its secrets. But I’ll bet your superiors didn’t feel the need to tell you the damn thing existed. I swear it’s true, I’ve got nothing to hide.” He smiled shakily, his heart pounding wildly.

The angel shook her head in disbelief. “There’s no such thing. An angel tablet. . . God would never place us on the level of demons and Leviathans.” She stepped forward, her blade ready.

Crowley stepped back so Dean shielded him. “Not lying! Why would I? No point, not a demon, no advantage in keeping it hidden.”
The angel stared at him, then darted forward, almost spearing Dean on her blade before shoving past and disappearing into the building behind him. The door slammed shut after her.

“Fuck.” He tried the door, but it was jammed. A moment later and he turned, punching Crowley in the jaw. “The hell were you thinking? If she were faster with a knife we’d be dead right now.”

“What, you thought I was aiming to be rotisserie? I knew what I was doing.”

Dean almost hit him again, but he caught a funny look in his eyes. He knew exactly how close that was, and he wasn’t letting on.

Damn. Dean had almost forgotten the rain, but it sure as hell hadn’t forgotten him. He was soaked. “Get back in the car. I’m not risking you fucking this up.”

He gripped his angel blade. He wasn’t going to let Cas die, not if he still had breath in his body.

Dean found a backdoor to the building on the other side of the alleyway, keeping his weapon ready as he slipped inside. The angel knew he was here, but he was sure now that there were more.

The rain rattled on the roof, falling faster and harder with every moment. The whole place was covered in dust, except a path footprints leading to the front.

“Take as much time as you need, Castiel. How can we return to Heaven?” The question echoed between the shelves. There was a gasp of pain, almost a whimper, and then, louder, “Don’t think I’ll tire of this. I can cut you apart until you beg for mercy.”

“Kushiel, Zadkiel, we need to go, now.” It was the angel from the alley.

“Why?” came another female voice.

“Dean Winchester is here.”

“Then kill him,” the second female said. “We can’t move Castiel, Hahasiah.” Dean moved between the shelves, trying to make out where they had Cas.

“I don’t care, Zadkiel, knock him out and torture him later, or kill him too. He doesn’t matter, he’s weak, but where there is one Winchester there is the other. I’m not risking any of our lives on the chance that Castiel talks.”

Dean lost it. He ran between the shelves, knocking over stacks of dusty books and a rack of faded magazines. “Cas!” he called.

A force pushed him back, sending him crashing into a display case and knocking over a shelf, but it was half the power angel mojo usually had. It wasn’t just Cas running low on battery power, Dean realized. The angels were slower, weaker, after the fall.

The angel Hahasiah rounded a corner with her blade ready. Dean pushed himself to his feet, wheezing. His side ached. “For the love of. . .” Dean muttered. “I think you have something of mine,” he said between gasps. “I’d like him back now.”

He ducked as the angel swung at him. Dean managed to slash the angel’s arm, but he slipped on a magazine that slid from the rack when he tipped it over. He hit the floor, trying not to get stabbed by his own weapon.

The angel was wincing and gazing at the wound in her arm. Dean saw his chance. He fumbled
before getting to his knees and shoving his blade deep into Hahasiah’s stomach.

She hit the floor with a strangled cry, trying to pull the blade free. A few seconds later, her body flared with bright light and went limp.

Feet pounded the floor as another angel appeared before him. Dean swore and yanked his only weapon free.

This angel was streaked with blood, the rusty color staining his arms and shirt, and Dean knew instantly what he’d done. There wasn’t even a second’s hesitation as Dean went after the angel in a blind rage. You couldn’t fucking torture Dean’s best friend and get away with it.

Dean didn’t even notice when the angel cut his shoulder. Instead he shouted his wrath and stabbed the angel through the neck.

For a moment he stared blankly at the bodies of the vessels, panting. Then he made himself straighten up. Out of nowhere the third angel ran past, through the door. Dean chased after, but she ran hard and he just didn’t have the strength to pursue her, even on an adrenaline rush.

“Cas?” he called anxiously, turning back to the shelves. What if they killed him? “Cas?”

There was a long pause where all he could hear was the blood pumping in his ears.

A groan came from somewhere off to his left. “Dean?”

Dean gasped with relief. “You’re alive?” He stumbled through the aisles until he found him, panting and tied to a chair. Dean felt lightheaded. He’d never wanted to kiss Cas this badly, but he pushed the idea away. Really bad timing. “Damn it, Cas. Next time you take a road trip, you call me every night, okay?”

Cas managed a laugh. “If you say so.” He started to move, and gasped. The cuts that crisscrossed his chest and stomach were still open and bleeding. They weren’t deep, but they were very painful. And he hadn’t eaten since... yesterday? But that didn’t matter. Dean was here.

“Nice peach fuzz, man,” Dean said soberly. He scanned Cas up and down. There were scars on his face and arms that shouldn’t have been there. He looked scrawnier, and then there were the torture wounds and purple bruises.

Castiel didn’t know what to think. He’d prayed for Dean to find him, and for once, he thought that perhaps his prayers had been answered.

Dean untied him. “What was that son of a bitch doing to you?”

“He wanted to know how to break Metatron’s spell,” Castiel said tightly. He wrapped his coat around himself, trying to hide his wounds and naked chest from the last person who would want to see it. “I’m sorry, Dean.”

“For what?”

Cas closed his eyes. How to explain this was his fault? Dean shouldn’t have gone to the trouble of finding him. He should have escaped on his own, or died trying.

“Come on,” Dean said. He supported Cas as he led him to the Impala waiting outside. Cas leaned against the side of the car, out of sight of everyone driving past, while Dean opened up the trunk and grabbed bandages. “We’re gonna fix you up better when we get you home, okay? But these can
“Hold you over for now.” He tossed Cas’s backpack into the trunk.

“Th-thanks,” Castiel murmured dazedly. He fumbled for the bottle of pills in his pocket and tried to take one — for the pain or for the guilt, or maybe both — but his hands were too shaky to unscrew the cap.

Dean got to work on patching Cas up. A few of these would leave some pretty obvious scars. He wasn’t sure it was shock or exhaustion, but Cas was falling asleep standing up, and looking up at his face Dean noticed that even with the beard obscuring his fucking *enviable* jawline, Cas looked hot.

He reminded himself to focus on treating the wounds. He’d found Cas. It felt like a goddamn miracle. It was one thing to expect to see his best friend dead or dying, ripped apart by an angel. It was another to find him like this. Dean pretended he couldn’t see the way Cas’s clothes hung loose off his broad frame, the sunken look of his cheeks, the shadows under his eyes. Two weeks on his own had done this to him, and it was without a doubt Dean’s fault for thinking Cas could fend for himself.

Crowley and Cas shared the backseat. Dean kept glancing in the rearview mirror, still doubting that Cas was safe, that this was real. Cas slept with his face pressed to the window, wrapped in the trenchcoat like it was a blanket.

They stopped to eat dinner, going through the drive-through line but parking in the lot anyway. Dean gently woke Cas, and he devoured everything they put in front of him like he hadn’t eaten in days. Dean wondered if that were true, and felt a sudden pang of guilt. He should have been there. He shouldn’t have stopped looking.

When Dean first passed him a burger, Castiel stared at it, uncomprehending, then stared at Dean. “I...” he said, before biting his lip and shutting up. He couldn’t explain the want that coiled in him, and not just for the food. He knew that if Dean knew how Castiel really felt about him, these little kindnesses would vanish. He felt like he was constantly betraying Dean by harboring this secret, mingling with the desire to feel so cared-for all the time.

Dean had to half-carry Cas into the bunker, guiding him to the nearest empty bedroom and finding some extra blankets. Castiel fell asleep in his new bed almost immediately.

For a few minutes, Dean stood by Cas’s door. He didn’t know what happened to Cas in the past two weeks. From how thin he’d become and the way he was acting, Dean wasn’t sure he wanted to know. Either way, it was kind of impressive, considering Cas had just survived two weeks on his own with no help from anyone. Dean felt a little surge of pride for him.

He smiled softly when he heard Cas start to snore, before turning around and closing the door behind him. Maybe now they could start to fix what they’d done.
Blasphemy

Blasphemy: slander against God

Dean closed another spell book with a groan. They’d been going around in circles for days, and yeah, maybe they learned a few tricks on taking out poltergeists, but there was still squat on Sam. It was driving Dean up the fucking wall.

“Cas, you found anything over there?” he asked.

Castiel didn’t glance up, paging through the heavy book in his hands. “This book is useless,” he said. “Interesting theory on how angels and procreation, but nothing that could help Sam.” He leaned back in his chair and tipped his glass back. He concealed his opinion on the taste of the liquor and swallowed quickly.

On some impulse, Castiel murmured, “Thank you for letting me stay here.” He immediately wanted to slap himself; now Dean would try to ask questions, and Castiel was not in the mood.

A week had passed since Dean brought him to the bunker. For the first few days it had been almost surreal, slowly letting his guard down after days of being constantly aware and on-edge. After fending off angels with a vengeance, or wondering how the hell he would find sustenance, Castiel was unnerved by the comfort in the bunker.

He had to wonder why he was still there. Dean had seen firsthand how useless he was, his grace nothing more than a memory. Castiel expected Dean to brush him off or find out what he knew, then gently encourage him to leave. Cas wouldn’t blame Dean if he told him to go. But Dean welcomed him in, and let him stay.

Dean stopped shuffling papers and looked across the room. “Cas,” he said after a brief hesitation, “you’re family. You don’t need to thank me, that’s what family’s supposed to do.” He pushed a thick leatherbound book away and grabbed an aged scroll, stifling a sneeze as dust rose.

My family has cast me from my home, stolen my grace, and repeatedly tried to kill me, Castiel wanted to point out, but he doubted Dean would appreciate it. After everything Cas had done to him and Sam, he didn’t know why Dean considered him a friend, much less family, unless Dean had some ulterior motive for his forgiveness. Or maybe it was wishful thinking. It wouldn’t be the first time Castiel tried to hard to believe Dean didn’t want him around.

“Hmm,” was all he said in response.

“Look, man, you’re my best friend, and right now you’re all I got left.” Dean was insistent. He didn’t get why Cas was so different now, thinking him one second and the next going closed-off. “I need you here and safe. The angels don’t deserve to call you family. Hey, listen,” he said, and Cas reluctantly met his eyes. “You are better than they will ever be.”

“If you say so,” Castiel answered neutrally, his face giving nothing away. Then he turned, and if Dean believed what his eyes were telling him, Cas had the glint of tears in his eyes. But Cas didn’t cry. He was a fucking angel, for God’s sake. It had to have been a trick of the light or something.

“And hey, you can take a break if you’re getting sick of this shit, God knows my brain’s fried by now.” Dean tried to laugh, but Cas just took another sip of beer and didn’t speak.
“You sure you’re okay, Cas?”

“I’m fine, Dean,” Cas answered mechanically, his voice oddly tight. He shifted in his chair, tugging on the cuffs and collar of his new shirt, something they’d taken from the storeroom. There were plenty of neat, pressed white dress shirts and black slacks, practically Cas’s staple outfit. But instead of looking more like himself, Castiel just looked uncomfortable, itching under the stiff fabric.

“Hey, Cas,” Dean tried again. “Are you — do want some other clothes, or something? You look like your shirt’s trying to strangle you.”

Cas let out a startled laugh.

“He’s right, Feathers. You look like a prude. Relax, let your hair down, get comfortable.” Behind them, Crowley leaned up against the doorframe, smirking. The dark circles under his eyes were getting worse, but Dean couldn’t talk. He hadn’t had more than four hours of sleep in the last week.

Streaks of red and black ran over the ex-demon’s hands, bleeding onto his rolled-up sleeves. The last few days Crowley started up a new hobby. First it had been the TV thing, and the cooking thing, and now this. Not to mention they were almost out of whiskey because of him. It wasn’t the greatest way for Crowley to cope with his “sodding bloody feelings,” but it was better than him setting the bunker on fire or something.

Castiel shook his head. “I don’t mind,” he said, forcing a smile. Dean didn’t need to know that he was lying. The suit was confining; it scratched Cas in uncomfortable places, and the heat of it was almost unbearable. But he shouldn’t complain, Dean was generous to let him borrow these from the storeroom, he shouldn’t impose any further.

“I’m serious. We can run into town or something if you want.”

“I said I’m fine,” he snapped. At the look on Dean’s face, he settled slightly, but his shoulders were still tense. The anxiety was constant now. Another stupid human thing to get used to.

Strangely, it had been easier to cope when he was on the run.

Crowley glanced at Dean, eyebrows raised. Dean made a face at him. “Well, if you’re just gonna stand there, we’ve got books to go through.”

Three weeks since the angels fell, and Dean still hadn’t gotten it through his thick skull. Not that Crowley didn’t think he was worth the effort, but really, Dean couldn’t actually expect him to help. Wasn’t that what their pet prophet was for?

Saying any of that out loud wasn’t worth the argument he’d get into. And the back-of-his-mind idea that he wouldn’t mind doing a little good for someone, even Dean, was beginning to irritate him. It was their fault he was so human, and if he wasn’t allowed to leave the damn bunker, so be it. Obstinacy was better than turning into a friggin’ pushover.

Crowley turned sharply and walked out of the room. Dean sighed and turned back to his research. Zero signs of improvement in the last three weeks; Crowley was as much of a jackass as always. At least Cas was nicer to be around.

Kevin had virtually locked himself in his room, poring over that goddamn tablet and trying to make sense out of a whole lot of nothing. Dean knew he called his mom at least once a day to check in. Dean would too, in the kid’s shoes.

On the other hand, this new Cas was worrying him. In the last week, he’d been acting pretty...
weird, even for Cas. Every night, Cas went down to the firing range and blew a clip into the targets until he nailed the center consistently. Whenever Dean did anything for him, from passing the fucking take-out Chinese to showing him around and getting him settled in a room, the guy stiffened up and looked at him like he didn’t understand what was happening for a few seconds. Needless to say, Dean was kinda concerned.

“Seriously, man, you doing okay?” Dean asked again.

“How many times do I need to say I’m fine before you believe me?” Cas snapped.

Dean leaned back on his chair. “Calm down, I’m just asking. You’ve been kind of off-kilter for a while now, I just wanna make sure you’re all good.”

“Well, I am, so will you let it go?” Castiel turned his back to Dean, peering down at his book. He couldn’t discuss anything with Dean; it was all too tangled together in his mind now, he couldn’t separate his feelings from what happened when he was on his own. “There might be something in here,” Castiel said, eyes falling on the phrase, ‘Dean and Resurrection’ in the table of contents. He turned to the page and started to read. “Never mind,” he said, tossing the book aside.

“What was it?” Dean glanced up from the yellowed pages of a spellbook.

“A spell to reanimate a corpse. A zombie,” Castiel said.

“I got nothing either,” Dean said. He was sick of searching through books, but it wasn’t like he could do anything else. It was this or pretend Sam was totally fine, that his brother wasn’t rotting away in the ground into nothing, alone in Heaven while he lounged around the bunker eating chips and dip and binge-watching Dr. Sexy MD.

He buckled down and fixed his attention on the books stacked around him. They’d been at this for hours already. Dean was desperate for a conversation, a hunt, anything so he didn’t have to sit here any longer. He still had trouble focusing; he hadn’t been getting a lot of sleep. He avoided it whenever possible. There’d been too many dreams about Sam, horrible fucking awful dreams that left him sweaty and his heart beating fast, and it was hard enough to get through the day without that haunting his sleep. Glancing at Cas, with that strange look in his eyes, Dean wondered if he was doing any better.

When he brought it up, Cas’s eyes darted away to focus on the ground before going back to the neatly printed words. “I’m fine,” he muttered.

It was nice to think Dean worried, but he couldn’t explain the dreams that forced him awake in the dark, that it took hours for him to fall asleep anyway. Dean didn’t want to hear that he had so little control over his body. Dean knew how to sleep properly. Dean wanted him to be okay so they could keep working, but he kept asking if Castiel was alright and he hated lying about it.

Dean turned back to his research. If Cas said he was fine, he was fine. No point getting into a fight, and it was clear his questions were getting to Cas.

A few minutes of rereading one sentence twelve times later, Dean called it a day. They were getting nowhere, and as far as he could see there was nothing in the lore. Dean was about to head off to his room and blare Lynard Skynard until his brain melted, when Cas stopped him.

“Dean,” he began, then paused. Dean needed to feel like he was accomplishing something today. Castiel could see it in every move he made. He closed his eyes. There were no two ways about it; he needed the advice, and Dean obviously wanted to help.
“I don’t know enough about being human,” Castiel blurted out abruptly. His heart pounded. Dean probably didn’t realize part of what Castiel meant by that, but Cas couldn’t help but cling to that hope, that fear.

“What?” Dean asked, brow wrinkling in confusion.

Half relieved, Cas continued. “I don’t have enough experience with human things, specifically what hunters do. I was just wondering, if you weren’t too busy, if you would help me. To learn how to be human.” He covered the half-lie with the ease of practice. Dean needed to accomplish something instead of going through the motions, and maybe Castiel could be more use if Dean taught him.

Even so, the last time he concealed something this major, he was on the verge of betraying Heaven, and that wasn’t easily forgotten.

Dean turned to Cas. “What do you want to know?”

A few minutes later, there was a series of credit cards and a few different paper bills spread out on the table. “So the trick with a credit card is, you pay for everything ‘on credit’ — buy now, pay later. Normal people, they pay eventually, but we cheat the system. We get cards with fake names and buy what we need. In the end it’s on someone else’s dime. You’re not trying that ’til I trust you to bluff.” Dean slid the cards into a pile and tucked them back in the wallet.

“I can bluff,” Castiel said, unconvincingly.

Dean snorted. “You really can’t.”

“That’s not true. I deceived you and Sam for months while I worked with Crowley to open Purgatory.” The instant the words left his mouth Castiel winced. That was nowhere near the right thing to say. Now the silence dragged on awkwardly.

In an effort to break the uncomfortable quiet Dean pointed at the paper money. “You know how all that works. Cash is better for quick shit, doesn’t leave a paper trail. But it sucks to carry it around and you could always run out, so you gotta keep a credit card on hand.”

“I know,” Castiel said, under his breath so Dean wouldn’t hear.

“Here’s the deal. Hunters don’t have time to sell shit or get a job on top of what we do, so we steal or hustle pool. Not legal,” Dean admitted, “but it’s better than honest work in this life.”

“Money was always one of humanity’s worst ideas.”

Dean narrowed his eyes. “What?”

“I don’t enjoy dealing with theft at gunpoint.” Cas’s voice was flat and his eyes icy. “Obviously there was nothing to worry about, he wasn’t half as strong as me, but for his sake as much as mine I plan to avoid it.”

That was weird. What the hell was Cas talking about?

“Cas —” Dean stopped. He reached out to touch Cas’s shoulder, then thought better of it. “Cas, what happened while you were on your own?”

Castiel turned away, his face stony and cold. “I don’t want to talk about it. I won’t talk about it.” He was firm. He couldn’t explain it to Dean, what he’d done and caused. . .
“Cas, you can’t just —”

“I said, I’m not talking about it!” Cas said, standing up.

Dean was surprised by the heat in his voice. Whatever Castiel said made Dean more curious, but he didn’t push the issue. “Okay. No talking about it.” He paused before adding, “Maybe later, Cas.”

Castiel smiled wryly. He doubted he would ever want to tell Dean what happened, everything he’d done. The suffering Castiel caused, the humans he’d killed would make Dean hate him, and Castiel knew that Dean would blame himself for all of it, for not finding him sooner.

And there were other things he couldn’t say to Dean. “If... I ever change my mind,” he agreed instead.

Dean watched him for a few seconds. “Okay, so you get money. There anything else you want to learn about?”

The discussion went on until Crowley poked his head in. “Sorry to interrupt my favorite lovebirds, but I’m ordering in. You want anything?”

Castiel stood up again. “That’s fine. I don’t want to take up all Dean’s time.”

Dean followed him. “Yeah, sounds good. I’ll go check on Kevin, see how he’s doing on the tablet.”

Kevin refused to open the door. “I’m busy!” he shouted through it. “I’m so close to a breakthrough, I can feel it!”

Dean groaned. “Kevin, you’ve been in there like twenty-four-seven. It’s not healthy, man.”

“What about Crowley? Have you killed him yet?”

“Kevin, do you think I’d let him run loose down here if I thought he was gonna hurt any of us? He hasn’t done anything worse than give himself food poisoning.” Those cooking experiments had their highs and lows, but yesterday Crowley spent six hours puking. “We’re ordering food, come on out and take a break.”

While Dean spoke with Kevin, Castiel curling up in a chair in the War Room with Crowley. The silence stretched for several long seconds. While Crowley busied himself with the liquor cabinet, he popped a pill in his his mouth and swallowed it down with a sip of water.

“I want to help him,” Castiel said, breaking the silence at last. Crowley jumped, then turned to look at him.

“Are you talking to me?”

“Do you see anyone else here?” Castiel asked dryly. He wasn’t sure why he’d bothered speaking at all, or why he’d said that of all things. Too late to take it back now.

“Want to help who? Everyone’s favorite bossy little prat?” Crowley took a seat and propped up his legs on the table.

Instead of lying or changing the subject, which Castiel later decided was what he should’ve done, he answered. “I know he thinks he needs me here to help bring Sam back, but... anything I could do I lost with my grace. If things were different, I would have brought him back.”

Crowley put his feet down and grabbed a bottle of scotch. Well, screw the angel and the hunter, he
would drink until he couldn’t read a fucking word in those damn books. “So you want to help. Before Sam — you were pretty keen on not helping anyone but yourself.”

“That was different,” Castiel said.

Crowley naturally didn’t believe him. Just because he was a little flightless bird didn’t mean he wouldn’t be skipping through the clouds right now if he had his wings back. “And how?”

“I didn’t want this, you ass. I thought it was best to stay away so I wouldn’t ruin their lives, but it’s too late for that now.”

“Is that why you didn’t come straight here?” Crowley sounded only mildly interested.

Cas didn’t answer. Crowley smirked. “It is, isn’t it. Castiel, you naughty thing. Do you have any idea how cursed many roads your boyfriend dragged me down looking for you? After the police station, I thought he’d figure you for dead, but your boy just couldn’t let go.”

“He should’ve.” Cas glared at the table, pulling at his conservatively buttoned shirt. The itch had only worsened as they day wore on, as sweat began to soak into the cotton.

“Not that I’m disappointed you called,” Crowley continued. “He was trying to conscript me for his war on the afterlife. Now he has someone else to gang-press.” He tipped his glass back with a smirk. Swallowing, he added, “I still can’t believe he’s keeping me here. I suppose he thinks I’ll be useful, though I can’t see how.” He hiccuped and cleared his throat. No point in sounding dignified anymore, really.

Cas’s shoulders sagged. Crowley knew he was going to regret asking. “What’s wrong with you now?”

“Well, not quite what Crowley was expecting. When he called Dean Castiel’s boyfriend, he hadn’t really thought. . . he should have, shouldn’t he? Then again, Castiel had been very dead, then not quite dead but insane instead, and then in Purgatory. He hadn’t had much opportunity to notice it.

Before he could speak again, Dean appeared in the doorway, a nervous and jumpy Kevin trailing after him. Quickly he whipped out his cell phone and dialed the nearest pizza delivery service.

He rolled his eyes dramatically as he ordered. “Yes, that’s what I said. And an order of those breadsticks. Thanks.” Crowley gave their address and hung up. “Incompetent morons. If hunting doesn’t work out, you could get a job there, Squirrel, you’d fit right in.”

Dean ignored the jibe and sat down at the table next to Cas, who stiffened visibly before relaxing. The former angel in question had picked up a newspaper. “There’s nothing paranormal going on around here. No unusual deaths or angel attacks, as far as I can tell.”

“Would they even draw attention to themselves like that? They aren’t stupid,” Dean said. He figured angels would be more the subtle type, anyway.

“I think some of them will stop at nothing to find me,” Castiel said. “If that means killing innocents, they will do it.” Cas couldn’t sugarcoat this for him. “Dean it’s bad.”

Dean stood and grabbed a beer from the fridge. “Well, we’ve had bad before. Can’t get worse than Lucifer.”
Cas nodded slowly. “I guess not.” At least most angels weren’t inclined to exterminate humanity. He
would have to keep an eye out for omens, even so. If any angel began murdering humans, for any
reason, it would be his responsibility to stop them.

By the time the delivery girl showed up, Crowley had started describing Star Trek to Cas in detail.
Dean had tuned them out; it was way too surreal to listen to that conversation, and not just because it
was practically a bad joke. Crowley was acting almost like a normal person, which, what the fuck.
And Cas was probably half-high thanks to the pain meds he was taking, so he was relaxed almost to
the point of normalcy.

The doorbell rang for the delivery. “I got it,” Dean said. With Kevin’s scraggly stubble, the kid
looked insane or homeless or both. And Cas had zero people skills, and Crowley. . . was Crowley.

Cas was still asking confused questions about Star Trek when Dean set the food on the table.

“Enjoy,” he said dryly. There was a sudden rush between the four of them to get the best slices. He
opened up his own box, grinning. Nothing better than meat lovers’ pizza. As he selected a slice,
another hand grabbed it, tugging. Dean glanced up; it was Cas.

Cas tugged at the pizza again halfheartedly, then let go. Dean could have sworn that Castiel was
blushing. He ignored it, his imagination was just telling him what he wanted to hear. Cas took a slice
of cheese instead.

Crowley poked Castiel in the side. When Cas glanced over, the ex-demon smirked wickedly at him.
Uncomfortably, Cas said, “I honestly don’t care how interesting you think it is. I’d rather help D—
help bring Sam back.”

“It’s entertainment, you bloody uncultured sparrow. I know it’s not the same as a good old-fashioned
gladiator fight, but trust me, it’s better than nothing.”

“This mean you don’t hate the bunker anymore?” Dean asked. Crowley made a so-so gesture with
his free hand before swallowing pizza.

“Could be worse. Good food.” Dean snorted. Crowley narrowed his eyes at him before continuing.
“Hot women — that’s you —”

Dean almost choked on his beer.

“And Dudley Do-Right over there’s been giving me plenty to think about.” He waved his hand in
Cas’s direction vaguely. Castiel frowned and turned his back to talk with Kevin.

“About what?” Dean asked. Was Cas talking to Crowley, and not to him?

Crowley tapped his lips with his finger. “I’ve been thinking,” he repeated pointedly, picking up a
glass full of either vodka or water, Dean wasn’t sure which. “You wouldn’t understand.” Dean
rolled his eyes. At this point, Crowley was well on his way to getting smashed.

Cas was glancing over at them uneasily. Dean watched his face for a few seconds, but the guy didn’t
say anything, and Dean was sick of getting his head bitten off just for checking he was alright. Cas
would shut down completely if he kept pushing.

His friend delicately picked up his beer and took a long sip, meeting Dean’s eyes with something of
a challenge.

After dinner, Dean got to put his feet up for all of ten minutes before he heard Crowley and Kevin
shouting at each other. He groaned and got up, sighing as he trudged down the halls. Their voices echoed off the walls, impossible to ignore.

He found them facing off in the hall outside Kevin’s room.

“You just stay the hell away from me, okay? Don’t touch my stuff, don’t knock on my door, don’t even come near me!”

“Don’t you understand I can’t be bothered, Kev dearest? I was planning on a what-is-it-called, a marathon, of Days of Our Lives. Hook myself up with some, some whiskey and drama. It’s pointless, you screaming in my ear.” Crowley reached for the wall to steady himself and missed, stumbling into it and wincing.

Kevin clenched his hands, breathing heavily. “Hey, Dean. Great job on keeping Crowley under control. I feel really safe.”

Dean stared at him. Crowley had been way better behaved than Dean hoped. Besides the painting thing and a few burned pans there was next to no destruction of property. Well, he was definitely guzzling all the alcohol, but that was a completely different argument. Dean could forgive him for the rest.

The first time he saw Crowley smearing red and black streaks across the tiled bathroom walls, he’d almost started yelling before he realized what Crowley was doing. Now, he left him to himself. For all Crowley’s shitty attitude, there was something unsettling in seeing him crying with paint all over his clothes.

And Kevin had every right to be angry, but he couldn’t expect a demon to be nice. Human Crowley didn’t seem too proud of what he’d done.

Dean turned to Kevin, who glared at Crowley warily. “Dude, calm down. He’s not gonna eat you.”

Kevin shook his head. Dean sighed. “I can’t believe I’m doing this. Kevin, if you can’t chill I’m sending you on an extended vacation. You’re going to the nearest spa resort, and you’re staying until you’re not so strung-out.”

The kid turned red in the fae. “And you’re gonna let him do whatever he wants? They hell are you trying to do, Dean?”

“Looks to me like he’s — hic — trying to, ah, to get’cha to stop fucking jumping like a nervous — hic — frog.”

After ages of coaxing and eventually banishing Crowley to the library, Dean convinced Kevin to settle down and stop panicking.

It was almost eight when Dean hit the books again. Cas was already there. Crowley squinted at the book before him intently, but Dean was sure he wasn’t reading anything, drunk as he was.

“Anything yet?” Dean asked, sitting down. Cas shrugged.

“No spells,” he said. “There’s Osiris, the Egyptian god of the afterlife —”

Dean chuckled hollowly. “Funny story. We, uh, kind of killed him already,” Dean said. “When you were dead.”

Crowley snorted and Dean glanced over his shoulder. “Dude, either help or get out,” he said.
Between the tissue-thin pages was an open issue of *Busty Asian Beauties*. “Pick one.”

Cas made a noise that was somewhere between a snicker and a cough.

Crowley mumbled something under his breath and stumbled to the door, taking the magazine with him.

For a while the whole bunker was blissfully quiet; the only sound breaking the quiet was pages turning and the clink of bottles on the table. Dean raised his eyebrows when he realized Cas was almost matching him drink for drink.

“Cas?” Dean asked suddenly.

Castiel closed the book he was skimming. “Yes, Dean?” He could feel a heartbeat that wasn’t supposed to be his pounding in his throat — was that the alcohol, or the pills? He put a thin smile on his face; he couldn’t keep himself from wondering if this was it.

“You know you can talk to me if you need to.”

Castiel nodded. “I know,” he said as levelly as he could with various intoxicants humming in his bloodstream. “But I’m not going to.” There was no trace of doubt or hesitation in his voice. He didn’t want to talk about it. He couldn’t talk about it. Why couldn’t Dean see that?

“Okay,” Dean said. There was a long pause before he said, “I can’t focus on these goddamn books right now. You up for a game of poker or something?”

Cas smiled. “I’d like that, I think.”

Crowley poked his head in to whisper advice to Cas a few times, to Dean’s irritation. He clearly had done nothing to sober up, and when Cas listened to him, he started to lose.

Dean smiled as Cas practiced shuffling, the fumbling movements of his hands finding their rhythm. It was harder to focus on the cards when he was buzzed, but Cas’s words were already faltering with the air of someone getting very drunk very quickly.

When they finished, Dean went down to his room. He put on a Black Sabbath mixtape before collapsing on his bed. Another day of zero progress. Fucking awesome.

He couldn’t keep doing this. Crowley was a jackass, Kevin was tense and overworked, and Cas was getting drunk and Dean knew something was wrong. He couldn’t deal with everyone’s shit at once. He hummed along with the music in an attempt to relax.

“The blood runs free, the rain turns red, give me the wine, you keep the bread. . .”

It might take time, but eventually he would get Sammy back. He had to.

He wasn’t working, this wasn’t working without Sam. Whatever they were when Sam was around, it felt wrong in a hundred ways without his little brother by his side. When they were researching, he’d almost asked Sam what he’d dug up before he caught himself. It was messing with his head, Sam being gone.

His phone sat next to his bed. Dean rolled over and stared at it, wondering absently if pressing Sam’s number would get him Heaven’s line.

A guitar solo came roaring through the speakers, and Dean returned to lying on his back, He was so
screwed without Sam. Half the time he was imagining his brother there, alive. The other half Dean was drinking. He needed to focus on something else. Hunting was better than staying in the bunker with Crowley and Kevin almost biting each others’ heads off. He’d find a case and work on that.

Somehow he fell asleep in the haze of liquor. He’d barely closed his eyes when Sam was back. This time, though, they weren’t in some vague location. This was Stull Cemetery, where they stopped the fucking Devil and the Apocalypse. Sam lay on his back in the center of the cemetery.

“Dean,” he whispered weakly. Dean was there, tears already streaking his face. “Dean, are you... are you here?” Sam coughed and blood bubbled up on his lips. There was a dark red stain spreading from his stomach across his white shirt. Sam’s nails were bloody and torn, like he’d been scratching an attacker, and the skin of his knuckles was all ripped up and bleeding, too.

“Yeah, Sammy,” Dean said desperately. “I’m here.” He tried to steady Sam’s weakly lolling head. “S’okay, Sam. I’m right here.” Dean pulled off his shirt, tearing it into bandages and trying to staunch the flow of blood from Sammy’s stomach.

Sam forced his eyes open. “Dean,” he said again. “Dean, can you hear me?” His chest stopped moving and Dean felt the world around him go cold as Sam’s eyes unfocused and he went limp.

“Sam,” he sobbed. “Sam!” Arms were pulling him away. “SAM!” He swung out and hit something soft. The arms let go.

“Damn it, Dean!”

Dean froze. It was Sam’s voice, But... he looked down at Sam’s unmoving body, and then at the other Sam, hair just as long and shaggy as the day he died.

“Dean?” Sam stepped back. He reached out a hand and pulled Dean to his feet. “Did it work?” he asked. Sam paused as if he were listening to a response.

Dean blinked, and suddenly he was standing in the Roadhouse. Sam stood in front of him. “Okay, Dean, listen. We don’t know how long the connection’s gonna hold out, so we don’t have a lot of time.”

“What’s going on?” Dean demanded, whirling around. Behind him, at the bar, Ash and Bobby were doing shots.

“Hey, boy, good to see you,” Bobby said, but Dean shook his head. This wasn’t real. Goes to show he should stop drinking before bed. Or maybe drink a hell of a lot more.

“You’re dreaming, Dean. It’s the only way we could get through to you.” Sam ran a hand through his hair. “I can’t believe it worked.”

“Sam, what the hell? You’re dead.”

Sam sat down at the bar. “Yeah, I know. Ash set this thing up so I could get in touch. We’ve got some serious problems on our ass up here.”

Dean glared back. “You think it’s been some kind of picnic down there? I buried you, Sam, and hanging around with Crowley ain’t exactly what I call fun. At least you’re in Heaven, man.”

“That’s the problem,” Sam said. “You remember Heaven’s like billions of heavens all put together, right?”

“Yeah,” Dean said. “So?”
“So, get this. The walls between heavens? They’re breaking down. People are just bouncing from one to the other. It’s how Bobby got here, and me. And Ash can’t even detect angels up here anymore. Dean, something’s seriously messed up.”

The room flickered. “Fuck,” Sam breathed. “Look, Dean, we’re losing our connection.”

“Of course you can’t hear the angels, Metatron kicked them all out of Heaven. They’re down on Earth, Cas is human, and I really don’t have time for this. This was fun, and everything, but I’m just dreaming. Can’t I have a regular dream for once?”

Sam started to answer, but a crackling filled Dean’s ears and suddenly his eyes were opening into the dark of his bedroom in the bunker. He was drenched in a cold sweat, and his breaths came in shuddering gasps. “Just a dream,” he whispered, once he’d gotten himself under control.

But he wasn’t so sure. Weirder things had happened. Hell, a lot weirder.

No. Not possible. It was a dream, it was just the stress of losing Sam. Still, his dream had been insanely vivid. What the fuck was his head cooking up?

Maybe he needed a therapist. Just the thought made him laugh humorlessly. Like he could go to a shrink and say he was depressed because his brother died closing the Gates of Hell. Dean would be headed straight for the asylum. After everything he’d faced, it was a miracle he hadn’t been committed yet.

Dean slipped out of bed and put on a dead-guy robe. He was going to get himself some coffee or something, maybe hunt through the library for something to help Sam. He ignored the bright numbers on his alarm saying that it was way too early.

While Dean slept, Castiel had been trying to do the same. Instead he found himself staring into the blackness of his room., unable to drift off. Every time he tried he felt more awake than ever.

Finally Cas had given up. He sat up and turning on the lamp by his bed. It cast a warm light in the room, but it illuminated something Castiel tried to ignore: the crucifix. It was the only decoration on the blank white walls, hanging next to the door. Castiel had wanted to take it down, but it was tightly attached. Instead he avoided looking at it. The blessed thing reminded him of the church of only a few weeks ago, and it left a sour taste in his mouth.

Castiel picked up King Lear from his bedside table; he’d been reading it for several days now. He tried to fix his mind on that instead, but the crucifix continued to draw his eyes. Hours had passed as he ignored it, forcing his attention on the tiny inked words. The pharmaceuticals in his system weren’t helping, and neither was the alcohol. He should stop drinking. He opened another beer absently and sipped it.

Somehow Cas couldn’t keep himself from glancing at it anyway. He saw it for no more than half a second before looking away, but the image seemed burned into his eyelids. The figure carved on the cross seemed to be waiting for him to fail again. A heavy weight pushed his shoulders down and his stomach twisted.

How could this have happened? Not long ago he would have been completely indifferent to Christian imagery. There was so little that humans understood fully about the divine, about the God they worshipped. But now the carving made him feel like he was about to throw up. Maybe it was the beer.

“God,” he whispered suddenly. “God, if you’re listening? If you’re watching me? Screw you, you
son of a bitch.” His voice echoed in the bare room. “You have never done anything to help me, or my family. I can’t even call you my father, can I? You don’t deserve the name. You abandoned me, and every one of your creations. I’ve never even met you. You’ve never spoken to me.” He was on his feet now, glaring at the cross like it could answer. “I won’t call you a father unless you start acting like one. You’re just a deadbeat jackass who doesn’t own up to his responsibilities and his failures.”

Castiel could feel himself getting more worked up, but he didn’t try to calm himself down this time. “You don’t want to hear it? I’m saying it anyway, because I don’t believe you’d bother listening! Your children think you’re dead, but you don’t answer because you don’t care! You never cared!”

He was gasping for breath now, his body shaking. “I want nothing to do with you, you understand me? You damn bastard, I believed in you and thought you loved me for thousands of years, and all that time you never glanced at any of us! You don’t deserve to be God! You’re...you’re worse than Lucifer!” he finally screamed. “You are worse than him! You tell us to love humanity and then abandon everything you created! You...you...”

Castiel swallowed hard, fighting back the tears in his eyes. When he spoke again, his voice was a whisper. “You don’t deserve to be loved. Not by the angels, not by humanity. Not by me. You don’t deserve anything.”

He realized that in his anger he’d ripped the crucifix out of the wall. He didn’t even remember standing up. A hole in the plaster crumbled next to the door. Cas dropped the carved wood on the floor. A moment later all energy seemed to drain out of him and he dropped to his knees, covering his face with his hands.

There was a knock at his door. Castiel didn’t even look up.

“Cas? What’s going on? You okay in here?” Dean pushed the door open, a coffee mug in one hand. He frowned when he saw Cas on the floor, gasping. “Are you hurt?” Dean crouched in front of him, setting down his coffee and trying to get a look at his face. Dean’s eyes widened in shock. He wasn’t gasping. Cas was crying.

Castiel shook his head. “No, I — I’m not injured,” he said, forcing the words out. “I’m fine.”

Dean couldn’t believe Cas would lie about this, not when it was so damn obvious he wasn’t. “It’s okay,” he said softly, trying to calm him down. “Come on, Cas, just breathe. Remember humans need to breathe,” he added, trying to defuse the tension.

Cas gave him a look. “Yes, Dean, I’m capable of breathing.” Just as he said it, another tear slipped down his cheek without permission and began to sob again, his body shaking with each breath he took.

Dean grabbed his hands and squeezed them tightly, not sure what else to do. He started talking quietly. “It’s okay, Cas, it’s fine. You’re gonna be okay. It’s okay, it’s okay, it’s okay.” The tears kept coming for a while, but Dean held Cas’s hands and talked aimlessly until he was breathing steadily again.

Cas didn’t speak for the longest time. Dean almost asked what he was thinking about, but he was afraid of setting him off again. Finally Cas took a deep breath.

“I’m sorry, Dean. I made a hole in your wall.”

Dean frowned. “Uh, Cas? Good to know, and all, but I’m more worried about what upset you like this.” He gently pulled Cas to his feet and settled them on Cas’s bed.
“I... I can’t tell you.” Castiel refused to make eye contact, instead staring at his hands where they lay clasped on his lap.

“Yes, you can,” Dean insisted. He shifted so he was facing Cas. “I don’t want this to happen again. You scared the hell out of me, Cas. You gotta talk to me, or I won’t know how to help.”

Castiel almost laughed; of course Dean would want to help. “I can’t, Dean.”

“Cas.” Dean clasped his hands around Castiel’s, trying to reassure him. He ignored how thin a line he was walking and kept talking. “It’s okay, just tell me what’s up.”

Looking into Dean’s face, Cas felt his resolve falter. He seemed so sincere. At last he spoke. “I... the night after the... after I escaped the police station, I ran. I found this church, I slept there. And I, I tried to pray. I begged him for help.” He didn’t need to say who he referred to. “But it felt... empty. I knew he didn’t care.” Cas didn’t, couldn’t say that he’d prayed to Dean instead, couldn’t explain his shock when that prayer was answered. That would bring up questions he couldn’t answer.

“Tonight, I just... I don’t know. I couldn’t stop looking at the crucifix on the wall, and I just.” He swallowed before continuing. “I ‘lost my cool.’” Cas finally met Dean’s eyes properly. “I disowned my father, and I don’t regret it.”

He closed his eyes, feeling tears there again. What was happening to him? He knew people were more emotional when they were drunk, but he wasn’t expecting this.

A hesitant hand pressed against his back, and Cas leaned into the touch without thinking.

“Look, Cas,” Dean said. “You can’t let it get to you, believe me. You can’t change it. Just remember that there are more important things than the douchebag who ditched you.”

They were sitting very very very close to each other. Their knees and shoulders were touching. Personal space, Castiel thought half-deliriously, but Dean didn’t mind.

“Thank you,” he got out at last.

Dean stayed with him for a while, not speaking. He almost spoke several times, things he would regret later; he stayed quiet. Dean couldn’t say what he wanted to, not the way things were. It tugged at him, even as he stifled it.

Cas had too many problems right now. It wouldn’t be fair to do something as low as that, when he knew it would end badly. Then he almost brought up the dream that woke him before he halted the words in his throat again. It was just a dream, he reminded himself. It was meaningless, pointless. Just the stress. He needed a break.

Speaking of which...

“Cas?” he asked quietly.

“Yes, Dean?”

“I’ve been thinking of hunting again.”

“Oh.” Castiel stared back at the floor.

Dean squeezed his hands a little tighter. “Do you want to come with me?” he asked.
Cas looked up again, suddenly feeling sober. “Really? I — I thought I wasn’t —” he stopped. Dean wanted to hunt with him. He shouldn’t argue.

“I need someone with me right now, and you need someone to keep an eye on you. We can protect each other.”

Maybe it wasn’t the alcohol in Cas’s blood, making him think Dean wanted something else. But then, it had to be.

Castiel wasn’t in the habit of lying to himself.
Misericord

*Misericord: forgiveness or mercy*

Dean and Cas had been in the planning stages for a week. It felt like forever since Dean was actually on a job, and Cas — Cas needed to learn everything he possibly could.

They covered bluffing past witnesses, police, medical professionals, and plain civilians. Castiel studied how to impersonate a federal agent, a CDC representative, and a good twenty other various experts in much too short a time. They reviewed stock answers and improvisation until Castiel could convincingly say he went wherever the United States’ government sent him.

He hoped he wouldn’t actually have to deal with police investigators; they’d almost certainly been briefed on his — James Novak’s — criminal activity, which meant his face was recognizable. If the case was backwater enough, maybe he’d be able to skate by.

Dean had started to fill Cas in on how to kill different types of monsters until he realized that Cas knew more than him — the smug look on his face was enough to prove it, even if Dean hadn’t then tested Cas on everything he could think of.

Castiel aced it.

While Cas studied his people and gambling skills, Dean got together several fake badges and slapped on Cas’s face. Crowley had stayed more or less out of his way, but Dean caught him listening in sometimes as he outlined basic hunter procedure.

Dean hadn’t noticed this before, but Cas was *smart*. Probably smarter than Sam, if he stopped and thought about it. He knew several dead languages — he could read original manuscripts in fucking ancient Chinese that for some reason the Men of Letters never bothered to translate. He could recite fifty exorcisms from memory, some of which weren’t even in human languages. But the way he acted, like everything he knew was nigh-useless, forced him to wonder exactly what Cas was dealing with before Rapid City.

In the end, Dean just had to cross his fingers and hope for the best. Honestly, Cas needed help relating to people. Even in light of what Cas told him last week, Dean still couldn’t figure why Cas had changed so much; he was closed-off, constantly either spooked or hardcore ready to punch anything that moved with barely any middle ground.

They went out to a secondhand store to get him a monkey suit like Dean’s to make the Federal Agent act more convincing, and Cas had almost taken the head off someone who came up behind him in the aisle, but not five minutes later he was almost frozen trying to make his purchase, his eyes darting from the clerk to the door to the security cameras with something exactly like panic in his eyes.

He could kick ass, but Dean wasn’t sure how much that was worth when he might be flinching at nothing a few seconds later.

They both needed a distraction, though, and a nice, easy hunt would help them both. Dean had barely slept since his dream about Sam. Whenever he wasn’t helping Cas prep for his first hunt as a human, he was hitting the books and hitting them hard. And obviously, Cas wasn’t doing any better;
the paranoia was only a part of it. He was drinking a lot. And Dean knew those pain meds weren’t being used much for the pain.

There wasn’t anything he could do but try to keep Cas’s mind off it, because that’s how to deal when your shit when you’re a hunter trying not to die in a world full of crap that wants to skin you.

That Thursday at four a.m., coffee was already brewing when Dean got up. Cas was buttering a piece of toast as he walked in.

“I woke up about an hour ago and couldn’t get back to sleep. I, I made you coffee. I’m not at all certain I did it properly.” He waved a hand behind him at a stack of glistening plates and bowls. “And I washed the dishes.”

Dean poured himself a cup and tasted it gingerly. He managed to swallow it; that shit was watery as fuck and made from the instant crap to boot. But it was manageable. He’d have to teach that to Cas later. “Thanks, man. You ready to go?”

“Yes, my things are by the stairs.” Cas sat down with his toast. Adrenaline ran through his body. He was going hunting with Dean. Until recently, that had been nothing more than a fantasy.

“I can’t wait to get out of here, hit the road again. We’ll find a case somewhere.” Dean was finally doing something real.

The stab of guilt for hunting instead of looking for a way to bust Sam out of Heaven was difficult to ignore, but at least now he felt like something could be fucking accomplished.

He snapped back to the present. Cas was searching his face, his brow creased in worry. “Dean, did you hear me? When are we leaving?”

Dean tried to clear his head. “Right now, I guess. If you’re all set to go, I’ll meet you at the car.”

“You didn’t eat,” Cas pointed out, but Dean didn’t seem to hear. He followed Dean upstairs. When Castiel closed the trunk of the Impala with their duffels in it, Dean was already in the driver’s seat. As he turned on the radio, Cas went around to the passenger side door and looked through the window, as if asking permission. To sit in Sammy’s spot. Just because Dean was taking him on a hunt didn’t mean Cas could take Sam’s seat. Cas wasn’t Sam’s replacement.

Calm down, he told himself. He couldn’t do the job if he was distracted. After another moment of hesitation, he unlocked the shotgun side door and through the window, Cas’s eyes lit up. For a moment, the smile on his best friend’s face made up for the sense that he was somehow betraying Sam.

As they headed up onto the road, he ran through a mental checklist. Kevin was going to keep an eye on Crowley, and Dean gave Kevin permission to call his mom to kick the ex-demon’s ass if he got too out-of-control. The bunker was, Thank God, the most secure place for Kevin and Crowley and the angel tablet, and Dean was leaving behind a fully-stocked kitchen and functioning utilities.

Dean lost track of the distance. It just felt so good to be back on the road, the classics pumping through the speakers and the blacktop under his baby’s tires. He sighed, stretched. The hum of the engine drained the tension from his shoulders. There wasn’t anything better.

Then Cas moved in the corner of his eye, and the illusion was shattered.

“That’s past eleven.” Cas squinted in the side mirror and tried to flatten his hair into something more
professional — it stubbornly refused to be tamed. “Do you want to stop and eat?” It was, admittedly, a blatant and transparent attempt to gently remind Dean that yes, food was a key part of a nutritious diet. Castiel himself still wasn’t used to consuming food regularly, but Dean should know better.

“Uh, yeah, I guess,” Dean said. At the next exit, he pulled off the highway, stopping at a roadside diner. He only realized he really was hungry until he got out of the car and smelled the savory, blissful scent of grilling burgers.

Within a few minutes, a waitress came to take their orders. She was hot, as far as waitresses go, but Dean just wasn’t feeling it. Maybe it was Cas, only two feet away.

“Coffee for me,” Dean said. “Cas?” His friend was looking mildly alarmed at being asked to interact with a complete stranger.

“Just water.” Cas brought their laptop in with them. When the waitress left, he flipped it open. “We can look for a case while we’re here.”

“Kay,” Dean said, glancing around the diner. No one was close enough to overhear.

Castiel clicked around for a few minutes before saying, “A few disappearances in Arizona. Possible ghosts in California?” He shrugged, then frowned. “That’s odd.” He leaned toward the screen. “Deaths in Idaho. Might have potential.” He was about to elaborate when the waitress reappeared with their drinks.

“You all ready to order?” she asked; she smiled at Cas, and Dean noticed her lipstick was shinier than it was two minutes ago.

“Yeah... Kayla,” Dean said, checking her name tag. “I think we’re ready. I’ll have the double bacon cheeseburger.”

Castiel didn’t say anything. Dean nudged him under the table.

Jerked from his thoughts, Cas quickly scanned the menu board above the counter. “I’ll have the, uh, crispy chicken sandwich.” he turned back to his laptop, examining the article.

Kayla’s face fell when Cas didn’t so much as glance her way. Dean cast her a sympathetic look as her smile slipped, ignoring the part of him that hummed in satisfaction. She sighed almost silently, said, “Coming right up,” and walked off in a huff.

Dean pushed at Cas’s shoulder. “Dude, the waitress is into you.” Cas was a bigger chick magnet than he thought. Maybe it was the new scar on Cas’s face making him look more — dangerous? Girls love a dangerous vibe. Or maybe it was the spark in his fathomless blue eyes and a jawline that could cut diamond and hair that had grown too long in the time since Castiel fell.

Castiel barely glanced up at him. “Is she?” he muttered absently.

Dean rolled his eyes. “So, you said something about Idaho?” he asked.

“The victims are missing, presumed dead.” Cas rubbed the back of his neck and rested against the booth. “The police are baffled by the case of Evan Jones,” he quoted. “Apparently Mr. Jones called a suicide hotline before he vanished. When the police arrived, everything was normal except for a fine pink mist that coated the walls.” He closed the laptop. “This is in our line of work.”

Dean considered the idea. “A fine pink mist,” he said. What the fuck left a ‘fine pink mist’ behind? “Yeah, Cas, we’ll check it out. Pink mist,” he said again. “What in the hell.” He sat back and sipped
his coffee.

Kayla returned with their food about ten minutes later. Dean kicked Cas’s leg under the table, trying to make him pay attention. When Castiel realized that she was watching him expectantly, he froze.

Thoughts ran through his head at lightning speed. She’s an angel she’ll kill me once she recognizes me even if she’s human she’ll call the police once she knows my face she’ll send me to prison and Dean too and . . .

“Hi,” Kayla said, giggling. “Cas, right?” she asked.

The flood of panic worsened, and he couldn’t respond. He hadn’t brought any weapons into the diner but a silver knife tucked into his boot, too far to reach — even if he could, it would be worthless against an angel or demon.

“Yes,” Dean said loudly, covering for him. His eyes flickered worriedly to Cas. He looked like he was on the verge of a fucking panic attack. “Uh, this looks delicious, Kayla,” he continued, gesturing to their plates.

Kayla grinned and leaned forward slightly. Dean noticed that if Cas wasn’t flipping out, he could see directly down their waitress’s shirt, and more, she was doing it on purpose.

“So, you boys just passing through?” she asked, twirling a strand of hair around her finger.

“We were just driving through and decided to stop for lunch,” Dean jumped in. He pushed the chicken sandwich at Cas.

Cas chanced a quick glance at Dean. He looked . . . relaxed, calm, like there was no threat.

“So you’re not going to stick around,” Kayla said, her shoulders dropping. “That’s . . . too bad.”

“Yeah, we’re, uh, driving out to Idaho to meet some friends,” Dean said, trying to keep Kayla’s attention off Cas.

“They moved out there a few months ago, and we’re going to see their new home,” Cas jumped in smoothly, feeling a wave of relief at Dean’s expression. He knew how to lie, and if he let fear of being caught control him, he would raise her suspicions.

“That’s cool,” Kayla said. She was getting very close to him. Suddenly, Cas understood Dean’s insistence on respecting personal space. He tried to smile politely as he shifted away from her, glancing at Dean in a silent question. He felt his heart skip at Dean’s concerned expression — he seemed like he really cared. No, he wasn’t supposed to be thinking about that. Even though he wanted to.

“Well,” he coughed. “Um.”

Dean interrupted him. “Uh, hey. I’d like a slice of your apple pie with ice cream,” he said. Cas needed bailing out.

Kayla gave him an irritated look. “Sure,” she said, forcing the perky-waitress lilt into her voice again and just about stalking away.

“I’ll have the same,” Castiel called after her belatedly. She glanced at him and smiled, obviously trying to flirt. When she vanished into the kitchen, Castiel looked at Dean. “Finish eating so we can leave.” His voice was tight and anxious, and Cas’s eyes kept flickering to the door of the kitchen.
Dean considered it. “We’re staying for the pie, but we’ll take it to-go,” he said at last. “We’d better get moving if we want to check out the scene in Idaho.” He started working on his burger as Cas examined his sandwich.

A few minutes later, Kayla returned with the pie. Dean coolly requested her to get them boxes for the pie, but finished off his ice cream quickly.

“You think Kevin’s doing okay?” Cas asked. “With Crowley around, I’m not certain he’ll be able to focus on the tablet.”

When Kayla came back with the boxes and the bill, she gave it to Castiel along with an extra napkin “for the pie,” she said, but the second she was gone Dean grabbed the napkin and checked the back. Sure enough, written in pen was a seven-digit number and the phrase “Call me!” with a smiley face underneath. Cas looked alarmed.

“God, Cas, calm down. It’s a phone number, not a death sentence. Come on, what’s the big deal?” Dean scraped up the last of his ice cream.

Castiel flinched. “She — I can’t trust her, I can’t. . .” He forced himself to smile and relax. “We need to focus. This pink mist, I know I’ve heard about it before. Human memory isn’t as powerful as an angel’s, I can’t remember it now.”

“Work, work, work. You sound like Sam,” Dean complained. The color drained from his face when he realized what he’d said. He pressed his mouth shut, slapped a few crumpled bills on the table, and waited impatiently for Cas to finish eating.

When they left, the phone number stayed on the table.

It was strange, sitting in the passenger seat next to Dean. It was as if the younger hunter was still there, and Castiel was trying to take his place. He tried to ignore the feeling he got from that thought and put his mind to the book in his lap. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was apparently difficult for humans to make out, but Castiel found it simple. Then again, he understood nearly every form of human language.

They quit driving around six. “I’ll just order some Chinese or something,” Dean said when Castiel suggested they eat. He parked the Impala at the nearest motel and coughed up the cash for a room.

Dean lay on his bed, flipping lazily through channels on the shitty TV and absently eating his takeout. Cas was half curled up on the other bed, examining the book and squinting with intent focus.

It was late when he finally switched off the TV; Cas was already asleep. Dean knew he had to sleep tonight. He’d run on coffee and adrenaline before, and it never ended well. He needed sleep.

He turned on his side and closed his eyes, feeling the exhaustion of the past couple days catch up with him. He tried to let his thoughts drift, but they always came back to his brother lying cold and decaying in his grave. It took several minutes for him to calm down.

“It’s okay,” he whispered through gasps. “I’m okay. I’m gonna bring him home. Sam’s gonna be fine.” He wasn’t any more convincing out loud than in his head. He needed a drink, he needed air. God, Dean needed something.

He went into the hall and pulled out his phone, leaning against the door. He dialed the bunker quickly. After five rings, there came the static sound of the phone being picked up. “Sodding screw off,” Crowley’s voice mumbled through the phone, slurred and extremely irritable.
“Are you drunk?” Dean asked.

“It is one in the — the damn morning, Squirrel. Why the hell else would I still be awake?”

Crowley’s words blurred together, or maybe that was Dean’s exhaustion. He suddenly felt dizzy.

“I can’t sleep,” Dean said. It was a stupid problem, why was he asking Crowley for advice?

“I, I’m not doing this right now,” Crowley said. “Call someone who cares.” There was a click.

“Crowley?” Dean demanded. “Damn it, Crowley, that is. . .” He tried to find a word through the exhausted buzzing in his brain. “Unprofessional.” His head hurt.

Somehow, Dean stumbled back into bed and found his way beneath the blankets. He lay there for the longest time, trying to count sheep, trying every trick he knew. He didn’t even notice when he finally dropped off.

Dean woke just as Cas was coming out of the bathroom. “What time is it?” Dean asked blearily.

Castiel checked the alarm. “About six.”

“What?” Dean mumbled. “Can’t be six . . . get up at four every day.”

“I let you sleep,” Cas said. “You needed it. We both did.” He ran a hand through his slightly damp hair. “How long will it take to get to Rexford?”

“Uh,” Dean tried to calculate in his head. “We’re in Utah, right? Four hours. Five, maybe. Around noon.”

His cell phone buzzed and lit up. The caller ID said it was Kevin. “Yeah?” he asked when he picked up.

“Hey, so Crowley said you called last night at like one a.m.”

“It was midnight for me,” he tried to joke, but Kevin was serious.

“You have to sleep, or you’re gonna burn out. No one knows better than me,” Kevin pointed out. “I’ll tell Cas to make you rest if you don’t behave.”

“This isn’t why you called.”

“Actually, no. I had a breakthrough on the tablet. It translates really well into this other language.”

“Great! What is it?” Dean asked.

“A dead language called proto-Elamite cuneiform. I’ve got it all translated, but . . . “

“But what?”

“Can’t translate it into English. It hasn’t been used in hundreds of years.”

“So it’s a dead end,” Dean said. “Awesome.”

Kevin sighed. “Not exactly. I got a phrase from the footnotes figured out. I think it’s Metatron’s spell.

Dean glanced up at Cas, holding their bags. “Well, uh, you get on that. Call if you hash it out.”
Cas asked, “What was that?”

Dean pocketed his phone and took his bag from Cas as he stood. “I’m ready to go,” he said. Cas started to mention breakfast, but Dean interrupted him. “We can get breakfast from a drive-through. Let’s get going.”

It was almost ten in the morning by the time they crossed the state border into Idaho. Their breakfast burrito wrappers were on the Impala floor, and Dean and Cas held precarious styrofoam coffee cups as they sped along the highway.

“I always wanted to do this, even years ago,” Castiel said impulsively.

“Spill coffee all over my car?” Dean asked sarcastically.

Cas shook his head. “Hunt with you. When we first met, I was. . . captivated by your skill. You were a weak, powerless child compared to me, I thought, but you — and Sam — had the strength of lions. I wished I could do what you did, when it came to war.” He smiled a little wryly. “I still tried to help you.” He laughed. “And now, I’m hunting with you. I don’t think I would have enjoyed the details so much if I were still an angel.”

There was no other way to explain it. The last time he’d hunted with Dean, he’d been an angel, but he hadn’t been stable. Destroying Heaven was still very present in his mind, and he hadn’t noticed little things like coffee, and how often humans needed sleep.

Last night had been rough for Dean. Cas had pretended not to hear when Dean got up and called Crowley so late, but Dean wasn’t the only one who hadn’t been sleeping well. Cas’s thoughts often kept him up late. Last night, it had been Heaven. He relived destroying everything, killing thousands of his brothers and sisters. He couldn’t be surprised that after Falling, they all wanted him dead.

Uriel. Uriel was the first angel who’d died thanks to his doubts, his loyalty to the Winchesters. Zachariah, Anael, Balthazar, Hester. Rachael, Hael, Gabriel, Raphael, Samandriel, so many others. Castiel had killed when he had all the souls of Purgatory within him, and now after the fall, countless more were dead. It was his fault.

A drip of hot coffee fell onto his leg as the Impala pulled off the highway, jerking Cas away from that dangerous train of thought.

“We’re almost there,” Dean said.

They arrived at the scene of the most recent disappearance less than fifteen minutes later. The place was a rundown cabin more than a house. Dean glanced at Cas before they got out of the car. Police tape surrounded the house, but for now, no one was around.

After they climbed over the police tape, Dean slowly pushed the unlocked door open. It creaked as it swung inward.

What they saw inside made him gag. Everything, the walls, the furniture, the floor, was coated in a thin layer of pink, but what was worse was the smell.

It reeked of blood and guts, and it was everywhere. Some of the pink shit was scraped off, but the overwhelming stench made Dean gag and slam the door shut. “Holy shit,” he breathed. “Cas, what the hell can do something like that?”

Cas didn’t hear. His palms were pressed to his eyes and he shook his head hard. Dean put a hand on his shoulder. “You okay?”
“I — know what it is,” Castiel whispered, trying to clear the sudden dryness of his throat. “Think ’m gonna throw up.”

“Breathe through your mouth,” Dean said urgently, pulling Cas away from the house. When he looked less green, Dean asked, “So what’s putting these people through the shredder?” No way it could be anything else. That was definitely the stink of corpse, finely chopped.

“An angel,” Castiel said. “A, a Rit Zien.” He cleared his throat. “They healed the wounded, but if nothing could be done the Rit Zien s- smote them to end their suffering. Their way of smiting is— it’s painless, and so fast you don’t even know you’re dying. And they can detect pain.”

“Okay, so how do we find it?” Dean asked.

Castiel shook his head. “Castiel shook his head. “Without a name, we can’t summon it. We would have to— to catch him in the act.” He went pale again, and put a hand over his mouth, trying to take deep breaths.

“You said you’ve seen it before. Why’re you getting sick?”

Cas went still. “Humans sense things differently,” he explained flatly. “The smell of a vaporized body never bothered me, as the taste of food wouldn’t be particularly enjoyable. I’ve told you before, human senses are more. . . intense.” For lack of a better word; there was no way to express that those senses were simultaneously weaker and stronger than an angel’s. Maybe this was why his heart felt as though it were planning to leap out of his chest with the way Dean braced his back and brushed his hand with soft fingertips. Father above, he needed a drink.

Dean tried to calm Cas down, rubbing circles into his back the way he used to do when Sam was little and had a nightmare. “But that’s not all.”

Cas winced. “No, that’s not all.”

“You think he’ll come after you.”

Castiel surged to his feet. “I know he will, Dean! Him, and any other angel who could find me, it doesn’t matter, I am Public Enemy Number One here, Dean, and there will be no taking me alive.”

Dean stood, but before he could speak, his phone went off. “Hold on,” he said. “Hello?”

“It’s me,” Crowley said. “Kevin’s trying to beat me into translating that bloody cuneiform nonsense. I liked it better when he was terrified out of his panties at the sight of me.”

Dean rolled his eyes. “Okay, what do you want me to do about it? Can you translate it?”

“That’s not the point!”

“Sooner we get the angels off our asses, the sooner you get to ditch the bunker with a bus ticket to not my problem. Now if you’ll excuse me, we need to deal with shredded people over here.”

“What — shredded people?”

“You don’t want to know,” Dean said. “Have fun with Kevin.” He hung up. “Cas, if you’re not okay with this —”

“It’s not important,” Cas said harshly. “Forget I said anything. We should go, the police may come back.”

In the car Cas stared blindly out the window, lost in thought. The pangs of guilt that shot through him when Dean touched him were driving him crazy. But he wasn’t supposed to think or talk about
that. Dean wouldn’t want him to.

The influence of the sight and smell of the cabin on his — Jimmy’s — his brain was unnerving. Bile rose up in his stomach knowing that it was his fault that man was killed. If he’d trusted Dean more, if he hadn’t been so naive as to believe Metatron. If, if, if. He almost wished he had time to get properly drunk. But the last time he’d done that, Cas had lost control and screamed rage until Dean came to him. He needed that control, he needed more than anything to have himself under control.

Before Dean could pick out a sleazy motel to crash at, Cas spoke. “Could we eat at a real restaurant? I’ve never not really.” He shrugged fluidly, not wanting to pressure Dean. “Just an idea.” He wasn’t sure why he said it. Dean wouldn’t want to go, but it was too late to take it back.

Dean didn’t answer for a few seconds. “How’s this,” he said. “When we’re done here, we can go to a real sit-down place. You and me and Crowley and Kevin at Olive Garden or something. Could be fun.”

Castiel couldn’t quantify the sensation of disappointment that followed Dean’s response. They were going to a real restaurant, after all. Dean didn’t think it was stupid. So he had that, at least.

They pulled up to the drive-through of a fast-food taco place. Castiel stared out the window, his face unreadable. The kid at the window — Nathan, by his name tag — handed them their bags absently, focused on the girl working the front counter.

“Hey, kid!” Dean snapped his fingers in his face to get his attention.

Nathan jumped.

“Just ask her out,” Dean advised him, giving a thumbs-up. “At least if she says no, that’s the end of it.”

Castiel drummed his fingertips on the window. He wished. But telling Dean everything. . . to be honest he wasn’t certain why he couldn’t tell Dean. Maybe that was the problem. Maybe it was fear, pure and simple.

He glanced out the window, and his other hand absently brushed Dean’s when he took his food.

Perhaps Dean would want to know the truth. Or maybe he’d hate him for it.

Castiel had had this argument a thousand times in his head, more and more often after their time in Purgatory.

The motel Dean found was marginally nicer than last night’s. That is, it didn’t stink of cigarette smoke and there was no questionable mold in the bathroom. Once they finished eating, Dean flipped through the TV channels and rested on Dr. Sexy, MD.

Castiel hoped Dean hadn’t noticed the way he was behaving. He knew the hunter would ask questions, the kind Cas couldn’t easily avoid answering. He couldn’t lie. He knew what happened when he lied to Dean.

He curled up under his blankets and tried to read his book, back turned to Dean to ward off conversation. The man was like a child with a toy when he wanted to know something. It was better if Dean had nothing to suspect.

How could Castiel have been so stupid, to think he could pretend he felt differently when he was near Dean constantly? He should have kept running and never gone to the bunker.
Dean called Kevin to check in around eight. The kid asked Dean again to tell Crowley to get off his
high-and-mighty ass and translate the cuneiform. He tried, but Dean figured the asshole would
require bribery at the very least.

He grabbed a beer from the cooler and almost tossed one to Cas before he realized his friend was
already familiar with them, callused hands sliding smoothly over the damp glass. Dean’s eyes
followed the curve of Castiel’s fingers until they tilted the bottle to his lips. He quickly looked away
and pulled his laptop out.

The blue light colored his face as he clicked through site after site, from fundamentalist group web
pages to wacko conspiracy theorist blogs.

Dr. Sexy and the occasional mumbling from Cas were the only sounds in the room. Finally he closed
the laptop and put it aside, grabbing another beer from the cooler. The single empty bottle of beer by
Cas sat on the nightstand.

Christ, he thought when he settled into his bed and cracked open his bottle. He had hit dead end after
dead end. He shivered. Losing Sam... he was pretty sure the only reason the gun in his bag hadn’t
put a bullet through his skull was the thought that no one could bring Sammy back if he went
through with it. And with his track record, he’d be headed straight Downstairs for eternal torment.

Which, aside from being a major buzzkill, would have a total of zero good results.

Dean swore under his breath as his mind drifted again to Sammy’s stiff, cold body lying dead in a
grave in the middle of nowhere. He swallowed a mouthful of beer and closed his eyes despite the
thoughts that followed him in the dark. Dean turned onto his side and tried to settle in for the night.

Cas had only had one beer, practically a formality. Dean would have noticed if he avoided the
abundant alcohol. It wasn’t enough to get him heavily intoxicated, though the pleasant hum of the
beer made a nice counterpoint to the thoughts in his head and the pill he’d swallowed when Dean
wasn’t looking.

It had been easier as an angel, Castiel mused. With — with Dean a forbidden torment he could
pretend that this love was the natural, innate sort between angels and the humans they saved. But
Castiel knew that saving Dean had been a sunrise in his existence and now here he was, at the
setting, not even an angel anymore, just a human, just like him.

Funny. Castiel wasn’t quite sure why it was funny. Dean was snoring on the opposite bed,
completely oblivious to the joke in Castiel’s head. Funny that as an angel the love he had would have
been forbidden, and now, when he was finally able, the words wouldn’t come to his lips and he was
so damn afraid.

Dean would throw him out if he said it. Dean would hate him, he would have to. This was a betrayal
of everything they were. Dean called him family, as close as a brother. Not that. Not what Castiel
would want, would choose.

He stared up at the ceiling. Maybe you’d want to know, Dean, maybe I should tell you everything.
Maybe you know how I feel, but you’re pretending not to, because you don’t want to ruin what we
have. I suppose telling you really would fuck it all up. Can’t say anything about how I feel, you’re
bad enough with how you feel. Can’t tell you I love you, not —

His thoughts halted suddenly. Castiel ached to tell the truth, to say what he couldn’t for fear of being
thrown aside.
Cas sat up slowly. Dean looked peaceful, sleeping with the moonlight cast over his body. He smiled sadly to himself. Cas could never tell the truth to Dean when he could hear it. Dean would never forgive him. Even after all his kindness and welcome. “Hey, Dean. It’s, uh, it’s me. Cas.”

Dean shifted slightly and Cas went still, but Dean settled back and he let go of the breath he’d held. “I. I wanted. . .” He shook his head. This was stupid. What was the point? “I can’t pretend I don’t, not when — Dean.”

His smile faltered. He realized too late that there were tears in his eyes, but he had to keep going had to say this with the only chance he might ever have. “I —”

Dean’s phone rang, and Castiel jerked, almost falling off the bed. Dean groaned, rolled over, fumbled for the cell and picked up the call.


“It’s me.” Cas could make out Kevin on the other end. “I— I’ve gotten somewhere with the tablet.”

“At—” Dean glanced at the clock. “Two a.m.?”

“I’ve been keeping busy, since Crowley’s still being a dick.” Dean rolled his eyes. “Anyway.”

“So what’d you dig up?”

“I found the part that’s Metatron’s spell.”

Cas sat up straighter.

“I can’t find any other details yet, but I’ve got the list of ingredients. The heart of a Nephilim, the bow of a cupid, and the grace of an angel in love with a human.”

Castiel’s stomach dropped to the floor.

“W-what?” Dean stammered.

“I mean, it makes sense,” Kevin continued, as if he hadn’t heard. “Nephilim, the offspring of an angel and a human, cupid, angel that makes humans fall in love with each other, and then —”

“What?”

Kevin tried to continue, but Dean ended the call and very, very quietly set the phone down on the nightstand.
Annunciation

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Annunciation: the act of announcing something significant

“You wanna explain what the hell that was?” Dean’s voice was soft, almost choked off, and Cas’s stomach turned to ice.

Cas stared blankly at the wall. Don’t say anything, don’t tell him anything, you can’t say anything. “What?” he said, his tongue betraying him.

“You know what.” Dean had practically stopped breathing when Kevin said it, and he wasn’t stupid. There was no way to misinterpret that. Either it was him or Sam, and he knew, just knew, that it wasn’t Sam. Dean couldn’t deal with this, not now. Not when everyone he lo— everyone he cared about died.

Castiel swallowed. “Dean, I—”

Dean cut him off. “I don’t want to hear you talk about it. I can pretend Kevin never said anything. It’s just — damn it, Cas, I can’t think about this now! When we’re through here, we’re gonna need to, to talk about it, but not here and not now. Because I can’t.” He couldn’t lose Cas. He couldn’t do it. He lost everyone, but he couldn’t lose Cas.

Castiel opened his mouth to apologize, but he hesitated. “If that’s what you want,” he said softly, looking away. How could he have been so stupid? He shouldn’t have even thought Dean would reciprocate his feelings. He was lucky Dean was willing to forgive and forget.

“Of course it is,” Dean said, then cursed how quickly the words spilled past his lips. “I mean — we need to talk about it, just, try to forget it happened. I need time. To think about this.”

Cas closed his eyes, feeling stupid human tears trying to fall on his cheeks. “Of, of course, Dean. I understand.” He felt silly crying, even worse because he couldn’t control it. Of course Dean wouldn’t want this, even in some fantastic dream Dean would reject him, of course, of fucking course.

Dean nodded, his expression unreadable. “Yeah. Yeah. Okay, good. Uh, get some sleep. We’re gonna have work to do tomorrow.”

The tightness in Castiel’s chest was pressing down on his lungs, but now it was impossible to ignore. How was he expected to forget that Dean knew, and hated him for it? He felt like he had when the Leviathan still lived within him. Sick and almost entirely dead.

He buried himself under the blankets and faced away from Dean. Of course Dean wouldn’t feel the same way. He could never want Castiel, of all his choices. Dean wanted blondes with big chests and flexible women with dark hair, dark skin, dark eyes. He would never desire an angel-turned-man who knew nothing of practical humanity who had destroyed everything and caused so much harm.

The last bright thing Castiel had after betraying his millennia-old family, destroying Heaven, and losing his grace, and he’d ruined that too without being able to stop it.
Castiel gazed into the dark of the room, his eyes catching on the strip of moonlight that passed between the curtains.

He didn’t know why he was still here. Cas was certain he would be thrown out, that Dean would tell him never to contact him again.

It had to be that, then. Dean wanted him here because he was still useful. He knew the workings of angels; he was still valuable in spite of his feelings.

Cas would work as long as it meant he was allowed to stay. It wasn’t even a question. Somehow that thought festered guilt in his chest. If Dean wanted him to leave, he would go. But he wanted to stay, to hold fast to the reason he turned his back on Heaven so badly. He remembered every second of the time he spent on his own. Cas couldn’t trade days with Dean for that life, not unless Dean truly wanted nothing more to do with him.

He let his eyes fall closed. It wasn’t a choice. In his too human, too goddamn vulnerable heart he wondered if it ever really had been.

If only Dean would just tell him to get lost and get it over with.

Castiel tried to sleep. His throat, constricted by emotion, made it difficult to breathe, but he was thoroughly exhausted. As the adrenaline of panic wore off, he settled into a comfortable position and drifted into sleep.

Yawning, Dean blinked awake. He could hear Cas moving, and feel the warmth of light on his face. The sun was up, then.

His stomach dropped through the floor when he remembered what happened late last night. “Goddamn it.”

Slowly he shifted into an upright position and leaned against the headboard of the bed. Cas held a piece of toast in one hand and the laptop in the other, seated at the small, one-man table in the corner.

“Mmf,” Castiel said through a mouthful of toast. “Good morning,” he added a moment later. He stiffened as Dean ran a hand through his bedhead, going from messy to — no. Dean wanted him to pretend. He couldn’t, but he had to.

“There’s coffee for you,” he said, very softly. “And the motel breakfast is free.”

“Thanks, Cas,” Dean said with raised eyebrows. He slid out of bed. Cas’s hair was damp and there was a towel crumpled on the floor; he’d taken a shower already, and changed into new clothes. Not that they looked any different from yesterday’s, since they were bunker surplus.

While Dean woke up and ate breakfast, Castiel began to search for summoning rituals he might not be familiar with — practically a formality, since he knew anything that had to do with angels on principle. Prayer would require a name. Almost every rite required a name, a feather, something. And any vague summon-all would attract every angel for miles and they would both be killed.

Castiel didn’t want to think about last night’s revelation. Just do what needs to be done. He won’t tell you to leave if you work hard and don’t complain.

Dean joined him in research a few minutes later. It was exhausting, going over the same information again and again, but Castiel still knew they needed something more if they were going to catch this angel. Looking for answers in the lore seemed to make Dean feel more self-assured, so Castiel didn’t mention that he was the lore.
“Okay, there’s gotta be a way to track it down,” Dean said, rifling through an old book from his duffel. They’d been at this for hours already, searching every mythological and biblical website they could get their hands on for a spell to find their mysterious Rit Zien. Dean was getting a little cagey, pissed off at the lack of results.

“I told you, we need a name,” Cas reminded him.

“What the hell is the point of all this lore if it can’t do jackshit to help?” he growled without looked at Cas. “Sorry. I’m just tense right now.”

Dean had somehow gotten sleep last night, even with the . . . incident weighing on his mind. He’d spent almost an hour staring blankly at the wall, but eventually he did fall asleep, and he was more energized than he had since the angels fell.

More importantly, his head was cleared, and there was another problem with the case besides how goddamn impossible it was. “Cas,” he said finally. “Maybe we oughta sit this one out.”

Castiel tensed. “Dean, if you’re worried about my ability to help —”

“It’s an angel, Cas. You know what he’ll do to you if he finds you, you said it yourself. If you walk around like it’s no big deal, it could find you, and I’m not letting you get run through a blender because we didn’t think this through!” Castiel tried to speak, but Dean talked over him. “We can get out of town, see if another job pops up. This doesn’t have to be our fight.”

“It already is, Dean,” Castiel pointed out. How could Dean of all people not see that? “It’s my fault he’s here in the first place. I am going to make this right. We have the weapons to stop him. I don’t care if it’s dangerous.” He closed the laptop sharply. “I’m an asset, not a handicap. If he comes after me, then we have a shot at stopping him.”

“I’m not gonna use you as bait!” Dean shouted.

Castiel sighed impatiently. “Dean, if it’s our best shot —”

“I said no.” Dean glared at Cas seriously. “I don’t put my friends on the line. If I did that, I would lose everyone who matters to me. I let Sammy put his ass on the line, and look how that went.” God, it was always going to be his fault, wasn’t it? He tried to calm down instead of going up in a rage. “If you really want to hunt this thing, you are not putting yourself in the line of fire. You stay here, you stay hidden, and you stay safe, damn it.”

Castiel didn’t want to agree, but if Dean still wanted him here, even after . . . well, he wasn’t going to put that at risk. And Dean needed someone to support him, with Sam gone. “Provided you realize that I will not allow you to put yourself in danger,” he added pointedly.

Dean almost snapped at him, but he held back. “Okay. Yeah, sure. I’ll stay safe, too. I guess.” Which would make it so much easier to catch the Rit Zien in the act and gank it, he thought mutinously.

Castiel gazed at him flatly. “Thrilled that you’ve come to your senses. Of course, that leaves us with nothing more than research, and frankly, that blows.”

Dean choked. When did Cas learn to say that? “Doesn’t matter if it blows, Cas. If we can’t get our hands dirty, that’s all we can do.”

They slogged through the wealth of useless information on the internet for what felt like forever. Cas wished, not for the first time and certainly not for the last, that he still had his wings. He and Dean could have been long gone from this place if he still had his grace.
“You don’t have some kind of magic angel-mojo grabber spell up your sleeve?” Dean asked dryly. He didn’t expect an answer and Cas didn’t bother to give one.

Dean managed to hold off the mounting frustration until eleven. By then, he was just about itching to climb the walls. “I can’t do this anymore,” he said. “I’m just gonna take a drive around town, get moving. I’ll come right back.”

He pulled his keys from his pocket and jangled them in Cas’s face. “Okay? Just going for a quick drive. I’ll pick up some lunch.”

“Okay,” Cas said. “Be careful.”

“Careful is my middle name.”

Dean sighed with relief as he slid into the driver’s seat of his baby, revving her engine with a grin. “I needed this,” he said, pulling out of the lot and turning up the music.

Back in the motel, Cas closed the laptop with a dull snap. At least the question had been answered, right? Dean didn’t want him, not like that. And Cas had known that, it was why he never mentioned it before. It had always been destined to go nowhere. And Cas felt like a fool for wanting.

But it was better this way, he tried to tell himself. Dean still had a friend in his life, and Cas would be able to support him. Just because he couldn’t look Dean in the eye anymore didn’t mean their friendship was destroyed. Right? Just because he felt guilt burn through his blood vessels when he had a wayward thought about what was under Dean’s very tight t-shirt didn’t mean he couldn’t still be around the first human he thought of as family.

Castiel tried to focus on research instead, pouring himself into it. He spent what felt like ages scouring the Internet, going to even the most obscure listings, even a few Satanist blogs, and nothing. The only place they hadn’t looked was the Men of Letters bunker. Knowing how busy Kevin was, he didn’t want to bother him, but he was running out of options.

If only Dean would just let him be the bait, they could stop the killing, he thought as the phone rang.

“Hello?” Kevin said. “Who is this?”

“Kevin, it’s me.” Castiel had the urge to hang up and forget his request. He could hear the stress in Kevin’s voice.

“Cas, I’m sorry, I haven’t made any more progress on the tablet. Crowley isn’t helping, either.”

“What?”

“He’s refusing to help translate the Elamite unless I let him go into town for a drink. What should I do?”

How should Castiel know? He didn’t care. He needed a drink himself, frankly, but he worried that he’d fuck things up even worse, spilling the more messy details of his feelings in full hearing of Dean. “Tell him he can go once the tablet is translated.”

“I already tried that,” Kevin sighed. “He flat-out refused to help until he can go to the bar.”

“Then take him to the fucking bar,” Cas said. He paced to the window, pushing the curtain aside and watching the traffic on the road speed past. “Thanks for telling Dean about the spell, by the way.”
“What are you talking about?” Kevin asked. “He would want to know everything about —” He stopped. “Oh. The grace of an angel in. . . that was you.”

“Congratulations,” Cas said dryly.

“Shit, I’m sorry, I —”

“Don’t.” Cas turned away from the window. “I can’t help you with Crowley. Dean’s not here at the moment, you should call him and ask. But I need —”

“Okay, thanks anyway,” Kevin said, cutting Cas’s request off. “Bye.” He hung up.

What a waste of time. Cas closed the curtains and stared blankly at the laptop on his bed. If he had to resort to this human invention to save lives, then so be it.

Across town, Dean was very pointedly not thinking about Sam.

“Rugaru, fire. Ghost, salt and burn the bones. Vampires, beheading.” He repeated a chant for an exorcism over and over even though Hell was closed for business and he’d never need to exorcise a demon again. Anything to stop thinking about Sam. He recited lines from movies until he started sounding like Don Corleone. He drove down the main street of Rexford seven times in less than an hour.

At some point, he heard his phone go off. Caller ID said it was Kevin. “Yeah?”

“Crowley’s not helping. He won’t do anything unless I let him go to a bar. Cas didn’t know what I should do. You’re the one who has him locked up down here.”

Fuck his life. Why the hell couldn’t anyone call with good news? “Just take him to the damn bar. Use your goddamn fake ID, keep an eye on him. I’ve really got bigger things to worry about. He gets a couple drinks in him, then you make him translate the tablet.”

“Um. . .” Kevin hesitated before he said, “Okay. Yeah, I’ll do that. I’m not drinking, though, not with him around,” he said seriously.

“Yeah, sure,” Dean said.

“Not kidding,” Kevin insisted. “I don’t trust him.”

“Okay, fine, whatever.”

“I’ll call when I get somewhere on the translations,” Kevin promised.

When it was almost noon, Dean decided to find a place to pick up lunch and then head back to the motel.

The restaurant was packed with people. People who just went on living their ordinary, normal lives. There was a woman with two little kids sitting in a booth staring at him disapprovingly. Probably because he looked like shit. No shower, still wearing yesterday’s clothes. The way she was glaring, the way she pulled her kids closer around her as he watched, it pissed him off.

This lady didn’t know anything. She didn’t know that Dean was hunting a fucking monster that shredded people into a pink mess, she didn’t know that angels weren’t the things keeping her kids safe at night — it was Dean who stopped changelings and hex bags and ghosts, not a bunch of winged dicks. She didn’t have the right to look down on him, stare and chide her children for asking about the grungy man with sunken eyes, because she didn’t know shit about him. Dean saved people
like her all the time. Hell, he saved the goddamn world for people just like her, and she was looking at him like he was gum stuck to the bottom of her shoe.

No matter how many people like her gaped and judged, they’d never know what he’d given, what he’d lost for them. His mom. His dad. Bobby, Ash, Ellen, Jo. Sam. God, it always came back to Sammy, didn’t it? It always came back to that scrawny little kid with shaggy hair and a .45 in the waistband of his jeans sitting in the shotgun seat of a shiny black car. Dean closed his eyes and tried to unclench his fists. They hadn’t seen the things Dean had seen, and really, wasn’t that the whole point of being a hunter? Saving people, sparing them the misery of knowing there were monsters all around and God didn’t give a shit?

Dean lost everything for these people, in this restaurant, people like them in every goddamn city in the world, and he wasn’t going to lose his head because they weren’t thanking him for it. People don’t thank you for saving their asses. They run. Who wouldn’t want to run from the truth?

The guy at the counter called Dean’s number. He handed over a credit card and took the to-go bag with a grin that sprang easily, naturally, to a practiced face. The smile vanished when he pushed the door open and got into his car. When had normal people become so damn infuriating? His life sucked, and he was blaming a bunch of people in a fast food place like it was all their fault.

Dean was heading back to the motel when he heard sirens behind him. He sighed, pulling over and waiting for the cops to give him a fucking ticket that he wouldn’t be paying. Instead the police car whizzed past, the lights flashing and siren wailing. Dean frowned, then followed it.

The cop car led him to a high school, of all places. Dean cruised past a small crowd of people — high schoolers — clustering near a bright yellow school bus. They cleared out of the way for the sheriff, and when they did Dean saw the pale pink layer of vaporized human plastered across the side of the bus. He hit the gas and went straight for the motel.

“Cas?” he yelled when he burst in. Castiel looked up in surprise. “Someone was just killed at the local high school.”

Twenty minutes later, they parked by a crowd of police cars. They flashed their FBI badges at the cops by the crime scene tape, Dean’s fluid motion clashing with Castiel’s fumbling. They’d both changed into nice suits before leaving, but Cas insisted on wearing his trenchcoat. “Whatever you say, Hellblazer,” had been Dean’s only comment. It wasn’t like he minded. Cas in that coat was, admittedly, hot, for all Dean couldn’t tell him so. God, he wished he could be truthful with Cas.

A few teenagers were speaking with the police by the edge of the yellow tape. “Grace was on the phone with her when it happened,” one of them was saying, wiping away tears. “Travis — her boyfriend — just broke up with her, and she was just, just wrecked.”

Dean held up his badge to the officer standing there. “I’m Agent Giraldo, this is Agent Benatar. Your friend, was she sick?”


“No terminal illnesses? No physical problems of any kind?” Castiel asked.

She shook her head. “Look, I’m sorry, but what does this have to do with anything? She blew up! People don’t just blow up!” She started to cry again in earnest. Dean turned away from her and went to look at the girl’s remains.

“Dean, something is very wrong here,” Cas said in an urgent whisper.
“Oh, wow, Cas, I didn’t notice.” Dean looked over the side of the bus and tried to suppress the urge to gag.

“Rit Zien only kill those who are mortally wounded.” Castiel shook his head. “This angel is killing people in emotional distress — the police report said the Evan Jones called a suicide hotline before his death. Dean, I don’t think he can tell the difference between the pain of an angel on the verge of death and the pain of a man who wants to die.”

“Or a teenage girl who just got dumped,” Dean said. “Great. Really helpful. I’ve never met an angel who did, Cas. This doesn’t even start to narrow it down.”

“It can still help us,” Cas insisted, a little hurt by the implication that he didn’t understand human emotion. Dean knew that wasn’t true, well enough. “We need to find someone in severe emotional pain, and we may be able to catch him in the act.”

“So we should find the next most suicidal guy in Rexford, or someone who just got dumped, or, hey, maybe he’ll go after someone who just spilled coffee on their shirt. Piece of cake.” Dean hated hitting dead ends. “Come on, man, I’ve got food in the backseat. I’m starving and it’s not like we have any leads.”

They spent the rest of the day sitting around the motel, gingerly keeping their promises to stay safe while both itching to just do something.

Dean glanced over at Cas. He was asleep, spread out across the top of the blankets with one arm dangling off the edge of the bed. He wished he could apologize for what he decided last night, but no, he couldn’t. He knew Cas couldn’t be okay, but dear God was he good at faking it.

Nah, Dean had a better idea. It was just past nine; he could make it back before Cas woke up.

Carefully he eased himself off the creaky motel bed, then slipped on his shoes and snuck out. With a little luck, Cas wouldn’t even notice he was gone. Dean sighed in relief when the door clicked shut behind him.

The bar he wound up at was incredibly loud. Dean could have sworn a couple kids from the high school were huddled into a booth, but it wasn’t like he could complain. He was no hypocrite. Dean ordered another shot and stared across the counter at the mirror behind it.

He looked like a fucking hobo. How the hell the sheriff and his guys believed him when he popped up at the crime scene, Dean couldn’t figure. Some people really did believe anyone with a badge.

Dark circles lay under Dean’s eyes from lack of sleep. One night of rest couldn’t undo the damage from weeks of nightmares and insomnia. He’d made a token effort to get his hair in some kind of order that morning, but he’d shrugged it off as pointless. His cheeks were sunken, and he’d lost weight.

The bartender passed him a shot and scrutinized him. “Rough day, huh?”

“Yeah,” Dean said, downing the shot. More like rough life, but he wasn’t about to say that.

“Job?” She ran a hand through her spiky dark hair, ruffling it up, and a gold bracelet slipped down her arm. Her blue eyes were wide with interest. If Dean didn’t look like he’d just walked out of a horror movie, he would have at least tried to hit that.

“Something like that,” he muttered instead.
She gave him a sympathetic glance. “Most people sit up at the bar ’cause they’ve got something to forget.” Her fingers played with a charm necklace. “No offense, but what are you here to forget?”

Dean didn’t answer; she continued, “I’m here ’cause I guess there’s nowhere else to be. My family kicked me out. I’ve been on my own for months, with my girlfriend, anyway.” She shook her head. “Just lucky I’m on scholarship, or I’d be screwed.”

Dean huffed a laugh without smiling. “Well, my brother and I, we’re in the same business. We were,” he corrected himself, wincing when he said it.

“What happened?” she asked, leaning forward on her elbows.

“He died on the job,” Dean said flatly.

She bit her lip, looking sympathetic. “Wanna talk about it?” At his expression, she added apologetically, “Psych major.”

“You know, gotta carry on, but it’s hard when your brother’s six feet under. These last few weeks have been pretty damn hard. Haven’t been sleeping.”

“You should.” Dean looked up in surprise. “Keep going, I mean. Only way to get through stuff like that. Keep calm and carry on,” she said with a wry smile. “It’s worth it.” She slid him another shot. “Last one,” she said. “Then you go and get some sleep. Have five minutes on me.”

Dean smiled a little at that. “Thanks,” he said, slipping her a twenty and raining the last shot. “I will.” Parking the car in the motel lot, Dean realized he almost felt okay. He thought maybe he could get some sleep tonight that didn’t come at a high price, but he still worried that the thought of Sam would keep him up. The room key jangled a little as he unlocked the door, but he didn’t think it would wake Cas.

Strictly speaking, Dean was right. The key didn’t wake Cas. The sound of Dean’s car leaving an hour ago did.

Castiel was sitting up on his bed, arms crossed. The lamp behind him was on, but Castiel’s face was in shadow. “I thought we agreed not to do this,” he said.

“I went for a drink,” Dean said. “That a crime now?”

“Without telling me,” Cas snapped. “You want me to stay safe and in the motel unless I’m with you, but you refuse to extend the same courtesy. Did it occur to you that I might be worried? I’ve been waiting for an hour, wondering if you were even alive.” His voice broke on the last word. Why didn’t Dean understand that he was all Castiel had left in the fucking world?

“If you were so worried, why didn’t you call?” Dean shot back.

Wordlessly Cas pointed to Dean’s nightstand, where his cell phone sat exactly where he’d left it.

“Oh.”

“You should have at least said you were leaving.”

Dean sighed. “You’re right. I should have let you know. I’m sorry, okay? It won’t happen again. Now can I go to bed?”

Cas gazed at him, his frown softening. “Damn it, Dean, you scared me,” he said. “I... I don’t think I
Dean felt sick. Cas was looking at him like he couldn’t imagine anything worse than losing Dean, *Dean* of all people. Of course, billions of people on Earth and fucking *Cas* had to be in love with fucking *Dean*. That look alone almost had him take back what he said about pretending last night never happened.

“Okay,” Dean said quickly, kicking off his shoes. “Now let me go to bed before I have to punch you.”

Cas lay silent as the minutes dragged by. He could hear Dean’s slow breathing in the other bed, calm and relaxed.

I don’t think I can lose you, he’d said., but Cas had almost kept going. That was terrifying, that even after learning how Dean felt about it he still wanted to confess everything.

Castiel wondered if it would have gone differently if Sam were still alive. If he would have helped mediate and he wouldn’t let Dean toss Cas out like was eventually bound to happen.

With Dean snoring gently in the night, Castiel could pretend that he wasn’t unwelcome.

“I love you,” Cas said, the words barely more than a breath. The tightness in his chest faltered, but didn’t disappear. If Dean were awake he would. . . he would probably leave him for the angels.

He lay awake for hours afterward.

Spending the next morning watching TV and hoping for some sudden revelation on how to catch an angel did nothing for Dean’s mood. This fucking holding pattern left him itching for something to do. If they were just going to sit around anyway, he could be working on a break-Sam-out-of-prison plan. That was more important, and this job was quickly verging on the impossible. This Rit Zien or whatever struck so fast they had an approximately zero percent chance of catching it in the act.

“Cas?” Dean said, breaking the silence.

For a few seconds, Castiel didn’t answer. “Yes?”

“Sorry I ditched last night.”

Surprised, Castiel stumbled over his words. “It . . . it’s fine. No problem. Just don’t do it again.” *Tell me you have that much respect for me, at least.* Cas couldn’t even meet Dean’s eyes. It felt like he was betraying Dean’s trust, staying when he couldn’t possibly *ignore* his feelings. Like he was lying. Lying to Dean always ended badly.

The quiet between them lay thick and heavy, but Dean wasn’t sure how to break it. There was no secret to what neither of them were mentioning, and it wasn’t his late-night escapade. He wished it didn’t have to be like this, and he could explain himself to Cas. But there was too much on his mind, he couldn’t worry about *that* too. He forced the subject to the back of his mind.

They called the sheriff of the town, asking the names of anyone with depression or suicidal tendencies. They didn’t have much to work with. Dean had trouble focusing, his thoughts straying over and over to the man working in silence across the room. He was so sick of the tense quiet.

“You know you’re allowed to talk to me, right, Cas?” he said teasingly.

“Did you find anything?” Dean asked, shoving his library book aside. “I’ve got nothing. Are you sure there’s no secret angel-mojo grabber?”

By seven p.m., they’d mapped out the homes of seven possible future targets and labeled them by proximity to the other deaths, reasons for being potential victims, and, on Cas’s insistence, bloodline as related to psychic genes. “They might project their emotions more powerfully,” was his brief explanation. “Greater risk.” The evening air drifting in through the window carried the chill of early fall.

“I’m wiped out,” Dean said. “Forget the damn case. I’m gonna take a shower. Turn on the TV, do whatever. I’ll be out in fifteen. Try to find a good movie.” The words felt stilted and flat, like he was trying too hard to act normally.

Dean stood under the water for a long time without moving, just letting the water wash over him. God, he needed a hunt, but this... this wasn’t a hunt. This was getting stuck in a rut, wasting time while Sammy was up in Heaven, alone.

And then there was what Cas had said, which he was not thinking about. He kept pushing it to the back of his mind, with everything else he wasn’t saying. Whatever part of him had been happy to hear that, it was quiet. There were so many more important things to worry about; this was a complication he just couldn’t deal with.

When he let his mind wander, it turned in directions he didn’t want to think about. Like how close he’d been to just ending it the night Sam died. Like Sam, dead.

As much as Dean tried to avoid those thoughts, they came back in force each time they were pushed away.

The mirror was fogged up when Dean finally stepped out of the shower. He started to wipe some of the mist away, but when he did, he thought he saw Sam’s face reflected in the glass. Dean’s blood ran cold and he whipped around, but there was no one there. He stared into the mirror, his heart pounding. What was he thinking? Sam was dead. His body was cold and rotting in the ground. And his dad was dust, his mom was dust. Bobby was dust. He’d lost so fucking many people.

Other hunters didn’t live like this. Hell, he knew hunters who were married to other hunters, or people they’d saved. Other hunters didn’t lose everyone they loved one by one.

Why the hell did it have to be Dean?

Suddenly his fist collided with the mirror. It hurt, but he swung anyway. The cracks from the first hit deepened. The third time was the charm. The mirror shattered, bits of broken glass skittering into the sink. Dean didn’t know when he’d started crying, fuck. Blood dripped from his hands where the shards slashed through the skin.

A door slammed shut, but Dean barely registered the sound through the white noise buzzing in his ears. Dimly he recognized Cas’s voice and a thumping. “Dean! Let me in!” Cas pounded on the door. “Dean!”

No, Cas couldn’t see him like this, bleeding and half-crazy and just so hollow. Cas who was in love with him couldn’t see him this way.

He was so focused on his own thoughts, he didn’t notice the angel until a moment too late.

Dean’s lower back collided against the sink when he spun around in shock. “It’s alright,” the angel said soothingly. “I can make the pain go away.” Dean reached for a weapon, any weapon, but he
didn’t have one. He was wearing nothing but a fucking towel, and his angel blade was lying on his pillow in the other room. There was glass all over the floor and he was gonna die in a fucking towel.

“Cas!” he yelled. The pounding grew more frantic, then stopped altogether. Dean tried to back away from the angel, almost slipping and slicing his foot open on the glass. “Okay, hey. You know what’s crazy? I actually wasn’t planning on dying anytime soon.”

“You are in so much pain,” the angel said, not listening. “I can make it go away.”

“Okay, good talk,” Dean said, wincing. He shifted until his back was to the door of the bathroom instead of against the sink. “Maybe I’d rather just, I don’t know, not die and work through it.” He laughed nervously as the angel approached him. “Hell, how about you try your mojo on someone else? I’m not interested.”

He tried to unlock the bathroom door behind him, but the angle was too awkward. “Damn it,” he hissed in frustration.

The angel raised a hand above Dean’s head. He slid down on the tiled floor as the hand glowed pink. Dean braced himself for it. This was literally the least appealing way to kick the bucket, maybe ever.

An axe smashed through the door. “Jesus Christ!” Dean yelled. The door was wrenched open, and Cas pointed a silver blade at the angel.

“Get the hell away from him,” Castiel said, “or you'll wish I killed you quickly.”

The angel’s hand stopped glowing. “Castiel?”

Cas froze. “Ephraim?”

The angel smiled. “Yes.”

His stomach twisted. Ephraim had been on his side in the war against Raphael. Another angel he’d known and betrayed, in the end. His fault, his stupid mistakes. “I remember you,” Castiel said. “Ephraim, you need to stop what you’re doing.”

“Stop?” Ephraim looked so confused. “There is so much suffering here, and you wish me to stop?” His hand began to glow again and he crouched toward Dean.

Cas stepped over the hunter and raised the angel blade again.

“Leave, now. Or I will kill you.” It wasn’t a threat. It was a cold statement of fact, and Castiel could see in Ephraim’s eyes that he knew it.

The angel shook his head, face filled with compassion. “No.”

Cas lunged for him, but Ephraim caught his wrist and forced the blade to clatter on the glass-covered floor. “And once I have taken away his pain, Castiel, I will take yours as well.” He shoved Cas to his knees easily.

There was a scraping noise as Dean pushed the blade toward Cas with his foot. Ephraim continued, “I will end your suffering as a human.”

Castiel strained with his free arm. His fingertips brushed the sleek silver surface of the blade, but didn’t catch. The second time, he forced himself to reach just far enough. The sharp edge of the
blade cut his hand, but he ignored the pain as he gripped the hilt and plunged the blade into Ephraim’s chest.

The Rit Zien’s body glowed fiercely. Cas closed his eyes against the blinding light until it flared out. Castiel pulled the blade free. “We should go,” he said. Then he went still. “Dean, are... are you naked?” he asked, raising his eyes toward the ceiling carefully.

“Uh... yeah,” Dean said. “Look, I’m gonna —”

“Yes.”

“We need to fix ourselves up before he get out of here.”

Cas was very quiet while Dean dressed in the bathroom, then proceeded to clean and dress the cuts on Dean’s hands and feet from the glass. Dean insisted on bandaging up Cas’s hand, as well. It stung even so as they packed up their possessions quickly. They were ten miles out of Rexford before either of them spoke again.

“What happened, Dean?”

It was a question Dean was hoping wouldn’t be asked. “I guess I just lost it. Like you did the other night,” he said. Cas flinched. He wasn’t expecting to be reminded of that particular occasion again; it had been difficult enough just working past it.

“I couldn’t... I kept thinking of Sam being dead, and everyone I’ve lost, and I punched the mirror, and I...”

Goddamn it, he knew exactly why it happened. Because pain was supposed to be temporary but he couldn’t remember a time when he didn’t hurt. Everyone he cared about was taken away from him in the end.

“I wondered why it had to be me,” He said at last. A tear slipped down it cheek. Fuck everything.

Castiel tentatively place his hand on Dean’s shoulder. “It isn’t fair,” he said quietly. “You don’t deserve to lose everyone. It isn’t because destiny wants you to suffer, Dean. Humans, they take risks even though they are so easily broken, and the people you care about take greater risks. They’re more likely to break, but that isn’t set in stone.” He closed his eyes before he continued. “We’ll bring Sam back, and make one of those losses right.”

As his words faded into silence, Dean’s phone rang. “I’ll get it,” Cas said, taking it from the dashboard. “You just...” He didn’t finish, pressing the phone to his ear. “Hello?”

“It’s Kevin. Listen, we have something on the angel tablet. Crowley agreed to translate, and after he got over his hangover this afternoon —”

“This afternoon?” Dean said, raising his eyebrows. “Damn.” He’d known Crowley wanted to get thoroughly smashed, but that was impressive.

“The two of you would have a lot of fun together,” Kevin said, “but listen. After he threw up and the headache wore off, he agreed to translate for me. That was a couple hours ago, but I misplaced some of the pages, had to find them. He just read through the footnotes, and said — well, he said the spell was. Um. Irreversible.”

Castiel dropped the phone. No. No, he had to have misheard. It wasn’t. It wasn’t irreversible, there had to be a way around it. Thousands of angels cast down to Earth because of him, there had to be a
way to fix it.

But it was Metatron’s scheme in the first place. He wouldn’t let a loophole like that exist. His vengeance was total and complete, and it fell heaviest on Cas. Of course it would be irreversible. A simple counterspell would be too easy, and Metatron wasn’t that stupid.

“Guys? Guys, can you hear me?” Kevin asked. Castiel picked up the phone again.

“Thank you.” Cas’s voice sounded so much more calm than he felt. He struggled for something else to say, finally settling on, “We finished our hunt, we’re on our way back to the bunker right now.” He hung up without a goodbye.

Cas didn’t speak again for the entire drive, his face pale and set. Dean worried that he was quietly having a nervous breakdown.

Frankly, Dean was surprised he wasn’t flipping his shit either. He didn’t know how the hell he was supposed to bring Sammy home if Heaven was permanently closed for business.

Instead, he just felt numb.

Dean would just have to find another way. So they couldn’t borrow some angel’s wings to get Sam back, they already figured that would be a no-go, anyway.

Glancing over at Cas, Dean realized that he was shaking, just enough to be visible. God, he felt bad for him. Cas had to be blaming himself; Dean knew he would be, if it were him.

This is why it wouldn’t work, he reminded himself. Even if you weren’t fucking cursed and everyone you care about didn’t bite the dust, you’d ruin it just by being you.

He couldn’t deal with this, not with the angels running loose and Sam dead an... he just couldn’t. It would go wrong and Cas would hate him and he would lose his only goddamn friend. Dean didn’t want Cas to die like every other godforsaken thing he cared about.

Chapter End Notes

This is about the closest it ever gets to the original season 9, besides Cas’s plotline in the first chapter.

You can find me on tumblr at clothedinconviction.tumblr.com if you want. Feel free to ask questions or just say hi.
Dean poured himself another cup of coffee and sat down. He struggled to remember how many he’d already downed, but it didn’t matter anyway. He’d keep drinking it until he had something to work with. Once there was a lead, he could stop.

Stacks of books, scrolls, papers, even maps lay scattered across the table. The lights were way too bright and reflected off the floor and tiled walls, but at least they helped keep him awake. Around the room, Castiel, Crowley, and Kevin bent over books in varying states of exhaustion and drunkenness.

Dean sipped his coffee and picked up his book again. He leafed through it, scanning for even a mention of resurrection. In the corner, Kevin flipped through a manuscript that listed different types of spells to bring back the dead across eighteen ancient cultures, including one from Easter Island and another that involved repeated human sacrifice. Crowley was no help; he stayed around for ‘moral support’ as they worked through stacks of documents.

Cas had a table all to himself, covered in page after page of lore. He searched through it and mumbled things under his breath, taking down notes in a fabric-bound journal. If Dean had been able to care, he probably would have been worried, but he hadn’t slept in twenty-one hours and was barely able to focus on his own research.

Kevin yawned. Crowley’s eyelids slipped down, only jerking to wakefulness when the skin mag he was holding fell to the floor in a flap of pages. Cas didn’t look too tired yet, but Dean knew the bottle of pills five inches from Castiel’s left hand wasn’t there to stave off pain.

He was getting irritated by the constant dozing. They were supposed to be helping, not slacking off. He couldn’t convince Crowley to do anything, but Dean trusted the other two.

Cas was worried. Dean hadn’t slept in his bed in over a week. The most he did was take ten-minute catnaps here and there. Every time Castiel brought up how even Dean would need rest eventually, he grew more rebellious and downed another cup of undiluted coffee.

“Do you think you’re fooling anyone?” Cas asked, finally snapping. The “medication” was certainly boosting his irritability along with his own brand of sleep deprivation. He stood over Dean and reached out to take his coffee away. “You’re going to kill yourself doing this. We agreed not to —”

“Not to kill ourselves over this?” Dean growled. “Damn straight. But that was two weeks ago, and times fucking change. Once Sam is home, safe and sound, I’ll sleep for a week. But rest is on the back burner now.”

“Dean, you haven’t taken a real break since Idaho. You’re going to run yourself into the ground and will be damned if I help you do it.” Castiel glared at him, refusing to break eye contact. Dean rolled his eyes. Who the fuck cared if he didn’t sleep? Didn’t matter.

Cas’s next words made his blood run cold. “Unless you take a break and get some sleep, I won’t help you with this anymore.”

Dean laughed, but it came out hysterical and wild. “You wouldn’t do that, Cas. You wouldn’t.” He looked around. Kevin’s eyes were shadowed and he wasn’t even trying to stifle a drawn-out yawn.
“Right?” he asked, and his voice sounded small even to himself.

Castiel pressed his lips together, gathering the will to say this. Dean wouldn’t cast him out for refusing to help. At this point, he wasn’t sure Dean had the strength to walk to the stairs. And he couldn’t watch Dean kill himself this way. “I think I’ll go to bed and sleep. And so should you.”

Instantly Crowley stood. He walked over to join Cas, his gait crooked and meandering from exhaustion and heavy intoxication. The empty bottle of whiskey by his chair vouched for that. “See you when you’ve decided to grow up and get some rest.”

Dean stared at Kevin a little desperately. “Guess it’s just you and me, huh, Kev?”

He shook his head. “Sorry, Dean, I need a break. You do, too.” He closed his book and walked out, leaving Dean alone in the library.

“Wait,” Dean said, scrambling to his feet, but Kevin didn’t pause. “You can’t just leave me here alone!” He took another gulp of coffee. “Okay, well, fuck you! Fuck all of you!” Dean shouted.

He inhaled raggedly and tried to calm his nerves. “Okay then. Guess I’m on my own. Awesome.”

The books had somehow become too heavy for Dean’s arms, but they were thick and old in coated in dust, so there had to be something in there that was useful, right? And so what if the letters were doing the tango on the page? He’d seen a hell of a lot weirder. He struggled through page after page of ancient texts that used long, twisting words that Dean was certain hadn’t been written in at least a thousand years.

The gold edges on some of the books were catching the bright incandescent lights and flashed patterns on the walls, glittering and shining. Each book Dean picked up felt like it had a hundred more layers of dust than the last. God, Dean was hungry. When was the last time he ate?

What the fuck was going on in his head? He couldn’t even focus his eyes on the page anymore, and the caffeine was starting to wear off again, which sent a headache pounding in his skull. Dean shook his head, trying to make himself think straight, but all it did was send the room spinning and worsen the already banging headache. He could feel blood pumping in his head. Focus. Dean had to focus. Focus, focus, focus.

Right. First thing was coffee. He needed more, he had to have more or else he couldn’t get anything done. When was the last time he slept? Dean didn’t care. He was supposed to care, he thought vaguely.

Dean stumbled crookedly to the coffee brewer and grabbed the pot, but it was dry. “Damn it,” he heard someone hiss. It sounded sort of like him. He slammed the machine down on the table angrily. He was failing. God, he was gonna fail Sam. He shoved the coffee pot back into place and fumbled for the coffee grounds. He added an extra scoop and only about two-thirds as much water. More caffeine. He had the idea that caffeine was somehow important.

Waiting for the coffee to brew seemed to take forever. His hands were twitching anxiously. Slowly, Dean’s eyes started to slide shut. “No,” he said, but the word came out slurred and tired. He forced his eyes open again. No, no, no no no. No sleeping. He wasn’t that tired. He could still work, could still figure out a way to bring Sam back. He wasn’t going to fall asleep. Sleep could, sleep could wait. “I can sleep when I’m dead,” he insisted. He didn’t know who he was talking to. Maybe himself, but it was harder to remember.

“If you keep up like this, you won’t have to wait too long,” came a drawling voice from behind him.
Dean barely managed to turn to see who it was, supporting himself with two hands on the counter. Two Crowleys were walking toward him. “You should really pay attention when your friends tell you to get some rest.”

The Crowleys reached out and grabbed him by the arm. “Come on now, Squirrel, it’s high time you got some sleep.”

“I am fine,” Dean said angrily. “Get away from me.” He tried to wrench away from the grip of the twin Crowleys, but their hands were like iron.

“Time for bed.” Dean fought weakly all the way to his room, where the Crowley forced him inside and shoved him roughly onto his bed. “You’re taking a long nap until you can think, and that’s final.”

“Sound like Sam,” Dean said, the words slurring in his mouth. “An’ he’s dead. Ev’rybody dies who comes near me, think I’m cursed.”

“We’ll discuss it when you wake up,” Crowley said coolly. “Ciao.” The door clicked shut behind him; Crowley locked himself out. When Dean was focused enough to unlock the damn door he’d be ready to rejoin the land of the living.

He wasn’t sure why he’d done it, only that he was too damn sentimental.

Dean didn’t hear Cas and Kevin knock on his door, or the whispered conversations that they had outside. Dean was completely oblivious to everything. The sleeplessness over the past month and a half had finally caught up with him in a big way.

Outside his door, Castiel and Crowley spoke in hushed voices. “He hasn’t eaten in days. If he doesn’t soon, it will kill him.”

“Trust me, he’ll be fine. When the jackass is ready, he’ll be up and starving.” His voice betrayed only a sliver of genuine worry.

“It’s not healthy, Crowley.” Castiel couldn’t believe he was having this argument, with Crowley no less. In the past two weeks there had been very little conversation between them, but he thought Crowley knew starvation could easily end a man’s life. “I can’t go for more than a day without eating. Dean hasn’t eaten in half a week. Unless we do something, he will die.”

He didn’t care if Crowley wasn’t concerned. He didn’t care that Dean knew the truth about his feelings but refused to speak of them. Castiel just needed Dean to be healthy and whole.

Crowley shot Cas a look. “What do you propose? Force-feed oatmeal down his gullet?”

“If we must.” Castiel met Crowley’s sardonic look evenly. “I will not risk his life on the chance he’ll wake up a little hungry. Either we bring him to a hospital or we find a way to do this ourselves.” If Dean didn’t wake soon, Castiel worried that even the most drastic measures wouldn’t work.

“Fine. But when he wakes up perfectly all right, I won’t hesitate to say I told you so.” Crowley retreated to his own morbidly decorated room, leaving Cas alone.

Castiel leaned against the cool, dark wood of the door, his eyes closed. “Please wake up, Dean,” he whispered. “I need you here.”

Three hours passed, with nothing from Dean’s room. He was still deeply out of it, and Cas just couldn’t wait anymore. He had to do something.
Castiel followed the instructions on a can of chicken noodle soup precisely, pouring the contents into a pot and heating it on the stovetop.

“You know, a watched pot never boils,” Crowley pointed out. “You’ll go mad from the waiting if you keep checking it every five seconds.”

“Crowley,” Castiel said. He tried to stifle his irritation. “I’ve never had a problem with waiting before.”

“And now, the very ticking of the clock can send you up the wall,” Crowley said. “Oh, the joys of humanity.” He pulled a chair away from the table and sat down. “Time moves so slowly when you wish it could just whip past you. Staying in this sodding bunker for weeks on end could drive anyone insane.”

“I can wait, Crowley.” Castiel anxiously checked the soup again. “It’s the only thing I can do.”

“So you’re telling me you aren’t just dying to save your precious Dean?” Crowley shook his head. “Don’t act like a child. Admit that if he died right now, you’d be destroyed.” He half-smiled. “Don’t forget, I had to read from that fucking hunk of rock too.”

Castiel’s jaw twitched. “How I would and would not feel is irrelevant. If Dean died you would be overjoyed.”

“Why do you think that?” Crowley asked, stringing Cas along. It wasn’t as if he had anything else to do in this godforsaken hellhole. The best that could be said was that hellhole wasn’t literal.

“Because you could leave. He’d the only thing forcing you to stay.” Cas checked the soup for the umpteenth time.

Crowley rolled his eyes. “Don’t be an ass. There are twenty cars in the garage right now. I could jack one and hit the road, by the time Squirrel noticed I would be long gone. Whatever he says, it doesn’t matter whether or not I stay.”

“Then why stay here?” Cas tapped out a rhythm on the countertop.

Crowley looked away. “Because there’s nowhere else to be. Running off would get my wonderful ass snapped up by an angel with a grudge, it’s more comfortable here, and... well.” He gave Cas a sideways glance. “Probably the same reason you’re here, when you get down to it.”

Castiel felt a chill run down his back at the look in Crowley’s eyes. Somehow, he knew exactly what he meant by that. “Leave me alone, Crowley,” he said abruptly, standing and removing the hot soup from the stove. “I’m going to help Dean.”

“The bowl of soup steamed in his face as he carried it to Dean’s room gingerly. Kevin was already at the door with a glass of water, working on opening the lock. “He should keep hydrated, too,” he said. Cas nodded and unlocked the door. Dean didn’t even stir when they walked in.

After gently setting the soup on the bedside table, Castiel made an attempt to wake Dean up. The hunter made a murmur of protest when Cas shook him a little, but gave no other reaction. Cas thought wryly that this would have been the moment to profess his undying love in a human fairytale.

He shook Dean again more forcefully.

“Wha’?” Dean muttered, eyelids flickering. “What do you want?”
Castiel kept nudging him until Dean’s eyes opened completely. “You need to eat something,” he said quietly. “Then you can go back to bed.”

“God, Cas. You worry too much,” Dean said, his mind starting to wake up. “I feel like fucking Sleeping Beauty or something. But yeah, okay.” He sat up in bed, leaning back. Castiel handed him the soup, which he took with shaky hands.

“You made me food,” Dean said in surprise. “Don’t know whether to be proud or scared.” He grinned weakly.

“I just followed the directions,” Cas said. “I think you’ll survive.” There was a pointed cough behind him from Kevin.

“’m so tired, Cas.” Dean took another spoonful of soup. “Lemme go back to bed.”

Kevin set the glass of water on the table. “We figured you’d come around eventually.” He left, probably to get more sleep himself.

Cas made sure that Dean finished the soup before he let him slide back under the covers. When the bowl was finally empty, Cas instructed him to drink the water if he woke up thirsty before shutting off the lamp. Standing in the doorway, he smiled when he realized Dean was already dropping off.

When Dean woke up completely, he wasn’t sure how he got in his bedroom. He tried to remember what happened over the past few days, but everything was blurry.

Dean changed out of his sweat-soaked clothes and into a clean shirt and pair of jeans. He stumbled down to the dining room, feeling a little light-headed and very hungry. The bunker was eerily quiet, but as he approached the kitchen he heard the echoes of voices.

“Castiel, if he gets malnutrition, we’ll take him to the frigging hospital. He’s just sleeping it off, I’ll bet anything. He’ll come around eventually.

“He keeps doing this. He has to stop putting himself at risk.” Cas’s voice echoed down the hall. “We need to put a stop to it.”

Dean walked into the dining room. Castiel, Crowley, and Kevin sat around a table with plates of pizza. “What’s going on?”

“And he’s awake!” Crowley said, jabbing Cas in the side. “See, told you he’d be fine. More or less,” he added, looking Dean up and down.

Cas breathed a sigh of relief. Dean was awake. Now that had been dealt with, there were other pressing issues. Dean barely ate over the past few days, except for the soup. “I’ve been worried,” he said. It was a gross understatement, and from Crowley’s snort Cas wasn’t the only one who knew it. “Are you alright?”

Dean nodded. “I’m starving.” He sat down next to Kevin and helped himself. “How long was I out?”

Castiel glanced at Crowley. “About three days,” he said. “You started to just shut down. I don’t know how you stayed awake as long as you did.”

“Well, I don’t remember much. What actually happened?”

Crowley finished off his pizza and answered, “You refused to take a break from trying to bring back
Samantha for about five days straight. Didn’t even stop for food. You were running yourself into the ground, taking cat naps and then jumping back on the job. So we made you sleep properly. Cassie here was worried sick.” He smirked when Dean’s eyes narrowed at Cas.

Castiel looked at the floor, unable to meet Dean’s eyes. “I wasn’t worried sick. You weren’t eating. You should have known better, humans can die of starvation.” He glanced up briefly before fixing his eyes on the floor again. “I didn’t want you to die.”

Dean grabbed Cas’s shoulder and caught his eye. “Thanks, man. I’m pretty glad I’m not dead.”

Cas shifted in his seat. “You still need to eat.” He thrust another slice of pizza at Dean.

Dean looked around. The papers that had been scattered over every surface in the bunker were now meticulously organized.

Castiel continued, “You haven’t eaten in several days, besides — besides the soup I brought you the second night.” He looked away again.

Dean ate almost half a pizza by himself in the next thirty minutes. When he finished, he asked the time.

“Almost eight,” Kevin said. “Is there something you wanted to do?”

Castiel felt like he could breathe again when Dean agreed to watch Star Trek with the rest of them. Dean’s wan, bleak expression, not to mention the way his clothes hung loose and baggy in places they’d fit a week ago, still left him concerned. Dean had every right to mourn Sam, but he didn’t have to destroy himself doing it. Castiel would ensure he had food regularly even if that meant force-feeding him.

The entire bunker had seemed so solemn when Dean was sleeping. Castiel had barely been able to sleep himself, he was so worried. Dean was the only real friend he had left. He liked Kevin, but the boy didn’t know him well. And Crowley, unfortunately, preferred to be a pain in the ass rather than a real friend or even a helpful acquaintance.

They watched Star Trek until eleven, when Crowley shut it off and ordered all of them to bed. Dean complained and pointed out that Crowley had no authority, but he knew he was right.

Castiel and Crowley were up early the next morning, Castiel against his will. Crowley shoved dirty dishes aside to make room for his master plan. “Waffles,” Crowley informed him with satisfaction. “And bacon.” He turned and added, “All homemade, of course. The real McCoy, as it were.”

“Crowley, it’s too early to be up,” Castiel yawned. “Dean isn’t the only one who needs to recover.”

“You’re only here for the dishes,” Crowley said. “I’ll credit you, of course. If you finish early I might even let you help with the cooking.” He was sporting a Kiss the Cook apron over his clothes. For all Castiel had Dean’s interest, Crowley knew a former angel could never be as interesting as him.

“Why are you doing this?” Cas asked. He turned on the faucet. “The cooking. Why?”

“I baked uvula muffins for the king of the Leviathans,” Crowley said haughtily. He was quiet for a moment. “I dunno, Cas. It’s been two months in this burrow. It’s not like there’s any other way to not think about —” About humanity. And about what mortality meant for him. He’s sure he knows what’s coming, in the end. “Started off just to have something to do, and it... escalated. Out of control.” He smiled wryly. “That’s me.”
Crowley stirred the ingredients together, changing the recipe slightly as he went and added cinnamon to the mixture. “Experimentation is the heart of cooking,” he said sagely when Castiel mentioned it. “Hell,” he added. “I think it’s the heart of humans in general.”

“I mean,” he continued, “demons? It takes near eternity to make them change. Innovation? Please. But humans, they — we, we see possibility. Blueprints are fine and all, but if we followed them to the letter every time, nothing new would ever happen.”

Castiel scrubbed at a plate in silence before saying, “Angels aren’t so different. They don’t try anything new unless they must. They follow the orders from above without thinking or questioning.”

He stared into the murky dishwater. “I was the same, until I met the Winchesters. I accepted my instructions from my superiors, I didn’t truly think for myself until I came to know De— until I came to know them,” he finished, his face flushing with embarrassment at the slip.

Crowley didn’t need to see Castiel’s expression to know what he was thinking. In fact, he was certain it was for the best that he couldn’t see Cas’s face. He had absolutely no notion at all what Cas meant by that. Crowley had no idea what Castiel could have wanted to hide, or what he was about to say.

He preferred lying to himself. It was easier than thinking that he couldn’t hold a candle to a fucking wingless bird.

Finally he answered. “Is that — the innovation — d’you think that’s what makes th— us human?”

“Humans have souls,” was all Castiel said.

“But demons are tortured souls, so destroyed they’re inhuman. What gets tortured out of them?” Crowley persisted. “The capacity to create just because. . . you want to create, to see the beauty of creation.” He beat the waffle batter ferociously.

“You think human souls are defined by their creativity?” Castiel pressed. He scrubbed at a stubborn pan.

“Well, everyone says they — we’re made in His own image. I don’t know.” He began pouring batter into the waffle iron. “Maybe.” He sat on the counter patiently.

Castiel wiped down the last mixing bowl and set it to dry. “I don’t know, either,” he said quietly. Crowley pulled strips of meat from a package and laid them out on the griddle he’d set to heat. The bacon sizzled and a phenomenal smell wafted through the kitchen. It almost made eating seem less a chore and more an enjoyable experience.

Crowley slid strawberries over to Cas. “Put those in a bowl and smash them up with this,” he said, handing him a potato masher. “Then pour the sugar in and keep going, get it all mixed together.” Castiel followed his instructions while Crowley opened up the waffle iron, put the golden brown result on a plate, and prepped the next waffle.

Within twenty minutes Crowley finished laying out a pretty solid breakfast. He brought orange juice and the waffle toppings out to the dining room and set the table, leaving the bacon and waffles in the oven to keep warm. A few charred waffles hadn’t deterred him. Last of all, Crowley put on a pot of coffee to brew.

“I feel like a housewife,” he said dryly as he laid out the cutlery, but he was barely stifling a small smile.

Crowley roused Dean and Kevin from their beds by banging on a pan with a spoon while prancing
down the bunker halls. “Breakfast is ready,” he called out in a sing-song voice. He cracked a wicked grin when Dean stumbled out of his room, scowling and covering his ears.

“What the fuck, Crowley?”

Crowley paused in his clanging. “I made breakfast.”

“Pancakes from Hell?” Dean headed down the hall. “If it is, I’m springing for Egg McMuffins.”

Crowley glared at him. “Eat or I’ll run off,” he said in a spectacular imitation of a petulant child. “You liked my damn pizza well enough last night.” He walked calmly to Kevin’s bedroom and politely knocked. “Kev? Wake up, darling, or you’ll miss breakfast,” he said sweetly at a normal volume.

“Asshole,” Dean muttered.

“You love it.”

Breakfast only swelled Crowley’s ego, in Dean’s opinion. His smirk when Dean grudgingly took seconds, and then thirds, was really pissing him off. On the other hand, Kevin wasn’t as jumpy around Crowley, but that traded off for compliments and satisfaction. Dean wolfed his food down, ready to finish and get back on track with research.

Dean and Kevin were forced — Crowley insisted they ‘reluctantly volunteered’ — to do the dishes while Crowley and Castiel lounged at the table. Crowley seemed lost in thought, and Cas didn’t speak to him. Dean hadn’t smiled at all during the meal in spite of their friendly conversations and intentionally non-serious subjects. Castiel had to wonder if it was his fault.

Obviously his tending to Dean would make him uncomfortable. He should have realized as much, that Dean wouldn’t want to be near him any more than necessary. Cas wished they could forget that entire night, pretend Kevin had gone to sleep and forgotten the truth by morning. He wished he could forget every stupid, worthless word that left his mouth that night.

Dean appeared out of nowhere, his hands soapy and his face pale. “Kevin just said you won’t let me look at a book for two days,” he said, a note of pleading in his voice. “Tell me he’s kidding.”

Oh. Castiel hated to upset him, but they couldn’t just let Dean throw himself back into his destructive habits. He shook his head slowly. “I’m sorry, Dean, but —”

“You’re sorry?” Dean repeated, his head buzzing. “Whose fucking bunker do you think this is? This is Sam’s life we’re talking about. You’re not — don’t tell me to just give up.” he let out an anxious laugh. “No.”

“What exactly did you get done those last forty-two hours when you were on the edge of killing yourself?” Kevin demanded from behind him. Dean flinched. “We can’t let you go back to research until you’re definitely okay.”

“What is this, an intervention?”

“Look at me! I’m okay!” Dean shouted. “I’m vertical, eating, sleeping, the whole damn works! What is this, an intervention?”

Crowley raised his eyebrows and glanced at Castiel, then Kevin. No, he was definitely staying out of this one.

The silence was enough of an answer for Dean. His stomach dropped.
Finally Cas sighed. “That’s not how I would put it, but yes.”

Dean closed his eyes, trying to steady his breath. His jaw twitched involuntarily.

Castiel put a hand on Dean’s shoulder. “No research until you’ve pulled yourself together, okay?”

Dean stared. He shook his head and stepped back, away from Cas, as his breaths came faster. “You don’t fucking understand,” he said. “This is way more than getting Sam back. This is... this is...” He closed his eyes and pressed his eyes wild. “I brought him back into hunting. This is my fault, Cas, I could have let him go, there were a hundred times I could have just let him leave, and I didn’t. He’s dead, and it. Is. My. Fault.”

He gasped for breath now but he kept talking. “I need to fix this. It’s killing me, just like the angels falling is killing you.”

Castiel stilled. “Dean, we know why you need to do this. We want to help you, but you’re throwing yourself away. The world isn’t going to end if you take care of yourself.”

Dean couldn’t believe him. “I’m gonna throw up,” he said. He couldn’t get his body under control.

“How — how are you?” he asked shakily.

Cas gazed at him, looking Dean in the eyes intensely, the way he used to. It felt like Cas was searching him for something.

“Are you sure you’re alright?” Castiel asked carefully.

“Yeah,” Dean said at last. “I’m fine.” For once the words didn’t feel like a lie. “I scared you again.”

It wasn’t a question. Dean could see it in Cas’s eyes, that what he’d been doing in the past two weeks was terrifying his friend, but Cas had still done everything to help. And that was after Dean more or less rejected him without an explanation. He wanted so badly now to tell Cas the truth about it, but he couldn’t make himself say it. If he did, everything would go to shit.

They were both silent. Cas wouldn’t push Dean for anything. A part of him wondered if this was Dean trying to distract himself from Castiel’s feelings and what they meant for his life. No. It couldn’t be his fault. Dean always put the people he loved ahead of his own health and destroyed himself for it. Castiel just had to accept he wasn’t one of those people.

That thought hurt more than it should have.

Dean spent the rest of that day in bed, surrounded by novels and magazines. Cas sat in a chair in the corner, reading silently.

“Cas?” Dean asked suddenly.

Very quietly, Castiel set down his book. “Yes, Dean?”
Dean steeled himself for the question. He already knew full well he wouldn’t like the answer he got, but it was better than leaving it a secret that Cas had to cling to alone. “What happened when you lost your grace? And after, I guess, too.”

For a few seconds Cas didn’t speak. He closed his eyes. He’d been expecting a very different question. “It was like — having my lungs hacked away from my chest and pulled out through my throat. And then — then Metatron healed me and told me to live a human life, and he sent me to Earth. He wanted me to return to Heaven when I died, and tell him my story.”

“Guess we’d better make it one hell of a story,” Dean said, offering a weak smile.

Castiel returned the smile, although for only a moment. “It already is, I think.” He hesitated. He’d been so set against explaining what had happened, but he thought, maybe, he needed to do it. Keeping it a secret from Dean would help no one. “I lost... everything, being human. I didn’t have money, or clothing, or transportation. And. And then I was arrested, and before you and Crowley found me,” Cas closed his eyes again.

He willed himself to continue. “An angel possessed a woman and found me locked him. She, she killed everyone in that police station, except for me. She told me to stay out of her way. This angel killed innocent humans to tell me not to interfere.” He slid down in his chair, dejected. “I should have tried to stop her,” he whispered.

The tightness in Castiel’s chest was a familiar sensation by now. He couldn’t believe he once thought these feelings were strange and foreign. By now he’d experienced the full range of emotion, but it was the warning of stinging eyes that told him he should think of something else, less painful. Less guilty.

“Cas.” Dean shifted to face him. He couldn’t believe what he was hearing, the guilt in Cas’s voice. “If you tried to stop her she would have killed you,” Dean pointed out. “And... I’m pretty damn glad she didn’t.”

Don’t lie to me, Cas wished he could say, but the words didn’t come. Dean couldn’t be glad for that. Not knowing everything. Castiel would have deserved it, after what he’d done after the Apocalypse.

It was some time later that he realized how late it was getting. When he checked the alarm clock on his nightstand, Dean stood up. “Come on, it’s got to be about time for dinner by now.” Cas trailed after him quietly. “Think Crowley made something again?” Dean asked as they headed down to the kitchen.

“At this rate, Crowley will cook everything in the bunker before he lets us have take-out again,” Cas said, a faint smile on his lips.

“Yeah, any idea what’s up with that?”

“I... don’t know,” Cas lied. He glanced at Dean, but he hadn’t noticed. If Crowley wanted to explain himself to Dean, that was his decision. Not that his explanation had made much sense to Castiel, either.

“Well, I can’t say I don’t like being well-fed for a change, even if the food isn’t all that great.” Dean walked faster as the smell of something cooking floated into the corridor. He was still wearing his pyjamas.

Castiel’s smile was a little wistful. It felt good to see Dean acting like himself again, even if there was almost no chance of it lasting. As long as Dean behaved normally, Cas could act as though nothing
had changed between them.

“It’s nice to know you’re feeling better,” he said softly, so that Dean couldn’t hear, and he wasn’t sure if he was talking about his friend or himself.
Meditation

Meditation: time spent in quiet thought

In the days that followed, Dean showed steady improvement. His eyes became less sunken and lost, and his energy came back full force. The only worries he had now were about his thoughts. Whenever Dean got stressed and anxious, he hid away in his room and turned his music up to drown out his mind.

It would be okay, he reminded himself frequently. With every day he spent less time worrying about Sam.

More often he caught himself gazing at Cas and thinking about what he’d said, what they still hadn’t discussed. He couldn’t avoid the subject forever, but he needed to figure out what he wanted before he said something he would regret.

At least it was better than having a mental breakdown over Sam, when his brother was safely tucked away in Heaven.

Cas took note of every miniscule improvement, and although Crowley pretended to be unconcerned, Dean often glimpsed him watching intently while he played cards or read a magazine. Dean didn’t want to ask. There was plenty of shit he didn’t need to know about Crowley.

Even once Dean was eating regularly again and rarely needed to retreat to his room, Castiel and Kevin were hesitant to let him dive back into research. After two weeks of Dean being pretty much normal, they finally relaxed, but Cas still watched for warning signs, waiting for even the hint of a waxy pallor in Dean’s face.

Dean had to wonder how much of Cas’s strict observance was the action of his best friend and how much of it was the guy in love with him, but it didn’t really matter anymore. Besides, he thought as he flipped through yet another yellowed manuscript, he wasn’t sure how much of his own interest was platonic, either.

Cas spent precious little time inside the bunker in those two weeks, besides what he spent with Dean in the library and at meals. He never went anywhere, just sat on the hood of the Impala, thinking. Considering. Sometimes he would bring a book with him to pass the time.

He’d also taken to lighting a pack of cigarettes a Man of Letters had left behind long ago. It didn’t matter that those things could kill him. Something always would, eventually. Who gave a fuck when it happened? Cigarettes in the morning, and sleeping pills at night.

The trees all around him had begun to turn colors, the lush green shifting into yellow and brown and orange. Up there in the open air, with a chilly breeze stirring his hair, he thought about everything.

Every new experience as a human was secretly terrifying. Secretly. Cas couldn’t explain to Dean or anyone else how spicy foods once made him worry that he was damaging his internal organs. Sight, smell, taste, sound, touch... Without the tension of the bunker, Castiel could think through it without fearing judgment.

Today, though, his musings began with Sam. He wondered what Sam’s heaven looked like, what he saw in his own scrap of paradise. Cas wondered if a memory of himself might be in Sam’s memory,
but then again, Castiel had done very little good to Sam in all the time they’d known one another. He doubted they were making any progress. After over a month of diligent searching for answers, they had come up empty again and again. Castiel had known they would. There was a single way that was certain to work, but with Heaven locked up — *his fault* — no angel could return Sam’s soul to his body. Dean knew that as well as Cas did.

He was still amazed Dean hadn’t thrown him out yet.

When Castiel returned from the outside world, Dean was lounging on the war room, his feet propped up on a table. He had an open bottle of beer in one hand and the morning newspaper in the other.

“Crowley and Kevin went shopping,” Dean said when the door clanged shut. Crowley ran out of some spice or other, and Kevin wanted to pick up some essentials. They’d be back in time for Crowley to to whip up lunch.

Cas was walking past Dean when the hunter’s phone went off. “Who is it?” Castiel asked, sitting down across from him. He hoped whoever was calling wouldn’t say something to set Dean off; he didn’t need to trigger another obsessive research spree.

“Hi, Dean, it’s Jody.”

“Jody?” Dean said, motioning for Cas to be quiet. “What’s up? How are you?”

“I’m... pretty good, considering.” She hesitated. “I heard about Sam. I’m so sorry, Dean.”

Dean felt a twinge in his gut when Jody mentioned it. He was struggling for words when Cas took the phone firmly and put it on speaker after a few seconds of fumbling. “Jody? This is Cas. I’m a friend of Dean’s. Why are you calling?” His voice was brisk, clipped, and Dean stared at him.

“I, uh... I got a weird case up here to ask you about.”

Dean glanced at Cas before looking back at his phone. “Shoot,” he said, finishing off the last of his beer and leaning back in his chair.

“So there’s this town not far from Sioux Falls. Never had any problems there before, ‘sides the occasional redneck getting smashed and lighting his corn on fire. But last week, four people vanished.”

Dean shrugged when Cas frowned at him. “Alright, so what makes you think this is our kind of weird?”

“Got a witness who says someone lifted a car to grab a girl last night.”

Dean opened his mouth, decided not to speak, and closed it again. “Okay, Jody, thanks for the info,” he said, and paused. “Hey, Jody? I’m... in kinda rough shape right now, and... well, I’m not sure I’m ready to get back in the game just yet. But listen, there’s a couple guys I know up in Iowa who can help you out. Want me to call them up and let you know if they’re interested?”

Castiel stared at Dean. He was turning down a hunt? Cas had never even imagined Dean sitting out on something like this. With a friend involved, no less. Was something wrong? He schooled his features into calm blankness. Dean didn’t need to see him suffering from feelings, concerns. That wasn’t why he was here at all.

“Yeah, okay, sounds fine by me. Guess I’ll have to see you again some other time. Bye, Dean.”
“Bye, Jody,” Dean said.

“Why’d you refuse?” Cas asked immediately, his face still carefully expressionless. “Are you feeling worse?”

Dean shook his head. “Nah, I just... like I said, I don’t think I’m up for it. I just think maybe some time off from all this wouldn’t be such a bad idea. Don’t want to just throw myself back in.

Cas nodded slowly. It could have been for worse reasons.

Crowley and Kevin returned a few minutes later, and Crowley immediately dashed into the kitchen to finish whatever he’d started. Dean was really learning to enjoy Crowley cooking for everyone. The noodles might be slightly overdone, but everything was still pretty good. Better than his usual fare, anyway.

A few hours after lunch, Kevin sat down with Cas and a stack of cards.

“What are you guys doing?” Dean asked, opening a beer. The cards weren’t normal playing cards.

“Teaching Cas to play Magic. It’s a game,” Kevin explained. “I offered, since I haven’t had anyone to play with in a few years.”

Dean watched while Kevin explained the intricacies of the game. Cas seemed more at ease talking with Kevin than with Dean. He couldn’t explain the ache in his chest at that thought. Well, he could, but he was very definitely not thinking about that. Cas grinning and playing around was completely different from how on-edge and nervous he seemed around Dean.

The game looked like the kind of thing Sam would love. Using your wits and taking down your enemies, the kind of geeky shit his brother would play given half a chance.

Crowley walked in as the game wrapped up. “Sadly, I won’t be cooking tonight,” he informed them. “Dear Kev insisted I cease my activities so he can have, and I quote, ‘something less pretentious.’ You can choose where from, I’ve been insulted enough.”

Cas glanced over at Dean. Tentatively, hoping his suggestion wouldn’t offend, he said quietly, “You told me we could try a real restaurant sometime.” He tightened his jaw. Dean didn’t keep him here for social interaction. The only reason he hadn’t been thrown out yet was his hard work. He had to remind himself of this constantly nowadays, or else he might get his hopes up.

Kevin cut him off. “Actually, I’ve got my heart set on the juiciest burgers I can get my hands on. We could go out tomorrow, or maybe the day after.”

“I don’t have a problem with it,” Dean said. He caught Castiel’s eye for half a second before they both looked away.

A few minutes later, Dean swore out loud. “What’s wrong?” Cas asked, straightening up attentively.

“’s nothing. I forgot I needed to get a start on the laundry, but I’m really not in the mood today. I’ll deal with it tomorrow, don’t worry about it.” Dean stood up. If he really needed to work, research was the better option.

He combed through a few pages of possibly useful material in the library, but he couldn’t help but think on the lack of anything that was actually relevant. It didn’t help that he knew the only surefire way of getting his brother back in one piece was not an option.
He headed for his bedroom. In the past two weeks, Kevin had helped him soundproof the walls. Dean could turn up his music as loud as he damn well wanted without pissing off anyone else.

Dean didn’t know how long he stayed there. The heavy bass beats and guitar solos helped him lose track of the time. The final notes of Stairway to Heaven faded as he finally pushed himself up off the bed.

There was a knock at the door. Frowning, Dean opened it. In front of his door was a stack of folded laundry. The hall was empty.

Dean headed down to the war room, where Crowley was scrutinizing a glass of something bubbly. As he sat, Crowley said, “Might as well,” and downed it in one shot.

“You seen Cas?” Dean asked.

“Wouldn’t you love to know,” Crowley answered, pouring out a small bottle of something amber-colored into his empty glass.

Dean sighed. “Thanks anyway.” He hunted down Kevin in his room and was informed that Cas had gone out to get the burgers.

Sure enough, as Dean came up to the war room the door slammed shut. Cas carried two bags with a colorful logo stamped on them and dropped them unceremoniously next to Crowley’s empty bottles of liquor.

“Since when do you drive?” Dean asked absently. Cas passed him a paper-wrapped burger and a box of fries that were dripping grease. Crowley leaned over and took a burger for himself, smirking at Cas while he did it.

Cas straightened up and met Dean’s gaze smoothly. “Since now.”

A few hours later, the four of them sat around a table, drinking and talking. Dean was thrown off by how damn normal it all seemed. For a moment he could pretend that Sam was just out of view and they were hanging out as a family.

He said something to Cas about his game with Kevin, but didn’t get an answer. Dean tapped him on the shoulder and instantly Cas snapped to attention, completely still. “Yes, Dean?”

Dean laughed nervously. “Dude, calm down. I was just asking if your card game thing was any fun.”

“You. . . you wouldn’t like it,” Cas said, not meeting his eyes. He stood. “I’m going to start on the dishes.” Before Dean could stop him Cas had disappeared into the kitchen and the sound of running water echoed back to him.

Castiel let the steaming water run over his hands even as the heat verged on painful. This was his task. He needed to earn his permission to stay with Dean. The thought of spending all his life like this wasn’t comforting, but he couldn’t so much as consider leaving or waiting to be thrown out.

He would do whatever needed to be done, whether that was research or housework. Dean’s comment about the laundry had made him see that there was more to do in the bunker than giving pointless aid in the library.

Whatever the other three did after they finished their last round of alcohol, Cas didn’t share in it. Once the dishes were washed and dried he went down to his room, curled up with his most recent
book, and read, trying to block out the relentless image of Dean living happy without him. It was only the sleeping pill that ultimately knocked him out.

The next morning dawned bright and hot. The trees rustled in the breeze when Castiel came up out of the bunker and sat on the hood of the Impala, exactly the same as always.

He began by forming a checklist of work that could be done in the bunker without Dean’s notice. He could sweep, and continue the laundry. Maybe the Impala should be washed, or the storage room could be reorganized.

“What do you do up here, anyway?” asked a drawling voice from the bunker’s entrance.

Cas looked up. Crowley was leaning against the door, wearing a bathrobe and, in all likelihood, nothing else. “What?”

“Kevin figures you come up here to pray,” Crowley said, the word sour on his tongue. “I doubt it. Not really the type, are you, Castiel?”

Cas didn’t say anything.

“I mean, you’re more one to, I dunno, toss Heaven on its arse and never apologize.” Crowley joined him on the hood of the Impala. Immediately he coughed and snatched the cigarette from between Castiel’s fingers. “Really, Cas? Smoking? God, and I thought you couldn’t sink any lower.”

Cas didn’t respond. Was that how Dean would see it, too, as the choice of a pathetic human? He enjoyed the nicotine’s sensation of hyperawareness, though it paled in comparison to an angel’s single-minded focus.

“So what do you do up here?” Crowley pressed. Suppose you just sit up here and fantasize about your Dean.”

Castiel shifted uncomfortably.

“Really, though, does it help? Getting away from...” Crowley gestured toward the bunker. “All that? Make it easier?”

Castiel forced an answer. “I think so.” He considered it. “Well, it’s nicer up here, anyway. I’ve found it’s easier to think out in the open air, but I don’t know if it helps. It depends on what you think about.”

“Don’t be a prat, Castiel. Do you think it would help my...” Crowley coughed the next word, “problem?”

“You mean your emotions.” Castiel wished he could shut those off, constantly, but he couldn’t say as much to Crowley. “Cutting yourself off from it won’t do any good,” Cas informed him. “It’s very childish of you to think so.”

Crowley made a face at him. “Shove it. You’re more repressed than me.”

Cas chose to ignore that. “Did you want to talk about it?”

“No.”

He and Crowley sat in silence for several minutes. “What about the Dean thing?” Crowley asked.

Cas’s heart jumped. “What Dean thing?”
“The Dean thing where you want him but you aren’t talking about it,” Crowley said, lying back across the black metal of the car.

A long pause. “How did you know?”

“Well, let’s start with how I’m not fucking blind.”

“I don’t want to discuss it.”

“You’re not alone, you know.”

That made Cas sit up straighter. “What?”

“You aren’t the only one who wants some of that, as it were.”

“Is there coffee yet?” Cas asked suddenly changing the subject gracelessly. He slid off the hood of the Impala. Crowley followed.

Dean was already seated, clutching a severely charred slice of toast in one hand. He watched Cas guardedly as he came down the stairs.

Before he could speak, Cas was in and out of the kitchen, returning with a mug of coffee to match Dean’s own. He sat down slowly, gingerly, next to Dean, leaning over his shoulder to look at the newspaper on the table before them.

Without thinking, Dean took Cas’s hand and met his eyes briefly. Cas breathed in sharply, but gave no other reaction. Crowley, on the other hand, stopped moving and stared, transfixed.

Dean let go as quickly as if he’d been burned. “Sorry,” he said, withdrawing his hand. He fanned out the newspaper, trying to cover the moment up.

Then his cell phone rang, and he pulled it from his pocket. The call was a welcome distraction. “Hello?”

“Hey, Dean. We’ve got a little situation here.”

Dean frowned. “Jody? Didn’t those guys help you out?”

“Not why I’m calling, we took care of that just fine,” Jody said, sounding strained. “There’s something weird going on.”

“Hold on, let me put you on speaker.” Cas’s eyes flickered up to Dean’s face, then back down at the table. Dean laid the phone down. “Okay, what’s going on?”

“Ghosts,” said Jody. “And a lot of ‘em.”

Dean frowned. “Ghosts? Ghosts are easy.”

“What are you talking about?” Castiel asked, sounding concerned.

“I don’t know what’s going on, there’s something wrong here.” Jody sounded freaked out. “This doesn’t make any sense. They’re not doing normal ghost things. Just walking around and acting like everything’s normal.”

Dean’s phone beeped to signal a call waiting. “Shit, Jody, I’ve got another call. Just a sec.” He picked up.
“Hello? Dean?” Charlie’s voice crackled through the cell. “Dean, something’s wrong. Like, seriously messed.”

Dean’s heart sank. “Ghosts?”

“Yeah — wait. How’d you know?”

“Doesn’t matter. Fill me in.” Dean resisted the urge to hit the table when Charlie didn’t respond right away.

“Harper, just a second — Dean?”

“What the hell is going on?”

“We were driving through town and these ghosts pop up out of nowhere!” Charlie snapped at him. Dean cringed at the feedback from the phone. “Harper, watch out! Sorry, Dean. They, they’re not like regular ghosts, they look like watercolors or something.”

“Cas, you ever heard of something like this?” Dean asked hoarsely. “Crowley?”

Crowley shrugged and adjusted his shirt collar. Cas shook his head, looking troubled. “Never. There’s no precedent.” He met Dean’s measured glance briefly, and then looked back at the phone intently.

“Great,” Dean said. “Charlie, where are you?”

“Um... Texas?” she said. “Sorry, we’re in some backwater town on the edge of nowhere. Harper and I were going after a vamp nest when we ran into this.”

Dean ran a hand through his hair. “Okay, did you try rock salt?”

“Yeah, ’cause that wouldn’t cause a fucking panic. We’re in a goddamn bank talking to a witness, Dean. People are panicking. You really want us throwing guns into the mix?”

“Yeah, yeah, okay. You can’t burn the bones,” he said, trying to think.

Charlie shot back, “Yeah, Dean, pretty sure we can’t do that.”

Dean paced back and forth. God, he wished he had gone to help Jody with her case, he could be in the thick of the action right now. He hated hearing everything secondhand. He wondered if this was what it was like to be Bobby. “Any ideas?” he asked. He saw Kevin standing in the doorway, eyes wide. He tried to focus. “Uh, okay. Can’t shoot ’em, can’t burn ’em.”

Charlie suddenly shouted, “Wait! Dean, they’re... leaving.”

“What?” Dean braced himself on the table, leaning over the phone like it could spit out an explanation.

“I mean they’re vanishing. Gone. Poof.”


“This... hunter, I’ve been working with. And also my girlfriend,” Charlie added. “See you around. Call me if you need anything.”

When Charlie hung up, Dean switched lines back to Jody.
“Dean!” she said immediately. “They’re gone. Vanished into thin air. What’s going on?”

Dean sighed and slumped down in his chair. “We don’t know.”

He spoke with Jody for a few minutes while Crowley, Cas, and Kevin stayed strangely quiet. Just after he finished talking with Jody, he got a text from Charlie.

Have you ever seen anything like this? Attached was a picture. It was a ghost, plain and simple; it had to be. Except it looked blurry even though the rest of the picture was in clear focus. Charlie was right. It kind of did look like a watercolor painting with the paint spreading and mixing.

Dean wordlessly handed his phone to Cas.

“No. I’m sorry, Dean, nothing like this has happened before in all history, as far as I am aware.” Cas slid the phone back to him, still avoiding eye contact. “It doesn’t make sense.”

“Well, something happened here, so we’d better find out what before it can happen again.” Dean sat down. “Fucking ghosts, man.”

No one saw much of Dean after that. He holed up in the library and buried himself in paperwork, texting Charlie and Jody for more information. This couldn’t be the first time this had happened.

Cas waited patiently for the load of sheets and linens in the dryer to be ready. He had stripped all the rooms in use of their blankets and bedclothes, starting up the decades-old washing machine and a loud, creaking spin dryer.

The whirring background noise was a wonderful distraction, drowning out nearly everything else. Castiel liked the humming, although the clangs of old machinery trying to function worried him. If something broke, the bedsheets could be damaged.

Crowley hiked up to the balcony and sat down at the solitary chessboard. He played against himself, white and black, Pawns and Knights and Queens. The only noise was the sound of the washing machine and his own quiet mutterings to himself. He frowned at the board when he realized he’d played himself into a draw. Only the two Kings remained.

He heard Kevin’s footsteps downstairs and called him up to play against him. After a long hesitation, the skinny prophet agreed and sat down across from Crowley.

Within thirty moves, both their Queens were killed off, a Bishop was gone on each side, and only one of the four Knights remained. And a hell of a lot of Pawns bit the dust in the process.

Dean was only roused from his vague research by Crowley appearing in the doorway and warning him that he was going to miss dinner. Dean hadn’t even realized he’d missed lunch.

Apparently the delicious smells wafting in were from Crowley’s spaghetti. Credit where credit was due, Crowley was actually a pretty good cook.

“I swear, the only interesting thing left to do in this godforsaken hole in the ground, and I’m wasting it on you,” he said, smirking as Dean glared at him.

Dean barely spoke while they ate, and Cas followed his lead. The ghost incident that morning hadn’t passed without leaving a mark on Dean. He hadn’t found anything in the lore, which meant there was nothing in the lore, which meant they had a grand total of zero leads, again. He was so fucking tired of working on no information.
The four of them were finishing their meal when Crowley said, “That was Jody Mills on the phone earlier, wasn’t it.”

“Yeah, why?” Dean drained the last of his beer.

“Guess you’ll have to reintroduce me to her.” Crowley shifted in his seat. “Considering I almost killed her the last time we met. It’s not the best of first impressions.”

“You think she’d want to see you after that?” Dean asked. Crowley huffed and muttered something under his breath. “What was that?”

“I said, maybe I wanted to apologize!” Crowley said, spitting the word out. “All right?” He glared around the table. “Anyone else feel like commenting?”

There was silence for a few seconds, then Cas cleared his throat. Dean jumped. He’d forgotten Castiel was even there.

“Dean, he said. “You aren’t... finished hunting altogether, right? You only chose not to help Jody because of your recent... problems?”

Dean flinched, but he schooled his features blank. “No, God no. I just... I need time, you know? With everything that’s happening. Hunting isn’t helping.” He paused, almost forgetting Crowley and Kevin were listening and watching. “Would you go back to being an angel?”

Cas felt his stomach drop. Seeing his expression, Dean backpedaled. “I mean, if you could, once the angels were back in Heaven. Would you do it?”

Cas fiddled with the hem of his shirt, thinking hard about his response. How was he supposed to answer that? Humanity, and all its struggles and warmth, or his grace and everything he’d known? “I don’t know,” he said honestly. “I don’t know if I could choose.”

“That’s okay,” Dean said, too quickly.

Cas looked down again. Dean had to know what he was thinking of, what he couldn’t give up for his wings back. Guilt surged in his chest, and he wondered if he were about to throw up.

Around ten, Kevin went off to his room to get sleep, leaving them behind in the den with their sitcoms. Cas followed him ten minutes later. At last, Crowley left Dean alone in the dark room, reminding him not to stay up too late. His own personal parade of babysitters.

It was almost eleven when Dean decided to turn in for the night. As usual, he tossed and turned in bed, still wide awake. Metallica played loud in the background, the soundproofing on the walls blocking it out for the others.

Dean drove alone in the Impala on a dark black road. The moon was reduced to almost nothing, and a Def Leppard song hummed through the speakers; the only sound in the cool night except the purr of the car’s engine. Dean savored the moment; it almost felt like old times again, before the Apocalypse and Hell and Sam’s death, the first one even. He could be on his way to a hunt with nothing but a bag of rock salt, a sawed-off shotgun, and his litter brother napping passenger-side.

The song began to cut out and the Impala’s headlights flickered. “Come on, baby,” he muttered, and started to pull over, frowning. He got to the side of the road, halting just before a deserted intersection. The moment he did, the radio and lights went out altogether.

He frowned. Was there are ghost or something around here? Shaking his head — it was probably just a coincidence — he turned the key in the ignition gingerly. The car tried to start up, the engine
whirring, but she died a moment later. Dean swore and tried again, listening to the drained whistling noise, and then the car died again. “Third time’s the charm,” he said, and tried one more time.

The Impala roared to life again, the lights flickering back on and the radio starting up. Dean was about to shift into drive when he saw another figure in the shotgun seat.

Before he could hit it or get out, the shadow spoke. “Dean!”

“Sam?”

“Dean!” he said again.

Dean hit the shadow hard. “Fuck you! Get the hell away from me!”

“Calm down! It’s me!”

“You’re dead!” he shouted, trying to punch the shadow frantically and meeting calm resistance.

Sam grabbed his shoulders and held him steady. He looked him straight in the eyes with an expression that clearly said, obviously. “We’ve been over this, Dean. You’re dreaming. If you haven’t noticed, this is the only way to get in touch with you.”

“This — this is real? This isn’t just, I don’t know, my whacked-in-the-head brain or something?”

Dean asked. In a split second, the Impala around them melted away and they were sitting on barstools in the Roadhouse. Okay, so maybe this wasn’t all in his head. This felt way more real than a normal dream.

Sam glared. “Dean, we can’t keep doing this. I can tell you right now this is a hundred percent real. Whatever the hell real is supposed to be, anyway. Ash and I jury-rigged this gadget so I could talk to you.”

Across the bar, Ash waved. “No problema!” Fondly, he patted the large metallic box next to him.

Dean glanced around. Everything looked just as it used to, from the rustic decor to the pool table. Even the musty mothball smell lingered in the air. He exhaled, his breath more of a shudder than a sigh. Without hesitation he grabbed Sam and wrapped his arms around him.

“You been taking care of yourself?”

Dean whipped around, letting go of Sam. “Bobby?”

“You look like hell, boy.” Bobby leaned up against a wall, trucker’s cap and all. “Ain’t you been eating?”

Dean hugged him too, then turned back to Sam. “Okay, this still doesn’t make any sense. What the fuck are you up to? I’m trying to bust you out of this joint, not get dragged in after you.”

Sam sighed. “Something big is going on. Ash is monitoring the energy fluctuations up here, and there’s some serious shit happening.”

“Yeah, Sam, and it ain’t exactly been fun and games back home, either.” Dean paced back toward the bar, then turned on his heel. “With the doors locked up and Cas’s wings gone, I can’t get you out of here. And it’s not like Metatron’s gonna be nice and let you walk outta here.”

“Metatron is dead,” Sam said flatly. “We don’t know how it happened. But he bit the dust and it’s been chaos up here ever since.” He ran a hand through his hair.
“Damn it, Sam, you can’t even get a haircut in Heaven?” Dean asked. Before Sam could snap at him, he added over Bobby’s snicker, “I can’t fucking do anything about it, Sam. Maybe you haven’t noticed here on your goddamn cloud, but I’m stuck on Earth with no way up.”

“Look, Dean, this isn’t some hunt, alright? The walls between heavens are falling apart as we speak. There are billions of souls up here, trillions maybe, and they’re just waltzing around Heaven, but that’s not the biggest goddamn problem here.” Sam drained a beer that seemed to appear from thin air. “With all the energy from these souls, they’re not just breaking down walls between the different chunks of Heaven. They’re smashing the walls between Heaven and Earth.”

“You’re telling me those ghosts today were souls breaking through the fucking veil?”

“More like sneaking,” Ash cut in. “See, there’s no angels to hold that veil together, so there’s nothing stopping them from slipping through the cracks. So unless your angel compadres can get up here, we’re gonna have an assload of souls on the physical plane. And you can bet there’ll be shit going down on Earth and in Heaven.”

“Awesome,” Dean said. He stood up, but as he did, a door swung open. He turned to see who it was, and his heart stopped.

He turned back to Sam. “You didn’t tell me he was here.”

Sam looked pained and shrugged. “We— we didn’t think we should.” He gazed past Dean. “We asked you to stay outside.”

John Winchester tossed a rifle down on the bar. “You ain’t the boss of me. Getting worse out there,” he added gruffly. “These fucking shitheads don’t listen to a damn word outta my mouth.” He clapped Dean on the shoulder and headed over to Sam.

“Hold on a minute,” Dean said, getting up. “You’ve been dead for years and you have nothing to say to me?”

John glanced at him. “Hey, Dean.” He turned back to Sam. “Listen, they’re getting worked up out there, frenzied. We got no shot at defusing this one.”

Dean looked back at Bobby. The older man was staring murder at John, but his gaze softened when he saw Dean. “Dying ain’t improved him much,” Bobby said, just loud enough for Dean to hear.

A smile twitched at Dean’s lips. “I’ll say.” He stood closer to Bobby. “How you doing up here?”

“It’s been nothing but booze and line dancing,” Bobby said dryly. “Your old man is a buzzkill like nobody’s business.”

Dean elbowed him, but his eyes fell on his dad, talking to Sam like not a day had gone by since he died to save Dean’s life. Hell, he — John died to save his life, and there he was flat-out ignoring him.

“Bigger fish,” Bobby said, like he knew what Dean was thinking. “We’re under a hell of a lot of pressure, boy. Just finding our hunter buddies round here ain’t been a cinch.” He rolled his eyes. “Your daddy’s still a jackass, but you gotta remember he’s not around for the coffee and yoga. Your mom’s trying her best too.”

Dean stared at his dad, then back at Bobby. “Sh— she’s here too?” He sagged against the wall. “What’s that like?” Last time he saw his mom and dad in a room together, he’d been four. And that night she’d burned on the ceiling.

“First time your momma saw him she smacked him so hard upside the head he had a bruise for a
He snorted. “Would’ve paid to see that.”

Bobby bumped him with his shoulder. “Mary’s proud of you boys, you know. You did more with your lives than she ever dreamed, even if she ain’t happy about you you grew up.”

John picked up his rifle and headed out without another word to Dean. For several seconds, Dean stared at the door he left through. Sam made a sympathetic face. “Sorry about that, Dean. He’s. . . still kind of an asshole.”

“Yeah, no, I got that,” Dean said. “Guess I was expecting a little more enthusiasm.”

Sam groaned. “He’s still a dick, Dean, but he’s good to have around in a bad situation. We haven’t tracked down Rufus or Pastor Jim yet, but we’re working on it, all right? It’s. . . going as good as it can.”

Ash spoke up from his chair, frowning at a dial on the outside of his machine. Dean realized he was glowing ever so slightly. “And that’s all the juice we’ve got for today. Sam, wrap it up.”

“Sorry, Dean,” Sam said. “We’ll try to keep you up to speed, but you’re gonna have to wake up. See you later.”

Dean took a step forward, but the Roadhouse dissipated around him. He reached out for Sam as the world faded, his fingers passing through his brother’s form like mist as the dream swathed him in black.

When Dean blinked again, his eyes opened on his bedroom in the bunker.

“Fuck.”
Dean ran into the war room, his heart thumping. It was empty. Damn it, damn it, damn everything to hell. “Cas!” he roared, his voice echoing through the silent corridors. “Get the hell out here now!”

Crowley came skidding into the war room ten seconds later. “What the hell, Dean?” he demanded, eyes blazing. “Can you clue me in on why we’re up at ass o’clock?”

Castiel ran in a few moments later, running into Crowley and pushing him aside. “What’s going on?” Behind him, Kevin stumbled blearily through the doorway.

“It’s — it’s Sam,” Dean said, out of breath. “He. . .”

“We know he’s dead, you stupid twat.”

Dean stared cold fury. “Thank you, Crowley. Cas, listen. Sam — Sam got into my dream.” Crowley’s pissed-off expression turned to one of confusion.

“What?” Castiel asked. “You mean like I ca— could?” He winced when he corrected himself. He couldn’t walk in Dean’s dreams any longer. His new limitations were often ignored until it was too late to take it back.

“I — I guess so, he showed up in my dream, told me Ash cooked something up so we could chat. Can that even happen?” Dean demanded.

Cas stared back at him, shock in his eyes. “I don’t — maybe.”

Dean closed his eyes. “Ash is — is a fucking genius — was — is —” He took a deep breath. “If anyone could do it, it would be him.”

“Even if he — Ash? — can do it, why would he?” Kevin asked. “I mean, sounds like this guy’s in Heaven. Why would he need to talk to Dean?”

All the energy flooded out of Dean’s body, and he collapsed into a chair. “Metatron’s dead. Something’s wrong with Heaven. Apparently without the angels to keep everything working right, the walls between heavens are breaking down, and more importantly, they’re starting to wear down the wall —”

“Between Heaven and Earth.” Castiel’s eyes fell closed, his entire body rigidly still. “That’s what happened. Human souls — showing through the cracks.” He was half certain he was about to throw up. This was what came of trying to make amends. The destruction of everything Heaven was and stood for, because he was so prideful he thought he could make it right.

He should just stay here in the bunker and do the chores Dean had no time to do. At least that was more difficult for him to fuck up.

Cas turned away from Dean. “How did this happen?”

Dean got to his feet and paced to the doorway. “We. . . they don’t know. Best guess is something — or someone — took Metatron out.”
“That’s impossible,” Kevin said. “There’s no way in and out of Heaven, the tablet said —”

“Well, apparently there is,” Dean snapped.

Crowley settled on the edge of the table. “So what? What’s so bad about all this?” he asked. “Sounds like someone else’s mess to me.”

Dean started to answer, but Castiel went for Crowley and pulled him off the table roughly, slamming him up against the wall. Crowley winced and struggled, but Cas held him fast. “Don’t you understand, you pathetic excuse for a human? Heaven is in chaos. If humanity breaks through that boundary, do you know what will happen?”

Crowley shook his head slowly, fidgeting.

“Exactly. Nothing like this has ever happened before. But if I had to guess? Imagine billions upon billions of ghosts wandering the Earth with nowhere to go, barely able to communicate, driven insane by resentment and loneliness. You can’t fight them, but they could kill you. How would you destroy a human soul? And you think this is not our fight.”

He let go of Crowley’s shoulders, shaking his head. “The angels are on Earth, and killing innocent humans to get what they want. And yet you think this is not our fight.” Cas’s mouth twisted in a wry smile. “It will be anarchy on Heaven and Earth.”

Castiel couldn’t believe Crowley of all people would doubt the havoc human souls could wreak on Earth. He turned to Dean. “You said Metatron was dead. Who killed him?”

Dean stared at him with wide eyes, surprised at the wrath that darkened Castiel’s face. “They don’t know. An angel, probably, but . . .”

Cas pressed his lips together and turned away from Dean. “This is all my fault,” he said, swallowing back something like a sob. “I shouldn’t have trusted him.”

“This isn’t on you —”

“Then who is it on, Dean?” he shouted. “I was naïve enough to trust an angel I hardly knew, I helped him, and now Heaven is falling apart and I am hunted by my family. Don’t try to tell me this wasn’t my doing, Dean, do not presume to know what is and is not because of me!”

“No one here blames you,” Dean said. “I don’t blame you. You made a mistake, hell, we’ve all made mistakes.” He sat down and stared at the table, propping up his head with his hands.

“Dean —” Cas cut himself off. “I don’t know how to fix this,” he whispered, forgetting Crowley and Kevin were with them. “How am I supposed to fix this?”

“If an angel got into Heaven to take down Metatron, then there’s gotta be some way in and out,” Dean said cautiously. “IF we can find it, we can get the angels back to Heaven, we can get Sam back.”

“If we can find it,” Cas repeated. He was fighting every instinct that screamed at him to run out into the open and pray until an angel found him, until one of them came at last to kill him, to end it. He couldn’t make this right. He just . . . couldn’t.

Dean watched Castiel pace back and forth. He was blaming himself again, for being manipulated and maneuvered into doing what some douchebag wanted. It was pissing him off, that he thought being screwed over should make him at fault. And it didn’t, not when Dean stood there with the
blood still on his hands, knowing down to the last second that it was his fault his brother was dead.

“Cas, how do you figure I feel about this?” Dean asked listlessly. “Sam is up there, since it sounds like you forgot that. And that, that’s on me. Sam is up there without me, because I was too stupid to stop him!”

He shook his head. How could he get Cas to understand? “Would any of this have happened if I had just left him alone?” Dean asked, and he blinked back tears. “If I went after Dad by myself, if I never got him out of Stanford, if I just let him be happy? You can’t blame yourself for that one, Cas, I’m the one who pulled Sam back into this mess.” He moved forward without thinking, and before he realized what he was doing, Dean was hugging Cas tightly.

“We’re gonna fix this,” Dean said. “But I need you to stop blaming yourself for what some douchebag pulled on your watch.”

Cas was stiff in his arms at first. Slowly he relaxed into Dean’s hug and eventually embraced him in return. After a moment of hesitation, he pressed his face to Dean’s neck and whispered, “Sam’s death wasn’t your fault, either.”

Behind them, Crowley let out a huff and looked from Castiel, carefully holding Dean like he was afraid of breaking, and Dean, clinging to Cas as if he were afraid of drowning. He didn’t know who looked more ridiculous. Although, he mused, if he were in Castiel’s position he couldn’t imagine being so gentle.

Cas slowly pulled away, and suddenly he was blushing and looking away from Dean’s face.

Kein cleared his throat. “Okay, well, if no one else cares, I’m gonna, um, head back to bed. We can. Um. Work this out in the morning.”

Crowley stood and stretched. “I’ll leave you two alone.” A moment later, he disappeared into the hall.

Slowly, Dean pulled up a chair and tilted his head up to look at Cas. “So,” he said. “Want a beer, or something?”

Castiel slowly walked across to the other side of the table and sat down. His eyes flicked up to meet Dean’s for a moment, before making the smallest shake of his head.

Dean was quiet. He’d noticed all those new, weird behaviors of Cas’s, all the laundry and dishes and the time he caught Cas sweeping the floor. And for some reason that made him think of Cas taking care of him while he was sleeping off the endless research and recovering from the malnutrition and everything, which led his train of thought . . . straight back to where it didn’t fucking belong. Cas was in love with him, and Dean . . . Dean knew how he felt. But he didn’t — he couldn’t —

Nothing he told himself was convincing him of anything whatsoever. Cas didn’t deserve to be left up in the air like this, hanging on tenterhooks for Dean’s decision.

And Sam would want him to be happy.

His dad was going to be pissed. And for some reason, that was what sealed the deal for him. Because his dad had a stick so far up his ass it fucked with his heart, but Dean would bet his mom would want him to be happy, too.

And he’d rather risk this going wrong than knowing about it, never talking about it, and slowly strangling their relationship.
Dean spoke before he had a chance to talk himself out of it.

“Uh, Cas?” Dean shook his head at the hesitation in his voice. No, he was going through with this. No time to be a coward. “Maybe this isn’t the best time, but I think we need to, uh, we need to talk about. . .” For some reason, Dean couldn’t finish the sentence, but he didn’t need to. The tension in the room practically screamed his intention.

Cas still wouldn’t meet his eyes. “If you want,” he said quietly. This was it. It was over.

“Yeah. Yeah, Cas, we need to talk about this.” Dean crossed and uncrossed his arms, clearly uncomfortable. “So you’re, uh. You’re in love. With me.” Castiel didn’t respond, didn’t react.

“Look, Cas, it’s — well, I, um.”

It’s fine, it’s fine, Castiel told himself. He could pack up his few possessions in a short time and be gone before morning. It was best for both of them. Clearly Castiel’s efforts to seem useful had failed. Miserably. He’d failed, again. “I understand, Dean.” Fuck, even his voice seemed to betray his feelings.

“No, Cas, I don’t think you do,” Dean said, and Cas flinched. “I really don’t think you get it. Because, uh, Cas. It’s. It’s not just you.”

Castiel frowned. “What?” he breathed. Carefully he raised his head, at last making eye contact.

“What I mean is, you’re great, Cas. Fucking awesome. And I really don’t want to lose you. And you’re not the only one who, uh, feels that way. So if you want to. . .” Damn it, none of this was coming out right. Why the hell couldn’t Dean just spit it out? He cleared his throat, reaching out on impulse and grabbing Cas’s hand. Keeping his eyes on Castiel’s, he cleared his throat again.

“I need you, Cas. But I don’t know how to do any of this, and I don’t want to lose you, either. So if this is something you want. . . Damn it, Cas, don’t look at me like I’m gonna tear you a new one!” He tightened his grip on Castiel’s hand and Cas’s eyes widened. “I want to, uh, if you mean it, then. . .” This wasn’t working.

Quite suddenly, it clicked in Castiel’s head. He wasn’t being thrown out. Dean wasn’t angry, or even upset. He had a newfound understanding for why humans talked about worries and fears as though they were a physical weight. Cas felt lighter than he had in weeks. Dean wanted this as much as he did. “I couldn’t lie to you if I wanted, Dean. I —” He hesitated. “I love you.” He flinched expecting a backlash that never came.

“Yes! Exactly. And I want to, but I can’t. . . Cas, everyone I l— everyone I care about, they die. And I don’t want to lose you. I want you to stay with me, I want to be with you.” He rubbed the back of his neck with his free hand. “But you know, I can’t do this if. . .” If I’m just gonna watch you die, he couldn’t say.

“Dean?” Cas withdrew his hand, unwilling to accept any of this. “If you’re serious about this, will you — can you just tell me? If you mean this as some kind of joke —”

“Damn it, Cas, it’s not a fucking joke! I wouldn’t joke about this.” Dean couldn’t believe Castiel even had to ask, and hell, he wasn’t gonna lose his nerve now. “You’re fucking badass and you’re my best friend and I want — I want the same things you want, except I don’t wanna fuck it all up.” He huffed out a sorry attempt at a laugh. “God, I wish this could’ve been romantic instead of in the middle of the night in the secret anti-monster bunker.”

“You’re serious,” Cas said, still unable to believe the evidence.
“As a heart attack,” Dean said, a tiny smile playing on his lips. Slowly, tentatively, like he was afraid to spook him, Dean twined his fingers with Castiel’s. “So if we both understand that part, there’s other stuff we need to talk about.” He shifted, unsure of how to broach the subject with his best friend. “How — how far do you want this, us, to go?”

Castiel still couldn’t believe this was happening. Years of wondering what these feelings were and then years more of knowing and wishing he didn’t have them — years of making mistake after stupid mistake. Dean had to be playing a trick, this couldn’t possibly be real. “I. Um. I think we should see how it goes.”

“Then you don’t mind me doing this?” Dean leaned over the table and kissed his cheek quickly, before he could stop himself. He pulled back just as quickly. Cas was frozen still, his face pale except for two bright spots of color on his cheeks. Dean wondered in a wave of panic if he’d overstepped his bounds before a shaky smile appeared on Cas’s face.

“I take it that’s a yes,” he said.

Cas nodded dazedly. “I think so.” His heart pounded. This was real. This was real. Dean just kissed him. He’d never thought of something so simple as also being so intimate as an angel and his mind was whirling with trillions of simultaneous fathomless thoughts and he couldn’t string any two together coherently. “You’re amazing,” he said breathlessly, a thousand wild and desperate confessions bubbling to his lips. “You’re amazing and strong and brave and loyal and beautiful —”

Dean cut off his babbling. “Whatever you say, Cas.” He grinned and yawned, standing. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

“See you,” Castiel repeated. He spent several more minutes staring at the table, swamped by what the rational section of his mind told him were simply hormones and biologically produced chemicals inducing a heightened state of perception, rapid heartbeat, and the shutdown of non-necessary bodily functions, but he couldn’t snap out of it by willpower alone. All he could think of were green irises gazing back at him and soft lips grazing his cheek. “Good night.”

Dean woke up more tense than he had been the night before. Somehow, in the dark and then the blinding incandescent light, his dream had felt unreal. But now he staggered out of his room, pale and feeling hollow. He couldn’t help Sam. He had no idea what was happening to his brother up there. The helpless sensation that churned in his stomach was tainting every move he made.

Crowley handed Kevin a plate of eggs as Dean stumbled into the kitchen in search of coffee. He declined when Crowley offered a plate; his own nausea wouldn’t be eased by the runny, gag-inducing substance. “I’m just gonna grab some cereal,” he said.

Cas wasn’t awake yet. Dean sat down in the kitchen with a bowl of cereal and a gallon of milk. Kevin reentered a few moments later, looking very green. “Don’t ask,” he said, grabbing a stale bagel and the orange juice with a shudder.

Cas wandered in about ten minutes later. He hesitated before sitting down next to Dean. He had barely been able to sleep.

Maybe it had been a hallucination brought on by the devastation of what Dean told them about Heaven. A fantasy brought into stark almost-reality. Castiel hated the thought, but it made more sense than what his memory claimed had happened.

Dean’s hand brushed his own gently, and Cas glanced up. Dean’s smile faltered. “You okay?” he asked.
“I’m fine,” Castiel said, brushing it off.

“Don’t ever lie to an expert.” Dean grabbed his shoulder and pulled Cas around to face him. “Cas, seriously. Are you doing okay? What Sam said, and everything, It’s not good, man, but I need you to be up-front with me.” He leaned forward and kissed Cas’s cheek, just as he had the night before. He was acutely aware of Kevin’s presence, of the tension in his back as he leaned close. “And we’ll, uh, ‘see how it goes.’”

Kevin raised his eyebrows, but said nothing. It wasn’t fair of him to make a comment now when apparently they were working out their, frankly, painful sexual tension on their own. If he said anything, he feared they’d backslide to square one, and he was not living through the ‘pinning for a distant lover’ phase again.

He glanced up and saw Crowley standing in the doorway, his mouth open. The demon’s — no, the man’s face went through several expression in a few short moments; the only one Kevin recognized for sure was jealousy. Crowley settled on a nonchalant, easy look, as if he hadn’t been staring in hurt shock a few moments before.

Cas still refused to answer Dean, but he felt much more relaxed already. Dean wanted him to stay. Dean cared for him. Maybe he even — no. He shouldn’t allow his hopes to reach so high. Castiel didn’t need to fear being removed from the bunker and told to make his own way on Earth. So long as he remained with Dean and had allies and resources, he still might stand a chance at fixing Heaven.

Dean set his spoon down. “Actually, I’ve been meaning to take a look at the car. I think something’s up with her.” How he knew this was a mystery, as he’d barely been allowed out of the bunker since his meltdown.

Around noon, he headed up to the front to see what was up. The sun burned hot and direct; it was steamy for mid-October. Dean squinted up at the cloudless sky before he rolled up his sleeves and opened the hood of the Impala. “Okay, baby, let’s see what’s up.”

Not an hour later, Cas stumbled outside with a glass of water. Dean straightened up from where he was bent over the open front of the car, banging his head on the black hood.

“Kevin sent me,” he explained. “He reminded me of the temperature and said to bring you water. . .” he trailed off, losing his train of thought as Dean walked around the front of the car.

“Yeah?” Dean said, stretching and leaning against the car. “What were you saying?”

“Um. . .” Castiel was little very much distracted. Obviously Dean had already noticed the heat. His shirt was crumpled on the ground and he was sweating and Dean had very nice abdominal muscles. .

“Cas?” Dean asked, waving a hand in front of his face. Cas blinked.

“I brought water.” He held it out abruptly, almost spilling it. Dean took the glass, spiking up his damp hair with his free hand.

“Thanks,” Dean said. “I think I’ve got the issue worked out, it should be an easy fix. I won’t be out here for more than an hour.” He downed half the glass in one shot.

Castiel determinedly focused on what Dean was saying instead of the shiny sheen of sweat on Dean’s muscles. “Oh. Then I’ll just wait out here for you.”
Dean raised his eyebrows. Cas was... was he flustered? By what? “Are you doing okay?”

“You’re very pretty,” Cas said, then winced. What the fuck had happened to his capacity to control his mouth? “I didn’t — I’m sorry. You look good, and attractive?” Castiel shifted, clearly uncomfortable. Dean probably thought he sounded stupid.

But even though Dean looked slightly unbalanced by his words, he laughed. “Uh, thanks, I guess. You know it’s okay to tell me what you think, right? Dude, you’re not gonna get in trouble for calling me hot.” Dean saw the look of concern and uncertainty on Cas’s face, and decided to just spell it out for him. “And you can hold my hand if you want, and and kiss me, and steal my coffee and add two tons of sugar to it. I don’t want this to be awkward for us. Just take it easy, okay? This is new, really new, for both of us.”

“I see.” Castiel knew the first, archaic human courting rituals, but he also knew the rules had long since changed. What he hadn’t known was that so much of it was simple and ordinary. He preferred it to the stiff ritual of the Victorian society or the practices of selling a woman into marriage. “Then it’s okay with you if I kiss you right now.”

Dean’s heart jumped. “Fuck. Yeah, Cas, you can kiss me.”

And oh, God, Cas was stepping forward with determination written in the crease of his forehead and a part of Dean he’d been smothering into silence for years was pushing him forward too. For a long moment Dean and Cas were still, their faces so close together Dean could feel Cas’s breath on his lips.

He had half a mind to joke about personal face, but he worried Cas might take it literally. Cas blinked, and Dean thought wildly that he could count his eyelashes at this distance.

A half-second later a whistle pierced the air and they jerked apart. Crowley smirked at them, standing just outside the bunker door. Cas was pale as death itself and fumbling to smooth out his clothes. Dean glared. “Way to murder the moment, Crowley,” he said.

“You make it sound like I’m here to make it easy on you,” Crowley responded. There was something in his voice that Dean couldn’t quite place; almost like envy. “Don’t remember that in the terms and conditions. As I remember it, you want me around for my stunning good looks and sharp wit.”

The strained attempt at a smile vanished from Dean’s face. “Crowley. If you don’t get the fuck out of here right now, no one will ever find your body,” Dean informed him.

“It’s fine,” Cas said. He struggled to catch his breath. He and Dean had been so close. He didn’t know if they’d ever been so near before, and his human heart was racing. “What is it, Crowley?”

“I ran out of paint for the bathroom,” he snapped, but there was only a breath of vitriol in it. “And it’s too early to start on lunch. I’m bored, damn it.”

“Maybe you could try helping out around here,” Dean suggested bitterly. “There’s a whole damn library full of books downstairs. Maybe you should try it out.”

Crowley made a derisive huffing sound and stalked back into the bunker. “Don’t forget to use a condom!” he called without looking back. Castiel murmured something about keeping an eye on him.

Dean got back to business. He wanted to finish up with the car before ten. As he worked, Dean couldn’t stop his thoughts from drifting back to his dream. He insisted he was doing fine, to Cas, to
Kevin, to himself. It wasn’t like Sam could die up there. His brother was safer than anyone else right now, but the urgency of the situation wasn’t lost on him, either. If he slacked off, they might never be able to fix this.

But no, Dean was just fine. He was under control during the day. It was at night he needed the music to drown out his thoughts so he could tune out long enough to fall asleep, it was at night the fear of failing Sam again hit him hard, but he hadn’t had a full-on mental break yet, so he decided he was gonna be okay for now. He kept his gun far away from his reach unless he planned on needing it. That kind of temptation had to be removed.

He sighed and ran down to the garage. Dean had a few tools down there, probably next to the sweet vintage motorcycle he’d been repairing last spring.

Dean was right; the problem only took about a half hour to fix. He came down the stairs with grease staining his jeans, t-shirt and toolbox in hand. He could feel the stirrings of a headache in spite of the water he’d already had — the heat was *brutal.*

Crowley grinned at him, raising a glass. “Life blows,” he said, and drank.

“That vodka?”

Crowley looked disgusted. “Water. We’re out of vodka, but it’s the thought that counts, yes?” He stared into the glass, clearly disappointed with something. “Unfortunately.” His words were heavily slurred and his eyes barely focused. Dean had a feeling he knew what happened to the vodka.

He ignored Crowley’s morose behavior and headed to his room. He sat listening to ACDC on repeat, blocking out any other noise in the bunker. He wondered what Cas was up to. Cleaning, probably; it seemed like it was a new hobby of his.

Maybe in a couple days the two of them could hit the road, go on a hunt. Dean doubted he could sleep at night without playing music so loud his eardrums hurt, but hell, if he was ready to get back in the game, he was getting back in the fucking game. If he stayed in the bunker, it would drive him crazy.

Some time later, a knock sounded at his door. Dean didn’t hear it. He was singing along, very off-key, to Highway to Hell and the speakers drowned him out anyway. The knock repeated more forcefully, but when Dean still didn’t answer, Castiel opened the door.

The music hit him like a physical force. “Turn it down!” Castiel shouted, but Dean didn’t even open his eyes.

Cas grabbed him by the shoulder and Dean’s eyes snapped open as he swung his fist at his face. Cas caught Dean’s wrist and stopped him, twisting his arm until he gasped and realized it was just Cas. He turned off his stereo and sat up. “Sorry,” he said sheepishly. “What’s going on?”

“Crowley is demanding we join him and watch something together,” he answered, absently sifting through Dean’s mixtapes.

Dean ran a hand through his hair. “Does he really give a shit?”

Cas rolled his eyes. “What do you think?”

Dean stood, and Cas followed him. “Them I guess I don’t have anything better to do.” They went into the kitchen. “Sure, I’ll watch whatever,” he added, “but I’m making the popcorn. The
microwaveable shit’s got nothing on the real deal.”

Castiel sat up on the counter. He pretended not to look when Dean bent over to get the popcorn popper from a low cupboard, even though Dean’s jeans were tight in the most appreciable places. (Cas was reminded of Chuck’s vivid descriptions of Dean’s body in the Supernatural books, and was suddenly envious of his visions.) And he definitely wasn’t watching when Dean’s shirt rode up as he reached for the popcorn, up on a high shelf.

“Enjoying the view?” Dean laughed.

“Perhaps a little,” Cas said, smiling back a little tentatively. Dean pushed his shoulder lightly.

Cas still found it difficult to believe this was real. For years he believed his affections would always be unreturned, and here he was. It had barely been a day; of course he still found it surreal that it was even possible.

When the popcorn was ready, he and Dean went down to the den, where Crowley was already lounging in an armchair. He held the remote control loosely in one hand. Cas sat on one end of the couch while Dean took the other.

The action on the screen quickly drew them in, distracting Cas from the fact that he was slowly getting closer to Dean every time he shifted in his seat. He jumped when he felt Dean’s arm slide around his shoulders in the middle of their second episode of Star Trek.

Around five, Crowley got up to order Chinese food instead of expending energy on making food, but while he was on the phone Dean snagged the remote. Kevin rolled his eyes, but Dean ignored him. “What else is on here?” He searched through the lists and stopped on a movie. “Wanna watch some Stephen King, Cas?” Without waiting for an answer, he selected it. “These are the classics.”

Crowley sat back down in his chair. “Really, Dean, Carrie? This is your idea of a date? You live in a freak show yourself.”

“Shut up,” Dean said. He leaned up against Cas, and Cas was leaning up against him. They watched horror movies until late in the night, leaving the empty containers on the floor of the den when they went off to bed.

Dean spent the next few days working hard in the library, but he was careful not to wear himself out, either. He figured Cas would stop him if he tried to overdo it, anyway, but he didn’t want to have that fight again.

Instead of spending endless hours on research, Dean found other ways to occupy his time. One of which was keeping Crowley out of his hair, which was more time-consuming than he thought.

More importantly, Dean and Cas had started to work out the specifics of this new relationship. After Crowley’s interruption, they were both too skittish about kissing to try it again. And Dean figured that, considering his history, kissing so soon would be a huge goddamn mistake, anyway. They agreed it was better to go slow, without rushing into something they couldn’t control. That left Dean with a lot of pent-up frustration and cold showers.

Dean also spent his hours giving Cas advice on the whole humanity thing — specifically, how to talk to people without freaking them the hell out. Apparently Cas interpreted that as Dean being freaked out by him, and it had taken serious convincing for Cas to understand that Dean meant people who didn’t know the paranormal existed at all.

One night, Dean brought up something he’d been meaning to ask anyway. “Do you want to find a
“Hunt again, maybe tomorrow?” he asked Cas. “It’s been awhile, and monsters aren’t gonna hunt themselves.” He didn’t mention that Crowley and Kevin were under no circumstances invited.

Cas’s face lit up. “I’d like to go, if it’s all right,” he said. “Do you have somewhere in mind?” His excitement was almost tangible. Dean remembered the Cas of only a few months ago, who would have considered icing a wendigo commonplace, almost boring, and he wished suddenly that Metatron wasn’t dead — he wanted to personally shove an angel blade through that bastard’s face for everything he’d done to Cas.

But Metatron was gone, and his murderer ran free while Heaven remained closed for business. It was hard to ignore the obvious problem dangling over their heads. Dean could see it in Cas’s eyes the way he knew Cas could see it in his; they needed to get Sam home and safe and needed the angels back and getting Heaven put together again. Dean figured that if they got back into the swing of hunting, they wouldn’t feel so helpless. He knew the familiarity of doing good made it easier for him.

For the next few hours, Dean worked on getting his things together for hunting, stocking his duffel and making sure he was ready for whatever he would have to swing at. He grabbed a machete in case of vampires, salt rounds for ghosts. He felt strange, leaving behind the holy water, but he didn’t need it anymore. He kept Ruby’s knife, though. There was holy oil and an angel blade in the bag, too. He packed up a few changes of clothes and some other essentials on top of that.

The hunter smiled in satisfaction at his work. “And He saw that it was good,” he said with a wry smirk. He went down the hall to Cas’s room. The walls were still blank and undecorated, starkly white as the day Cas moved in. Boring. He wondered if he should give Castiel advice on how to spruce it up a little, make it look more like home. Then again, Sam never really unpacked in his room.

“You all set for tomorrow?” he asked. Cas had an open bag on his bed, and Dean spotted a few different weapons inside along with a few outfits.

The clothes were identical copies of what he wore every day; white shirt, black pants and jacket. And God, it had to be uncomfortable, but somehow Cas was getting through it without complaint. The goddamn guy still refused to take off the damn trenchcoat. Dean wondered briefly if he slept in it. He dug his fingernails into his palm to remind himself to pay attention to what was actually happening.

He sat down on the end of Cas’s bed and began a few refreshers on bluffing and gambling. Cas hadn’t had much practice in the last few weeks, and Dean wanted to review basic tells for when someone was lying out of his ass.

Earlier that day, Crowley had convinced them to go out for drinks. Kevin had almost gotten out of it on the grounds that he had to supervise Crowley’s rampant alcoholism on the ex-demon’s last outing, but Castiel convinced him by promising he could pretend they didn’t know each other.

After Dean and Cas finished up with reviewing some poker strategies (Castiel was fucking awesome at card counting — maybe it was the angel thing), they headed out to the war room with their bags, surprised to see Crowley waiting patiently.

“Hello, boys. I see you’ve decided to take a moment from worshiping at the devil’s altar?” he needlel them, looking Dean up and down as they climbed the stairs. “You know Satan, always watching. Mmm, Dean, you’re looking delicious.”

Dean let the remarks roll off him. He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “Backseat, Crowley.”
Crowley stuck his tongue out at Dean but Cas slid into the seat behind Dean without a complaint. He understood that with all he was going through, Dean didn’t need a stark reminder of Sam’s absence. Kevin sat on the opposite side, tense and squished between Crowley and the door.

The bar had the scent of cinnamon hanging in the air. To be honest, Dean thought it was a little weird, but then again, when was the last time he was in Lebanon’s local bar? A group of college-aged women were laughing and chattering around a table, a few couples shared drinks in booths, and it was impossible to miss the people who came here to smother their problems in a bottle. They were the ones leaning up at the bar with their heads down or tucked into corners with their coats on.

Dean felt a mild twinge of sympathy. He knew exactly what that felt like.

Kevin darted off to a table by the college girls, and Dean led the other two down to the end of the bar. Dean sat with his back to Crowley so he could face Cas. Crowley scowled at them. “Disgusting saps,” he muttered.

Dean ordered a beer when the bartender came over to them, complaining when Crowley called for scotch. “You drink the same shit every day! Why should I pay twice as much for it here? Get something else. Martinis, whiskey, hell, get a shot of tequila. Now that’s something worth paying to see,” he said.

Crowley glowered. “I’ll have tequila next round, as long as you’re still paying.” Dean flipped him off and turned to Cas. “What are you having?”

Cas had rapidly calculated that it was highly unlikely this woman was an agent of the angels and decided she wasn’t a threat to his safety. That didn’t make him any more sure of what to order. “I’ll, um... give me a shot of...”

Dean grinned. “He’ll take whiskey,” he told the woman.

She smiled flirtatiously. “You’re cuter than most guys who walk in here.”

Dean laughed, but he felt Cas’s presence beside him more acutely than ever before. “Yeah, well,” he said before he could second-guess himself, “you’re not the only one who thinks so.” He tilted his head toward Cas.

Castiel intuitively felt her attitude change when Dean said those words. A moment later and she was staring at him, her mouth dropping open slightly. Disgust, Castiel thought. “Uh — oh. Okay,” she said, not sounding like it was okay at all. She smiled again, eyes too wide and mouth stretched too far. “I’ll just. Get that whiskey for you.” She walked off, her fake grin still far too wide.

“Well, screw you too,” Dean said. He slipped his hand into Cas’s, tangling their fingers together, before bringing their clasped hands up to rest on the counter pointedly. “If she’s got a problem she can say it to my goddamn face.”

Crowley made a noise of irritation. “Don’t start anything, we haven’t even had one round yet.”

Cas watched the bartender intently while Dean argued with Crowley. Her body was tense, and she kept glancing over her shoulder at them. When he caught her eye, she turned back quickly. She gave him his drink without making eye contact or small talk, and slammed Dean’s beer on the counter in front of him.

“Hey, darling, when am I getting my scotch?” Crowley asked in a low, attempted-sultry voice. Dean watched him lean forward, an almost charming smile sliding onto his face.
“It’s coming right up,” she said, obviously irritated. When she passed the glass to him, he put one hand on top of hers.

“The name’s Crowley,” he said. “And you are?”

“Working,” she said, giving him the exasperated smile of someone who needs to keep a customer happy.

“Right,” Crowley said, idly leaning back. “Ivy,” he read off her nametag. He sipped his scotch coolly.

“Yeah, and busy,” she added curtly.

“Don’t be that way, darling, I’m just chatting,” he said. “A little friendly conversation.”

“Leave her alone, Crowley,” Dean said, a warning not in his voice.

“What did I do? I said hello,” Crowley traced the rim of his glass absently.

“Just let it go, alright?”

Ivy leaned over the counter. “Look, I don’t need someone like you defending me from him, okay?”

“Except I’m the one paying for his drinks,” Dean said, trying to keep a hold on his temper. “And he’s acting like a d-bag. Would have thought you’d be okay with that.”

“I don’t need your help,” she snapped. She shot a dark glance at his and Cas’s hands, still clasped together as they were.

Dean almost snapped a few choice words right back at her, but he bit down on his tongue to stop himself. No picking a fight. This was their last day before getting back on the job. He couldn’t get riled up now. Instead he turned to Cas, who was gingerly sipping his whiskey.

“What do you think?” he asked, forcing cheer into his tone.

“She’s small enough for us to have a height advantage, but there is muscle tone in her arms that suggests she is practiced in self-defense, enough that she would make a challenging opponent. Her long hair is a weak point, also she would be outnumbered. Overall, not much of a threat, though she’s very quick to judge.”

Dean stared. Finally he managed to mumble, “I meant the drink.”

Cas let go of his hand sheepishly. “It’s all right. Dean, you’re tense.”

“Yeah, I fucking noticed,” he said icily, shooting a glare at Crowley, who was valiantly trying to chat up the bartender.

Castiel shrugged. “If she understood as much about us as she pretends, she would thank you for halting the Apocalypse and apologize for her rudeness to an angel.” Cas’s expression darkened. “Well. A fallen angel.”

Dean glanced around self-consciously, then kissed his cheek. “You’re awesome anyway.”

About to respond, Cas heard a huff from Ivy’s direction but chose to act as if he hadn’t. Instead he leaned purposefully against Dean’s shoulder, keeping his eyes intensely focused on Ivy and her blonde ponytail.
They left around eleven. Crowley had argued for staying until closing, but Dean wanted them back early so he and Cas wouldn’t be hungover and tired when they left the next morning. Kevin trailed after them when they walked out to the car, stumbling a little.

As they drove along the deserted back road to the bunker, Dean had the sense that something was wrong. The chilly October breeze rustled the trees and stirred the leaves on the ground up into a whispering flurry that scattered across the road.

They rounded the corner and Dean hit the brakes hard. The sky was clouded over, but a burnished orange reflected back up into the sky and black smoke was a plume spiraling upward.

Dean stopped the car a good thirty yards off, getting out and running down the road with the other three following in various stages of drunkenness.

The bunker was in flames.

“What the fuck?” Dean shouted. “Shit!” Smoke spilled through the open doorway; the door itself was several feet away, bent out of shape and torn completely off the hinges. “God damn it.”

He stared up at the flames that licked at the entrance. “Did you start a fucking fire in there, Crowley?” he demanded.

“I live here too, if you’re suffering under the delusion that I would —” Crowley cut himself off, panting.

Kevin gazed blankly at the blazing, orange-stained clouds, shaking his head in denial.

Castiel’s face went absolutely pale as he stared into the bright fire of the bunker. “Dean. Dean! There’s someone in there!”

The figure standing in the doorway suddenly walked out of the bunker, body seeming to be ablaze. It ascended the stairs and stood before them calmly. As the smoke cleared, Dean could see her clearly. She had thick, curly hair, dark skin, and sharp cheekbones. Her brown eyes were dark and full of anger. He distantly heard Cas intake his breath sharply.

“You,” he breathed.

“Dean Winchester,” she said, her voice even and controlled. “Castiel.” She sighed, looking them over. “I am sorry about this. It was necessary. You have too much information already. I warned you, Castiel, that I do not want you meddling in our affairs. I am simply removing the temptation. You have tried, and failed, to save our people. I will do this myself.”

Dean saw the glint of an angel blade in her hand. “Who are you?” he asked, trying to subtly reach his own weapon from its place tucked in his belt. Then the angel fixed her fiery gaze on him.

There was the strangest light of respect in her eyes. “Azrael,” she said. “You must excuse me. I have other matters to attend to. Especially in respect to undoing the damage Castiel has done,” she added. “I will bring peace, but he cannot and will not be a part of it.”

“This wasn’t my fault,” Cas said, but the doubt in his voice was unmistakable.

“Is it not?” Azrael asked coolly. “The angels must return to our place as caretakers of humanity. Metatron was foolish. As were you. I will not permit mistakes.” The fire behind her flared and crackled furiously.

“I warned you not to step in, Castiel,” she said. “But you killed an angel not long ago, and I know you continue to search for a way to interfere. I cannot allow it.”
Dean swore under his breath. He’d finally worked his blade free from his belt. As he straightened up, Azrael’s mouth formed a half-smirk. The flames in the bunker went out abruptly.

“I do not wish to kill you, Castiel,” she said, sounding almost sympathetic. “But you must understand, I cannot allow this to continue.” She shook her head. “Goodbye, Castiel. I hope I do not meet you again.”

“You said I had one warning,” Cas said, taking a step forward. Dean glared at him, but Cas held his ground firmly. “What changed?”

“I have judged your killing of Ephraim to be just,” she said evenly. “He was ending human lives, forgetting the value of our Father’s greatest creation. I will make no such error. You taught me that.” Azrael didn’t break eye contact as she stepped closer to him. “But if you do break this trust again, you may rest assured that I will kill you.” With that, Azrael gazed up into the smoke-hazy sky and moved purposefully to the car parked near the edge of the road, got in, and was soon disappearing around the bend.

Wordlessly, Dean walked as if in a dream, dazed and slow, into the bunker. The papers that had been scattered across every surface were just . . . gone. He was willing to bet that everything in the library was ash. A thick layer of grey flakes had settled over everything that hadn’t burned, which wasn’t much.

Only a few tables and chairs survived the destruction, scraping by with deep black scorches on their polished surfaces. The wood paneling, the bookshelves, even the fucking lampshades were gone.

An insane urge to laugh bubbled up in Dean’s chest. What, losing Sam wasn’t enough? Heaven falling apart and angels walking the Earth — she had to destroy the only hope he had left. And fuck it if that wasn’t the most morbidly funny thing Dean had heard in a goddamn year.

“What are we supposed to do now?” Cas asked. Dean jumped. He hadn’t realized Cas and Crowley had followed him in. Castiel’s eyes were wide with shock and anger.

Dean shook his head, staring at the patterns of black as that coated the tables. “We keep each other safe. Because that’s all we can do when every goddamn thing in the world is against us.” He had to support himself on one of the remaining tables to avoid collapsing. “We save the entire fucking ungrateful world, and we save Sam, and we fix it. Because that’s my job. And now it’s yours too. We’ll make it right, because we have to.”
Contrition

Contrition: the state of feeling remorseful or penitent

Dean and Cas had wasted an hour working through the bunker and trying to find anything that survived the inferno, just to find out that almost nothing passed through the flames.

The armory was wrecked; most of the weapons had either burned or been melted down in the heat. That wasn’t too bad; Dean and Cas had packed up most of what they would need on a regular basis and stowed those in the trunk of the Impala hours before. More important was the fact that almost all the books in the library were in askes. The only ones that remained were in the climate-controlled safe in the basement, the original copies of some seriously valuable manuscripts. And the tablets. The tablets were intact, so Dean knew Azrael had no use for them.

Which, to be honest, wasn’t all that helpful. Dean couldn’t read Quechua or Sanskrit or any of the languages those salvaged books were in.

Castiel stared into his hands as Dean rifled through what was left. This was his fault. He’d let this happen. He knew Dean would find a way to blame himself, but Cas had more of the bigger picture here. Cas was so stupid. Azrael. . . how could that have happened to her, how could she have fallen this far?

He swallowed past the lump in his throat. Because he’d done the same thing, once. “Still nothing?” he asked. He didn’t even look up from where his eyes were fixed, on a small heap of ash by Crowley’s left foot.

“You think?” Dean snapped. There were hot tears in his eyes. “God, Cas. Yeah, there’s nothing.” He’s dreaming, that’s all, he’s asleep, and when he wakes up the bunker will be whole and Cas will be an angel and Sam. . .

“Well, what do you want to do?” Cas asked.

Dean heaved a sigh. “I guess we get the hell out of Dodge. Azrael could drop in whenever she wants, and if she does we’re all screwed.”

Crowley stayed completely silent through their exchange. He propped his head up on his hands, elbows resting on the table.

“Then let’s go. Just sitting here won’t help us.” Cas stood up, brushing ash off his shoulders. It left smears across his coat, and his face fell slightly. “Kevin’s room was untouched by the fire. It’s clear Azrael doesn’t see him as a threat. He’ll be done packing any moment, so let’s just leave.”

They were maybe an hour out of Lebanon when Dean pulled the car over and they fell headfirst into the nearest bar.

Dean slumped against the bar. He could hear a muffled clinking of glasses as Crowley and Kevin got themselves desperately drunk, worse even than earlier that night. God, it was almost two a.m., and they were screwed to hell.

Lazily, Dean raised his hand to signal for another drink. A good hour from the bunker, with no intention of heading back. There was no reason to stay and mourn the skeleton of home. Crowley
had thrown up at least once already, and Kevin was curled up in a booth, panicking and knocking ‘em back.

Cas sat next to him. “Dean, stop it,” he said quietly, shaking his shoulder gently. “This isn’t your fault.”

“Yeah? Then whose is it?” he asked. Slurred. He’d had plenty to drink in the last two hours or so. Castiel was worried. He couldn’t let that destructive, self-destructive cycle take hold, not tonight. He’d seen him burn through determined, disillusioned, damaged, desperate, and finally, simply done. It wasn’t Dean’s fault.

“Well, let’s start with hers,” Cas said flatly.

Dean raised his head, then let it flop back down. “Fuck off, Cas.”

“I knew her, Dean. She’s the angel who warned me to stay away from angels and let me out of jail. She did this of her own accord; and no one died because of it tonight.” Cas sighed and tried to haul Dean to his feet. “And some of that blame falls to me.”

Dean shook his head. “Tol’ you to quit blaming yourself for shit you didn’t do.”

“Don’t presume to know everything I have done,” Cas said, drawing himself up to his full height. “When I fought Raphael, I had followers, supporters, almost as many as my opposition. Azrael was. . . one of them.”

Lifting his head, Dean asked “So?” The pleasant fog that had washed over him in the bar was already wearing off, but he was stubborn enough to hold onto the feeling for as long as possible.

“I taught them the gift of free will, but not its dangers,” Cas said, quietly. “And Azrael believes her will can bend those of other angels. And I could have tried to stop her, when she slaughtered everyone in the police station in Longmont. I could have stopped going after Ephraim once we knew who, what, he was.” He supported Dean, helped him stand upright. “So if the blame belongs to one of us, it’s mine.”

Dean shook his head, but he was too exhausted to argue.

A few minutes later he heard off-key singing from his left, and turned his head just enough that he could make out Crowley standing up on a platform with a microphone, stumbling through the words to a goddamn Journey song.

“Oh, for God’s sake,” Dean grumbled, steadying himself on the bar. He grabbed Crowley and hauled him off the stage before he could butcher Don’t Stop Believing any more than he already had.

He and Cas dragged Crowley to the Impala, shoving him into the backseat. Kevin followed them out and promptly passed out in the backseat.

Cas slid in between Crowley and Kevin. The sky was still dark and clouded. He shivered. The hair on his arms was standing up. Human biological reaction to the cold, he told himself, but he couldn’t shake the sensation that something was coming after them.

They huddled into a motel around three a.m. Cas had to half-carry Kevin into their room. He promptly fell on top of the blankets of a bed, arm dangling over one side, fast asleep. Crowley simply collapsed on the floor and fallen asleep right there. Cas took one bed, and Dean slowly settled into a chair, moving on autopilot and lost in thought.
They’d just lost everything. Every scrap of research, anything he could have used to bring Sam back, it was just gone. Where the hell was Dean supposed to find something that could save his brother now?

The chair was lumpy and there was a wire coil poking up painfully through the upholstery. Dean shifting slightly and it stabbed him in the back, ripping his shirt. Swearing, Dean leaned forward and tried to adjust it. It was too late — or early — for this shit.

Even in the darkness of the motel room, he struggled to fall asleep. If he had another dream of Sam tonight, he couldn’t take it. Not with the bunker gone and the fucking ghost apocalypse that was coming their way. God, he just wanted Sam home and safe, but not even home was safe anymore. Shit.

At last his eyes slipped closed. What felt like mere moments later, Dean was gently shaken awake. Cas stood over him, clutching a credit card. “Dean? I’m back.”

“Wha’s goin’ on?” Dean asked, still half asleep. “Dude, what time is it?” The room was still dark, but he could just make out Cas’s pale blue eyes and dark, mussed hair.

“Six,” Cas said with an apologetic expression. “But you’re the one who said we needed to keep on the move.”

“I said that?” Dean mumbled, and got to his feet. He groaned and fell back when he felt the soreness in his legs, but he sprang up again when the sharp coil poked him in the back again.

Once he was on two legs, Cas handed him the credit card. “I needed it for the coffee,” he explained. Dean looked around, barely able to focus in the dim light. His eyes fell upon four paper coffee cups. “You went and bought Starbucks?” he asked. Without waiting for an answer, he grabbed a cup and started to chug it down. He needed some liquid energy today.

On the floor, Crowley was still snoring, and while Cas was up and at ‘em, Kevin was out, too.

“How are you doing, Dean?” Cas asked, softly enough to keep from waking the other two.

“Me? Oh, yeah, I’m fine.” Dean stretched his mouth in a smile, but his eyes were dark.

Cas sighed. For all he was a good liar, Dean couldn’t convince Castiel on the subject of his well-being. “Dean, don’t lie to me. Please have that much respect for me. I need that.” He dropped his bag on the floor and sat down on the end of his bed. “This isn’t going to be easy.”

“I know.” Dean slumped down next to him, falling backwards and staring up at the ceiling.

“It’s never been easy,” Cas reminded him.

He felt Cas’s hand on his own and sat up again. “Don’t give up is all I’m asking,” Cas said. “Sam can handle being up there a little longer, he’s stronger than you give him credit for.”

Dean groaned, rolling off the bed and standing. “I know he can handle it, Cas. I’m not sure I can.”

Cas glanced away, feeling guilty for the desire to prove his faith in Dean through tiny kisses pressed to each freckle on his face. “We should probably go.” He stood up and picked up his bag. “I want us out of here before seven.”

“Since when do you call the shots?” Dean asked, trying to sound playful but instead just sounding
tired.

“Since before you were even born,” Cas said. There was the briefest hesitation before he kissed Dean’s cheek. Dean exhaled a laugh, and a sad smile found its way onto his lips. It wasn’t much, but at least it was genuine. Castiel would have to be satisfied with that. He didn’t feel much like smiling himself.

Dean shook his head. “Did you sleep okay?” he asked.

“I didn’t even realize I wasn’t awake,” Cas said, relieved that Dean had changed the subject. “But I think I might be a little hungover.” He winced as his headache intensified, throbbing. He could feel his blood vessels pumping.

“We can get you some aspirin when we fill up the car. I’m hungry. Are you hungry?”

“I also purchased several muffins,” Cas said, waving a hand toward a bag on the counter.

They roused Crowley and Kevin a few minutes later, finished up their breakfasts, and hit the road before six-forty-five.

They were on the road all day and late into the night, barely stopping to refill on gas and grab food. Dean didn’t speak to any of them except for the occasional murmur to Cas, and turned up the music whenever they asked where they were going.

While Crowley stared out the window blankly and watched the world speed past, Castiel spent the drive in quiet thought.

He knew what Dean would say if he tried to explain himself properly, if he told him that he needed to hold himself responsible. He should have taken note of Azrael’s identity when she released him from jail, instead of running like a coward. Now the bunker was destroyed, and while he couldn’t be held accountable for what she’d done, and Dean would say as much to him, he knew why Azrael did it, and that was because of him.

If he hadn’t been so reckless and heedless of the danger he posed to Dean, maybe this wouldn’t have happened. Remembering those who had followed him in the days of Raphael, Castiel recalled telling them how flawed Heaven was, that there were things that humans had that they did not know or comprehend, that they should be free to make their own choices.

This was no coincidence. It couldn’t be, not this time.

Crowley had dozed off sometime around four. Kevin didn’t seem to have woken up at all, curling up in the middle seat and breathing deep and calm. Occasionally, he twitched.

At last they parked in a driveway in Bethany, Pennsylvania, at almost midnight. They sat in silence for several minutes, while Dean stayed slumped in his seat.

“Dean?” Cas asked. He spoke just loudly enough to stir Crowley into wakefulness. He scrambled to sit upright and wiped drool from the corner of his mouth. “Are you certain you’re all right?” Dean looked exhausted and had just brought them to a stop in front of a dark, ostensibly civilian home.

“Get Kevin up,” was all the response Cas received. He nudged Kevin awake gently, hoping he wouldn’t spook him.

Kevin blinked awake slowly, then straightened when he realized where they were. “What are we doing here?” he asked. “Why are we at my mom’s?”
“What you’re doing here,” Dean said, “is getting out of this mess before it’s too fucking late.” He opened up his door and climbed out, swinging open Kevin’s door a few moments later. “You, kiddo, are going to college, and getting married, and having two-point-five kids. No ifs, ands, or buts,” he added as Kevin tried to speak. “Get your ass inside, before I have to throw you.”

Kevin glared at him and climbed out of the car. Cas followed. “We’re staying for a while, Dean,” he informed him calmly as he brushed out his coat. “You can’t just drop Kevin off without speaking to his mother. You have an obligation to explain what’s happening, and you can’t leave that to Kevin.”

Dean rolled his eyes, but Cas swept past him and climbed the front steps, ringing the doorbell before Dean could stop him.

Lights flickered on upstairs, followed by several more. The door opened just slightly enough for petite Mrs. Tran to see through the crack. “Castiel?” she said, sounding shocked. “What’s going on?”

“Kevin’s fine, we’re all fine,” he said immediately, cutting off her worry. “But he’s going to have to stay with you from now on, and we need somewhere to sleep tonight, if you have the room. Dean,” he added, glancing back and glaring at the man in question, “will explain everything.”

Mrs. Tran unlocked the door and let them in. Crowley reluctantly followed, hovering at the back of the group, on edge.

Crowley knew that Mrs. Tran wouldn’t have forgotten her imprisonment at his hands. Another stupid demonic action that left guilt heavy on his shoulders.

Kevin curled up under a blanket on his mom’s couch while Dean, Cas, and Crowley took seats around the living room. Mrs. Tran sat down next to Kevin and let him rest his head against her. Seeing the two of them so close together, Dean knew he was doing the right thing. Kevin was barely twenty, younger than Sam was when he ditched Stanford. And he curled up against his mom like she was a shield. Dean wondered what that felt like. He let out a tiny sigh in relief. Kevin was just a kid. And he needed to have a life, a real one. He had the tablets, but he didn’t need to live in the bunker when demons wouldn’t come after him. No angels had any beef with him, either.

Dean had to let go and give Kevin the chance to live. The instinct to keep Kevin close was strong, but he couldn’t hang on forever. He had to do it, give Kevin the life that Sam never got to have, the normal life he deserved.

Mrs. Tran looked to him as she let Kevin lean up against her. “So what is it? Why are you here?”

Dean took a deep breath and began to explain. The bunker was no longer safe, or even remotely habitable, Kevin should be with someone he trusts, Cas knew angel warding sigils he could get tattooed as a cautionary measure, there’s a college not too far from here where he can go to school. She listened patiently, without interruption. When he was through, she gazed at her son, dozing on the cushion next to her. “Kevin isn’t any safer here than with you,” she pointed out.

A wince passed Dean’s lips without his permission. “Sorry, but he really is. We put ourselves in the line of fire pretty much every day, and unless he needs to be out there in the field with us I want him here, where he can be close to you and have a life outside of this shit.” He stood. “Look, Lazarus College is only a few miles away. Get him an education, please, or do whatever you want, but just don’t let him get mixed up in this unless he absolutely has to be.”

Mrs. Tran let them stay there for the night. Kevin moved into the guestroom upstairs while Dean, Cas, and Crowley arranged themselves around the living room. Dean wound up sharing the couch
with Cas, pulling the blankets up as far as possible only to have them yanked back by an irritable and exhausted sexy angel.

The next morning, Dean woke to sunlight streaming through a window directly into his eyes. He swore and scrambled to his feet, struggling to untangle his legs from Cas’s. It had to be at least nine. They should be on the road by now. What were they doing lying around here?

He ran into the kitchen, where Mrs. Tran was chatting on the phone. “Hey, Missouri? I’ve gotta cancel our coffee this week. My son and his friends just came in from out of town. Yes, he’s moving back home, since there’s a college in town.” She laughed and said, “It’s better than letting him tramp all over the country, right? Well, I’ll see you around.”

Dean gazed around the kitchen blearily. Coffee brewed on the counter, and a box of — holy fuck, those were doughnuts. The good kind, with jelly in the middle. When the hell did Mrs. Tran find time to buy doughnuts?

“Morning, Dean,” she said. “You boys’ll be back out there, saving the world soon, but at least stay and eat breakfast. You can’t get much to eat out there, skipping from motel to motel.”

That drew a laugh from him. “Yeah, not really.”

Cas and Crowley joined them soon after. Mrs. Tran side-eyed Crowley, but when Dean reassured her that he was human now, she relaxed. When she handed him a mug of coffee, Crowley responded with a very quiet “Thank you,” the most he’d spoken since they arrived on Mrs. Tran’s doorstep.

Kevin stumbled down the stairs at half-past nine, looking mildly confused. Mrs. Tran got him a doughnut and a cup of coffee and sat him down to keep an eye on him.

Dean and Cas said their apologies, but it really was better for them to keep moving. They couldn’t stay, but they made Kevin swear to stay put and get himself a goddamn education instead of wasting his youth on hunting and tablet translation.

As they left, Crowley lingered, catching the door and holding it open. “Are you gonna leave?” Mrs. Tran asked brusquely, making him flinch. “Or did you forget something?”

Crowley fidgeted, shifting his weight from foot to foot. “I, er. I realize you don’t care for my, my presence in your house. And nothing can fix what I did. I, er, I just needed to know that you know, if I could undo what I’ve done to you and your son, I would.”

Linda Tran’s jaw was set. “Yeah. Well, too bad you can’t.” She took one step closer to him. “Just get out of my house.”

Crowley’s lips twisted in a thin smile. “Figures.” He turned, almost bumping into Cas, and followed him to the Impala.

“What was all that about?” Dean asked once he’d slid into the backseat.

Crowley’s easy, derisive smirk was back in place as if it had never left. “Just telling her I thought she had a lovely home.” He leaned over and opened the cooler on the floor, popping out a beer and taking a sip.

Dean wasn’t sure where they should go from there. He told Cas to open up the laptop and see if he could find a hunt or something in the general area.

As Castiel searched, Dean pulled out onto a two-lane highway and let his mind wander as he drove,
with the minimum possible focus on the road.

Goddammit, the bunker had come so close to home. Almost like Bobby’s house that way. They hadn’t even lived there a year, but he’d settled in, decorated, made it his own, and that was just... gone. Dean had always wanted that, and for God’s sake, why couldn’t he have it? Why the fuck did it have to be taken away from him whenever he got close.

But they were back in his baby, driving along back roads in the dark and the fog. Wasn’t he home? Wasn’t he happy, here in a home on four wheels that had covered miles and miles of backwoods country and small towns?

The Impala had been home all his life, but he was starting to wonder if his home was meant to be on four wheels.

Cas lost interest in the search for a hunt quickly, and turned to stare out the window. He’d heard every word of Crowley’s attempt to apologize to Mrs. Tran. He’d seen the guilt in Crowley’s eyes at Mrs. Tran’s home, and without asking, he knew exactly how it felt to face the results of the harm he’d done. Overhearing Crowley’s admission when they left had made him realize that he couldn’t go on pretending he deserved forgiveness. Not with Dean. Dean shouldn’t hold him close just because he gave his trust too easily.

Dean drove them until nightfall, when Crowley started to complain loudly and vehemently. “If I have to spend one more minute in this wretched car, I’m going to blow my bloody brains out! We have listened,” he said dramatically to Cas, “to the same seven bands play the same sixty songs all day.” Which wasn’t to say that he hadn’t been complaining all day anyway.

Dean was ready to check into a hotel for the night anyway. “We’ll find something in the morning,” he said, shaking his head.

They grabbed burritos at a drive-through in a small town in Ohio and found the area’s cheapest motel with running water, someplace called the Cockerel Hotel. The ceiling was cracked, there was a funny pinkish-gray mold in the shower, and there wasn’t even a free breakfast to make up for the stink of puke in the carpet, but at least it was only five bucks a night. And the beds weren’t total shit, either. The pillows were so soft Dean suspected they were stolen.

Well, what the hell. Five bucks a night, and they’d be gone by sunrise.

Dean tossed Crowley the keys to their room and headed down to the car after Cas to grab their stuff. Crowley didn’t have anything but the cooler stocked with scotch and vodka, which was kind of depressing, but Dean couldn’t find it in himself to feel sorry for him. He noticed as Castiel hauled his own duffel out of the trunk that it was painted with anti-angel sigils, which filled him with a funny kind of pride.

“Dean?” Cas let his duffel fall on the pavement. “I need to talk to you.” A chilly breeze ruffled his hair and blew that stupid long coat around him.

Dean leaned against the car, guarded and waiting. “What’s up?”

Cas looked away. He didn’t want to do this, but Dean had to understand. “You can’t... we can’t be close, Dean. Not the way we —” he swallowed. “I want.”

Dean opened his mouth to speak, to refute him, but Castiel kept talking. “Have you forgotten everything I’ve done to you? I attacked you when you tried to say yes to Michael. I betrayed you to Heaven and knowingly aided in releasing Lucifer from the Cage. I hid everything from you in the
war against Raphael and tore down Sam’s wall. I unleashed the Leviathans and I abandoned you in Purgatory and I lied to you again and after Naomi pulled me out, and I hurt you again and left you again, Dean.”

He took a shuddering breath. Cas had to continue, had to explain himself. “I have done nothing but harm you, Dean, so explain exactly how you can have forgiven me.”

Castiel’s heart thumped in his chest. What a mortal sound, a heartbeat. Dean stared at him, wide green eyes and long lashes and hundreds of freckles and no, stop that, you can’t have him.

“Did you fix it?” Dean asked quietly, turning to face him.

Cas frowned. “What?”

“I asked you if you fixed it.”

“I don’t know what you —”

“Because you turned you back on Heaven even after you betrayed Sam and me, and you confessed the truth about your war in Heaven and you fixed Sam’s crazy and helped take down the Leviathans. And you told me yourself, Naomi had you all fucked in the head, that wasn’t you, man. I know you wouldn’t have done that to me again.” Dean stepped closer, their bodies a mere foot or so apart.

“You did bad shit for good reasons, Cas, and when you fucked up you asked forgiveness and tried to make it right. Of course I can fucking forgive you. You earned it.”

It occurred to Dean quite suddenly that they were way too close together to feel even remotely platonic.

“Uh, Cas?” he asked. Castiel just gazed back silently, his eyes dark. “If, if you’re okay with it, I’m gonna kiss you now.”

Cas nodded, and just kept nodding as Dean pulled him closer and their lips met.

For a moment it was just Dean, Dean’s hands on Cas’s back and Dean’s mouth pressing into Castiel’s, but then Cas responded. One hand found its way into Dean’s hair and the other braced against Dean’s back roughly. Dean winced slightly and Cas almost pulled away, but Dean stopped him. He could take a little discomfort. Dean opened his mouth and gently ran his tongue along Cas’s bottom lip before Cas met him the same way, and Dean made a strangled sound.

Damn, where the hell had Cas learned to kiss like this? Dean felt a surge of jealousy when he remembered Cas kissing Meg, but he stifled the feeling. That was years ago, and Meg was also dead. But he couldn’t help but wonder if Meg ever kissed Cas when she cared for him after he’d absorbed Sam’s insanity. The thought wasn’t a comfortable one, considering Cas’s mental state back then, and he shoved it to the back of his mind as he pushed Cas back against the side of the Impala and slid his tongue into Cas’s mouth.

The bubble of security shattered with a glass bottle thrown against the side of the car. Dean’s hand instantly went for the gun in his belt. “Fucking fags,” a voice said behind them.

He whipped around. Some guy with stupidly long hair, longer than Sam’s, was leaning up against the motel wall and shooting them a death glare.

“Fucking fairies, no sense of human friggin’ decency,” the man continued. “Filthy cocksuckers, acting like they’re humans ’stead of goddamn leeches —”
Dean started forward, ready to tear this jackass a new one, but Cas’s arm pressed against his chest. He hesitated and Cas took the moment to storm toward the man, coat flapping in the breeze.

Castiel was pissed. Within half a second he’d reached the man, who was clearly tipsy, and grabbed him by the collar. Before the man had a chance to react, Cas slammed him up against the wall of the motel. The adrenaline running in Castiel’s body made up for the lack of grace, and he was able to push the man just barely off the ground and hold him there.

The guy started stammering, but Cas pressed a finger to his lips to silence him. “What’s your name?”

The man leaned away from Cas’s face. “J-Jack Wilson.” He had gone very pale in very little time.

“Mr. Wilson, would you care to repeat your comments for posterity?” Cas asked in a level, dangerously calm tone.

Mr. Wilson shook his head fervently. “No, no. I’m —” He gulped when he caught sight of Dean, standing behind Cas and rolling up his sleeves to expose his strong, scarred forearms with a dark grin. “I’m fine.”

“That’s good to hear,” Castiel said. “And, for future reference, the next time you choose to attack someone over their sexuality, be aware that not everyone is willing to be the better person.” He let his angel blade slide down from where it was tucked in his coat sleeve, and it fell easily into his hand. Cas lifted it just high enough for Mr. Jack Wilson to see it.

Mr. Wilson went very still.

“Do you understand me, Mr. Wilson?” Cas asked, still in that relaxed, cruelly flat way.

Jack Wilson nodded, his face pale.

“Good.” Castiel stepped back and released him; he slid down a few inches from where Cas had him pinned and proceeded to stumble toward the back of the motel on wobbly legs.

Dean released a breath he hadn’t noticed he was holding. “Dude. Cas. That was...” He laughed. “Fucking awesome.”

Cas shook his head. “No it wasn’t.” It was... badly thought out. His arms were already beginning to ache from holding Mr. Wilson off the ground for so long. What wouldn’t he give for the strength of an angel.

“Yeah, it was. Really,” Dean said, putting a hand on Cas’s arm. “The guy just about shit his pants, don’t downplay that.” He pressed his lips just behind Cas’s ear, his nose brushing dark hair.

“Dean! Stop it,” Cas said, pushing him away gently, with an exaggerated solemn look on his face. Whenever Dean flashed that stupid, charming grin, Castiel wished he had the confidence to kiss him.

But Dean said all was forgiven... no. Just because he didn’t hold it against Castiel, he couldn’t just forgive himself. He wouldn’t push too hard, when he knew Dean didn’t do long-term relationships. He wouldn’t allow his reckless, human wants to control him and convince him to make mistakes like those he had made before.

Even as he hesitated, Cas felt Dean bump shoulders with him and lean up against his body as they picked up their bags. It was almost certainly intentional, and a tiny smile played across his lips.

Crowley was already sprawled across one of the beds in their motel room, clicking through the
channels on the tiny, ancient television sitting on the bureau. “This is the drivel we’re paying for?” he asked as Dean dropped his duffel on the floor with a thump.

Dean glanced at the TV. A guy with long dark hair and a white doctor’s coat was making out with a pretty intern on the screen. “Don’t slam Dr. Sexy,” Dean said. “You don’t wanna watch, don’t fucking watch.”

Dr. Sexy, M.D. continued to play while Crowley glared up at the ceiling. Dean watched intently while Cas sat in a cramped, paisley-patterned chair, writing in a fabric-bound book.

“Cas?” Dean asked during a commercial break. That dark head lifted slightly.

“Yes?”

“What’re you up to over there?” Dean sat up and leaned over, trying to see.

Cas glanced down at the book and then back up at Dean. “It’s, uh, it’s a journal. I suppose. Like your father’s.”

Dean flinched at the mention of John. It had been more than a week since he’d gotten the cold shoulder from a man who’d been dead for eight fucking years, but the memory still hurt. “So what are you writing about?”

“The angels,” Cas answered softly. “And all that I remember. You would be surprised how much of my memory is relevant to our work.” He’d found the book several weeks ago in the bunker storeroom when he was looking for clothes that weren’t his usual white shirt and black pants. While the original mission was more or less a failure — the Men of Letters did not stock casual clothing — he was glad he’d found the blank journal.

He had drawn sigil after sigil, protective signs and banishing spells and even curses and summoning rituals. There was a spell for draining grace from angels, a potion that long-dead saints used to imitate the powers of angels, and a brief exorcism for human souls. Castiel had written out accounts of his experiences after the Apocalypse that never came to be, from Raphael’s threats to his short stint as an interim God. He had finished his time as the host of the Leviathan and what he learned from their presence in him and was just beginning on what happened when he woke on the shore of a lake without his memory. Memory, he had found, was shockingly fragile. He wanted to preserve as much of his as possible.


After a few more episodes of the Dr. Sexy marathon, Dean switched off the TV. “We should get some sleep.” If he’d be doing any more driving tomorrow, he should probably rest up. Dean considered saying that Crowley needed his beauty sleep, but decided against it. He didn’t want to start a fight.

Castiel looked up at him briefly, then settled deeper into that fugly-ass chair, drawing up his knees under his coat and pressing his face into the headrest.

That set Dean off a little. He knew Cas felt bad about the Naomi thing and all, but this was fucking ridiculous. “What are you doing? Come on, get some pajamas on and get in bed.”

Instead of standing, Cas just stared at Dean blankly. “There are only two beds.”

Dean paused as he took off his top later and left behind just a gray t-shirt. “So?”
“So two of us will have to share,” Castiel said patiently.

Dean shrugged. “Crowley can take the floor.”

“I wouldn’t put my head on that floor if you paid me,” Crowley drawled. “I don’t think so. You’d have to shoot me first.” He lay back on the bed by the window with an air of finality. “You and your lover should share,” he said flatly, staring up at the ceiling. He’d meant his words to have some kind of bite behind them, but in his ears they sounded weak, almost envious. Well, fuck that.

Dean stammered, feeling like an idiot as he tried to defend himself. “What? We’re — we aren’t, we’re not exactly —”

Crowley forced a laugh and sat up, trying for calm derision. “You’re pathetic, Squirrel. Nice try, can’t fool me.”

“We aren’t,” Dean insisted weakly. They weren’t having sex, hell, they were barely even kissing yet. He could feel himself blushing, which, what the fuck, sex wasn’t embarrassing, talking about it wasn’t embarrassing.

“Well, I’d share with your pretty angel, but I prefer no-strings-attached, and he’s rather needy.”

Castiel stood up and pushed Crowley half off his bed. “Behave yourself.” He turned to Dean. “We could get another room, if you insist on my sleeping in a bed.”

“No, it’s fine,” Dean said, avoiding looking at either of them. Behind his back, Crowley winked at Cas.

Castiel removed his coat and suit jacket, but refused to switch his clothes for something more comfortable.

“Should I wear earplugs?” Crowley asked, still in that vicious tone.

Dean glared. “That’s fucking disgusting.”

“That’s fucking something,” Crowley said under his breath.

Cas settled down on the bed, gazing at Dean. “If you try to take advantage of me, you will lose your hand,” he informed him. He was only half joking. He wasn’t entirely certain that he would resist if Dean tried to take this further. He wanted Dean, holy fuck did he want, but he still didn’t know the truth, if . . . if Dean truly wanted him. As more than just a fling, or a ‘see-how-it-goes’ relationship.

“Oh, really?” Dean asked, raising his eyebrows. “Prove it.”

Cas paled, and Dean laughed, sliding under the covers. “I promise I won’t do anything,” Dean said gently. “Not without permission, anyway.” He winked and turned on his side, away from Cas.

The night was chilly and the rumbling heater under the window wasn’t doing much good. Castiel shivered beneath the blankets. He could hear the creaking of a tree outside their dusty window, and he felt Dean’s weight on the other side of the bed, even though their bodies didn’t touch.

Dean shifted, his leg brushing against Cas’s, and he almost fell off the bed, jumping as if he’d been shocked. Under his breath he mumbled an Enochian curse.

Instantly Dean sat up. “You’re awake too?”

Cas exhaled slowly, deliberately. “Yes.”
“I can’t stop thinking about her. Azrael. How did she find us?”

It was clear what Dean meant. How did she find you? “You’re warded against angels. No angel could find you without a prayer, or —” He stopped. “But I’m not.”

“So it could happen again?”

For a few seconds, Cas didn’t speak.

“Yes.”

Dean considered that.

“So Azrael could be following us.”

“Or her followers.”

“You think she has followers?” Dean asked.

Cas sighed, sliding back down. “Angels rarely do anything without the agreement of others. I have no doubt.”

“Fucking great,” Dean muttered.

Cas pressed his lips together. “Dean, I —”

“If you’re gonna say you’re sorry, don’t fucking bother. I already told you, this isn’t on you.”

“If that’s what you want.” Cas gazed through the dusty window, where a shaft of thin, pale moonlight came through. “Whatever we choose to do, it will be a risk, Dean.”

“I know, I know.”

Of all things, Castiel wished this weren’t what they were facing. He would rather defend against demons or Leviathans or every form of monster under the godforsaken sun.

He acted so certain of what he knew and did, but it was all he could do to hide from Dean how truly adrift he felt. What could a reckless, naïve fallen angel do to stop this? What the fuck could he accomplish without his wings?
Six days had passed since the destruction of the bunker, and in that time they had found no cases and stayed in several more grimy hotels. Crowley had almost completely stopped talking, closing off and speaking rarely as possible, while Dean and Cas grew closer together.

Cas woke to something cold pressed against his skin.

He groaned a protest and rolled over, burying his face in the pillow. The coldness pushed down against his neck. He rolled over again and opened his eyes.

Castiel went deathly still. The face above him was out of focus, but he knew better than to move now, with a blade at his throat.

“Goddamn it,” he heard from across the room. “If you’re gonna kill us, can you hurry up?”

Dean was pinned down in the chair in the corner, with an angel holding a blade to his neck as well.

“We aren’t here to kill you,” the one above Cas said, brushing dark strands of short hair away from green eyes. “That would defeat the purpose.” Dean felt sick. The angel was possessing a teenager, a kid. The lime-green sneakers were a dead giveaway, not to mention the artfully ripped black skinny jeans and some indie rock band t-shirt. A gold cross in one ear glinted in the dim lamplight.

Crowley snored on obliviously in the other bed.

“Do you have any idea how difficult it was to find you, Castiel?” asked the other angel. Her red hair was pulled back from her face in a tight bun, and her skin was dark against the pale gray of her oversized shirt and dress pants. Her vessel was definitely an adult, though, which was better. “We searched for weeks, but we don’t have our full power.”

“And now you have me,” he said. “Go ahead. I have no weapons. I am defenseless. Kill me.” He heard Dean suck in a breath.

The angel above him sighed. “We have already stated that is not our intention. Have you become stupider as a human?”

“That’s enough, Hadrianiel.” The other angel straightened her shirt out with her free hand. “I’m not going through this again.” Cas didn’t quite recognize the name. This Hadrianiel looked like a gatekeeper, though, which would explain the lack of familiarity. The angel’s shoulders were stiff and tense, and each movement seemed calculated and regimented. It reminded Cas of his old garrison, a little, though they were trained in an entirely different style of combat.

“If you don’t want to kill us, what do you want?” Dean asked. “Because I would really like to go back to work, eat breakfast . . .” His nerves were humming already, even as he tried to defuse the tension. Just don’t piss them off, and everything will be fine.

The darker-haired angel — Hadrianiel? — looked at him as if the answer was obvious. “We wanted to speak to Castiel.”
“Is he armed?” the angel guarding Dean asked.

Hadraniel pulled the blankets away from Cas, exposing him to the chilly air of the fall morning. He shivered as the angel gave him a brisk and uninterested once-over. “No.”

“Then we will talk,” the female angel said. She crouched in front of Dean, gazing intently into his eyes. “Unless you’re going to cause trouble?”

Dean smiled sarcastically. “I think I can control myself,” he said. Crowley was still asleep. It wasn’t a surprise, the guy had way too much to drink the night before, as usual. Would’ve been nice if he’d been awake to help them not get caught unawares.

The angel tucked her blade away, straightening up. “My name is Zipporah,” she informed him.

“Yeah, nice to meet you,” Dean said, glaring. “What the fuck do you want, again?”

“We came here to discuss recent developments with Castiel,” Hadraniel said pointedly, climbing off the bed. “Not you.”

Cas followed, standing close to the wall. “What is it?” he asked resignedly.

Zipporah glanced at Hadraniel. “We have heard things. You helped Metatron cause the fall of the angels.”

“How do you know —” Castiel was interrupted by a rumble of thunder. A few moments later rain began to drum on the roof, coming down hard. There was the sound of a tree creaking in the wind outside. Cas saw Dean glance through the window uneasily at the tall maple outside, at its yellow-gold leaves.

“Metatron deceived me,” Cas admitted. “I thought. . . He told me we were performing trials to seal Heaven, and the angels could reconcile without violence spilling onto the Earth. Not this. I didn’t, I never wanted this.”

Zipporah rolled her eyes, leaning up against the wall. Castiel carefully avoided eye contact. “Believe me, none of us did.” She laughed wryly. “Doesn’t mean it’s not a problem.” She said problem bitterly, like she was repeating what she’d been told.

“I can’t do anything about it,” Cas answered sharply. “Without my grace, I’m only human.”

Across the room, Crowley groaned and rolled over, the sheets twisting around him. His snores choked off and he sat up, blinking. “What time is it?” he asked, the words slurring together.

Zipporah turned to face him. “That’s the famed King of Hell?” she asked, disappointed. “I thought he would be more. . . impressive.” She walked away with her back to them, pried open their cooler, and popped open a can of beer.

“Screw you, I am impressive,” Crowley said, but his confidence wavered. Then he blinked hard. “Tell me I haven’t done something I’m gonna regret.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” Dean said bitingly. “It’s just a fucking angel, thanks for helping us keep an eye out.”

Crowley’s mouth dropped open. “Oh.” Zipporah sat down next to him and took a long drink of her commandeered beer. Crowley leaned away, his eyes fixed warily on her.
Dean stood up and paced toward the window, wincing as lightning flashed and thunder roared behind him. The storm was right on top of them, and he didn’t trust the ceiling to avoid collapse.

“How was it done?” Hadraniel asked, moving stiffly to block the door.

Cas’s eyes flicked to Dean. “Metatron approached me and said he planned to lock the angels in Heaven, much like Hell is now. We removed the heart of a Nephilim.”

“Justly,” Hadraniel said, chin jerking up authoritatively.

The urge to argue was smothered before Castiel let himself speak. He continued, “Afterward, Dean aided me in taking the bow of a Cupid. It was given willingly.”

Hadraniel let out a sigh of irritation, but didn’t speak.

“Naomi... attempted to warn me.” Hadraniel frowned in confusion, but Dean was watching Cas’s face. He was obviously distressed, shaking slightly. “But after what she did to me, I couldn’t trust her word, and I went to Metatron in Heaven. He — he strapped me down, and —”

The stream of words cut off, and Cas closed his eyes. He was rigid and pale and looked like he was on the verge of tears.

Dean crossed the room in a second, to hug him and try to help him through the rest, but Cas pushed him aside roughly. Hurt, Dean stepped back as Cas inhaled deeply and steadied his voice.

“Metatron cut out my grace.” His eyes were rimmed with red, but he had yet to shed a tear. “He — he cast me down to Earth and left me like this. Human.” He raised his hands, forcing a wan smile. “Is that what you wanted from me?”

Zipporah sighed and tossed the empty beer can on the floor lazily as another roll of thunder rattled the window. “You expect us to believe you?”

“If you doubted by honesty, you wouldn’t be here,” Castiel shot back. “I was, I was manipulated by someone I thought I could trust.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time,” Crowley commented acidly, making everyone else turn. “After all, a whore is a whore is a whore, yes?”

Cas flinched at his words. “That’s not the same —”

“As loath as I am to agree with,” Hadraniel glared at Crowley, “that, it is an accurate assertion.” The angel’s gaze reverted back to Cas. “You have a history of dealing with... devils.”

Dean could’ve sworn those cold eyes had flickered to him for a moment.

Shaking his head, Cas tried to protest, but Zipporah spoke over his attempts at apologies. “You have lied to achieve your ends before this. Why should we trust you now?”

Cas went silent, his eyes dark with something between anger and grief.

Dean stepped between the two angels and Castiel. “Get the fuck out of here.” He said it firmly, with no room for argument. “Get the fuck out.”

Instantaneously a flash of light filled the room, lighting their faces up without shadow as a roaring noise like a cannon shook the room. A lamp fell from the nightstand and Crowley jumped up off his bed, face stark with panic. Outside, Dean could see the tree by the window, its beautiful leaves fried
to a crisp and its entire trunk charred black and split right down the middle. Parts of it were on fire, smoke billowing up away from it.

Dean glared back at Zipporah and Hadraniel. “Who the hell do you think you are? I’ve had it up to here with you puffed-up bastards. You don’t get to fucking harass him and put his life in danger over whatever fucking crusade you’re on this week, alright?”

Hadraniel huffed, about to respond, but Dean continued loudly. “We’re out here in this shitty motel with cockroaches and sheets that smell like pot and sex because one of you burned our home, don’t come crying to me about it and expect some kind of sympathy.”


Dean glared at her icily and said nothing, standing in front of Cas with his arms crossed protectively.

“What, you’re telling me you didn’t hear about that on angel radio?” Dean asked. “Huh. Guess you jackasses aren’t as omniscient as you pretend to be.”

Behind him, Cas said warningly, “Dean, what are you doing?”

Dean glanced back at him, and Cas almost sighed with relief. He shook his head minutely, just enough to signal Dean to stop. It wouldn’t help to anger these angels, not when they didn’t know anything about their intentions.

Dean swallowed the harsh words he wanted to say and gritted his teeth. “This angel, she showed up and burned down the bunker where we’ve been living. She burned everything we had.”

“Do you have a name?” Hadraniel demanded, advancing on Dean. “This angel, do you have a name?”

Dean put his hands up with a razor-thin smile. “If I wanted to tell you, you’d know about it.”

The angel never broke eye contact, continuing to walk closer to him. “Tell me.”

Dean stared straight back, never once blinking. His eyes began to water while Hadraniel looked completely unaffected. He focused intently, trying to memorize the sharp features, long, narrow nose and pale, cupids-bow lips, rather than cave in. Hadraniel met him gaze for gaze.

“Ooh, more frigging sexual tension. Kill me now,” Crowley muttered, getting up and grabbing a beer from the cooler.

“Azrael,” Cas snapped, breaking the silence. Dean forgot the staring contest and whipped around. “Her name is Azrael.”

Dean sighed impatiently at how easily Cas gave in. “Okay, you got the goddamn name. Go fucking bother her and leave us the hell alone.”

Hadraniel turned and crossed the room to Zipporah. They spoke together for several minutes, giving Dean a chance to talk to Cas.

“What the hell is going on? You want to talk with them? You want to help?”

Cas looked pained. “Dean, I —”

“You heard Azrael, Cas! You interfere, you’re dead. You think we’ve got a chance at stopping her with no weapons but what we’ve got in our bags and trunk? We don’t. We need these asshats gone
and gone fast.” Dean shook his head. “More important, are you even okay? You didn’t have to tell
them about what Metatron did to you, I saw what it was doing to you.”

“I know. I just —” Cas promptly lost his ability to stand and sank down against the wall, and Dean
supported him before guiding him to their bed. “You don’t understand.”

“Then make me understand!” Dean said, his whisper harsh. “What do you want me to do, Cas, you
won’t even let me touch you.”

Castiel took a shuddering breath, but before he could respond, Hadraniel and Zipporah faced them.

“We want your help,” Zipporah said frankly. Hadraniel stood behind her silently, head cocked to one
side with a look of mingled disdain and interest. Dean resisted the urge to stab these winged bastards
just to get them off their backs. He knew it would only make it worse.

Cas looked up at them. “I can’t help you.” He glanced at Dean, who reached out as if to grasp his
hand, and he pulled away. He wet his lips before adding, “And I doubt you truly need or desire my
help.”

“We know what Azrael has done,” Hadraniel said. “Can you truly say you don’t wish to find her?”

“She killed Metatron,” Cas said. “She destroyed our bunker and warned me against association with
angels. You think I’m going to risk my life now?” The rain drummed on the roof and walls, nearly
drowning their voices out.

“I know you will,” Hadraniel said. “You killed Raphael when he tried to take control of Heaven. I
trust that you will do the same now.” Crowley and Dean exchanged silent glances. Yeah, because
that hadn’t backfired horribly at all.

Castiel held back what he wanted to say. That his actions back then were why they were in this mess
to begin with, if he hadn’t ruined Heaven in his high-minded mission it wouldn’t need fixing. He
knew what he had done was right for humanity, but for angels? He’d caused their downfall, and now
Azrael was taking her cues from the monomaniac that he had once been. He couldn’t allow his
corrupting influence to spread to any other angels.

Instead, he said, “It’s nice to see that some of you still have faith.”

Zipporah snorted, but Hadraniel glared at her and she went quiet, fixing her gaze on the floor. “We
need your help,” Hadraniel continued as if Cas hadn’t spoken. “You are a leader, Castiel.”

“I’m really not,” he said, glancing at Dean again. “I’ve been told not to interfere in the affairs of
angels, and in my experience it always ends with people getting hurt.”

Dean frowned. What the fuck did Cas mean by that? Sure, it hadn’t exactly been easy since the
angels got involved in his life, but people always got hurt in his line of work. It didn’t change too
much, considering they’d met just before the Apocalypse. Was he talking about Azrael’s massacre at
the police station?

“Castiel,” Hadraniel said, sounding more than a little unbalanced, “You aren’t suggesting that you
would abandon us now, in times like these?”

“You aren’t suggesting I would change now, knowing I have done nothing but choose others above
Heaven since my creation?” Castiel retorted calmly. “Lead the angels yourself.”

“Rejoin us,” Hadraniel entreated. “We can restore your grace if we retake Heaven, I am certain of it.
You can be one of us again, a Seraph at full power. Your... associates,” the angel said distastefully, “will be safe, protected by our collective strength. And your alliance with us will attract those who are still loyal.”

“To Heaven, or to me?” Castiel asked sharply. “I would think casting out the Heavenly Host would bring all the wrath of the angels down on me. No angel would trust me now.”

“I am offering that trust,” Hadraniel insisted, moving in front of Zipporah and towering over Castiel. “We offer that trust, Castiel.”

With a wry smile, Cas shook his head. “We are not too different, Hadraniel. You live in desperate times, chaos abounds around you, and you are willing to make an alliance with anyone or anything so long as it brings you some advantage. You try to lead with those tactics, and you’ll find yourself alone. Or worse,” he laughed hollowly, “human.”

Dean flinched. Was that how Cas really felt? He resisted the desire to grab Cas by the shoulders and demand the truth, knowing that Cas could just be trying to keep these angels from smiting their asses.

He stayed quiet as Cas continued to go back and forth with Hadraniel. Cas was trying to draw out as much information as possible, on Hadraniel’s forces, weapons, and the full effects of the fall on grace. Hadraniel seemed completely oblivious to the interrogation, willingly giving facts and figures in an attempt to convince Cas to join the fight.

At one point, Zipporah stood up and wandered out of the room, returning twenty minutes later carrying a wine cooler and a bottle of fucking tequila, her hair and clothes soaking wet. She lounged in the room’s only chair and started drinking, hiccuping now and then. Crowley joined her after he decided that whatever Hadraniel and Cas were talking about, it wasn’t worth his time to listen.

Dean paid attention for a while, but after over an hour of their tense, charged debate and exchanges of barbed words, he gave up and tuned them out, searching for local obits on his laptop. Maybe he could find an easy salt-and-burn in the immediate vicinity and he could do something.

Two hours of searching while Cas and Hadraniel talked was driving him crazy, and literally nothing bad had come up yet. Maybe the general monster population had sensed the cataclysms of the falling angels and the demons being forced back into Hell, and decided to just lay low for a couple months. But still, there had to be something, right? Somewhere some monster was getting away with murder.

Anything but listening to Castiel talk to some stranger, debating over stupid intricacies and trying to convince this angel that he’d made enough mistakes in his time without fucking up again. Dean didn’t understand half of what was said, but he heard enough of it. Cas recited every betrayal and rebellion he’d committed, and it was really getting to Dean. It hurt to think that was what Cas thought of himself.

Sometimes he couldn’t even understand what was being said, as they slid from Latin to Enochian to English to some other archaic language Dean couldn’t identify.

“We are family,” Hadraniel said pointedly. “Our father created us to protect humanity. How can you turn your back on that?”

Cas shrugged. “Not an angel anymore,” he repeated. He half-turned and gestured to Crowley to pour him what was left of the tequila.

“How dare you?” Hadraniel said, standing in a moment. “Dismissing your family and all you have ever known, and for what? The companionship of the King of Hell and a human who refused
Paradise?"

“Ex-King of Hell,” Crowley mumbled.

Cas stood as well, finally meeting the angel on level footing, and Dean realized that in reality Cas was a good four inches taller than Hadriel’s skinny vessel. He set aside the laptop and shifted so he could jump to his feet if things got ugly.

They did that just about immediately.

“I had heard you were fallen, Castiel, that you had turned your back on Heaven, but this? How little do you value our father? He may be gone, he may have left us behind, but he gave us a job.”

“And I am no longer a part of that! He allowed me to fall, he permitted my story to unfold this way! If he had a problem with this, do you doubt circumstances would arrange themselves to his convenience?”

Hadriel looked shocked. “How can you say that? You, of all of us? Our father would never want an angel to fall — no. You’re wrong!”

“Wrong about this, or just in general?” Cas asked dryly. He sipped from the glass Crowley handed him. “Haven’t you heard? God doesn’t give a shit if we live, die, or fall.”

“Cas, that’s not fair,” Dean said, unable to stay quiet any longer. “What’s that got to do with getting the angels back into Heaven?

“If you think God wants you to succeed, you should think again. You’re as pathetic and idealistic as I used to be.”

Hadriel lost it. An angel blade appeared from seemingly nowhere, and the shorter angel lunged at Cas fiercely. “I am not idealistic! You fought a war for Earth, and a war for Heaven, and I was there, I saw everything. I saw our family slaughtered!”

Zipporah leapt to her feet and came between them, more sober than Dean expected. He grabbed Cas by the shoulders and hauled him back. “Shut up and quit fighting, Cas. I’ve been sitting here for three hours and you haven’t shut up about how much you’ve fucked up since then.”

Zipporah was speaking in hurried, soothing tones while Hadriel fumed. As she spoke, the other angel cast dark looks at Castiel and muttered Enochian words, things that made Cas shake with anger.

“Put your bloody pigstickers away, you numbskulls. You’re both big enough, I’m sure.” Crowley was sprawled out across the bed by the window, wearily sipping a glass of wine. “You’d think you didn’t all want the same thing.”

Of course he was poking the bear, but Dean was getting involved now, and as much a bastard as the hunter was, Crowley didn’t want to see him hurt. And this stupid nammering was pussing him off. Couldn’t they all just shut up, have a drink, come to an agreement without the smiting and the shouting?

Zipporah mumbled an explanation of Crowley’s words to Hadriel, who glared at him, offended, but slowly the angel relaxed.

Cas looked at Dean, focusing in on the details of his face in an effort to calm himself. “What do you want me to do?”
“I just want you to figure out what the hell it is you want.” Dean stared back at him with total seriousness. “get these pricks out of here, don’t, whatever, just make a goddamn choice. You wanna work something out, do it.”

Without turning to face the angels, Cas said, “I won’t argue, then. Does that satisfy you?”

Hadraniel nodded sharply.

Zipporah released her grip on her companion’s body and bounced down on the end of the bed. “I’d rather associate with proper humans that with the uptight brats we entreat with,” she said, and hiccuped. “At least humans know how to have fun.”

Dean half-smiled, thinking of the kind of fun she’d been having since she showed up.

“I’m not here to deal with humans,” Hadraniel began, but Zipporah interrupted.

“We are here because we need his help. And if you have not already noticed, Castiel is as human as it is possible to be.” She looked at Cas, who recoiled. “We need your help, brother.”

“How many times do I have to say it? No sane angel would trust me, and I am not fit to command.”

“Cas,” Dean breathed. “You know it could be our best shot at getting to Sam. . .”

Almost imperceptibly, Cas nodded.

“Our father has given you a purpose, Castiel, to heal Heaven.”

“If that’s my purpose, I’m doing a shit job of it.”

The silence stretched for several seconds, tense and practically humming. Dean’s eyes flickered from Cas to Hadraniel rapidly.

“Not that any of you care, but I’m gonna go get something to eat,” Crowley said, standing up. “anyone want anything?”

“Sit down.” Hadraniel spoke harshly enough to make Crowley sit right away.

Once Crowley was seated, Hadraniel took a deep breath. “I will reiterate. To sum up our request, we want your help. We can take you to where we are amassing our followers. From there you could help us take leadership. If we can find Azrael, then we can trace a path to Heaven, and there must be a path. Azrael could not have killed Metatron otherwise.”

Cas considered that. “I need to talk to Dean,” Castiel said, meeting Hadraniel’s eyes with his own steely glare.

“Go on then.”

Dean followed Cas into the bathroom. “What?”

“I don’t trust them.” Cas leaned against the sink. He pressed his hands to his face. “I can’t trust them, Dean.”

“Even though they might be our only chance at fixing this mess,” Dean said.

“Every time I place my faith in anyone, I am betrayed,” Cas said, gripping the edge of the sink and looking at Dean’s reflection in the mirror. “The only ones who have ever been there when I needed
them are you and Sam.”

He sighed. “And Dean, there’s something else.” He turned around. “They could never accept that
we’re in a . . .”

“Relationship?” Dean suggested dryly. “It’s okay to say it, Cas, I’m not afraid of the word.”

“Maybe I am,” Cas said. He reached out to touch Dean’s shoulder, then thought better of it.
“Humans and angels, it’s anathema to us — them. Nephilim are. . . they’re abominations, unholy
offspring of those couplings.” He wasn’t an angel anymore, but these two acted as though nothing
had changed.

Even after hours of debating through Latin, English, Hebrew, and Enochian, Hadraniel and
Zipporah still ignored the truth, though it was painfully obvious that he wasn’t an angel. Castiel had
the ominous feeling if they knew about him and Dean, they wouldn’t be so determined to get his
help.

“I get it.” Dean almost sat on the edge of the bathtub, looked at the loose, pine-printed tiles, and
straightened. “Look, I always said angels were dicks, and here’s the fucking proof.”

“They don’t understand, they refuse to understand. So much of this is my fault, even if it was a
mistake. Every time I try, I make it worse, and yet they still want my help. I can’t do it again, Dean,
it’s not just about us. I know that without the angels, we don’t stand a chance at saving Sam, but I
cannot risk the world on that chance.”

Dean started to speak, but Castiel cut him off. “They’re wrong, if they think I can do anything to
help without my grace.” Cas put his head in his hands, trying to hide his teary eyes. “I have made so
many mistakes, Dean. I don’t . . . I can’t do it again.”

At last Dean realized what was so wrong with this. Cas had always been fucking stoic, a goddamn
statue with the power to smite the opposition. And here he was, barely holding back tears. He
seemed so human, so vulnerable. After a moment’s hesitation, Dean pulled him into a hug. “Look, if
you aren’t okay with this, or fuck, if you just don’t
want to do it, I’m right there with you. I can wait for a better shot at helping Sam, alright?” Even as
he said it, he wondered if that were true. He felt sick just thinking of his brother up in the penthouse,
fighting a war that Dean couldn’t even imagine.

They returned a few minutes later, Cas insisting they couldn’t keep the angels waiting even after
several passionate, very persuasive kisses. Hadraniel stood in the same position as when they’d left,
but Zipporah was sprawled across Dean and Cas’s bed, reading a motel pamphlet with disinterest.

For a few seconds, Castiel stood there silently, building up the courage to say it. “I’m sorry,” he said
at last. Zipporah put the pamphlet aside. “We’ve come to a decision. I have —”

The door burst open, colliding with the wall in a crash.

Crowley yelled and slipped off his bed as three angels walked in, heads held high. Their eyes swept
the room haughtily.

“Hello, Castiel,” one of them said coolly. “Long time no see. It’s time to pay for what you’ve done.”

“I don’t think so. Go, and you will not be harmed,” Castiel said. He glanced back at Hadraniel and Zipporah, who already had their blades ready. If these angels were trained in combat, they would be dead in minutes, but it was nice to think they might stand a chance.

Another angel laughed, one he recognized as Sariel. She’d been the commander of the garrison that influenced humanity’s so-called holy wars. Clearly, if they’d ever had anything in common, their kinship was long gone. “Or what?” She held up her own angelic weapon. “You don’t have the strength to fight us.”

“I will anyway,” Cas said. “What do you want? To kill me?” He felt Dean come up next to him and wished he were properly armed.

Dean gripped his own blade tightly, hoping these other angels didn’t realize he was prepared to fight.

The angels were now looking at one another, confused. “He’s human.”

“She didn’t say that, she told us he was a threat.”

“Of course he’s a threat, he’s Castiel. Human or not, that will not change. He’s dangerous,” Sariel said. “If Azrael wants him dead, then there must be a good reason.” She leapt for Cas.

Dean didn’t even think. He stepped in front of Cas instantly and brought his weapon up to clash against the angel’s blade.

“Sariel, Kushiel, Camael, stop this.” Zipporah staggered forward. Dean smelled tequila on her clothes. “We’re here peacefully.”

“We come in war,” the tallest of the three said, his voice deep and commanding.

“Is that not what you always do, Camael?” Hadraniel asked. “What good are you, so far from a heavenly battlefield?”

Camael’s jaw tightened. “And what of you, now your post is worthless? It is not as though you were competent, even in Heaven.”

Hadraniel paled and rushed forward, bringing a glittering blade up to stab at Camael. The angel stepped back calmly and allowed Hadraniel to stumble, obviously still awkward in the use of that gangly vessel.

Fucking great, Dean thought, and he swung his blade around to stab at Sariel’s leg. He shouted as she grabbed his arm and pulled him off balance. He hit the floor, scraping his hands on the rough carpet.

Castiel saw a blade flicker out to stab him and jumped back, scrambling for his bag — his blade was there. He barely turned with the shining silver in his hand when Kushiel came after him, rage in every tensed muscle. The angel caught his arm and he fumbled with his blade, pain shooting through him.

In the corner of his vision, he could make out Hadraniel, slicing and blocking attacks with a grace that Castiel recognized as real training. Gatekeeper, indeed.
A yell sounded from somewhere behind him, and a blast of fire blew past, barely missing Castiel’s ear. A few feet away, a bottle of flaming holy oil shattered against the wall, only a few feet from Zipporah and Camael. The angels stumbled away from the fire, and Kushiel jumped up to pull Camael from its reach. All the angels gave the wall a wide berth.

Dean glanced around when the fire hit and the clay broke. Crowley stood by Dean’s bag, holding a match in one hand. He quickly prepped another jar of oil, panicking.

Without a moment of uncertainty, Dean got to his feet and charged at the angels, swinging his blade and slashing one angel’s arm deep enough to make him drop the blade. Another struck at him, the hilt of that weapon striking the side of his head. He gasped and dropped to his knees, pressing one hand against the rapid swelling.

Hadraniel stood a few feet away, slashing at Camael. Just as the blade entered Camael’s throat, Dean realized Sariel was about to attack Hadraniel from behind. Dean swung up from his position on the floor, feeling the blade sink into Sariel’s back, just missing the spine. She jerked to a halt as lights flared in her eyes and throat. Dean closed his eyes against the brightness, pulling the blade free of her body and letting her fall.

A few moments later the light faded, leaving an imprint of wings seared into the wall.

Dean panted, spinning on his feet to see Cas and Zipporah fighting of Kushiel. Cas’s arm bled, staining his white shirt, and their opponent looked like the cut in his side was healing. Before Dean could do anything, Cas grabbed Kushiel, pulling him forward, and Zipporah stabbed the angel in the stomach.

In the quiet that followed, Cas stared at the vessels of his fallen siblings. The ache of guilt was familiar by now, but it didn’t change the pain of it. No matter what he did, it wasn’t enough to stop the fighting.

Suddenly a clap broke the silence. Crowley stood next to his bed, looking mostly unruffled. “Lovely show, everyone. You really had me going there for a moment.” The fire in the wall continued to blaze.

“Shut up, Crowley,” Dean said, but there was no animosity in his breathless voice. “You have shitty aim.” After a second, he added, “But, uh, thanks for the help.”

“I’m trying to be nice, you thick bastard.” Crowley walked over, nodding in approval at the black wings scorched into the wall and floor.

Zipporah and Hadraniel conferred in hushed voices, too quiet for Castiel to make out what was being said. He gazed down at the bodies on the floor, trying to ignore that guilty sensation. “We have a problem. Now Azrael wants us dead, and it’s because they were talking to us.” He pressed down on his cut in an attempt to stem the flow of blood. “She sent them.”

Dean grabbed his duffel and pulled out a pack of cotton and an Ace bandage. He wrapped up Cas’s arm hurriedly. “This’ll have to hold you over til we can get you patched up,” he said as he tied off the bandage tightly.

Cas groaned and rubbed his arm. “I’ll be fine.” He turned to Hadraniel and Zipporah. For a moment he doubted his decision; maybe he was making another mistake. Several seconds passed as he worked up the courage to speak. He glanced out the window. The rain had stopped, and the fire of the newly cracked and charred tree had dwindled to nothing.
“Hadraniel, Zipporah.” He cleared his throat. “If I could do anything to help, I would. But I am powerless, and Azrael’s followers are after me. I am a danger, and if I join you Azrael will never stop trying to kill us all. I won’t go with you.”

Hadraniel stepped forward, but Zipporah put out her hand. “No,” she said. “It’s his choice, not ours.”

“It is not a choice! We must undo what he has done!” Hadraniel insisted. The light coming through the window caught on the bloody silver blade in the angel’s hand. Dean stepped closer to Cas protectively, even though he had no idea how he would stop two angels on his own.

“He’s human, Hadraniel. Of course he has a choice.”

“He’s not — I see. If you feel that way, why don’t you run off and join him?” Hadraniel asked.

Zipporah hesitated before responding. Dean frowned. “Because I’m not a human. And because I want to do my duty.”

“Good,” Hadraniel said, clipped. “Then we’re leaving. Now.” The angel glanced back at Castiel. “If you decide to make the right choice, you know how to find us.”

Cas gave a tiny, almost imperceptible nod.

Hadraniel strode out, head held high, and Zipporah followed. The door slammed shut behind them without a touch.

Castiel let out a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. “They’re gone,” he sighed.

“Did you think they wanted to stick around?” Dean asked rhetorically.

“I was a little concerned they might kill us, Dean!” Cas said. He went into the bathroom to shower and change, but he kept talking through the door. “There was no way for us to get away if they fought.”

Dean couldn’t argue with that. “We could’ve tried, anyway.”

Cas laughed bitterly. “That wouldn’t have been useful. They’re trained in combat.”

“Did you know them?” He thought Cas would have mentioned that.

“No,” Castiel sighed. “But Hadraniel has been trained. Ordinary angels don’t fight like that. The posture, the movement. Hadraniel is — was — a gatekeeper.”

“Gatekeeper?”

“The angels who guard the gates of Heaven,” Cas explained. “They maintain the boundary and defend against threats — or they did. It’s why the barrier between Heaven and Earth is able to decompose; they’re gone, and no one is holding it together.”

“Too bad you sent them on their way,” Crowley said from where he still stood, between his bed and the window. “I’m positive I was getting somewhere with Zipporah.”

“You wish,” Dean said, too exhausted to put any effort into his words.

They left soon after that, packing up everything they had and getting out. They left the vessels behind. Dean wasn’t sure where they were going, not yet, but Cas wasn’t paying attention anyway. He couldn’t stop wondering if he’d chosen the right path.
Maybe he’d decided too quickly. They might have been the last and best chance at finding and stopping Azrael, at bringing Sam back. Hell, they were angels. He had half a mind to pray for them now and tell them he’d changed his mind, but something stopped him. He knew they would never approve of his feelings for Dean. They already scorned him for being human.

No. They would have to make their own way.

Dean turned off the highway, heading down a narrow, empty road. He knew that without the angels they wouldn’t stand a chance, unless they found a new strategy, a new ally, a new anything. Until things changed, they may as well find a hunt and save a life or two.

Cas broke the silence quietly. “If Azrael has angels following us...” he trailed off.

“Then we’re pretty much screwed. I know,” Dean answered.

“Bollocks,” Crowley muttered.

“I need to have a tattoo. A protection sigil,” Cas finished. “To keep them off our trail. But if we are already being watched, we will die for trying to stop her.” His voice was surprisingly level. “But death had never been permanent with us.” His eyes flickered to Dean. “I would rather die fighting than live and keep running away.” He knew from the way Dean’s mouth twitched in a smile that he felt the same.

Cas wanted to kiss him then, tell him encouraging, trite words, but he couldn’t make himself try.

None of them spoke for a long time as they cruised through town after town, heading for nowhere. They stopped every so often, to refuel and take breaks, but even then they exchanged only a few words, each of them lost in his own thoughts. It was getting late, the sun already slipping toward the horizon, when Dean stopped them at a gas station.

“Next town we come to, we’ll find someplace to sleep,” he said, and got out to fill the car up. The breeze of late October blew leaves around the car as he stood around, waiting for the tank to be ready.

For a few seconds, Cas and Crowley stayed silent. Then Crowley leaned forward and poked him in the back. “I’ve been thinking,” he said. Cas turned the music down as he spoke. “Dangerous, I know, but...”

When Cas didn’t speak, he forged ahead. “Someday, I’m gonna die again. And, I don’t know if I’m going to Heaven or to Hell anymore. Hell, I’m not sure I would want to go to Heaven even if I could, the state it’s in now.” He smiled wryly. “Well, All I’m saying is, I don’t know anymore, what’s gonna happen to me. I can’t remember how I’m supposed to feel about it.”

Cas felt his stomach drop. What about him? He doubted he would be let into Heaven, if there was even a Heaven to be let into. No angel in their right mind would permit it. Maybe he belonged in Hell. It would be fitting, he thought. The new story began when you pulled the righteous man from Hell. It wouldn’t be strange for it to end in the same place it began.

Crowley was still talking. “I’ve been in Hell, spent years on the rack until I wasn’t even human, and now? I don’t know why I’m so afraid to go back.”

Maybe they were all doomed, in the end. No Heaven, no Hell, just fading souls like ghosts on the edge of existing. How should Castiel know now?

“If you go to hell, it’s only because you won’t be welcome in Heaven,” Cas said softly, turning away
from Crowley and looking out the window at the fog that had begun to settle over the fields all around them.

His answer must have left Crowley thoughtful, because he didn’t continue the conversation. Castiel turned the music back up, listening to a song he didn’t know the words to but trying to hum the tune anyway.

He put a gentle pressure on his arm, wincing as pain shot through it. The white bandage wrapped around it stopped the bleeding, but not the ache.

Being human felt more real after facing an angel. It was clear during every attack and fight that he was easier to break. He was so inadequate as an angel, but he was even worse as a human. He still didn’t understand his emotions completely, or metaphors, or how an angel’s senses could be so intense but yet not as exact as a human’s.

He got out of the car without realizing what he was doing. His legs took him straight to Dean, standing by the gas pump impatiently. When Cas reached him, he didn’t hesitate, leaning up against him and pressing their lips together. Dean was startled at first, but quickly responded, pulling Cas closer.

Whatever came next, he would be okay. He would have to be okay, human or not, because Dean was there beside him.
Laity

Laity: ordinary people, as distinct from professionals or experts

Fog swirled in the wake of the Impala as the car zipped down some dusty back road. Early November had come on quickly, stealing their breath and turning it into opaque mist on mornings like this one. They’d ditched their last motel at most an hour and a half ago, and the cold was already starting to seep into their bones. Dean needed to find time to work out why the fucking heater kept fritzing. The nights, on the other hand, were comfortably warm now that Dean and Cas shared a bed and didn’t flinch from the barest touch. For all Crowley’s nudge-nudge-wink-wink behavior, though, they hadn’t done anything more intimate than the occasional kiss.

Dean finished leaving a message on Kevin’s cell phone. He checked in every day, just five-minute calls to make sure everything was going okay. Kevin was still working on translating the angel tablet, but Dean told him to give it a rest yesterday, which apparently translated to ‘sleep through our morning phone call.’

Cas had helped Dean handle a vengeful spirit a couple days ago, but it was nothing major. Very run-of-the-mill, as far as hunts went.

Dean ignored Crowley’s endless complaints about his music, but even that was happening less often. Sometimes they actually talked to each other, even though the conversations were always a little wary. Dean still wasn’t sure how far he trusted Crowley, but after his attempt to help against the angels Azrael sent, something changed. Actually, Crowley was usually working on the latest crossword puzzle, courtesy of motel newspaper stands.

Cas spent a lot of those drives just thinking. Dean wanted to ask what put that look on his face, but he was almost afraid to find out. Whatever he said, it wouldn’t help, so there was no point in talking about it. The trees were almost bare, the multicolored leaves whispering as they blew across yellow, dry grass.

Around seven a.m., they came to a town called Darwin, Minnesota. The town was maybe four hundred people according to the sign on the city limits. Pretty much the same as every other fucking small town they passed through in their apparently unending road trip. “Okay, we’ll stop here for breakfast and figure out if there’s a hunt anywhere nearby.”

They’d been driving aimlessly for two weeks now, and they still had nothing on Azrael or how to get to Sam. It wasn’t like Dean expected his luck to start now, but he still hoped they would come across something. He did have his fingers crossed for a hunt around here, though; small towns were goldmines for spirits and bloodsuckers; every town had its quirks, and they were backward, superstitious places.

The diner he pulled up to was filled with Elvis memorabilia. Sixties rock ‘n’ roll played from speakers concealed behind a jukebox, and the pictures on the walls were in black and white, stylized nostalgia at its finest.

“We need to find something to do, or I’m gonna go crazy,” Dean said once the waitress took their orders. She was the kind of girl he might have flirted with back in those days before Hell, before every third person he met was a demon and he was still allowed to have fun.
“Seconded,” Crowley said. “I’ve had more than enough Metallica for one lifetime.” He smirked, but Dean noticed there was no malicious look in his eyes.

As they ate, Dean chatted with Crowley about something — probably his snoring, Castiel wasn’t really listening. He was thinking again. He couldn’t seem to keep his mind off the topic, ever since Crowley first brought it up, but he hated thinking on it. He couldn’t stop fixating on what he did to his family in Heaven. Seeing how much they loathed him, firsthand, brought it back to the front of his mind, and now he couldn’t push it away.

The guilt for what he’d done to them seared his heart. In the millions of years Castiel had existed, he’d caused more damage to Heaven than Lucifer. No wonder he fell. He deserved it. Cas smiled sadly to himself, staring at the bacon on his plate and shaking his head.

A sudden burst of sneezing jolted him out of his thoughts. Next to him, Crowley covered his face with one arm.

“You okay?” Dean asked, more amused than concerned.

“Think I’m coming down with something,” Crowley said. “My throat’s been sore for a couple days now.”

“Great,” Dean said. “Don’t breathe on me.” Crowley made a face.

Dean unfolded the local newspaper he’d picked up on the way in. A lot of times these small downs didn’t put their news online, which made his job that much harder.

Cas brought up something about the movie that was on in the hotel last night and argued with Crowley about the story in hushed tones. They didn’t need to attract any more attention, considering they were three strangers in a small, secluded town.

Dean paged through the paper until he found a small article in the obituary section. “Hey, Cas, take a look at this.” He circled it with a pen and passed the paper over.

Crowley tapped his fingers on the chessboard-patterned table impatiently. “What’s going on?”

Dean shrugged. “Could be nothing.” He nudged the paper with his pen. “They’ve had four disappearances in the past year. All by the lake, bodies never found intact.”

“What about bodies that weren’t intact?” Cas asked, still reading through the tiny article.

“Most recent vic washed up onshore. That is, what was left of her. Everything but her bones and entrails was gone.” Dean glanced around, checking to make sure no one would overhear. “Think it’s a case.”

The paper made a shushing sound as Cas slid it back to him. “I agree, it’s worth a look.”

“Great. We can check into a motel and get to work.”

“Well —” Crowley sneezed again. “Not that either of you give a —” He sneezed again. “— shit, but I’ll be sitting this one out.”

Dean eyed him as he sniffled and wiped his nose, looking nothing like the suave and manipulated bastard he was used to, and nodded. “Yeah, good call, man.”

They checked into a motel just off the highway and got to work in the creaky, dank room. Crowley
watched Dean and Cas set up camp around the cramped table, his attention flickering to the dim television to the two of them and back again. He was already surrounded by crumpled tissues and his voice was stuffed up. “I can’t believe he finally stop traipsing across this bloody boring country and I can’t do anything,” he said irritably.

Dean ignored him and scanned through the little article again. “We’re gonna need to access their records. There’s a library a couple blocks away.” He looked at Cas. “Wanna get a head start?”

The library was a peeling-paint kind of place, one that had obviously been around for over a century. Cas wandered off a little, inspecting the old shelves and worn books around them.

Seated behind the desk up front was a young woman, chatting with an older lady who placed several books in her bag. “Hi,” Dean said, once the lady walked off with her books. “I’m, uh, Vince Neil. I’m looking for records of, of disappearances around here. Got anything I can use?”

The girl gave him a suspicious look. “Why do you want records of that?” She sat up straight, scrutinizing him.

Dean tried to play it off. “Eh, nothing really. Just, my little brother’s in college, see, and he’s doing this whaddya call it, dissertation, about unsolved abductions in the county. But he’s real busy, so I’m doing him a favor.” The lie almost caught in his throat. Maybe in a different time, another world, it could even have been true.

The woman still didn’t look reassured, but she clicked through the ancient computer, a big clunky thing, to find what he wanted.

Dean waited, feeling uneasy. It was too quiet around here. “Looks like we’ve got some records of that. They go back to 1856, though. Are you sure. . .?”

“I’ll take everything,” Dean said. He grabbed Cas by the sleeve. “C’mon, man.”

They hauled stacks of photocopied documents down to the motel room after grunting thanks to the librarian for the help. “Okay, so if these disappearances go back to 1850-something, it probably ain’t some psycho serial killer.”

Dean had to run out to the only chain restaurant in town — a fucking McDonald’s, for God’s sake — in the middle of sorting through the records because Crowley started whining, his clogged airways not helping any.

By four in the afternoon, they’d covered half the wall with articles of related vanishings, some methodically graffitied by Cas’s bright yellow highlighter, others marked up with red pen and Dean’s disjointed comments. The strongest pattern they could find was that they all happened next to the lake.

“Over sixty people go missing by that lake and it barely even gets a mention in the paper?” Dean said, his gaze skimming over the pinned-up pages. “Something’s not right here.”

“Ugh, this fucking cold,” Crowley said, raising his voice. “I can hardly think with my nose stuffed up.” He changed the channel, letting the remote slip from his fingers and bounce on the bed.

“Then stop thinking,” Dean shot back. To Cas he added, “Well, if something’s going on by the lake, we oughta look into it. According to the obit, there’s a wake going on for the last victim at the local funeral home. How about we swing by, have a chat with the family? Maybe they know something.”

As the door closed behind them, Dean heard Crowley groan out another attention-seeking complaint.
about the low quality of daytime television.

Dean parked the Impala a block from the funeral home. The building had the same mildewed, disused look of the rest of the buildings in this isolated town. Inside the funeral home was even worse; the walls carried the faint scent of mothballs and the lake air. It was almost like the breeze blowing off Mare Lake sank the slippery wetness into the bones of the wooden buildings along the shore.

A small crowd of people milled around the floor. They cast wary glances at the small, boxy casket. It was closed, covered with heaps of parched flowers and photographs of the victim when she was alive. Not much to bury, was there? Just bones and the last remnants of her body.

“Can I help you?” An older man, the priest, walked up to them. Cas stiffened beside Dean.

“Uh, yeah,” Dean said, “can you point us to the register book?”

“Oh of course,” the priest said, watching them closely. Cas straightened up under the prying gaze.

“How did you know the deceased?”

“She was a friend of mine, in college,” Castiel said, cutting Dean off before he could open his mouth. “Brooke and I lost touch a while back, but I know she would be glad to know I’m here.” He extended his hand expertly, lies falling easily from his lips. “Cas— ah, Cas Winchester. This is my brother. Dean.”

The priest regarded his hand for a long moment before shaking it and nodding slowly. He walked away to talk to a small huddle of black-dressed mourners.

“Seriously — ‘brother?’” Dean hissed as they meandered through the scattered clumps of people.

“We don’t know how tolerant the locals are, Dean, and I don’t want to raise suspicions. They’ll already be questioning who we are.”

Dean shrugged. “They always do that. Small towns like this, they don’t get that many outsiders. ‘Course they’re suspicious.”

Cas wasn’t sure he believed him, but he broke away from Dean to converse with a group of young adults who spoke in hushed voices near the polished casket.

Unsure of how confident he was in Cas’s ability to chat up people in their mid-twenties, Dean carefully made his way to a table stacked with hors d’oeuvres and the middle-aged men and women sipping cups of water. “I know, Sharon. Brooke might seemed normal enough to her friends, but everyone knows why it happened. She deserved it. Her affair with David —” A woman with brittle hair dyed red cut herself off when she caught sight of Dean.

“What actually happened to her, anyway?” Dean asked, breaking into the circle. He cast a wink at Dyed-Red and laid on the charm. “Hey, my name’s Dean. I didn’t know Brooke personally, my . . . brother was friends with her in college and no one’s been able to tell me what happened to her. So what did it? Was she sick?”

Dyed-Red glanced at the rest of the group, unsettled by his questions. “W-wolf attack. Right. That’s what it was. Damn things don’t keep to the woods these days.” She pasted an appropriately mournful smile on her face. “Christine. Nice to meet you.”

Dean hung around just long enough to get the phone numbers of families of some of the victims from the gossipy little group. Once he had something to work with, he grabbed Cas and dragged him
away from his conversation with several young women, all of whom were gazing at him like he was a slice of angel food cake.

“Okay,” Dean said. “Got the numbers for the victims’ families. Did you get anything out of those girls?”

“Their phone numbers,” Cas answered dryly, pulling three napkins out of his pocket and handing them to Dean. The lustful gazes of the women had made him a little uncomfortable, considering he wouldn’t be able to flirt back if he’d tried. He would have much preferred a fight to talking to people; at least in battle he was competent and experienced. “But I did hear one thing. They all seemed to think this Brooke deserved what happened to her.”

“Yeah, I heard something like that.” Dean shrugged and threw Cas’s napkins aside, letting them blow across the dead grass outside the funeral home. “I figure we’re better off checking the lake anyway.”

Mare Lake was really not the place to be in early November. The breeze off the chilly water blew straight through Dean’s jacket, and the creaking of the lifeguard tower on the shore didn’t settle him whatsoever.

On the edge of the sandy beach sat a large, wooden cabin turned tourist joint. The shitty kind that sold the same mugs Dean could find at every gas station within fifty miles along with amateur photos of the lake in summer. Instead of the cool, tropical blue waters in the pictures, the waves now were steel-gray and capped with white foam, whipped up by the icy breeze.

Dean walked up to the counter, where a gangly, long-haired teenager snored in his chair. He slammed his hand down on the bell, jolting the kid awake.

“Can I see one of those maps of the lake?” Dean asked once the kid was fully conscious. He stunk like he’d been smoking weed.

The kid scrambled to his feet and rifled through a stack of papers until he found a detailed map of the lake. Dean pretended to examine it for a couple seconds, then turned to the kid again. Cas came up from behind him with a chipped mug printed with the silhouettes of bears and trees.

“So, you ever seen a wolf on this beach?” Dean asked casually. “Heard from a buddy of mine you got some big ones ‘round here.”

The kid’s freckles stood out starkly against his pale skin. “Uh, n-no? I mean, yeah. Yeah, we see ‘em all the time.”

“Kinda dangerous, letting people walk around a beach where wolves can just walk right up.” Dean picked up Cas’s coffee mug and inspected it absently. “Isn’t there some kinda safety regulation? I hear you’ve had a lot of people get dragged off by those . . . monsters.”

The kid ran a hand through his hair. “Those people deserved what they got,” he said.

Dean raised his eyebrows. “Even the eight-year-old on a family vacation?”

The guy stiffened and moved closer to the telephone on his side of the counter.

“Have you ever felt or seen anything unusual around here? Cold spots, maybe an apparition?” Cas pressed, leaning forward. Dean felt a stirring of pride in his chest for Cas. His angel had taken to hunting like a fish to water.
“With the lake this close, it’s always cold,” the kid said uneasily. He placed his hand on the phone and quickly dialed three digits, stepping back. Dean could tell he was hoping they wouldn’t notice his left hand slowly reaching for a handgun on the back shelf.

“Hey, man, it’s cool,” Dean said, just making conversation.” The teenager ignored him, talking in a low voice with the officer on the phone.

Cas dropped a bill on the counter and took his mug with them.

Dean swore. A police car blocked the exit from the beach parking lot. “Fuck fuck fuck,” he hissed. As the officers got out of their car, Castiel stepped in front of Dean as if to shield him.

“Dude, chill out,” Dean muttered, bumping him with his shoulder. “Hey, officers, what’s the trouble?”

“We received a call about harassment of an employee and a minor. Care to tell us what happened?”

“Nothing happened. My brother and I were asking a couple questions about the people that went missing at the lake. You hear things, we were just wondering if he saw anything,” Dean said, hoping to smooth it over.

“You boys reporters or something?” the other officer asked suspiciously, one hand drifting to where handcuffs were hooked on his belt. He nodded at Cas. “You look real familiar.”

Quickly, Cas shook his head. “Just passing through and heard about the woman that was killed.”

The cops fixed their gazes on him. “Give me some ID.”

Dean put up his hands placatingly. “We didn’t do anything illegal — asking questions isn’t a crime.”

One of them huffed. “You come back here again and we’ll lock you up for the night for harassment.”

Dean nodded. “Okay. Yeah. We won’t be coming back. No problem.”

They had to wait a few more tense minutes in the Impala while the officers checked in with the kid in the store before the cops finally drove off and let them out of the parking lot.

“That was close, Cas, that was too fucking close.”

“Now do you think they’re hiding something?” Cas asked, glossing over the near miss with his identity as James Novak, murderer.

Dean sighed. “Yeah. And now we’ve got cops watching us, we’re gonna have to be careful.”

“What are you thinking?” Castiel asked.

They got out of the car. Dean was shaking with anger. “I can’t stand cops,” he said. “Nosy interfering assholes.” He slammed his door shut. “And we’ve got to switch up the plates after this.”

“If they’re hiding something, then they know what’s going on,” Cas pointed out. “There must be at least one person who won’t keep it secret.”

“Yeah, Cas, that’s real helpful,” Dean said. “Let’s just take it easy for tonight. I think there’s an Indiana Jones marathon on tonight.”
Castiel gave Dean a blank look.

“Indiana Jones,” Dean said patiently. When Cas still didn’t recognize it, he said, “I’m getting you a pop culture education if it kills me. We’re watching Indiana Jones tonight. It can. Uh.” Dean hesitated. “It can be kind of a movie date, if we can get rid of Crowley.”

Cas stopped, surprised, before picking up his pace to keep up with Dean. He’d thought. . . he didn’t know what he thought. That Dean had thought better of their relationship, that he would want to take it back. Even with all the time they spent together, even with the kisses in the bathroom when Crowley was out of sight, he doubted.

They were heading upstairs to their room when Dean heard a man in the hall. “I’m not kidding, this guy is seriously freaking me out. He might be on drugs,” a younger guy was saying to the manager. “He’s yelling his head off in the room down the hall. Look, lady, I’ve got kids, I don’t want a creep like that getting near them.”

“Crowley,” Dean growled. He bolted up the last flight of stairs and down the hall. Once they were closer, his suspicions were confirmed.

“COULD SOMEONE PLEASE EXPLAIN TO MY WHY IN THE NAME OF LUCIFER’S LACY PANTIES DO HUMANS GET SO BLOODY ILL ALL THE FUCKING TIME?!”

Dean rolled his eyes. “Crowley, you son of a bitch,” he said, unlocking the door. “Shut up, Crowley!” he shouted. “We leave you alone for what, a couple hours? And you go and pull shit like this!”

“I can’t live in these conditions, Dean!” Crowley said. He looked like hell, his nose red and his skin flushed. Wild eyes glared from under sweaty hair.

“Then take some fucking medicine, jackass!”

Crowley recoiled as if he’d been stung. Dean had to look away from his hurt expression. Crowley almost seemed sympathetic, but he couldn’t back down.

“Dean,” Castiel shushed him. His mouth curved in a disapproving frown. As much as he empathized with Crowley’s situation, it didn’t excuse his behavior. “Crowley, don’t be an ass.”

Crowley gaped at Cas, opening and closing his mouth without making a sound. He looked from Dean to Cas and back again. He mumbled something halfway between an insult and an apology before dropping back onto his bed and turning away.

Castiel pressed his lips together. Had he been too harsh? Crowley wasn’t the same careless, malicious demon he’d known. He couldn’t treat him as if nothing changed.

He pushed it out of his mind and turned to Dean. “You mentioned a date,” he said, a smile twitching at the corner of his mouth.

They sat together in the second bed under the covers as Dean found the channel. The first movie was just beginning with Indy traipsing through a South American jungle.

By the time Indy and Marion escaped the Well of Souls, they wound up leaning against one another, cushioned by pillows and entangled in the blankets. Crowley had dropped off some time ago, snoring lightly. Cas wished they could always be like this, intimate without awkwardness, just being close and happy. He heard Dean let out a contented sigh, just loud enough for him to catch, and he smiled.
After the first movie, Dean ran out for pizza and came back just as the beginning credits of The
Temple of Doom drew to a close. “We’ve gotta be careful,” he said, tossing the box on their bed.
“Pretty sure the cops are gonna keep an eye out for us now.”

During the commercials toward the end of the second movie, Cas turned to Dean. “Do you think I’m
different now?”

A little started, Dean squeezed Cas’s hand under the blankets. “You mean from when you were all
holy? Yeah, why?”

“Crowley’s very different, too. More human.”

Dean raised his eyebrows. “Why? ‘Cause he caught a cold?”

“Because of how he acts,” Cas said. “He told me he thinks more about what will happen when he
dies, and he feels emotion.”

Dean’s smile was a little twisted. “Yeah, well, guess he’s pissed he has to deal with his fucking
feelings.”

Cas fixed his gaze on Dean, eyes dark. “Don’t you get it? Emotions are serious. Experiencing
humanity is different, strange, when you’ve been something else for so long. It scares him.”

Something in his voice made Dean look closer. He leaned in. “Does it scare you?” he asked, so quiet
it was barely a breath. They were very close together, Dean realized. Very very close, their shoulders
and hips and legs touching, and . . .

“What do you think?” Cas asked sadly. Their faces were less than six inches apart and Dean couldn’t
even fucking think straight.

“Uh, the movie’s back on,” he said, trying to distract Cas, but he still couldn’t break eye contact.
Slowly he leaned closer and Cas leaned forward to meet him halfway and son of a bitch. Cas’s hand
let go of Dean’s and came up to rest at the back of Dean’s neck, pulling him closer. Dean took the
opportunity to tangle his fingers loosely in Cas’s hair, deepening the kiss.

The sound of gunfire from the television startled them, and they separated. Crowley smirked at them,
the remote in one hand. His fingertip was on the volume control. “Oh, I’m sorry,” he said. “Were
you busy?”

“Fuck off, Crowley,” Dean said. “Fucking asshole,” he added under his breath.

Cas fell asleep that night with his head lolling on Dean’s shoulder as the finale of The Kingdom of
the Crystal Skull went on without him. Dean slid away gently, trying not to wake him up. He smiled
fondly at his best friend, his — well, his boyfriend, looking unkempt and so completely human, and
he felt a warmth in his chest as he drifted off.

Of course, the warmth wasn’t going to last. It had been weeks since Sam’s last visit, of course he had
to be due.

Ash looked like he’d been waiting for him when his eyes flickered open on the Roadhouse. “Nice to
see you. Took you long enough to hit the sack, old man.”

Dean’s heart sank. “What’s going on now?”

Sam cleared his throat. “It’s getting worse,” he said. “We’ve been trying to talk with some of the
belligerent ones and get them to calm down, but nothing’s working. They just don’t care.”

“So take them down,” Dean said, but he knew it wasn’t so simple.

“They’re dead, Dean, we can’t get them any deader,” Sam said. He sat at the bar next to Bobby, who had an empty bottle of whiskey in hand.

“These jackasses don’t know the first thing about taking care of this place. Hell, we shoulda just put Ash in charge,” Bobby said. Dean joined them at the bar.

“There’s nothing you can do about it?” Dean asked.

Sam scoffed. “Yeah, if we wanna get ourselves ki—” He stopped. Quieter, he continued, “We can’t risk being out in the open anymore. Even if we could convince billions of people to stand down, leaving the Roadhouse is too dangerous.”

Dean stiffened. “What’re you talking about? It’s fucking Heaven, how are you in danger?”

Sam pressed his lips together and glanced at Bobby uncertainly. His gaze flickered back to Dean. “It’s the angels,” Bobby said, reaching out to put a hand on Dean’s shoulder, like he wanted to calm him down.

No. Dean wasn’t gonna let this slide by. “What about them?” he demanded, standing up forcefully. Sam winced as the barstool clattered to the floor.

“Dean, it’s not just us, alright? We’ve got plenty of hunters trying to get somebody’s attention, figure out who’s in charge. The angel that’s running everything called in reinforcements,” Sam said, brushing it off like it was nothing.

Dean couldn’t think through the sound of his heart pounding. He was asleep, how could his heart be racing? “Sam, what did she do?”

“She brought more angels up here, and, well — well —” Sam closed his eyes. “They’re consuming us.”

Dean felt icy cold. “W-what? Souls can’t be destroyed.” His throat felt like it was closing up. He tried to control his breathing and settle down, but he just couldn’t. “Sam, you — you can’t die again.”

Sam refused to look at him. “They’re not killing us, Dean. They’re eating us.”

He went completely, rigidly still. “What.”

“Whatever kind of magic this is, it’s — it’s not killing us. We’re under attack, wiped out. They’re eating us. For energy. You know, souls, we’re like a power source. And they’re just . . consuming our souls like food. It juices them up, and we have no weapons, nothing. Whatever this angel wants, she’s not gonna let us get in the way.” Sam still wouldn’t meet his eyes.

Dean swallowed, trying to stifle the panic rising in his chest, but it didn’t work. His head buzzed. “And what the hell can I do about it?” he asked. “We’ve got jack on this angel. She can track us down and set the bunker of fire, but we can’t go after her ‘cause she’ll kill us, we can’t trust any angels, there’s no way to get into Heaven and do anything, and you think I can help how?”

Sam was silent, looking down at his hands. “An angel set the bunker on fire?” he said at last.
Dean felt a sting of guilt for dropping that news on Sam so roughly, but really, it wasn’t like Sam hadn’t just done the exact same fucking thing to him. “No one got hurt, but the place is pretty much a shell now. So yeah, Sam, thanks for letting me know Azrael was going around fucking shit up before she destroyed our home.” Dean slammed his fist into the wall. It gave slightly, like he’d punched a mattress.

“Damn it, Dean, I just need you to know what’s going on! We can’t hold back billions of souls on our own willpower, we need a real fix here and we need it fast. I just want out of this mess, okay?” Sam followed him as he paced, finally trying to meet his gaze. “Just do whatever you can.”

“Sam, what the hell can I do? How the fuck am I supposed to help you?”

His brother held him by the shoulder. “It’s not like there’s a manual for this, Dean, of course it’s hard.” Sam shook his head. “I just want you to keep trying. We’re doing everything we can up here, too.”

“And... time’s up,” Ash said, sounding apologetic. He stood up from his chair in the corner and thumped the machine. “Sorry, amigo, this thing’ll burn out if we go overtime. See you later.”

Dean tried to shout at Sammy, demand that he listen, but the walls turned to mist and they were gone. Dean opened his eyes.

He stared into the heavy, pressing darkness of the motel. Cas curled up next to him, one knee poking his back uncomfortably. Dean wondered if that was what woke him up. Crowley’s snores were loud, probably from his cold. A dark cast lay over the room, broken only by a thin rectangle from the streetlamp outside that shone between the curtains and lit the wall next to him.

Sam, he remembered suddenly. Sam was in Heaven, with Bobby and Ash, fighting a war that he couldn’t win. And Dean couldn’t do a damn thing about it, couldn’t even put a knife in the back of the angel who did this. Sam and Bobby were in the line of fire here, and Dean felt a sharp, burning sensation in the back of his throat.

He swallowed the taste of vomit down, but the darkness surrounding him still felt suffocating. He needed air. Sammy was gonna get killed trying to stop Heaven from collapsing in on itself and here he was, hunting in some hick town in the middle of nowhere. His throat seized up, and his breaths came faster and faster.

“No,” he whispered to himself firmly. “You’ve got work to do, and you can’t lose it. Calm the fuck down.”

The silence that followed only made it worse. Dean couldn’t stand it. He stood up and grabbed his room key from the bedside table. He couldn’t remember where he left his jacket, so he took Cas’s trenchcoat and left himself a mental reminder to put it back when he came in.

Outside, Dean could breathe again. The air was icy, aching into his bones and turning his breath to mist. The November moon was almost entirely obscured by thick clouds that drifted across the sky. Dean calmed slightly when he glimpsed the pale light glinting off the Impala.

The chill breeze swept through the lot again, and it blew straight through him. Dean wrapped Cas’s coat tighter.

Just because the angels were a load of fucking bastards and Sam was in the penthouse putting his entire existence on the line didn’t mean Dean could give up. It wouldn’t help Sam if he flipped out and lost his shit. Dean had to keep fighting, or Sam would never come home.
He stared up at the overcast sky and shivered. Only months ago that sky was lit with thousands of falling angels. Now here he was, driving across the country with Cas and Crowley, and he had a fucking boyfriend, of all things. How did everything change so goddamn fast?

The breeze stirred the leaves of the trees nearby. Dean glanced up at the moon, now obscured by the endless expanse of clouds stretching all the way to the horizon.

A noise behind him made Dean turn around. Cas stood in the doorway with a concerned look in his eyes. He wore a blue t-shirt and black sweatpants, which looked so strange on him, even after all this time, Dean almost laughed.

“Are you okay out here?” Cas asked.

Dean forced a weak smile. “Yeah, ‘m fine,” he lied. “Just thinking.”

“It’s too cold to be out this late. Come back in.”

He sounded so concerned, standing there in socks and sweatpants, and Dean’s smile turned genuine. “Why? So you can warm me up?” he asked, cocking an eyebrow.

Cas bumped his shoulder. “Is that supposed to be a flirtation?” he retorted, but he was smiling too.

For a few moments, they stood quietly together, looking up at the sky.

Castiel spoke again. “You asked if I was afraid.” He leaned against Dean, their shoulders pressed together. “I . . I am. Not of dying. Of what comes after. They won’t let me into Heaven.”

“What?” Dean turned to look at him, and Cas felt a flash of guilt for unloading his worries onto Dean.

“After, after everything I’ve done to them, I won’t be allowed into Heaven.” He stared at the ground, hoping Dean understood. “I’ve caused too much suffering to be worth much anyway.”

Dean grabbed Cas’s hand. “Don’t you ever say that,” he said fiercely. “You are worth more than all those angels put together, you know that? You’re the only one with any brains between them. They’re all selfish dicks. You’re better than them, okay?”

Cas nodded slowly, reluctantly. “If you say so.” Somehow he couldn’t find it in himself to believe Dean’s words, but it was nice to think Dean believed them.

Dean leaned back against his angel. How could he tell Cas about the dream now? It could only make things worse for both of them. He knew Cas would blame himself for the state of Heaven even though it had nothing to do with him.

He felt Cas’s hand on his shoulder. “It’s snowing.” Just as Cas spoke, Dean saw a snowflake land on his sleeve.

There was a second of quiet before Cas kissed him lightly and said, “Come back inside, or you don’t get coffee tomorrow.” The snow was quickly turning into a flurry.

Dean glared. “Don’t threaten me. I can kill you in your sleep.”

“Try me, I’ve been a soldier since time began.” Cas walked back inside. Dean followed with a playful smile, glad to be distracted for even a few minutes.

Around eight in the morning, Dean was jolted awake by a sudden burst of sneezing from Crowley’s
bed. He opened one eye, and blinked at the harsh sunlight streaming through the now open curtains. Cas stood at the window, gazing outside at the fresh layer of glittering snow where it caught on the bare trees, before he closed them up again and sent the room back into semidarkness.

Dean shoved the comforter aside and stood, turning on the lights, before sitting back down on the bed. “Feeling better?” he asked Crowley. All he got was a glare before Crowley buried his nose in a tissue and sneezed again. “Guess not,” Dean said.

“This is frigging humiliating,” Crowley muttered, the words muffled by his clogged nose. “I can’t live like this.”

“If you’d take some fucking medicine, it would be gone by now,” Dean pointed out. He realized Cas was staring at him. “What?”

Cas jumped. He hadn’t expected Dean to notice his gaze. “You’re still wearing my coat,” Cas smiled. “It looks good on you.” You look beautiful.

“Thanks,” Dean said, wrapping it around him like a protective layer. The coat felt like an extension of Cas.

Cas settled at the table. “Now what?” he asked. “We still don’t know what kind of creature this is.”

“Normally I’d guess werewolf, but they don’t turn during the daylight, and Brooke vanished around noon. And wendigos don’t leave anything behind,” Dean said, pushing all thoughts of coats and kissing aside. Sam nagged at the back of his mind, and a part of him wanted to confess, but it could only hurt Cas to hear it.

By ten, he and Cas were ready to go, all suited up and looking semi-professional. They pretended to be insurance agents, checking in on the families of the deceased. They asked most of the standard hunter questions — any flickering lights or cold spots, any weird night-owl partying types hanging around, dead pets with their veins sucked dry — and nothing. The families and friends all got suspicious too fast for Dean’s liking and hurried them out, refusing to answer any more questions.

“Well, that was a bust,” Dean said as they headed back to the car. The wife of a victim from a few years ago had coldly shown them the door. “I’m thinking you were right, this town’s gotta be hiding something.”

The snow from the night before melted away by noon. Cas pointed out that Crowley would probably be an ass if they went back to the motel, so the two of them went down to a small family-run diner in town. Castiel held back his enthusiasm — this is how people date, we’re on a date — and tried to focus solely on the case.

It wasn’t working. The moment he stifled the excitement bubbling in his chest, his worries resurfaced. He was closed-off and reserved, and the change was so sudden that something must have happened. But when did something change, Cas was with him all yesterday and all night. . . maybe he was just frustrated by the lack of leads. Castiel felt the same; these people were hiding the truth, maybe even protecting the thing that was killing them. Didn’t they want to be safe?

Dean chewed on a burger, staring absently into the air. It was clear he wasn’t listening to a word Cas said about checking out the nearby woods, so he reached out and clasped Dean’s wrist. Instantly his eyes flickered to Cas and he swallowed.

“Cas, we’re in a public place,” he hissed under his breath, glancing around at the other people in the restaurant.
“It doesn’t matter. What can they do?” Cas asked. He ignored the pounding of his heart, because for all Dean’s discomfort he still hadn’t let go of his hand.

“Jump us, for one thing,” Dean pointed out. He glanced around again, but still didn’t pull out of Cas’s grip. Now Cas wanted to lean forward and kiss him just to piss off anyone who thought they shouldn’t. He knew this wouldn’t be what sent him to Hell, whatever the fundamentalists in this town might say.

“What’s the matter?” Cas asked when he realized Dean was completely serious. He let go. “Dean, you know there’s nothing wrong with this.” Except that Castiel’s family would smite him if they knew; if they could still call him an angel, they would still call his feelings **abomination**.

Dean smiled wryly. “They’re just fucking hard to ignore.”

Cas started to ask what he meant, but he was cut off by a gaggle of skinny preteens who stormed into the diner and huddled together in the booth behind him. They weren’t wearing nearly enough layers for the weather, and their ears were red from the cold.

What struck Cas about them was the look of terror on each pale face.

They were silent, shivering in their thin autumn jackets and glancing around the diner fearfully.

At last, one dark-haired girl spoke. “Don’t ever talk about it again, okay? I don’t wanna hear what you think, Heather. It was a wolf, okay? Okay?”

“Y-yeah, Julie. Just a wolf.”

In the space of a moment, Dean met Cas’s eyes and told him, without a word, what he was thinking. Dean got up and leaned against the kids’ booth. “Don’t talk about what?”

What little color was left in their faces drained. “N-nothing,” said the dark-haired girl.

“Really. Nothing.” Dean said. “Didn’t sound like nothing to me.”

“Shut up, Julie!” the other girl hissed. The two boys breathed agreement.

Dean smiled easily, crouching down so he was level with Julie. “You can tell me what you’re hiding or you can tell your parents.”

Julie stuck her jaw out stubbornly and shook her head.

Slowly Dean stood up to his full height, and four pairs of eyes widened. Julie still refused to open her mouth, but her eyes were fixed on the gun in his waistband, only partially hidden by his jacket.

“There’s something in the lake,” a boy blurted out suddenly. “It eats people.”

“Bryan!” Julie whipped around and slapped her hand over his mouth. “He’s a liar,” she said, but her voice shook.

“Oh, you think so?” Dean almost admired her courage. He had more than two feet on her, and a weapon.

Four twenty-dollar bills fluttered onto the table. “Try that again, but this time with honesty,” Cas said evenly, his low voice making the kids tense up.

The second boy answered quietly. “It looked like a horse. It bit Brooke Jacobsen and pulled her into
the lake. We all saw it.”

Heather and Bryan nodded fervently, but Julie stubbornly shook her head again.

“We weren’t s’posed to be there,” Heather whispered. “Please don’t tell my mom.”

Dean glanced at Cas, who nodded, looking thoughtful. He deftly picked up one of the bills, but the other three he left for the kids. They snatched them up as Julie stared him down coldly.

“Now that we’re out sixty bucks, you think we got a lead?” Dean asked, sliding back into the booth.

“Yes,” Castiel said. “It’s a kelpie.”

“You mean like a water spirit?” Dean asked. He had to admit, he was a little excited at that thought. He was sure not even Dad got to gank one.

“They’ve been around for centuries, and they’re almost extinct now,” Cas said. “I saw their first murders when I watched the Earth. Kelpies kill and eat humans, and leave only the entrails behind. They can shapeshift to human form.”

“They’re still shapeshifters.” Cas smiled back and finished what was left of his meal quickly.

“So silver bullets can take down Nessie. Fucking awesome.”

He and Cas went back to the motel to figure out a way to lure the kelpie out into the open. They figured the thing would come after something on the beach or in the water, but Dean wasn’t sure it would still be hungry after devouring Brooke Jacobsen only a week ago.

“They have hibernation cycles of about six years,” Cas countered. “The kelpie is eating what it can now so it won’t starve in its sleep. Anything it sees, it will attack.”

Crowley continued to whine and moan about being “frigging incapacitated” until Dean just about threw a bottle of Nyquil at him; judging from the half-empty bottle of vodka on the nightstand, Crowley was at least healthy enough to get to a liquor store and drink his way into a stupor. Half an hour after Crowley downed an excessive dose of medicine, he was passed out on the bed, snoring.

Early the next morning, with the chilly November fog soaking into their skin, Dean and Cas loaded up a couple handguns with silver bullets and headed down to the beach. As Dean parked the car, the fog turned to drizzling rain, the fat drops leaving divots in the damp sand; the snow had melted away hours ago.

No sound could be heard but the splash of the waves on the beach and a few birds who passed overhead. The fog made it almost impossible to see the lake at all, and Dean wondered how in the hell they were supposed to see the kelpie when it came after them.

Cas was a warm presence by his side, even though his coat was now spotted with raindrops and his hair was starting to stick to his forehead with wet. Dean managed a tight, tense smile when Cas caught his eye.

Nothing happened for what felt like forever; no kelpie came to bite their heads off. Cas and Dean spoke in hushed voices and pointed looks, unable to raise their voices in case they scared the kelpie off.

Castiel had inched closer and closer to Dean, until they were almost pressed together, and Dean was seriously debating kissing him then and there, when a high screech split the silence.
They took off running toward the sound, slowed by the sand shifting beneath their feet that kicked up with every step. At last they reached the water’s edge.

A gangly teenager with long hair was being dragged, half-conscious, down to the water by a man. The waves lapped at his limp body and soaked clothes, and in it stirred the blood from a slash in the kid’s arm.

The man was covered by nothing but strips of weeds that tangled in his shaggy hair and stuck to his dark skin and the black fur on his legs. Dean cocked his gun and fired, sinking a bullet into the thing’s left shoulder. It let out an animal scream and its form shifted, twisting and mangling until it was a huge black stallion, still wrapped in slimy weeds and standing tall over the gangly kid.

Cas shot at the kelpie and hit it in the leg. It screamed again and clamped its teeth around the arm of the kid, dragging him further into the icy water.

“Get the kid!” Dean shouted, firing again and almost tripping in the moist sand. The kelpie reared and came down again, its hooves only inches from crushing the teenager’s throat.

Cas dodged the kelpie’s sharp teeth and grabbed the boy by his legs, dragging him away from the water as Dean blew round after round into the kelpie’s body. Cas checked the boy’s pulse once they were clear, pressing his suit jacket to his bleeding arm hurriedly. A quick look at his face made Cs’s stomach drop; it was the boy who called the cops on them when they were asking questions. He was already going into shock, and the icy water wasn’t helping matters. The bite was deep, slicing clean through muscle.

The kelpie collapsed on the sandy beach heavily, with several dripping holes in its flanks, chest, and neck. Even so, Dean burned the rest of his clip straight through the corpse, to be sure the hardy thing was dead.

Cas tore his jacket into strips to make a bandage, trying to stem the blood flow, but it wasn’t helping. He swore and fumbled for his coat a few feet away, searching for his phone. “Call the police, or something. I can’t —” He swore again. Castiel wished for the hundredth time for the capability to heal with a touch, this boy could die and if he hadn’t lost his grace. . .

Dean dialed quickly, and as he did so, the boy coughed to wakefulness. “Shouldn’t’ve done it. . .” he mumbled, wincing as blood dripped from the gash in his arm. “Should be dead right. . . now.” He gasped and struggled against Cas, but fell back immediately. “If God thinks I need to be punished. . . who are you to —” another heaving, ragged gasp, “stop it?”

Castiel frowned; the sound of Dean telling the cops where they were became only background noise. “What does God have to do with this?”

“He. . . sent it. He always. . .” The boy fought to rise again, even weaker. “M-my punishment. Di-divine retribution, Father Lyons said so.”

“God had no hand in this,” Cas said, trying to calm him. “This is no holy wrath, just a monster.”

Dean ended the call. “The cops are on their way. Cas, we’ve gotta get out of here.”

The former angel gazed up at him. “Dean, he can’t be left alone.”

“We’re gonna be arrested if we’re still here in five minutes! I don’t want to ditch him either, man, but can he make it five minutes?”

“He thinks he was meant to die. He’ll kill himself.” Cas’s words were flat. “He will let himself die,
Dean.

Cas resolutely kept pressure on the wound, trying desperately to keep him alive despite the massive blood loss he’d sustained. The boy looked small on the sand, his red-blond hair damp on his cold face. His eyes were wide, and he whimpered weakly, jerking under Cas’s weight.

Then he stopped fighting. His eyes were still open, wide and blank, and his rasping breath had gone silent.

Dean looked pained, but he grabbed Cas’s shoulder urgently. He pulled Cas to his feet and they ran back to the car as sirens echoed through the thick pine forest. Cas didn’t seem to be paying attention to anything, running after Dean with an empty look that sent chills down Dean’s spine.

Moments after they pulled onto the road, Dean saw the cops round the bend and speed into the beach parking lot. “Fuck, that was close,” he breathed.

They barely parked and got inside their room before more sirens blared. Dean pushed the curtains back and caught sight of a cop car out front. The officers who’d confronted them at the beachfront store were talking to the hotel manager. “Uh, new plan, Cas. We’re hitting the road.” He shook Crowley awake, grabbed their bags, and ditched the motel. The side door was unwatched — for God’s sake, did they even try?

“Come on, and be quiet. Crowley, if you start sneezing, I swear —”

“I took your frigging medicine,” he whispered back irritably.

The sound of cops yelling from inside the motel reverberated into the parking lot. The three of them hurried to the Impala, climbing in and starting her up as silently as possible. Dean muttered curses under his breath as he very slowly reversed and didn’t stop swearing until they’d pulled onto the highway.

“Adios, Darwin,” he said as they breezed down the highway.

Cas was staring forward, wan and quivering. His eyes were filled with tears, but he didn’t let them fall. “I couldn’t do anything,” he whispered, twining his fingers and clenching them tight.

Dean decided it was a good thing he hadn’t told Cas about his dream. He didn’t want him blaming himself for something he couldn’t change. Telling himself it was justified was easier than admitting he couldn’t risk destroying Cas for the sake of easing his own guilt.

Glancing over at the man who was mourning a stranger, a child, he knew that Cas had more than enough guilt to face already.
Lightning snapped across the sky, the flash reflecting on the wet hood of the Impala. Wipers swished across the windshield as heavy rain pelted the glass. They’d been on the road almost nonstop for three weeks, and were just crossing state lines into Alabama.

“How long d’you figure this rain’ll last?” Crowley muttered, scribbling something in a crossword

The drink of the night, from the smell of Crowley’s flask, was beer. They’d already finished off the whiskey two days ago, and Dean confiscated the vodka. He glanced back in the rearview mirror.

“How long d’you figure this rain’ll last?” Crowley muttered, scribbling something in a crossword

“Don’t know. ‘s getting late anyway, we’ll head for a hotel.”

“Thank God. I was wondering when you’d hit on that simple solution.”

Dean drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. “You getting cabin fever or something?”

“Your observational skills never cease to amaze,” Crowley drawled. “Just a little exhausted, darling, not to worry.” He stretched and yawned again. “Wake me when we’ve stopped,” he mumbled, laying across the backseat and resting his head in Cas’s lap.

Dean’s jaw was set. Crowley had been a pain in his ass for too goddamn long, but he’d gotten worse in the last few days. Dean was officially at the end of his rope. Did Crowley think he wasn’t tired? He barely slept anymore — they had to keep moving, just in case.

Only a few days after they’d taken care of the kelpie, they’d been ambushed on the road by two angels who apparently didn’t realize that Dean and Cas were fucking desperate, and that there was nothing more dangerous than desperation. Dean shivered, thinking of Cas pinned down on asphalt with an angel about to slit his throat. Cas had stabbed her in the stomach, but when Dean tried to pull him out of the car so they could get away, Cas couldn’t move, staring at the body blankly and whispering, over and over, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

He still hadn’t mentioned his most recent dream to Castiel and Crowley. He had nothing that would help or cheer them up, so what would be the fucking point?

It would only make things worse, and he did not need to deal with that right now. Not to mention that the thought of talking made him nauseous. He could pretend it was just a dream, but if he said it out loud it would be real.

“Dean.” Cas’s voice drew him back to reality. “You look exhausted. I can drive, if you.” He trailed off at the look on Dean’s face.

“No. No way I’m letting anyone drive her in weather like this.”

Castiel looked away, eyes following raindrops as they slid down the window. He couldn’t watch Dean wear himself out. “You’ve barely slept this week. Don’t forget what happened last time.”

That stung. Dean knew he needed rest. He wasn’t trying to put it off or anything. He just... couldn’t. Nowhere was safe, he had to stay up and keep watch. “Cas, it’s not like that. I have to... We gotta stay safe. I have to protect you. And Crowley,” he added as an afterthought, glancing back
Compassion filled Cas’s eyes, somehow both pissing Dean off and making him want to kiss him. God, when was the last time they had a chance to do that? They’d been busy running. “If you’re sure,” Cas said, “but Dean, talk to me if you’re having trouble.”

“What, like you talk to me?” Dean shot back without thinking. Cas’s face fell. Dean tried not to let the hurt look get to him. It was true. Cas didn’t really go in for the chats anymore. Hell, he spent more time talking to his fucking journal than he did to Dean. He didn’t like the realization of how much he hated the silence between them.

Cas pressed his lips together, shifting so he was facing the window. He watched lightning strike again and again, knowing that Dean knew damn well how that remark hurt and knowing he wouldn’t apologize anyway.

How could Dean want their conversations to go? Dean, you know I’m in love with you but you won’t say it back, now let’s go slaughter more of my kin. Let’s take everything I’ve done wrong and make it worse, and talk about how I can’t do anything right and I can’t save fucking anyone and yet you still keep me around. Sometimes I think you only say you want to be with me out of pity. Maybe Cas was missing some vital aspect of human conversation, again, but to him those didn’t sound like great talking points.

Cas fell asleep with his forehead pressed against the window, not waking until Dean shook his shoulder and said he’d found a place to ‘catch some Zs.’ Castiel blinked awake, taking in the cleared sky that left only the glint of moonlight on wet and shining streets.

“Wha’ time’s it?” Crowley mumbled as he slid out of the car, stumbling toward the dim lights of the motel.

“Little after eleven,” Dean answered. Cas took his bag and followed Crowley inside, relieved when he was hit by a wave of warm air.

They quickly fell asleep without speaking or settling in. Castiel curled up close to Dean in the bed they shared, trying at least to take advantage of the rare opportunity to touch him. Pitied or not, Cas would take what he could get.

They woke at almost the same time, around five. “Up and at ‘em,” Dean said. “Time to get moving again.”

“Would it kill you to give us the full night for once?” Crowley yawned. “Don’t think I’m getting my full eight hours.”

“Oh, yeah,” Dean said. “How ’bout I take us out for a spa weekend. We’ll book private massages, get our nails done. Maybe Cas can take a yoga class! We’re not getting anywhere with the angel problem, but that sure as hell don’t mean we can stop running.” Dean stretched and picked up his duffel bag, slinging it over his shoulder.

“And if I don’t want to go?” Crowley asked.

“Then we’ll leave you here.” Dean said tersely.

Crowley smiled sardonically. “By all means.”

Dean’s jaw tightened. “Get your ass in the car.”
“A Winchester, running away? Never thought I’d live to see the day.” Crowley stood, lips quirking in a malicious smile. “You’re scared,” he teased. “Scared of big, bad Azrael with her flames and her followers and her vengeance. You’re. . .’’ he trailed off, eyes widening. “. . . scared.”

Castiel watched Dean, barely breathing. He felt sick. Why would Dean be scared now? He’d faced angels and beaten them. He’d stared down the two most powerful archangels in Creation. “Dean?” he asked.

“Shut up.” Dean’s voice was choked off. “I’m gonna shave, and then we’re gonna leave. Got that?” he asked, shooting Crowley a pointed glare.

“Got it,” he answered, still deathly quiet.

The second the bathroom door closed, Crowley sat down heavily on his bed, the same expression still frozen on his face. “He’s afraid, Castiel,” he breathed in disbelief.

And how could he believe it? Dean was infamous for fearlessness. He’d killed gods and monsters and had the sack to command Death himself. There was a reason monsters told stories to their young about the Winchester Brothers and the wrath they would bring, and it wasn’t because monsters were particularly good storytellers.

Cas nodded. “I know.” He took a shaky breath. “So are you.” It was impossible to mistake the panic in Crowley’s eyes. “Why?”

His eyebrows shot up in surprise. “You don’t see it? Can’t say I’m in Dean’s fan club, but the bastard’s died more times than anyone I’ve ever met. If he’s scared of one little angel. . .”

The bathroom door swung open, cutting Crowley off. “Come on,” Dean said, shouldering his bag again. He went to the door, waiting impatiently as Crowley and Cas grabbed their own things and followed him out.

They spent all day in the car again, but this time Crowley didn’t complain at all. That was surprising in and of itself, but Dean also noticed that Cas rarely even glanced up from his journal to eat or use the bathroom when they stopped to fill the tank. He wrote faster than he usually did, filling page after page.

By the time they stopped for the night, Dean was getting a bad feeling in his stomach. The fact that Crowley didn’t even complain when he played Back in Black three times in a row on purpose cemented his worry.

“So I’m gonna go grab a bite to eat,” he said once they’d settled into their hotel. “Either of you want anything?”

Crowley glanced up. “Grease and fat, it’s all the same to me.”

“I’ll have whatever’s there,” Cas responded absently, still writing. The uneasy feeling in Dean’s chest worsened as he opened the door and left.

“What’cha writing?” Crowley asked, peering over Cas’s shoulder. He popped open a beer, smirking. Castiel turned so the other man couldn’t see. “It’s private,” he said.

“You mean it’s about Dean.” Crowley snickered.

“ Mostly, no.” Cas turned back again, but held the journal to his chest to protect his words from
Crowley’s prying eyes.

Crowley must have decided he was hiding everything he felt about Dean. That was true, a little, even though the journal was primarily about hunting and accounts of his angelic existence. More importantly, he wanted to conceal his worry that Dean was going to slip back into destroying himself out of desperation.

“So tell me,” Crowley said, “how wild are the fantasies inside that artfully tousled head of yours?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Cas said.

Crowley slipped into a low, sensuous tone. “I mean, how filthy is your imagination?”

Cas flushed. “That’s not what it’s for.”

“You’re blushing,” Crowley taunted.

“You’re asking me about sexual fantasies, what were you expecting?”

Crowley’s expression turned smug. “What, you’re a human and you don’t plan on exploring the wonderful world of —”

“What are you so afraid of?” Cas asked sharply.

Crowley shut up, the color draining from his face. “What?”

“I don’t believe for a moment that you’re only afraid because he’s afraid. You’re scared of something else.” He leaned forward, gazing into Crowley’s eyes intently.

Crowley had the uncomfortable sense that Castiel was trying to read his thoughts, and shoved him away. “Personal space,” he said, ignoring the question.

“I don’t give a shit,” Castiel snapped.

“Don’t think I haven’t noticed you and Dean aren’t so cuddly anymore,” Crowley shot back. “Haven’t been kissing much, there a reason for that?”

Cas straightened up like he’d been given an electric shock. He looked like he was about to answer, but he pressed his lips to a thin line and sat on the bed closer to the window. He started writing again, refusing to let Crowley and his envy get to him.

When Dean came back with food, it was to a room filled with tension he was afraid to break. “Everyone okay in here?”

“Yes.” They spoke at the same time, voices toneless.

“Ooo-kay,” Dean said. He stared at the two of them with concern for their sanity. “I’m gonna watch some TV. Let me know if you want to change the channel or something.”

Dr. Sexy, MD was surgically removing a tumor from his attractive patient’s brain as Dean got himself comfy on the bed. He struggled to pay attention with the crackling silence around him.

When the episode ended, the news came on, and Dean was too lazy and exhausted to change the channel. When the weather was over — more rain in the forecast — a report began. “And now to the devastating tragedy in Mobile. An eleven-year-old girl, stabbed to death in a back alley behind a pharmacy. Police are investigating the markings found around her body.” Dean perked up a little.
Baffled police was a good sign for a case.

The camera cut to an officer. “We’ve seen this before, all over the country, in fact. We believe it’s a signature — the killer leaving some kind of message.” The report flashed to an image of the alley. Across the pavement stretched a black shape, seared into the ground. The shape of angel wings.

“Holy shit. . . Cas? An angel died not too far from here.”

Cas jumped to his feet. “You want to investigate?” he asked. The image on the screen was replaced with the reporter’s sorrowful face.

“Well, why the hell not?” Dean asked. “I mean, if it can get us anything on Azrael —”

“This may not be her work,” Cas reminded him. He didn’t want to raise Dean’s hopes too high for nothing. “There are other angels out there who could have done this.”

“I still think we should at least check it out,” Dean said. “Tomorrow we can head down, it’s just a couple towns over.”

Cas was still unsure. He saw the tension in Dean’s shoulders and wished that this could all just be over. He wanted to take a closer look, yes, but if they did they might be risking their lives, especially if Azrael had set new angels on tailing them again. He absently rubbed the skin above his hipbone, where warding sigils had been tattooed shortly after Azrael’s warriors attacked them in the middle of a deserted highway.

Castiel said none of this. “Tomorrow,” he agreed.

Dean’s mouth twitched it what was almost passable as a smile, but Cas could tell he was just as uncertain. He closed off that line of thought and turned back to his journal. Tomorrow.

The morning sun came undisguised by clouds or fog, shining in the clear blue sky. Cas woke as the light hit his face. Instead of shaking Dean awake, he sat up and looked out the window for several minutes.

He turned away from the window, eyes falling on Dean in the partially lit room. He had half a smile on his face, and his hair was mussed from tossing and turning in his sleep. Cas wanted to kiss him. He closed his eyes. Something stopped him every time he considered kissing Dean, but he didn’t understand why. They’d agreed, they both enjoyed it, but. . . Cas spread the curtains wide, letting the soft morning light flood the motel.

Dean shifted slowly, waking up and covering his eyes to shield himself.

“Good morning, Dean,” Cas whispered.

“Morning, Cas,” Dean murmured, sitting up. “You ready to go?”

“We should eat before we leave,” Cas said. “And Crowley is still asleep.”

Dean yawned as he slipped out of bed. “No rush, I guess. If we want to look professional we’d better shower anyway.”

Cas took the first shower as Dean shoved Crowley out of bed. Even through the rushing of the water, he could hear Crowley complaining over being woken so abruptly. He ruffled his hair with the towel and remembered too late that his change of clothes was still laid out on the bed.
Dean was reminding Crowley of the mystery angel’s death when Cas entered the room, very wet and very not clothed. A white towel was wrapped around his waist, but the rest of him was just . . . there. He caught Crowley smirking out of the corner of his eye and resisted the urge to hit him. “That’s my boyfriend,” Dean said, clipped. “Eyes front, soldier.”

Dean showered after him, then hauled their bags out of the car while Cas and Crowley grabbed breakfast. Cas brought him a doughnut when they followed him out to the Impala.

They rode into Mobile around eight a.m., just as the sky began to cloud over again, and the humidity of the hours before a storm made the air heavy and thick.

The alley where the mystery angel bit the dust was cordoned off with yellow police tape, and a marquee had been set up so that rain wouldn’t damage the evidence. Dean straightened his suit jacket and stepped through the slush with Castiel behind him. Crowley stayed in the Impala, very hungover and slumped in the backseat.

Dean flashed his badge to the officers. “No trace of the killer?” he asked.

“Just the wings there,” one of the officers said.

They spent a few minutes looking over the scene. “This girl was definitely an angel,” Cas whispered to Dean so the police wouldn’t hear. “But why would Azrael want to kill her?”

“Oh, well, I don’t know,” Dean snapped. Why would she have her supporters consume human souls? Why the fuck did she do anything? “Maybe she’s trying to recruit them, and ices them when they refuse?”

Dean gave an officer one of his phone numbers. “Call me if you find anything.” When they got back to the car, Crowley was curled up on the floor, his clothes rumpled. “Don’t think anyone saw me,” he yawned as they pulled away from the yellow tape.

“Anyone who did probably thought you had too much last night,” Dean said.

Crowley let out a mock laugh. “Anyone who saw you probably thought you should’ve had a bit more.”

Cas watched for Dean’s reaction, but he brushed it off. Even so, Dean’s muscles were still tight with stress, and he needed a break.

“There’s a hotel right on the edge of town,” Castiel pointed out. “If you want to stay around.”

For a moment, Dean didn’t answer. He couldn’t stop running and risk Azrael catching up. He began to say that they needed to keep moving, but what came out was, “Sure, why not? Our only lead is right here, no reason to leave for now.”

Crowley blinked, surprised, but said nothing. In the rearview mirror, Dean saw his expression shift from that shock to unsettled worry. They look didn’t fit Crowley’s face — Dean didn’t think he’d ever seen Crowley look genuinely concerned before.

The guy at the motel register gave them a suspicious look, but didn’t ask any questions.

They lounged around the hotel for several hours, doing nothing. Dean made a run for tacos a little after noon, then flipped on the television and turned it to a movie Cas was informed was Star Wars: A New Hope. He couldn’t pay attention; something had been bothering him since they’d arrived. Their ‘lead’ could hardly be called as much, so what made Dean was to stick around?
It was five in the evening before he said anything. He sat in the armchair, watching Dean after the hunter turned the TV off. “Why did you choose to stay?” he asked finally. “It can’t be the lead, this isn’t even a hope of a lead, and we’ve done nothing with it. I won’t let you lie to me again, Dean.”

Dean sighed. “Because we need to talk and I didn’t want to do this in the car.” Dean sat down on the other bed, facing him. “We haven’t been . . . talking, at all.”

“Dean,” Cas began, but Dean cut him off.

“Look, Cas, there’s all kinds of crap that I’m not telling you. And I can tell there’s some stuff that you aren’t telling me, either. I don’t know what the fuck Crowley’s problem is.” Dean grabbed Crowley’s shoulders and pushed him at the second bed, turning to pace the room.

“I should’ve said something. I should’ve, and I didn’t because this shit is bad enough as it is without this on top of it. But I’m sick of pretending it didn’t happen.” Dean pressed a hand to his forehead. “I had a dream, three weeks back. Sam and Ash and Bobby, they showed up again, and they told me —” He choked on the words. He couldn’t say this.

Cas started to speak, but Dean forced himself to spit the words out. “The angels are consuming the souls.”

Castiel went completely and utterly pale. “They’re . . .”

“Sam said it was like they were eating them. And it makes them stronger, Cas. I can’t fucking sleep at night because I don’t want tonight to be the night I find out my brother’s been ‘consumed’ by a fucking angel.” He ignored the tears on his cheeks and kept going. “You want to know the shit I didn’t want to tell you? This is it.” He was shaking. “This is it.”

This is it. Cas couldn’t breathe. This was what happened when he fucked up. Heaven was in total chaos, angels were being murdered because of him, and now this. It was his fucking fault, and he knew Dean knew it. He tried to calm himself down. “Dean, I’m sorry.”

“I don’t fucking blame you, Cas!” Dean shouted. “I’m not mad at you, okay? But it’s so damn hard to tell you I’m doing fine when I might fall asleep tonight and find out my brother’s gone for good when it’s my fault I let him take on the trials, it’s my fault I couldn’t stop him. I should have . . . and you think this is about you?”

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“I seriously don’t give a fuck right now, Cas. I care that my brother —” his voice cracked. “ — my brother is dead and he might be gone forever, and I don’t want to know if he’s okay or not because I am so damn afraid of the answer.”

He pressed his lips together and turned away, closing his eyes. “I can’t fall asleep and find out he’s gone.”

“You’re afraid,” Crowley muttered.
“Yeah, I think we’ve fucking covered that,” Dean snapped.

Crowley interrupted him. “And that scares me.” He managed a brittle smile. “You wanted to know ‘what the fuck my problem was.’”

Dean sagged against the wall, stunned. “You’re scared.”

“Dean Winchester doesn’t scare easy. Monsters go running for Mummy when they hear you’re coming. But you’ve been on the run for days, and you’re scared.”

Any other time that would have sounded like a taunt and Dean would’ve ignored it, but now it bit him deep.

Crowley shook his head in disbelief. “So I figure, if the man who makes demons wet themselves is scared, well, I haven’t got a chance. And when I die we all know I’m headed back for the pit again. I don’t. . . I don’t want to go through that again.”

Dean punched him.

Crowley gasped, holding his jaw. “The fuck was that for?”

“What the fuck kind of chances do you think I’ve got?” Dean asked, in more of a growl than a voice. “I’ve killed people, innocent people, ‘cause the unlucky bastards got possessed. I started the goddamn Apocalypse and you expect me to be. . . what, Heaven’s MVP? I am nowhere near their good books.” Not that it would matter anyway. The way Heaven was going, Hell might be the better option.

“At least everything you did, you did for good reasons!” Crowley shouted. “I killed, and I enjoyed it! I murdered angels and humans and demons, and I did it for myself!”

“You have an excuse,” Dean yelled back. “You were a demon. Anything good in you was carved out — I’m a human, always been one, so what the fuck kind of excuse do I have?”

Crowley had fire in his eyes as he grabbed the front of Dean’s shirt. “So what, now my guilt is worthless?”

“Don’t you play the victim here!”

“Shut up!” Cas shouted.

Dean blinked. He’d forgotten Cas was there.

“This isn’t a competition, who’s more doomed. I’ve broken Heaven twice, unleashed the Leviathans on Earth, and killed hundreds of angels, my family. Who’s more guilty is not the issue here. Stop fighting.”

Dean watched Cas’s face, breathing heavily as his anger faded. “Yeah,” he muttered. “Yeah, okay.” He slowly settled on the edge of his bed.

“Bitch,” Crowley muttered, glaring at Dean.

Cas grabbed Crowley by the shoulders and shoved him away from Dean, letting the man stumble against the wall. “Crowley. Shut. Up.”

Crowley hissed, ‘I’m trying to friggin’ apologize, and he —’
“I know.” Cas met his eyes firmly. “He’s upset. We all are. Don’t make it worse for yourself.”

Dean stared at Crowley, about to boil over. He couldn’t understand how he could act so compassionate after Sam... and then turn into such a raging jackass.

Crowley slumped to the floor and stayed there, completely silent, his eyes closed. Finally Dean found something to say. “Crowley,” he began.

Cas wasn’t paying attention; he was examining something in his bag, then turned and went into the bathroom.

Raising his slowly, Crowley stared at him, anger still written on his face. “What,” he said, the word sharp.

“If it helps... I forgive you. For the shit you did to Sam and me when you were, uh, you know.”

Crowley’s face remained unreadable. “Thanks,” he said, and Dean could have sworn he heard a hint of sincerity in the man’s voice. “And now I’m gonna go get wasted.”

Dean huffed out a laugh, watching as Crowley stood and put on a coat. “There’s a bar down the street. You touch my car and you’re a dead man.” Crowley was unpredictable. He was snarky and bold, but he hadn’t actually killed anything as a human except a few cockroaches in some questionable motels. He was polished and cocky and a dick. Basically the opposite of Cas.

Castiel, his Cas, still fumbled with metaphors and didn’t try to draw attention to himself. Still, he was a strong fighter and a damn good kisser. Dean smiled. He was nice to be around, and didn’t stress him out of piss him off as much as Crowley. Maybe it was the angel in him, but Dean doubted it.

Cas was better than the shitty excuse for angels he called family. Dean had known Castiel long enough to know that his partner made a good angel, but a better human. Sometimes when Dean looked at Cas he saw shadows in his eyes, shadows he knew from his own face in the mirror, and from Sam’s. But there were so many more times now that he met Cas’s gaze and saw warmth and happiness there, the sadness didn’t worry him so much.

The bathroom door creaked open and Cas walked out, moving carefully as if he were trying not to make too much noise.

Dean’s jaw dropped. Cas wasn’t wearing his normal clothes, that stupid suit and backwards tie and trench coat. He’d changed into a band t-shirt that looked suspiciously familiar and a pair of jeans that looked brand-new.

“Cas,” Dean said. Castiel jumped and faced him, his cheeks coloring. “Is that my shirt?”

After a moment’s hesitation, Cas answered. “Yes.” He cleared his throat. “I thought my other clothing was... too formal.” He shifted uncomfortably. “Is it...”

“You look good,” Dean said, letting the smile that had been threatening his lips spread across his face. “Hey, it’s about time to eat, and Crowley’s off drowning his troubles. Wanna go out and get something with me?” The last words left his mouth in a rush.

Castiel gazed at Dean in openmouthed surprise. Was he really asking... “Is this a date?”

Dean turned as red as Cas. “Do you want it to be?”

Cas broke into a grin.
The tiny diner they wound up in was squeezed between two bigger buildings, like someone had found an alley and built the place to fit. It reached up between a bakery and an apartment building like a flower struggling to reach the sunlight, but it was packed with people.

Their waiter ran from table to table, trying to serve all the customers at once, but he managed to scribble down their orders: two double bacon cheeseburgers, an order of fries, and despite Dean telling him they were gross, Cas’s mozzarella sticks.

“Cas, about what I was saying earlier, I’m sorry. It was a dick move,” Dean admitted when the waiter vanished into the crowd.

“I don’t blame you, Dean. Crowley provoked you.” Cas watched him with the same warm, content gaze.

Dean shook his head. “I mean when I yelled at you for being sorry. I knew it was hard to hear, and I made it worse.”

Cas looked mildly surprised. “Dean, I —” He looked away. Castiel hadn’t expected an apology; he understood that Dean was angry and scared, and he lashed out without thinking. But maybe the apology was a sign that Dean was trusting him again. “I forgive you,” he said at last.

That eased Dean’s conscience. “Good,” he said. “Thanks. I’m sorry I’ve been so on edge, it’s just with everything going on. . .” He sighed. “I can’t afford to be happy and forget this shit.”

“You deserve happiness,” Cas said softly. “You don’t have to lose yourself in helping everyone else.”

“You should get to be happy too,” Dean said, trying to change the subject. Cas started to shake his head with a thin smile. “You do. If I deserve it, then so do you. You’re doing the best you can, same as me.”

Cas’s smile broadened. “I can’t argue with that.” Dean’s face was so sincere. He really meant what he said. And screw it if that didn’t make Cas fall in love with him a little bit more.

Dinner flew by, their talk mostly on safe topics that wouldn’t freak the normals out. The recent rainstorms, which Dean hated but Cas loved. Sports; Cas didn’t quite get the point, kept comparing them to gladiator fights. Even the movies they’d watched in so many hotel rooms.

Dean waved away the waiter’s offer of a beer, or anything to drink. When they finished their burgers, though, Dean insisted on buying two slices of ‘Frannie Jean’s Homemade Apple Pie.’ Cas ended up with whipped cream on lingering on his lips and Dean had to resist the urge to kiss it away.

When they headed back to their motel room, the storm broke. They drove through the rain and covered their heads with Cas’s coat when they ran from the Impala to the safety of the hotel, laughing like little kids.

A wave of guilt washed over him. Here he was, laughing and joking around with Cas while Sam was fighting a fucking war. Dean’s laughter cut off abruptly and he stiffened, heading down the hall to their room without a word.

He could hear Cas’s footsteps as he followed, but ignored them. The door of their room slammed shut behind Castiel, but he didn’t glance back.

“Dean, what’s the matter?” Cas asked, sitting next to him where he’d fallen on their bed.
His voice was muffled, but Castiel caught the choked words nonetheless. “Sam’s the fucking matter.”

“Because he’s . . . gone?” Cas said, diplomatically avoiding the word dead.

“Because he’s fighting a goddamn war in Heaven and I’m down here laughing it up with you,” Dean snapped. He rolled over, staring at the ceiling. “You can I do that to him?”

Cas hesitated, then reached out, running his hand through Dean’s hair. It must have been a leftover from humans’ days as apes, the feeling of being combed for insects by a mate or loved one that made this action so soothing. Even Cas felt calmer as he stroked Dean’s hair gently, and he was sure he had no human instincts. “Dean, Sam loves you. You think he would want you to mourn him and never move past it?”

Dean huffed a mirthless laugh. “Sam would kick my ass.”

“Exactly.” Cas smiled sadly. “He wants you to be happy. So maybe, for both of us, you should try.”

Dean sat up, his eyes meeting Cas’s. He moved forward until their faces were only inches apart. He could feel his warm breath, just barely, brushing against his cool skin. Cas’s tongue darted out to wet his lips.

“Maybe you could help me with that,” Dean breathed.

Cas leaned closer and kissed him softly, almost chastely, like he was afraid to do anything more. Dean reached out and pulled Cas nearer, almost on his lap. Cas’s hands found their way to Dean’s waist and they swayed together as Dean broke the kiss and moved his mouth to Cas’s neck.

He gasped, surprise and pleasure in the sound. In the month or so since the bunker was destroyed, they’d kissed, yes — but Dean had never done anything like this. Cas didn’t know what he was supposed to do now, feeling like Dean was doing all the work. It wasn’t as though he made a habit of watching human courtship as an angel, how could he know what Dean wanted?

“Shh,” Dean murmured, his mouth brushing the curve of his ear. “Quit thinking so loud.”

Cas rolled his eyes, but then Dean was kissing his neck again and his eyelids fluttered closed.

A tugging on his hips startled Dean, and he almost pulled back before he realized Cas had hooked his fingers into his belt loops, apparently trying to find something to do with his hands. He grabbed one of Cas’s hands without looking and guided him to where his shirt rode up, exposing his stomach.

Cas understood, sliding his hands up Dean’s body and pulling his shirt half up. He still felt frustratingly like a child, aware of how little he knew about . . . this sort of thing. Here be dragons. Dean was still kissing him, and Castiel knew Heaven would never forgive this sin if they found out, but somehow he was having trouble caring.

Dean pushed his tongue back into Cas’s mouth, which would have made him gasp if his lips weren’t otherwise occupied. He leaned back and saw Dean’s beautiful green eyes widen. Cas twined his fingers in the fabric of Dean’s shirt and pulled it up until it got stuck. Dean realized what he was trying to do and dragged it back down, fumbling with the buttons of the flannel. Finally they got it off him, and Cas quickly copied him, almost ripping his — well, Dean’s — shirt over his head.

In a moment Cas had pushed Dean down on the bed, holding himself a few inches above, just enough to let them catch their breath. Dean panted in the semidarkness, eyes fixed on Cas.
A flash of light made them jump, quickly followed by a jolt of thunder; they’d forgotten the storm, having things that were so much more important on their minds.

Cas gazed down at him. “Dean,” he began.

“Yes,” Dean said immediately, breathlessly. “Come on, Cas, don’t stop now.”

That and the swell of Dean’s jeans was enough for him. Cas kissed Dean gently, then moved down to his neck, his lips barely brushing the sensitive skin there.

Dean quivered underneath him, making tiny, breathy sounds with every movement — “Yes, there — Cas — hnn. . . Cas, yes.” He made that particularly satisfying hum of pleasure when Cas reached the curve of his soft stomach, and tried something he’d heard from somewhere or another, probably the Pizza Man. He’d sucked at the skin there, just enough to leave a small mark.

“Miss my handprint on your shoulder,” Cas murmured as he ran his hands over Dean’s body.

“Me too,” Dean whispered. The thunder rolled again.

Cas suddenly found himself faced with an incredible dilemma. His lips were now brushing short hairs that he knew lead to Dean’s. . . what was the euphemism humans used now? Dick? That only gave him a sickening reminder of the Leviathans. His cock? He had the feeling Dean would object to the more clinical penis, in spite of the word’s accuracy.

Regardless of the terminology, Cas had to decide. Keep going, or stop now while he could still beg forgiveness from his family?

“Cas?” Dean’s voice caught his attention. “Cas, you don’t have to, if you don’t. . .”

“I. . .” Cas couldn’t think properly with all his blood flow going to his. . . his cock, instead of his brain. “I don’t know.”

“’s okay, Cas.” Dean squeezed his shoulder, propping himself up. No pressure, man.”

Without thinking, Cas unbuckled Dean’s belt and unzipped his jeans. “I can’t. . . not sex, not yet. But. . .”

Dean lifted his hips, grinding them against Cas as best he could at that angle. The man’s mouth opened slightly, and he met Dean’s eyes as the lightning cracked again.

“Like that?” Dean asked him mischievously. “C’mere.”

He got Castiel’s belt undone and opened his pants, glancing up to make sure Cas was still on board with this. Dean took the fabric of the jeans and Cas’s underwear and slid them down slowly, exposing everything.

Dean was so fucking glad that Jimmy Novak was long gone, or this would have been pretty damn awkward. The thought made him snort, and Cas looked a little alarmed. “Not you,” Dean muttered, grabbing Cas’s ass to draw their hips closer. He quickly wriggled out of his own jeans and pulled his underwear down to his thighs.

He slid off the bed just long enough to rummage through his duffel and find his solitary bottle of lube, quickly laying back down and slicking his dick up, ready to get this show on the road. He passed the bottle to Cas, who imitated him and moaned at even his own touch. Dean had to wonder if Cas had even done that much with himself before.
Cas let Dean guide him down until their bodies were pressed together. Dean rolled his hips up again, dragging their cocks together, and Cas was so close to blasphemy he could do nothing but whimper or risk attracting the attention of angels. “Dean, please,” he groaned, not sure at all what he was asking for but wanting it all the same.

“’s okay, Cas, I got you.” Dean rolled them over so he was on top of Cas. He ground their hips together again, drawing another desperate moan from Cas. He knew Cas had never done this before, he had to be getting close to the edge.

“Dean,” Cas whined as Dean raised himself up, cutting off all contact and letting his knees straddle Cas’s hips. He bent down and drew his tongue over Castiel’s nipple slowly, agonizingly.

“Come on, Cas, doing so good,” Dean whispered, moving back into position and grinding him until Cas’s chest was heaving.

“Dean!” The name was barely a hiss on Cas’s lips as pleasure overtook him, and he came.

Dean kissed him as the lightning struck again, swallowing his moans and keeping him close through his orgasm. For all his pride in his stamina, Dean almost wished he’d gone over the edge at the same time as Cas. He sat up on his knees as Cas panted in the aftermath; he jacked himself quickly and was glad for the slick of lube and Cas’s come. He brought himself off a few moments later and flopped down next Cas.

“You doing okay?” he asked, once Cas was breathing normally again.

“Y-yes,” he managed. “We should. . . clean up.”

Dean laughed and turned on his side to kiss at the corner of Cas’s mouth. “Never done that before, huh?”

Cas closed his eyes. “You know I haven’t.” They could hear the rain now in the silence of the afterglow. Cas was mostly sure that was what this was called. It was soothing, hushing Castiel’s worries about what his kin would think.

“I’ll admit, we kinda fucked up the whole shirt thing,” Dean said, teasing a laugh from Cas. “But you did good for your first time. You learn quick.”

It felt like the most natural thing in the world for Cas to curl up against Dean’s warm body, and he wanted so badly to fall asleep then.

Dean stood and Cas made a noise of protest, but he disappeared into the bathroom and came back with a wet hand towel. He wiped Cas clean, then himself, and threw the towel into a corner of the room carelessly before sliding back into bed with Cas and drawing the covers over them, kissing him once more before drifting off to sleep.

The morning was chilly. Dean looked around the darkened room. Crowley wasn’t back — Dean figured he’d fallen asleep at the bar or something. Castiel was only half on the bed now, his right arm brushing the floor and his head lolling on the edge of the mattress.

He watched him for a few seconds, then dressed and stumbled down the hallway. There were a couple other early-risers getting their stale muffins and Cap’n Crunch. An older guy reading the local paper glanced up at Dean when he entered the room, huffing irritably and shaking the paper so his face was concealed.

“Well, good morning to you too,” Dean muttered. He poured himself coffee and nabbed a piece of
toast, ignoring Oscar the Grouch and heading back to the hotel room.

Dean pulled his phone out of his pocket, scrolling through his contacts list. Jody, Garth, Charlie, Kevin, Sam, and a bunch of other hunters. He wondered briefly how many were dead that he hadn’t heard about, then pushed the thought aside. Word would’ve gotten back to him one way or another.

He was still staring at his phone when Cas woke. “Morning, Dean,” he said, muffled by his pillow.

“Morning, Cas.” Dean shoved his phone into his pocket and got to his feet. “What do you think, you wanna stay here another day or get moving?”

Cas stood and stretched. Dean had a very good view of his ass as he did so, and he smirked. “I don’t know, Dean. There’s nothing else here, but if you really think it’s a lead,” he yawned, “we could stay. I was thinking we should find a real hunt.”

He turned to face Dean as he pulled the stolen ACDC shirt over his head. “Running away from this won’t solve anything,” he said quietly, but he didn’t elaborate. Dean knew what he meant.

Cas picked up his duffel bag and rummaged through it, picking up his journal and flipping through it. It fell open to a careful sketch of a tree he’d seen only once but had fixed permanently in his memory. The tree created by Anna’s grace. He pressed his lips together. Anna had fallen for humanity. Cas had fallen for something else entirely. He swallowed hard.

Last night had been . . . awesome, in the archaic sense of the word, when humans still used it to express the mighty power of God. Castiel never could have dreamed that Dean would want him back. Maybe it wasn’t pity that Dean felt for him.

Dean’s phone rang. He picked up, frowning. It was Crowley. “Where the hell are you?” he asked.

“Well, funny story. Went out for a drink, had a beer, a few martinis, so on and so forth, some things were said, saliva was exchanged, and long story short I’m hiding in some woman’s bathroom while she’s making breakfast. For two.”


“Pot, I’d like to introduce you to Kettle,” Crowley shot back. Dean’s stomach dropped for a moment — how did he know? — before Crowley added, “Don’t be such a damn hypocrite, Squirrel, you’ve done it before.”

Dean sighed. “Okay. Where are you?”

They picked Crowley up, his hair a mess and his clothes rumpled. Apparently he’d climbed out the window to escape. They were only a few miles outside of town when Cas spoke suddenly. “I’ve been reconsidering my decision,” he said, “to work on our own. I want to seek Hadraniel and Zipporah’s help.”

Dean’s eyes flickered to Cas’s in the rearview mirror. “What made you change your mind?” he asked, keeping his voice carefully even. Crowley already dozed next to Cas, leaning against the window.

“What you said, about the state of Heaven. . . this is bad. We can’t kill Azrael on our own, we both know that. I think we should stop pretending that we can. If we call them into this, we will have allies who have more power than the three of us together. We can end this before. . .”

Dean nodded, trying to keep his eyes on the road instead of looking back at Cas. Something about
his words felt strange to him. He realized, suddenly, that he didn’t want to call the angels up. After last night especially. Cas said they would smite him as soon as look at him if they knew about their relationship, and if those were the allies they had, what good were allies? They’d made stupid alliances before, but this was dangerous in itself. Not to mention Hadraniel treating them like shit didn’t exactly endear Dean to angels right now.

He glanced in the rearview mirror just long enough to see pale blue eyes watching him, and the worry in them made him relent. He had to trust Cas’s judgment. “Okay,” he said. “If you really believe it’s the right choice, we’ll try.” Knowing how hard it was for Cas when he told him about Heaven’s circumstances sealed it for him. They would need real mojo to make this right, mojo Dean and Cas didn’t have.

“When we stop tonight, I’ll call them. If they still want our help, they’ll come,” Cas said, with a shaky voice. “We will do this, with or without them,” he added, “but it’s easier knowing we aren’t alone.”
Imploration

Imploration: urgent or piteous supplication for aid or mercy

“Hadraniel, Zipporah, wherever you are, if you can hear me. I know it must be too late to change my mind, but we all need all the help we can get.” Castiel had been repeating his message again and again, out loud and in his head. “So if you can, if you still want to, please come to us so we can speak.” He opened his eyes. “I feel stupid doing this.” He closed his eyes and added, as he did every other time, “We’re in the Domino Hotel, one hundred and eighteenth street north, New Haven, Kentucky, room number sixty-nine.”

He flopped backward, bouncing slightly on the bed. “They have to have heard by now. It could take them days to get here with no wings.” Dean was leaning against the wall, eyes closed, and Crowley was showering.

“Then all we can do is wait.”

Lunch was at a tiny sandwich shop down the road from the motel. They came back to their room, watched a movie, and mostly just tried to pass the time. Dean suggested to Cas they go to the town’s bowling alley — pretty much the only thing to do in the area — for dinner and a game. “Come on, Cas, it’ll be at least a little fun.”

A knock at the door interrupted Cas’s caustic response as to Dean’s idea of fun. He stood straight up, his shoulders stiff and tensed.

“Castiel?” Hadraniel opened the door uninvited. There was no angel blade in sight, which was a good sign. Maybe they were trusted. Maybe.

Zipporah followed, looking unbelievable different. Her gray shirt was slipping down her shoulder, more stretched-out than it had been last time. There were several large bloodstains spattered across it. The tight bun that had controlled her hair was now loose and surrounded by flyaway hairs.

Hadraniel watched him with a disapproving glare. “You called for us, Castiel.”

“I did.” Cas looked at the both of them. “Can I take your presence as a sign that you still want my help?”

Zipporah shrugged. “I’m in. It’s tough enough trying to keep our allies in line without a real leader.”

Dean jerked his head at Hadraniel when the angel didn’t voice an opinion. “What about him?”

Hadraniel frowned. “Can you not do that?”

“Are you gonna help us or not?” Dean asked, not understanding.

Zipporah rolled her eyes, looking supremely irritated at having to explain. “You said ‘he,’” she said, clearly bored.

“Yeah?” Dean said. Cas let out a false cough in an attempt to get Dean’s attention.

“Hadraniel doesn’t have a gender,” Zipporah said patiently.
“He’s possessing a guy,” Dean said, confused. He nodded vaguely in the direction of the absence of boobs.

“As if there were a sexless human available,” Hadraniel snapped. “Show some respect.” Dean looked the angel up and down, frowning.

“So you’re actually junkless. Huh. Okay. Just, uh, what do I call you, then?” Dean asked. “If we’re supposed to be working together and everything.”

Hadraniel stared at him. “You may call me Hadraniel.”

Dean snorted. Zipporah whispered something in the other angel’s ear that sounded a great deal like pronouns.

Hadraniel still looked confused, so Zipporah answered with a sigh. “Just use something simple. They, their, you know. I don’t think it matters much.”

“Okay,” Dean said, shrugging. He wasn’t sure he really got it, but frankly he didn’t care that much. If Hadraniel didn’t have a gender, then that was that. Wasn’t like Dean thought about it before, but he supposed the whole “wavelength of celestial intent” thing didn’t come with masculinity. He’d have to ask Cas if he felt like that.

Cas cleared his throat. “What do you two know about Azrael?” Cas asked them. He stifled the urge to sit down by Dean and twine their hands together, in some innate quest for comfort. With Hadraniel as traditional as they were, it wouldn’t have ended well.

“We know she’s dangerous,” Hadraniel said immediately. “She’s blockaded the only way in and out of Heaven. We’ve learned that the passage was created by Metatron, but we know almost nothing else.

“What does she want?” Cas asked. “Heaven? Earth?”

“Nothing, as far as we know,” Hadraniel answered.

Zipporah lounged on Dean and Cas’s bed. Dean almost protested, but he stopped himself. They’d been invited, and he didn’t want to get himself smote because he couldn’t hold his fucking tongue. He knew how most angels felt about the infamous Dean Winchester.

“What we do know,” Zipporah said, “is that she demanded we stop trying to get into Heaven, and killed Jehoel and Araniel in front of us when they told her to shove it up her ass.” She rolled her shoulders lazily. “Frankly, I’m shocked she hasn’t been killed yet. Downright irresponsible, killing more of us when there are at most a few thousand that survive.” She shook her head, a sardonic grin on her lips. “Doesn’t matter.”

“It does,” Hadraniel snapped. “With Heaven so fragile, we will have a disaster once she loses control of her supporters — and with her temper, that is a certainly. We must stop her.”

“Wonderful,” Castiel said, trying and failing to contain his annoyance. “What exactly do you two plan to do about it?”

Zipporah sighed loudly and Hadraniel pressed their lips together.

“Nothing. You have nothing.” Cas could feel anger running through his body, and he shot a look at Dean. He knew he had to be pale and shaking, but he couldn’t just stand down. “We called you down here because we believed you could help us,” he said, his polite tone nothing but a diplomatic
“We already have been,” Hadraniel said, “or did you forget her supporters attacking you?”

Their angel blade appeared in their hand. Dean forced back a wry smile. And so the fun begins. “Great.” He stepped back, closer to Cas. He could tell he was quietly fuming, trying to avoid an angry outburst like that last, when Hadraniel and Zipporah first came to ask their help.

Crowley popped his head out of the bathroom. He stopped short when he saw the angels, then straightened up and marched past them to settle on his bed.

Zipporah’s lips turned up in a smirk. “Crowley.”

“What do you want from us?” Cas asked, ignoring them. “You don’t have a plan. Any idea why you even want us around?”

The angels exchanged a glance. “You are... very notable among the angels. Every one of us knows him. And not everyone wants you dead,” Hadraniel said. “Our hope is that if you join us, more angels will turn to our side and we will be able to overpower Azrael’s followers.”

Dean shook his head. “Let me get this straight. You want our help so you can have better PR.” He couldn’t believe this. He was Dean Fucking Winchester, and Cas was... Cas, for God’s sake! “Do you know who the fuck you’re talking to? I’ve been on Heaven’s Most Wanted list since frigging ever, Cas broke the world twice, and we’ve got the King of Hell riding around in the backseat. And you think we’ll be good press?”

“Ex-King,” Crowley snapped under his breath. He raised his voice above Dean. “More important, you think you can use us like pathetic little pawns the moment we’re no longer useful, the instant we become inconvenient.”

“Who gave you a say?” Hadraniel demanded.

“You did, when you asked for our help,” Dean shot back. “Not just Cas’s. You don’t get just Cas. We’re in this together, or not at all, so you can shut your fucking mouth.” Dean was this close to punching the smug look off their face. “You want respect from us, then we better damn well get it from you.”

Hadraniel and Zipporah glanced at one another again. Finally Hadraniel spoke. “Keep doing what you’re doing,” they said, voice icy. “If you have a problem or you learn something important, you can call for us.”

“We’ll start here,” Cas said coolly. He had tried remaining calm, and that plan had promptly gone out the window. “Azrael is sending her followers after disruptive souls in Heaven and having them consumed to power their grace. And now Sam Winchester is up there, trying to fix it, trying to stop it while so-called angels do nothing! I suggest you and your goddammed followers deal with that first, before selecting me as a mascot!” He was almost shaking with anger — what a human thing to do.

Hadraniel glared at him before storming past, out the door and disappearing into the hall. Zipporah rolled her eyes. “Hadraniel is overdramatic. We’ll do whatever we can, sweetheart, so long as you play your own part. If something happens, pray to us and we will come to you.” She followed her companion.

Dean wished he’d punched Hadraniel after all. God, what an asshole. Zipporah was okay, but
Christ, they weren’t exactly making it easy.

“Awesome,” he muttered. “Fucking awesome. Cas, have I mentioned your family’s a load of douchebags?”

“Once or twice,” Castiel said dryly. He was still pale and tense. “Dean, I’m sorry. I should’ve known they would want to use us, not help.” He paced past Crowley, who was opening another goddamn bottle of whiskey. “I should have known I’m almost useless to them.”

“Cas, you’re not —”

“Really, Dean? Now? They want me to be their goddamn mascot, but they’re willing to leave us in the line of fire as long as they scrape by. Father forbid I fight with them,” he said bitterly. “I’m completely worthless to them as long as I’m human.” Cas stared at the wall, considering the consequences of punching it.

“Yeah, well, fuck them. I’m done with trying to be nice. We’ll work together if that’s what we gotta do to fix Heaven and help Sam, but we don’t have to get all buddy-buddy with them, either.” Dean grasped Cas’s wrist and pulled him around to bring them face to face. “You and me — and Crowley,” he added reluctantly. “— we’re good enough on our own, but there’s a lot less sacrifice if we work with someone who’s got some real firepower.” He sighed.

“Cas, I hate to say this, but if those douches are all we got, then I’ll take it, as long as we do this together. I’m not leaving you behind on this one.”

Castiel pressed his lips together, trying to hold back what he wanted so badly to say. Dean didn’t need to hear it, not again. He knew. He didn’t want to hear three stupid words that made everything complicated.

Cas didn’t know if he could say them again.

The cold air blew in not long after, bringing with it thick grey clouds that promised snow. Dean and Cas stayed warm under their blankets, kissing occasionally. Crowley didn’t stop complaining under his breath about stupid Winchester making stupid decisions. Cas fell asleep around twelve-thirty, but Crowley and Dean stayed up.

The TV was blank. Not even a whisper of wind broke the deathly silence between them. Only a faint silver glow lit the darkness of the room, giving an eerie cast to Crowley’s profile. The hairs on the back of Dean’s neck pricked warily. Even the warm presence of Castiel beside him didn’t ease his apprehension.

“Werewolf or wendigo?”

Dean jumped. Crowley hadn’t moved, but he’d definitely spoke. “What?”

“Who would win in a fight? Werewolf or wendigo?”

“Uh. . . wendigo. Why?”

“That’s what I was gonna ask.”

Dean sighed. “Speed. The motherfucker’s a fast son of a bitch. It eats people, but it’s no animal, it’s smart. Werewolf has nothing on that thing.”

“I disagree —”
“Of course you do.”

“— I think a werewolf could do more damage.”

“Because?”

“Wendigos are too busy eating. It’s all about getting what they want, when they want.”

“And. . .”

“And in that fight, the werewolf would know it’s outgunned and fight even harder to survive. That bastard would win just because it needs to stay alive. It’s tenacious.”

Dean let that rest.

“D’you think that we actually can do anything in Heaven?”

Dean watched the gentle rise and fall of Castiel’s chest next to him. “I don’t know.”

“But what do you think?” Crowley pressed.

“I think that we’re all screwed no matter what happens. I think the only thing good we’ve got left is each other.”

“Aww, I’m touched.”

“Not — fuck, not you. Jesus. Don’t be a fucking creep.”

“Had to say it.” Crowley leaned forward as if he were about to stand, then leaned back again. “You think we don’t stand a chance.”

“I just think if we scrape by, it’ll be luck, not anybody’s skill.”

“Doesn’t surprise me. And here I was hoping you’d be the goddamn werewolf.” Crowley snorted. “Thought we all were the friggin’ werewolf.”

Dean slid back down into a comfortable position. Crowley didn’t bother trying to continue. It was too late at night to have a conversation with him.

Crowley sighed, eyes flicking to Dean’s relaxed, half-asleep figure buried under the mothball-scented comforter. Bastard’s hair was spiked up practically stiff, for God’s sake, and the ass wasn’t even wearing a shirt in this weather and he was cuddling with Cas and he wasn’t even awake anymore.

Jesus Christ, that sounded pathetic.

Dean was comfortably warm. The spaghetti on the stove, the garlic bread in the oven, was filling the air with wonderful aromas and Cas was hugging him from behind and pressing his face to the curve of Dean’s neck, and there was Sam going on about a case in Montana featuring an elementary-school girl in the hospital for something Dean remembered from Dr. Sexy earlier, which for some reason meant there was a case at all, but Dean didn’t care because he was so damn happy.

He blinked, and the bunker was gone. He was in Bobby’s house, draped across the couch. But that wasn’t right. Bobby’s house burned down. . . Dean stood up, glancing around. When he saw Sam, Ash, and Bobby in the kitchen, he only breathed a sigh of relief that his brother was okay.
“What’s going on now?” he asked.

“Dean!” Within a second, Sam had crossed the room and hugged Dean, holding him tight and practically strangling him. “Dean, Dean. . .” Sam whispered, like he couldn’t believe he was really there.

“I’m here, Sam,” Dean said, hugging back. Sam’s grip loosened, but he didn’t let go. “It’s okay, Sammy, I’m right here.”

Sam hesitantly pulled away, like he was scared Dean would disappear if they stopped touching.

He looked like shit. There were bruises on his face and arms, and dark circles under his eyes. “We thought you were dead,” he said. “We’ve been trying to get in touch for two weeks, Dean. Haven’t you been sleeping?”

Dean looked past Sam, to Bobby and Ash. He could hear other voices nearby, but not clearly. “No, not. . . not really. I couldn’t fall asleep and find out you weren’t coming back.”

Sam closed his eyes. “Dean, I’m not gonna lie. It’s been rough up here. I know you’ve got your own problems at home, but this.” He swallowed. “We had to leave the Roadhouse, it wasn’t — wasn’t safe anymore. Pamela. . .” he shook his head. “She’s gone.”

“Pamela?” Dean said, blood running cold. “God.”

“We’re losing, Dean. We don’t have weapons. We can hold angels back, for a while, but not long enough to get their blades. We’re helpless up here.”

“You doing okay?” Dean asked, his voice almost as hoarse as Sam’s.

“Me? Yeah, I’m fine,” Sam said, trying to sound like it was true. His quiet, shaky tone betrayed the lie, and Dean didn’t think he would have believed it anyway. “How’s Cas?”

“He’s. . .” Dean tried to figure out how much he should tell his brother. “He’s holding up okay. We’re.” He cleared his throat. “We’re dating. Kind of.” He had no idea if Sam know how he felt about Cas, but he certainly wasn’t going to go into full-frontal detail.

Sam broke into a weary, if slightly surprised, smile. “That’s great, Dean.”

“But seriously,” Dean continued, “anything new for me? We’re going around in circles, we’ve got nothing on Azrael, nothing on the way into Heaven. There are these angels, they might be able to help, but I don’t trust them.”

Sam nodded. “And Crowley?”

“Should’ve ditched him on the side of the road first chance I got,” Dean said. “Guy’s a pain in my ass. And he cheats at poker and drinks all the beer.” But he didn’t mind so much anymore.

Sam laughed, the sound dry and hollow. “So you guys are okay, then.”

“Yeah, whatever the hell ‘okay’ means anymore.” Dean didn’t mention how sick he felt all the time, thinking of Sam up here. He hadn’t even told Sam how close he’d come to following him into death, when the angels first fell. There were some things he couldn’t share, not with anyone. “Yeah, I guess so.”

Silence fell between them. Sam shifted uncomfortably. “You know, beside the whole war thing, I’m
“Stop lying, Sam,” Dean said flatly.

Sam flinched. “I’m not lying,” he said, but his voice shook. “I- I’m not —”

“Sam.” Dean grabbed his shoulders and kept a tight hold on him. “I can see it in your face, little brother, you can’t fool me.”

Sam jerked in Dean’s grip like he was trying to run away, badly disguised panic in his eyes.

“Listen, Sammy, it’s okay. I just. . . cut the crap and tell me what’s going on here.” Dean let go and stepped back, giving Sam some space.

Sam took a deep breath. “I can’t.”

“The hell you can’t.”

“You don’t know shit about this, Dean —” Sam began.

Dean cut him off. “I don’t care. You have to talk to me.”

Sam closed his eyes. “Dean — I got caught in the Roadhouse. They found me, but they didn’t, you know. They wanted to know where we were hiding and why we were fighting Heaven’s orders.”

Dean’s throat went tight. He knew what Sam was about to say.

“They, uh, they tortured me. They didn’t get very far,” he said with an empty smile. “Bobby and Ellen came and bailed me out.” He tried to turn away, but it was too late. Dean could see the tears in Sam’s eyes. “They didn’t get anything out of me.”

“Damn it, Sam, you soul’s been through enough!” Dean said. “You listen, Sammy, I’m gonna fix this. I swear to whatever is left of God in this world, I’m gonna make this okay. You’re going to be okay, you’ve carried so much weight and it’s my fault.”

“It’s not —”

“It’s my fault, so you shut up, ‘cause I’m bringing my fucking brother home even if every goddamn angel tries to stop me.” His eyes now caught the bright white scar lines on Sam’s bare arms and the ones on his neck —

Sammy stared at him, still looking like he didn’t quite believe Dean was there. “You don’t. . . you. . .”

“Listen, I’m only gonna say this once. I need you safe and happy, and I can’t live with myself knowing it’s my fault — or mostly my fault,” he added when Sam began to protest, “that you’re here getting knocked around and beaten.”

“Hey, Dean?” Sam asked, his voice stronger now.

“Yeah?”

“Whatever the hell happened to ‘no chick flick moments?’”

Dean snorted. “I’m serious, Sammy. I would swear to God, if he gave a shit. So I swear on my soul, whatever that’s worth. I’m going to bring you home.”
Sam finally looked him straight on, instead of avoiding his gaze. He looked like he was about to speak again, but instead he threw his arms around Dean and squeezed him tightly again.

Dean didn’t even hesitate, returning the hug and closing his eyes tightly.

“Do you two really wonder why everyone thinks you’re together?” Ash asked loudly from behind them. They let go of each other instantly as Bobby snorted.

Dean glanced around. “Where’s Dad?”

Sam turned away. “He, uh. He didn’t want to. . . distract you.”

“You mean he doesn’t give a shit about seeing me.”

Bobby appeared at his side, startling him. “Now listen, your daddy’s a selfish ass, but that don’t mean he doesn’t care about you.”

Dean scoffed. “Yeah. And him not worrying about me, that’s how he cares.” He shook his head. “Forget it.” He walked away, then turned back. “I’d better get back to sleep. I’ll see you next time you call,” he said shortly. “You take care of yourself up here, okay? Don’t you dare lose hope, or else I’ll have to kick your ass.”

“I’d like to see you try,” Sam said, a trace of a smile hinting at his lips. “See you around, Dean.” Ash flipped a switch and Bobby’s house began to fade, Sam going with it. The vision gave way to a more normal dream featuring Cas and a very soft bed.

The following morning came way too fast. The instant Dean’s eyes opened, he remembered every second of the dream as if it had happened only moments ago. A sick feeling settled in his stomach when he remembered the hollow look in Sam’s eyes, but it was a feeling he’d begun to get used to since his death.

He stayed in bed for several minutes, burying his face in Castiel’s chest, before forcing himself to get up and shower quickly before searching out the hotel’s continental breakfast. Crowley was already there, sipping coffee with a partially drunk bottle of whiskey.

“Don’t you think it’s a little early to be pulling out the, uh, Johnnie Walker?” Dean asked, gesturing to the bottle. He felt strange speaking now, disconnected, like his mouth and body were being controlled remotely, and he was acting mechanically.

“What, you’ve never heard of Irish coffee before?” Crowley asked.

“You’re Scottish,” Dean said.

“And this is scotch,” Crowley said dryly. “I do what I want.” He stirred his coffee with a finger, then hissed and pulled away.

“Dumbass.” Dean poured himself a coffee, then stole Crowley’s whiskey.

“Hypocrite,” Crowley muttered.

“Aw, you know you love me anyway.” He winked.

Crowley huffed, but he didn’t have a stinging retort to fire off. The irritable feeling in his gut subsided, and he finished off his coffee rather than speaking. Then he said, “Thank you.”

Dean stared at him, jolted out of his thoughts. “Are you drunk? Man, it’s like six a.m.” He sipped his
coffee and made a face of disgust.

“I’m not drunk, moron, I’m trying to be nice,” Crowley said. “You said you forgive me.”

It took Dean a moment to realize what Crowley was talking about. “You still on that?” he asked. “I figured you wouldn’t even care.”

“Don’t pretend to understand me, Squirrel, it only makes you look incompetent.”

“There he is,” Dean muttered into his cup. Crowley glared.

Shifting in his seat, Crowley continued, “I wanted to thank you for saying it. It really... it really helped, alright? There’s something to be said for being forgiven.”

“Who here isn’t looking for forgiveness?” Cas sat down next to Dean and pressed a brief kiss to his cheek. “The only place you can find it is with who you hurt. You should try being quiet, people are staring,” he added.

“You’re awake,” Dean said. He fiddled with a loose string in his shirt. He didn’t feel distant and disconnected anymore. Now everything felt much too sharp and harsh and real, colors burning into his vision.

“I know,” Cas responded absently.

“That’s not what I — never mind.”

Cas poured his own coffee into a styrofoam cup as Dean and Crowley stood, ready to head back to their room. “Do you want to stay here, or keep moving?”

Dean shook his head. “I, uh, I need to talk to you.”

Cas caught the look on Dean’s face and felt his stomach drop. “Another dream?”

Dean cleared his throat, then cleared it again. “It kind of... I...” Without warning, he bolted, headed for their room.

Cas found him there, sitting on the end of their bed and staring blankly into space. Crowley perched on the edge of the table and Cas settled next to Dean, their shoulders just brushing each other.

“You remember Pamela?” Dean asked. “You burned her eyes out after you pulled me out of Hell.” Cas protested and reminded him that it had been accidental, he hadn’t had a vessel at the time, but he quickly closed his mouth and let Dean continue. “They. Uh. They consumed her.” Cas’s hand tightened around Dean’s, but otherwise he showed no outward signs of worry.

Dean took a breath and plunged into the rest of what happened. When he finished, Cas looked stricken — like he’d just been stabbed. His breathing was shallow, harsh in the silence. “I will kill that fucking creature,” he said. Dean stared. “I don’t care what it takes, I will do anything to stop this. We will kill Azrael and restore the angels to Heaven.”

Dean didn’t know the last time he’d heard so much conviction in Cas’s voice. He wasn’t sure whether to be proud or scared.

Crowley shivered at the cold, calculating look in Castiel’s eyes, but he spoke anyway. “Yes, and promises are worth so much if we never find a way in. I move we relocate to Canada and live under assumed names until we die.”
“Funny. Try to take this seriously,” Dean said, too tired for six-thirty in the morning.

“I am taking this seriously. There’s no way I couldn’t.” Crowley’s voice rose several octaves as he spoke. “Maybe you don’t get it, so read my friggin’ lips: This. Will. Kill. Us. Hate to be the one to break it to you, sunshine, but I’m not sticking around for it to happen!”

“If you don’t shut the fuck up right now, Crowley, I swear —”

“Dean.” Cas’s cold, blank tone shocked him into silence. “Crowley, if we don’t stop it, what is happening to Sam will happen to us. I guarantee it.” Those words drained all the color from Crowley’s face. Castiel was too damn sick and tired of moving in endless, fruitless circles to listen to them argue. “Try to remember what’s important.”

Crowley nodded jerkily at Cas and went quiet, sipping from his rapidly cooling coffee.

Cas turned to Dean. “How are you ‘holding up?’” The words were slightly awkward on his tongue, but Dean didn’t laugh.

Dean rubbed a circle into his thigh absently. “If I keep thinking about it, I’m gonna puke.”

Cas managed a brittle smile. He knew the feeling.

Dean glanced at him. “And you?”

When no answer came, Dean asked again. “Cas? Are you doing okay?”

“Me? Yes. Yes, Dean, I’m fine.” Castiel lied with the smooth practice that Dean had taught him.

There was only one way to beat Azrael now. They had no other choice but to side with Hadraniel and Zipporah. He knew that angels were capable of consuming human souls as a power source, but he never believed that Azrael could go so far as to order it as a war tactic. Not even the archangels dared cross that line. Azrael would watch all of humanity burn as long as she got what she wanted. Without other angels on their side, they had no chance of surviving.

And this was all on him.

“Cas. . .”

“I said I’m fine, Dean!”

Dean drew back, surprised. Crowley whistled.

It sent aches through Dean’s chest to see Cas like this. “Look, if Azrael’s angels can get into Heaven, then maybe we’ve still got a shot. We can stop her. We will.”

How could Cas tell Dean that there was only the slimmest chance of actually making this right, that Castiel would most likely die in the attempt, if he wasn’t killed for the sin of loving a human, if he wasn’t killed for helping Metatron cast the angels out in the first place.

He shook his head, trying to fight back the tears in his eyes. He’d never had to deal with tears as an angel. “Dean —”

Dean took his face in his hands and kissed him.

At first, Cas hesitated. It wasn’t right to take advantage like this, but the weaker, human part of him that would take whatever Dean was willing to give caved in. He kissed back and tried to push back
his concerns.

Behind them, Crowley looked away and coughed pointedly. He couldn’t believe the goddamn audacity of them. Of course the ex-King of Hell would get a verbal slap while Broken Wings over there got all the tenderness Dean had to offer.

Dean broke the kiss when Crowley cleared his throat again. He placed a hand on Cas’s shoulder comfortably. “You can’t put this on yourself, Cas.”

“It’s beyond my control,” Cas said softly, trying to make himself believe Dean. “We will fix my — we can fix this,” he amended quickly.

As long as Hadraniel, Zipporah, and their followers came through for them and fought on their side. Castiel still couldn’t tell himself they would forgive him.

Dean couldn’t shake the feeling that Cas was lying just to get him off his back, but he didn’t want to push him to snap. Instead, he reached out — to kiss him or just hug him, Dean wasn’t sure even as he did it.

Castiel didn’t give him the chance. “We need to keep moving,” he said.

They drove across the country for three days. Dean and Cas took down a lone vamp in Nebraska Cas rarely spoke anymore, unless they were discussing a hunt or Heaven, and they hardly ever touched anymore, let alone kissed. Something had changed, and Dean couldn’t figure out for the life of him what the fuck it was. Whenever their hands so much as brushed Cas would flinch like he’d been burned. Dean worried that something was really wrong.

They hit up a skeevy motel around six. Dean picked up a twelve-pack of beer — Crowley had finished the last of their stock that afternoon — and brought it out to their room while the other two got settled. “Here we go,” he said, setting the case on the floor. “What are you doing?” he asked, confused.

Crowley sat cross-legged on the floor, holding a handful of cards and fanning his face. Cas was leaning against the foot of one bed, half curled-up with his own cards on his lap.

“Go Fish,” Crowley said as Cas drew another card. “If you join, we can make it Strip Go Fish.”

“Yeah, I’ll pass.” Dean opened up a can of beer and took a swig, unzipping his bag and getting started on wiping down and sharpening his machete. For a while he watched them play, as Cas lost seven times in a row. He smirked when he realized Crowley was cheating at a kid’s game, but he almost laughed outright when he realized Cas was cheating and then letting Crowley win, looking morose and distracted.

Cas stood up a few minutes later, picking up his duffel and heading for the bathroom. Dean flipped through channels for a while before realizing that it had been almost half an hour and Cas was still in there. Crowley had given up on their game and broken out a bottle of vodka he cheerfully explained had been stolen from a convenience store.

Dean knocked on the door to the bathroom. “Cas? You doing okay in there?”

Cas lifted his head, staring dizzily around at the quarter-full bottle of whiskey and the three — no, four — empty cans of beer next to him. Dean couldn’t see him like this. He straightened and splashed water on his face, hurriedly shoving the alcohol behind the toilet where Dean couldn’t see. The bottle tipped over, clinking and sloshing whiskey across the tiles.
“Fuck,” Castiel mumbled.

Dean couldn’t take it anymore. He’d caught the sound of glass inside and knew instinctively that Cas was drinking, which, what the hell. He hadn’t been drunk in months, and that was the only reason he’d be hiding it. Then the water started running. He picked the lock and pushed the door open.

Castiel stood there in Dean’s Black Sabbath t-shirt and a borrowed flannel, getting them soaked as he drenched his head in water. The sink faucet gushed, splashing the mirror and the sickly yellow tiles on the wall.

“Cas, what’s going on? What are you — you’re drunk. Come on.” He pulled Cas away from the sink and shut it off.

“Dean.”

“You aren’t talking. You haven’t been ever since I told you about Sam.”

“I —” Cas stared at the wet tiles instead of Dean’s face. How could he possibly explain this to him? He pressed his lips together, water dripping onto his shirt. The numb feeling in his chest and head refused to fade, not with alcohol or icy water, and probably not with the pills he had stowed away in his bag in case of emergency.

“I don’t know what the hell is wrong. And it’s scaring me, Cas.” Dean grabbed his shoulders. “It scares the shit out of me, because this isn’t you, Cas. Hell, I bet Crowley noticed, and he’s half-drunk on the regular. What the fuck happened?”

“Listen to me, Dean,” Cas said, iron in his voice. “You cannot begin to understand. I can’t — how can I make you understand? You don’t get it. I don’t deserve —” he cut himself off. Shit, shit, shit. Dean would never let this go now.

“What? What don’t you deserve?” Dean demanded. “Tell me.”

“I don’t deserve to be alive!” Cas snapped. “I’m the reason the angels fell. I’m the reason Sam is dead, if I hadn’t left you to stop him on your own he wouldn’t be gone. I’m the reason my whole family wants to see my head on a plate, and I can’t — I’m afraid that I’ll snap and just stop everything. You think you break everything you touch, I know that.”

Dean tried to speak, but Cas cut him off. “But you don’t. I was already broken, and now here I am, destroying the world! If it wasn’t for me, Sam would be safe with you and none of this would have ever happened!” He looked pale and cold and his eyes were rimmed with red. He had to force the words past a lump in his throat. Human. He suddenly felt much too sober, the pleasant veil of intoxication fading rapidly.

“If I fail again, I know what I’ll do, don’t you understand? I can’t do this anymore, I’m the reason Sam has been tortured and innocents are being consumed by my brethren.” He hit the wall with his fist, not seeming to notice the scrape of skin and the blood welling on his knuckles. “And I’m the reason this body craves sugar and I have to ask you to stop the car so I can urinate and I bleed when I’m cut with an ordinary knife and I feel like I’m about to throw up.”

His voice dropped to a whisper. “And if I fail you again I will kill myself.” He took a shuddering breath. “And I know you don’t need me, not the way you say you do.”

That was a punch to the gut. “Cas, don’t you say that, okay? Not you.” Dean grabbed Cas’s chin and forced him to make eye contact. “I need you as bad as I need Sam, okay? You are my family, don’t think for even one second that you’re not.”
“Stop lying to me, Dean!” Cas closed his eyes and pushed him away. “I can’t — I love you, Dean. But that doesn’t mean I’ll believe anything you say. Please, please don’t,” he pleaded, the smell of beer still hanging on his breath. That lie only made it worse. He knew how pathetic he seemed. He had to stop pretending he could have what he wanted with Dean. He wanted Dean to stop lying to him, but more than anything he had to stop lying to himself and saying that there was even a tiny chance that Dean could love him back.

He should stay fixed on what needed to be done, and then he could, could get out of Dean’s life and find his own place in humanity, one that didn’t impose on Dean’s world. Since the moment he raised Dean from Hell, he’d done nothing but fuck everything up. He just wanted to make things right, and then he would leave Dean to be safe.

Dean felt ice trickle down his spine. “Cas, I’m not lying. I care about you so much — hey. Listen to me, Cas,” he said. “I need you here with me, but more than that I want you here, I l—” He choked on the word, and Cas huffed out an empty laugh.

“Yes. Of course. Dean Winchester, the righteous man.”

“I’m not lying,” Dean repeated. “And I need you here, with me, so we can do this damn thing together. We can take down Azrael and bring Sammy home.”

“Dean, I caused the angels to fall. There’s no coming back from that. I’ve destroyed any chance at being forgiven, and the Fall gave Azrael her opportunity to stage a takeover, don’t you dare tell me this has nothing to do with me, we’ve been over this before.”

Dean felt clear for the first time quite suddenly. “Stay with me.”

Cas stopped, the tears in his eyes now slipping down his cheeks.

“Yeah, you screwed up. You trusted Metatron, and you couldn’t stop Azrael, and so what? You think I didn’t have to forgive myself for the damn Apocalypse?”

“That wasn’t —”

“Then what was it? Manipulation? Then what was Metatron?” Dean demanded. “And how could you know what Azrael would do?” He shook his head. “We’ve got to pull our heads out of our asses, Cas. Blaming ourselves every time something goes wrong doesn’t get us anywhere.”

Cas’s eyes flickered open just long enough to meet Dean’s before he closed them again. He saw nothing but sincerity there. Dean meant every word he was saying, and Cas didn’t know if that was good or bad anymore.

“Now we’re gonna quit laying the blame on ourselves unless we actually do something wrong. You and me both.” Dean took a deep breath. “It’s not. It’s not my fault Sam died. I made mistakes, but in the long run it’s not my fault he’s gone. Can’t stop me from wanting him home and safe and happy, but it isn’t on me.”

Immediately he felt lighter than he had in a long time. The weight of guilt wasn’t gone, not by a long shot, but even telling himself it wasn’t his cross to bear eased it.

“What do you say, Cas? We have a deal?” he asked.

Castiel didn’t answer.

“Come on, Cas. Please talk to me.”
At last, Cas met Dean’s eyes, a faint, weak smile at his lips. “It’s not my fault the angels fell. I was tricked, but trust — trust isn’t a flaw.” He let out a shuddering sigh. “What is happening now isn’t my fault. But it is my problem.”

He slowly got to his feet, then met Dean’s steady gaze again. “I-it’s okay, if you can’t say it. I know that you mean it.”

Castiel ignored the sting of lying again.

“Cas, you might be the only thing keeping me sane right now. I need you.”

He smiled despite feeling as though he’d been slapped in the face. So that was it. All that wondering of why Dean would stay with him after betrayals and abuse and ill feeling between them building up for years, and that was it. Dean Winchester wanted him out of a desire to maintain his mental health. Well.

At least it wasn’t pity.

“And…” Dean was still talking. “You still feel like you’re on the edge?”

Castiel understood what he meant. “I’m not going to leave you now,” Castiel answered, voice barely audible now. “I won’t give up and leave you to fight alone.”
Baptism

Baptism: a person's initiation into a particular role or activity

“You know, it wouldn’t kill you to spend one night without getting shitfaced,” Dean said, covering the mouthpiece of his phone so the cop on the other line wouldn’t hear.

“Shut... up,” Crowley groaned, pressing his fingers to his temples and massaging them. “Like you’ve never been on a bender before.”

“You’re lucky we buy your liquor with the fake credit cards, or you’d owe at least two thousand dollars by now,” Cas pointed out, annoyed. “And we’re never going to get anything done if you keep this up. How helpful can you possibly be if you’re intoxicated on every hunt?”

They were in some motel in east Texas, hunting a werewolf and a kitsune. The two of them were working together — the wolf go the heart, kitsune got the brain, and everyone was happy but the schmuck they ripped apart. Dean and Cas were still working on how to find the monsters. They’d chased them across six counties with just a trail of bodies to mark their path.

Dean hung up his call. “Fuck. They found another body. We’re too late, they’ve got to be on the move again. Damn it.”

He started packing up, muttering curses under his breath. Castiel caught his handgun when Dean tossed it to him, strapping it into the thigh holster he now wore over his secondhand jeans. “Dean, don’t get started. We’ll catch them.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I know, I’m just pissed. We missed them again, and now another guy’s dead.” Dean sighed. “I’m gonna hit the shower and then we’ll follow their trail.”

Dean was just leaving the shower, a towel wrapped around his waist, when he saw someone standing in the bathroom, his hands pressing against something Dean couldn’t see, a mime in an imaginary box. “Not again,” Dean muttered. This was the last thing he needed. “Who the hell are you?” he demanded.

The figure turned to look at him, and Dean’s heart stopped in his chest. The man was blurred at the edges, his features indistinguishable. He kept pushing on nothing, and as Dean stared, his body sharpened in focus, becoming clearer. His nose and eyes developed out of the fog that formed his face.

“Fuck fuck fuck,” Dean hissed. He threw on his clothes quickly, running out of the bathroom when he heard a gunshot.

There were six or seven of them in the room, pressing against something that none of them could see. Cas had a shotgun propped against his shoulder, and Crowley was standing on the bed like the ghosts were mice skittering around the floor.

Dean grabbed his gun as Castiel shot another ghost into mist, but it re-formed after a few seconds. “Damn it,” Dean repeated, firing a shot into another ghost and hiking up his jeans as they slid down his hips. He heard screams through the thin hotel walls and winced. Outside on the street, many more shadowy, blurred figure stood, milling around and struggling against their own invisible walls. Cas and Dean shot the ghosts over and over again until they were out of salt rounds. Dean grabbed a
crowbar from his duffel and started swinging, until one grabbed him from behind. Red-hot pain burned through his as the spirit clutched him, fingernails clawing his shoulders. He gasped and dropped to the floor as it clamped burning hands around his neck.

Dean couldn’t breathe. The barely solid fingers seared his skin as they tightened and cut off his air supply. Shit shit shit shit.

Cas was distracted, warding off two spirits at once as they struggled against that invisible boundary. He didn’t even see Dean on the floor, and Crowley was busy shouting his head off.

The edges of Dean’s vision began to go dark, and he fought in a frenzy, desperate to stay awake more than anything.

Almost as suddenly as it had grabbed him, the ghost let go. Dean rolled over, panting and grabbing for his crowbar as his vision slowly returned. Another blurry ghost stood over him, already sharpening into focus. Dean’s heart stopped.

It was Sam.

Sam grabbed the ghost that attacked Dean and hit him, over and over. When the ghost was on the ground, gasping and cringing, Sam straightened up and turned. It was definitely him, long-ass hair and all. Even the new white scars on his arms stood out clearly.

Crowley made a choked sound and Dean scrambled to his feet. “Sam?” he whispered.

Sam went even paler, if that was possible as a ghost. “Dean?” he breathed.

Then he was gone.

Dean spun around like Sam was playing a trick on him, like he was just hiding. Aside from Crowley, Cas, and himself, though, the room was empty. He ran to the window and saw that all the ghosts had vanished. They weren’t really ghosts, though, were they? he thought wildly. Souls piercing through the goddamn veil.

He jerked back to reality, where Cas and Crowley were staring at the place where Sam had stood. “Well, I guess this means Heaven’s not doing so great,” he said under his breath. Cas looked like he was about to throw up, gagging as the color drained from his face and left behind a greenish pallor. “You wanna call in the big guns on this, Cas?”

Cas shook his head. “There’s no need, we’ve handled the immediate problem.”

“They wanted us to fill them in if something happened. Cas, it’s been two weeks and they haven’t called in, maybe we should have a chat.”

He could barely focus, a dizzy whirring in his head muffling his thoughts. Sam was still alive. Well, not alive. But about as fucking close as he could be under the circumstances. Dean could live with that.

Blood rushed in Castiel’s head. It was so much worse than he’d thought. The souls of humans were beginning to shatter the boundary between Heaven and Earth. A few months and it would be gone completely. It was repairing itself to some extent, he could see that, but without angels using their grace to maintain it, the barrier would completely deteriorate within a few months.

“Dean,” he began, but he was interrupted by the door being smashed in. Hadraniel strode in briskly as Zipporah ran hands nervously through her hair, which had long since frizzed out of its original
severe bun and turned into a loose, wavy mess. Dark circles shadowed her eyes.

“What happened here?” Hadrianiel demanded, leaving close to Cas’s face. Cas realized suddenly what Dean had always meant by personal space. “Castiel, what have you done?”

“I shot a ghost,” he said dryly, stepping back. “More than one. How did you find us?”

“What, you think we came for you?” Zipporah knocked back something from a bottle and slumped on Crowley’s bed. “Funny. Thought you didn’t have any juice left in you, Castiel, but we’ve felt this before. “What are you cooking?”

“He didn’t do anything,” Dean said, standing between Cas and Hadrianiel. “We’ve got enough problems without you assholes sticking your noses in. I thought we got the message across last time.”

“Who gave you permission to speak?” Hadrianiel asked, grabbing his shoulder and pushing him aside.

“I gave myself my fucking permission. You don’t tell me what to do, so stay out of our faces unless you want a knife in yours, capisce?” Dean couldn’t believe their fucking nerve, showing up here like this.

“Dean, wait.” Cas put a gentle hand on his shoulder, warning him. “Did you come here to kill me, interrogate me, or did you want something from us?” He didn’t want to fight if they didn’t have to; it was bad enough that Heaven was in this condition without facing severe wounds at the very least. He was aware of the cool metal of his angel blade stowed in his belt. He didn’t want it to come to that, but he couldn’t keep allies that would turn on him at the slightest mishap.

Hadraniel tilted their head to the side. “We came to find the source of a cluster of electromagnetic frequencies, encountered a series of spirit apparitions, and at the center of the chaos is you. It has happened before, this is no isolated incident. What do you know of it?”

“We know it’s not his fault, dumbass,” Crowley put in from where he still stood on his bed. He rolled his eyes and sighed when Hadraniel glowered at him, putting on a front of ease and nonchalance. “What now? Did I ruffle your feathers?” he asked, mock-concerned.

Zipporah made a noise that almost passed for a laugh. Dean glanced at her before he focused on Hadrianiel. “Look, I don’t know what the fuck your problem is, and frankly I don’t give a damn. But you don’t touch him. Azrael is the problem, and she’s a fucking angel, in case you missed the goddamn memo.”

Dean couldn’t stand them. They just showed up and blamed Cas for this shit, when Dean knew firsthand that Cas faulted himself more than enough. He was gonna punch this dick if they thought they could just waltz in and tell Cas it was his fault. “I’m sorry you can’t handle your own damn issues,” he added, jaw set. “I’m sure it’s hard on you, dealing with all the crap we can’t fix for you. Welcome to the jungle, kiddo, better hold on tight.” He turned and huffed out a breath.

Hadraniel grabbed the back of his shirt and pulled him back, gripping his shoulders and getting way too close for comfort. “Listen to me, Winchester, and listen well, for once in your short life. I am more powerful than you could ever be. I could destroy you where you stand. You have no authority over me, do not pretend to it. You will show me respect, or you will not be happy with the consequences.”

Their eyes were flashing, almost sparkling with grace, and their words were icy and soft and incredibly dangerous. An involuntary shiver ran down Dean’s spine. He wondered for a second if they would really do it. Kill him.
Hadraniel released him. “Watch what you say. I have spent millennia guarding the gates of Heaven against demons. Somehow, I doubt you would be more dangerous.”

Try me, Dean wanted to say, but most of his mind was screaming that was a bad decision, so he kept his trap shut. He nodded and moved back, out of Hadraniel’s reach.

“If you want to know what happened here, you might want to try being polite and asking first,” Cas said coolly. Now he stepped closer, his voice calm and firm. He wouldn’t let the angels intimidate him anymore. He was a soldier, he wouldn’t allow himself to be cowed by them. He knew some angels were . . . doubtful of humanity’s worth, but he’d hoped — he didn’t know anymore. He’d hoped being on Earth had changed their minds.

“We were on a hunt when souls manifested around us. We had nothing to do with it. If you were paying any attention, you’d know that Azrael has done nothing to prevent the deterioration of the veil. The souls who are not fooled by Heaven are already breaking through.” Cas settled down into a chair, forcing himself to act completely in control. “If that’s everything you wanted, you can leave.”

“It’s not.” Zipporah leaned back on her elbows. “We think we have a chance at the gate to Heaven,” she said, taking another long drink from her bottle. “Personally I think there’s no point. You know that even if it’s the real deal, it will be heavily guarded,” she called to Hadraniel, who was now leaning against the motel wall with their arms crossed.

“I am fully aware,” they answered curtly. “Castiel, we would be. . . greatly appreciative if you and your. . .” Hadraniel glanced first at Dean with his hand on the angel blade tucked into his belt and then to Crowley as he leaned over Zipporah’s shoulder and inspected her bottle. Their eyes filled with disapproval. “Your companions would give us your assistance.”

“You want our help? Crowley asked in mock disbelief. “You?” He snorted. “Right.” As if he could believe that after meeting them. They wanted the shining star of a seraph, not the ex-King of Hell, an angel-turned-human, and Dean Frigging Winchester.

“Don’t get too excited,” Zipporah said.

“We believe it would be to our advantage to have you on our side,” Hadraniel continued. “Any aid will be invaluable, and our supporters are too daunted by the threat Azrael poses to take a stand and fight back.”

“It’s reckless, and you’re the only one who can’t see it,” Zipporah said. Hadraniel went to her and spoke in a hushed voice, too quiet for Dean or Cas to hear.

Castiel glanced at Dean, who tilted his head to the side in a silent question. Cas shrugged. It wasn’t a good idea, not by a long shot. They could be walking into a trap.

It was impossible to discuss their options with Dean. It was obvious that Hadraniel didn’t have the tolerance to look past Castiel, supposed angel of God, consulting a human for advice. He wanted so badly to be able to trust them, but he wasn’t the naive and innocent angel he had been once.

His eyes fell on Dean, who mouthed, It’s your choice.

That was the least reassuring thing he could have said. If he agreed, he put all of them on the line, not just himself. One slip-up and Hadraniel would have a knife at his throat. If he refused, they would never have this chance again. He had no power, no anything. If they fought Azrael alone, they would be facing hundreds of angels — they would be dead before they even saw the gates of Heaven. The angels would consume them before they reached Heaven in death.
In the end Hadraniel and Zipporah had the same goals. Heaven had to be put back in order with the angels in their rightful place, it had to be returned to its former glory, as it should be.

Castiel met Dean’s eyes and nodded. Yes. They had no other choice. And he needed to finish it.

Dean understood. He closed his eyes and swallowed hard. “Crowley!” he hissed under his breath. “You want in?”

Hadraniel and Zipporah were too absorbed in their conversation to hear as Crowley said, “As long as I don’t end up run through with a goddamn sword.”

“Fair enough.” Dean released the hilt of his blade, letting his jacket fall back to cover it again. He set his jaw stubbornly. This would be dangerous, but if they succeeded Sam might be home by the end of the week.

“Hadraniel,” Cas said.

They turned. “Yes?”

“We will help you.” Cas took a deep breath. “On these conditions.” Hadraniel jerked their chin up stiffly. “You will not threaten Dean or Crowley. And you will not disrespect them. You will both treat them just as you treat me.”

Hadraniel stared at Castiel in complete disbelief before nodding firmly. “That can be done.”

“Good.” Cas refused to look away. Finally, Hadraniel broke eye contact and turned to Zipporah.

“We must go now. The sooner we leave, the less chance Azrael will have to stop us.” They grabbed Crowley and pulled him off his bed, then set their shoulders stiffly and turned to face Castiel. Impatient, they waited as Dean, Cas, and Crowley packed hurriedly, as Zipporah watched. She raised her brows with interest as Cas armed himself with several weapons, hooking a clay jar of holy oil to his belt and tucking his blade into his sleeve.

They headed out to the Impala. Hadraniel stopped short when Dean opened up the back door for them to climb in.

“You have got to be joking,” Zipporah said. “You want us in a car that stinks of hunter?”

“Do you see any other way of getting around?” Dean asked. Then he thought of something. “Hold on. Your wings are gone. How’d you even get here?”


“Well, I’m pretty sure the fucking bus route doesn’t cover the way to Heaven’s backdoor, so either you get in or you’re walking.” Dean was too damn tired of angels looking down their noses at him.

Hadraniel looked like they were about to argue, but at last they let out an irritated sigh and slid into the backseat.

Dean smiled. These frigging angels couldn’t boss him around.

“Dean?” Cas was watching him anxiously. “There are only three seats in the back, and there are five of us. Someone needs to take the passenger seat.”

“It’s okay,” Dean said, his voice feeling far from the thoughts in his head. “You can take shotgun, Cas, it’s fine.” He would survive with someone not Sam next to him. It wasn’t the end of the world.
If anyone knew that, it was him.

Hadraniel informed him where the door was supposed to be, still treating him with icy flatness. None of them spoke as Dean drove, each studying another’s face and looking away as soon as the other took notice. Dean was the only one who kept his eyes fixed on the road ahead.

Cas finally tore his gaze from Dean’s set, resigned face and stared out the window. A pang of guilt shot through him whenever Dean’s eyes flickered to him. He wasn’t here to replace him, but it was clear how Dean felt.

Dean still flinched when he caught motion in the passenger seat, expecting his brother and seeing Cas instead.

He took a deep breath. There was no point in flipping his shit just because someone else was up front with him. More important was the fact that if he and Cas showed any more affection than what was normal for friends, the odds were on they’d be smote in seconds.

Well, to be fair, he and Cas still barely spent any time together, which sounded ridiculous even to him, because they were together in the car for several hours every day. They shared a hotel room and a fucking bed, but they hadn’t kissed in a week and even touching had still gotten rarer and rarer. Dean wasn’t sure what had happened between them, just that he and Cas had suddenly stopped trying. Maybe it was Heaven, maybe it was buzzkill Crowley getting in the way, or maybe it was something else.

Because fuck, Dean was wondering if Cas really did love him after all. He knew the angels and Heaven were a big deal, he did, but more and more it felt like Cas was only still here because he felt like he had to be, to help bring Sam home.

And that thought pricked him with guilt for even considering it. He knew what he’d said to Cas when he was losing his shit in that goddamn motel in Nebraska, about needing Cas to keep him sane, and maybe that was why Cas stayed and promised he wouldn’t do something crazy.

It wasn’t right to be angry with Cas for closing off and shutting down now that they were on a mission. Dean honestly wondered if he had the right idea, since worrying over what the two of them had become was now a bigger distraction than Crowley’s endless complaints. Maybe going cold and emotionless made it easier to cope.

There was supposed to be a bigger picture here, right?

“So,” Zipporah said, jolting Dean out of his thoughts. “Crowley, are you ever going to ask what I’m drinking instead of staring at it?”

Crowley made a face and Zipporah laughed. “What, you didn’t think you were that obvious?”

“Alright, I’ll bite. What slush are you drinking, Feathers?”

Zipporah smirked and passed him the bottle. “Try it for yourself.”

Crowley took the bottle gingerly and sipped. He immediately spat it back out and coughed. “What the hell is that?” he gasped through his choking, his eyes tearing up.

“Moonshine,” Zipporah said proudly, taking the bottle and knocking back what was left. “And absinthe. I didn’t want to carry two bottles.”

“It’s disgusting,” he said, covering his mouth with his sleeve. “How in Satan’s name did you find...
alcohol worse than the swill Dean drinks?”

“Excuse me,” Dean began, then gritted his teeth and let it go. He couldn’t let Crowley get to him. “Like your scotch is any better,” he muttered under his breath.

“Since when do angels drink anything?” Crowley asked. “I seem to remember you lot can’t get drunk.”

“I drink ever since I wanted to drink,” Zipporah said coolly. “More fun than acting like a —” She paled and snapped her mouth shut. Hadraniel was staring straight ahead and refusing to react to a word she said.

Aside from that little exchange, though, the drive was almost silent. Dean felt the itch to turn on the radio just to have something filling the quiet, but he figured Hadraniel wouldn’t be interested in classic rock. He looked at his box of cassettes longingly a few times, considering putting one in just to piss the angel off, but he decided against it. He was walking on pretty damn thin ice with them already.

He almost reached out and squeezed Castiel’s hand as a comfort when they crossed the state line into Arizona around four, knowing that the Impala would get them to the Sonoran Desert in two hours or so and at that point it was too late to turn back.

Thankfully, the infamous desert heat wasn’t very intense, a result of winter finally taking root in early December. The sun wasn’t quite going down yet, but it was getting close to the horizon.

Castiel didn’t even pay attention to the changing landscape around him, engrossed in his own thoughts. Ziporah reminded him oddly of Balthazar. Or Anna. Or someone he couldn’t quite remember, someone he wasn’t sure he knew. Once, she might have chosen to fall rather than become like Hadraniel.

Thinking of Balthazar and Anna made him wince — he’d killed Balthazar personally, and he couldn’t justify turning Anna in, since he now knew she must have been tortured and conditioned by Naomi into what she became.

That only strengthened his resolve. Castiel had to put Heaven to rights, before another corrupt angel could take control and destroy it again, becoming the next Metatron, the next Naomi.

The next Castiel.

He shivered and turned away from the window, closing his eyes. He wished he could ask Dean for comfort, wished that he could believe him when he said that none of this was his fault. This blame on his shoulders ached.

They stopped about a mile from the edge of the Sonoran desert, because apparently the oor to Heaven had to be in the middle of nowhere instead of, hell, a playground, or something. Anywhere but where sand would wreck the Impala’s paint job and grind into ever gear. Dean was pissed that they’d have to either take her through or rent a fucking Jeep like a damn tourist. The sour look on Hadraniel’s face didn’t do anything for his mood.

Dean didn’t stop scowling when he parked the Impala in a lot and paid for the rental, or while they hauled their weapons to the trunk, or when they all had to squeeze in. He already hated the damn hunk of metal with a passion and couldn’t wait until it was back where it belonged, decaying in the sun as sand stripped away its ugly paint job and gummed up the works. It felt like he was cheating on his Baby.
Finally they were on the dirt road, headed for nowhere. Fucking cacti dotted the hard, cracked
ground, and Dean muttered curses under his breath as he tried to figure out how to work a car for the
twenty-first century. It wasn’t as bad as the shitty minivans he’d hijacked when the Leviathans made
them into Public Enemy Number One, at least. His face was red with stifled embarrassment. He was
supposed to know how to drive this damn motherfucking car.

His jaw set, he finally started to get comfortable driving this huge, clunky car. They were jolting over
rocks and bumps in the road when the car died.

“For God’s sake,” Dean groaned, getting out and opening up the hood to find out what was wrong
now. The gas tank was full, they shouldn’t be having any issues.

“It’s not that uncommon,” Crowley said. “Happens to lots of guys.” Dean flipped him the bird and
peered into the hood.

“Wait. Shut up,” Zipporah said, standing up in the car. Hadraniel started to push her back into her
seat, but then they paused. A sinking feeling crept into Dean’s stomach and he reached for his angel
blade. Well, so much for the element of surprise, huh?

Hadraniel was out of the car in less than a second, and Zipporah appeared on the other side of it. Cas
quickly scrambled out as well, an angel blade ready in his hand.

Crowley was still seated inside, ducking own, out of sight. He didn’t want to die in the desert with an
angel blade sticking out of his back, or worse. Then he straightened up and climbed out awkwardly,
holding his own silver blade. This was probably the second stupidest thing he’d ever done, and even
he could admit he’d done some exceedingly stupid things.

Dean pulled Cas aside. “Don’t get yourself killed, okay? I know this is your mission, and everything,
but that doesn’t mean you can go around risking your life for angels who’d smite you as soon as look
at you.”

Cas jerked out of his grasp. “I’ll be fine, Dean,” he said tightly, gripping his weapon and holding it
steady. “I’m more worried about you.”

Dean didn’t have a chance to ask what he meant by that. Seven angels appeared in front of them, and
he swore under his breath. This would be fun.

Hadraniel struck first, their blade flashing out to be met with a block from another angel. Dean
stopped thinking about anything and just fought, trying to stab them, cut them, anything, but he was
so slow compared to them. They had to be supercharged from consuming souls, because these angels
moved like lightning, and it was hard enough to keep from getting slashed up himself; he could
forget getting in one good strike.

Castiel sliced at one of them, but she countered him easily. “You think you can beat us, Castiel?” she
asked, lunging for him. He dodged her, but just barely. They were outnumbered, the part of him that
had fought demons in Hell for years to pull Dean from the pit informed him. They needed to even
out the odds. Out of the corner of his eye, Cas could see Crowley pressed up against the Jepe, blade
shaking in nervous fingers. He almost didn’t see his own opponent try to slash his chest open.

“You’re pathetic,” she said, walking around him and tilting her head to the side. “You tried so hard
to fix Heaven, and now look at you. Weak. Worthless. I’m impressed, Castiel, I never thought any
angel could fail as badly as Lucifer.”

Castiel’s heart stopped. Was that really what he’d done? No, he couldn’t let her words affect him,
she was trying to sabotage him, he knew these tactics.

“You fight your own family,” the angel continued, before her blade flickered close to him and he swung up his own to meet it. Sparks scattered and died in the air. “Fighting a losing battle, Castiel. I would have thought you would be proud, since we’re finishing what you started. Heaven will be better under our control, and we can purge the world of filthy abominations like you. Sacrificed for a higher cause. Maybe you’re the proof that rebels always end badly.”

He lost control. “I may be as bad as Lucifer,” he shouted, “but at least I’m not as useless as our father.” Cas swung his blade up and skewered her through the chest as she lunged for him again. He pulled the blade out of her and turned just in time to see another bearing down on him from behind.

Cas brought his blade up, barely able to stop the angel from slicing his neck open, but instead of pausing, the angel slid the blade aside and stabbed Castiel’s shoulder, tugging his weapon loose and bringing it up to strike again as Cas dropped to the ground, his shoulder already gushing blood.

He flinched as the angel brought the blade down, unable to roll away or protect himself. Instead of feeling metal sink into his chest, he heard a loud clang and looked up to see Crowley standing over him, holding the angel back with his own weapon.

“Careful,” he grunted as he shoved the angel back a few steps. “I think I’ve still got a couple tricks left in me.” He stood between Cas and his opponent, his whole body shaking even though he sounded like his usual condescending self. “Wouldn’t want you to be iced by the ex-King of Hell, now, would we?”

The angel swung at him, and Crowley stepped backward with a high-pitched squeak. “Well, guess you’re on your own then, Cassie,” he said before staggering backward until he hit the car. He swore as the angel came after him, brushing past Castiel without a pause. Cas struggled to his feet and clenched his blade in one hand, trying not to pass out as blood stained his coat.

Crowley winced as he tripped and fell backward, his hands scraping on the rough ground. The angel crouched down next to him and pressed the tip of his blade to Crowley’s stomach, smiling.

The angel collapsed forward onto Crowley, his grip going slack. Castiel’s blade stuck out of his back.

Crowley crawled from underneath the vessel’s limp body, gasping as he flopped weakly down on the ground. “Kill me now,” he muttered.

Cas was on his knees again, his ears ringing. When had he hit the ground? “Yeah,” he breathed as stars sparked in front of his eyes. Then he fainted.

Dean was on the other side of the car, trying to fight off two angels at once. He was up against the door, panting as he sliced one in the arm. There was a long gash across his chest now, but it was shallow. He hit the ground hard as they both lunged for him at once, then stabbed one in the leg. “Damn it,” he hissed as he scrambled out of the way.

Hadraniel grabbed his arm and pulled him onto his feet quickly before striking at one of the two. They caught the angel in the chest, and she fell backward. Dean plunged his own blade deep into the second angel’s gut as he turned to face him, pulling the weapon free as the angel’s body flared with light and went out, leaving wingprints burned into the cracked earth.

“How does it feel?” the other angel said, gasping as the wound across her chest began to heal. “To be a traitor to your family? To Heaven?”
“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” hadraniel said, but something in their voice made Dean double-take.

The angel scoffed. “Yes, you do. We all know who let the Scribe into Heaven, when he didn’t belong there. And you blame Azrael for this? She’s setting right what has gone wrong, Hadraniel.”

Dean smeared his fingertips in the blood oozing from his chest and dragged them across the car door.

Hadraniel shook their head. “No. She has only made the Fall worse. Heaven is falling apart, collapsing, and your head is too filled with dreams to see it.”

“If not for you and Castiel, this never would have happened. We’re just cleaning up your mess.”

Hadraniel grabbed the front of the angel’s shirt and shoved their blade into her stomach. After the blast of light faded and the angel’s wings scorched the ground, Hadraniel turned, their face pale and unreadable. “Zipporah —”

A flash of light seared the air and Dean squeezed his eyes shut. When the brightness was gone, the last two attackers had vanished. Hadraniel and Zipporah were gone as well. He gave a tense smile at the banishing sigil he’d painted on the car.

He heard noise from the other side of the car and found Cas and Crowley there. Crowley was wheezing heavily where he lay in the dirt, but Cas was kneeling on the ground and whispering something.

Dean crouched down next to him.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Cas muttered under his breath over and over, “I didn’t mean to do this, I just wanted Heaven to be safe again, I’m sorry, damn it.”

Dean reached out and grasped Cas’s shoulder. “Hey,” he began, but Cas’s reaction cut him off. He jerked away from the touch, hissing in pain.

“Cas?”

“Angel. . . stabbed me, Dean, just hurts a little,” Cas groaned. Dean apologized and realized they should get out of here, before Azrael sent more goons to assassinate them.

Dean and Crowley helped Cas up into the shitty, olive-green Jeep. They finally pulled up to the rental lot just as the sun disappeared over the horizon. Cas curled up in the shotgun seat, wincing as he accidentally bumped his shoulder on the roof of the car as he got in.

They bandaged Cas up as well as they could at the first motel they could find. In the morning, Dean figured they’d have to find someplace to stay for a while. Cas was in pretty rough shape, and there was no way Dean was dragging him all over the fucking country in that state. Fuck, Dean wondered if they shouldn’t just head back to the bunker. Then he remembered Rufus’s old cabin, where they’d stayed after the Leviathans burned down Bobby’s house.

It was better than nothing.

There was one other thing he needed to do before they left. He dialed Charlie’s phone number. When she picked up, Dean didn’t give her a chance to speak. “Listen, Charlie. I know you’ve got to be busy, but I need someone who doesn’t have a fuckton of issues right now, so if you could head over to the address I’m gonna text you, that would be really fucking super.”

“Dean?” Charlie asked.
“Yeah,” he said. “It’s me. So will you be there?”

“What’s up?”

Dean closed his eyes. Cas was asleep, curled up under the covers of their bed, and Crowley was stretched out on top of his blankets and snoring like a chainsaw. “Crowley’s a pain in the ass and Cas is kinda laid up right now. I’m just... not in the greatest shape right now. So will you meet us there? I... I need someone else right now.”

“Cas and Crowley? You mean, like the angel and the demon?” Charlie asked.

“Try demoted to ordinary human, but yeah.”

“I will definitely be there. Can’t wait to see you again, Dean.”

“Thanks,” Dean sighed with relief. “I’ll see you then.” He texted her the cabin’s address and sat on the edge of his bed. Dean didn’t have a clue what the fuck he was doing. It wasn’t like it was a picnic, crisscrossing the country with his boyfriend and a douchebag. They’d gotten nowhere with getting Sam home, and frankly, having angels for allies did fuckall for them.

He just wanted one year without all of this, just one year for a vacation without having to worry about Heaven or Hell or Purgatory. What that really so much to ask?

Cas murmured in his sleep, rolling over slightly and wincing as he put too much pressure on his shoulder. God, he looked so damn vulnerable. Dean swallowed hard. Vacation would have to wait.
“Crowley, Charlie’s gonna be here any minute and you look like you just crawled out of a horror movie.”

“My life is a horror movie,” Crowley said. He really did look awful — Dean wasn’t sure if he’d slept last night, but he figured Crowley could do whatever the fuck he wanted. It was the not shaving, not changing clothes, and smelling vaguely like eight types of whiskey that irked him.

They’d gotten to the cabin five nights ago after the disaster in Arizona, but it had already snowed over six inches and a light flurry was falling. Of course mid-December would bring the shitty weather with it. Dean had been tense ever since eleven a.m. the day before, when he was changing Cas’s bandages and noticed that his shoulder wasn’t healing. Or if it was, it was going too slow for Dean’s comfort.

Everywhere he looked there was another problem that needed fixing. After the comfort of the bunker, the cabin was, frankly, utter shit. Dean had boarded up two windows against the cold when Cas pointed out the cracked and shattered glass. He’d insulated the basement and did his best to repair the sagging ceiling, and against all odds it had yet to cave in. The couch was molding after two years of minimal use and sitting more or less out in the open, so Dean had driven to the nearest town and bought a new goddamn couch. On the upside, Cas had found a way to spend his time; when he wasn’t transcribing their hunts and his memories into his journal, he was organizing Bobby’s old haphazard records and manuscripts.

And Cas’s shoulder and the state of the cabin weren’t all that were keeping Dean up at night. Crowley barely did anything nowadays but drink their ever-depleting stock of liquor and stare at the completely useless demon-killing knife that Dean still carried out of habit. Dean was sure he only got to sleep by passing out in an alcohol-fueled stupor. They didn’t need someone else who found it almost impossible to sleep.

Cas usually stayed curled up in his bed. He was starting to get tired of spending so much time in the sole bedroom alone. Dean knew full well he was getting antsy, but he wasn’t letting Cas get up with his shoulder still scraped-raw, red, and sporting a bloody gash. Despite how well-meaning Dean was, it bothered Cas to no end. He was still perfectly competent.

Dean didn’t even visit so much as duck in to change the bandages and leave. Castiel reminded himself that Dean was trying to make the cabin livable, that he had other priorities.

It wasn’t so easy to sleep now. Now Dean slept on the couch instead of pressed reassuringly against him. Castiel found himself hating this stupid weakness in his humanness. As an angel, he never would have felt so dependent on the presence of another corporeal body beside him.

It would be easier to deal with the sudden distance between them if Dean weren’t just. . . pretending. If he was pretending. Cas was never sure anymore, and that was almost worse than being certain his feelings were unreciprocated.

Because if he were sure, he could tell Dean he didn’t need to fake it to make him feel better. But as it was, every second they spent together Cas let him hold his hand and whisper comfort in his ear and
never said a word about what a lie it had to be, because he was selfish and wanted to believe it was real.

Maybe it was the constant ache of his shoulder, telling him what he wanted to hear.

Dean finished straightening up the big room. It looked okay, considering how much dirt had gotten in since the last time Dean was here. It had taken a lot of sweeping to even get the floor clear of dust.

At last came a loud, excited knock on the front door. “Dean?” Charlie’s voice was muffled by the solid wood. “We’re here!”

“We?” he muttered to himself as he headed up the stairs.

When Dean pulled the door open, he saw Charlie’s cropped red hair first, then her grinning face. He barely registered the second figure before Charlie pulled him into a hug. He held her tightly.

“It’s great to see you, Charlie.”

“Well, I couldn’t just ditch you, after that call. You sounded... not good.” Her expression turned serious. “I know you don’t wanna talk about that. But I’m right here if you do,” she said as she released him. He didn’t remember telling her about Sam, but she seemed to already know.

“So, where’s Castiel and... the King of Hell?”

“Ex-King, dammit,” Crowley shouted from the bathroom.

“Cas is probably asleep. He’s still recovering.” Dean turned to the woman who shivered patiently behind Charlie. He took in her dark skin, her curly black hair, her pentagram pendant, and the obvious shadow of a large knife concealed in her sleeve. “Uh... who is this?” he asked. He didn’t mean to be rude, but he needed his safehouse to be, well, safe.

“Oh! Sorry, I’m so rude. Dean, this is my girlfriend, Harper. She’s a hunter,” Charlie added. “We met in Maryland. I ran into a... what was it called?” She glanced at Harper.

“Rawhead,” Harper said. Her voice had a musical lilt to it. She pulled her black hair from its ponytail, letting it bounce around her shoulders. “Mind letting us in?” She pulled her coat tighter around her.

“Yeah, sorry, come on in,” Dean said, stepping aside to let them through.

“Harper was investigating the same thing, and she totally saved my ass. She pulled a taser out of her pocket and fried the thing.” Charlie hung her coat over a chair. “Crush at first zap.”

“So you’re the famous Dean Winchester,” Harper said as she dropped a large backpack on the floor. “Heard a lot about you. From Charlie, other hunters. The last pack of vamps we took out together seemed a little disappointed you weren’t there to chop a few heads.” She flashed a mischievous smile, white teeth bright against her dark skin.

Dean grabbed Charlie’s arm and halted her. “What kind of stories have you been telling?”

Charlie winked. “That’s a secret.” She muttered, “LARPing,” and disguised it as a cough. “So when can I meet this Castiel? He sounds awesome.”

“He’s still kinda hurt, he might still be sleeping...”

“I’m awake, Dean,” Castiel said from the doorway. His shirt rode up, exposing his defined hipbones,
which, frankly, damn. The bandage around his shoulder was mostly covered by the shirt, but the white cloth still peeked out of the short sleeve. Dean realized much too late that the shirt in question was one of his, and more importantly that Charlie noticed.

At least he didn’t have to worry about her judgment.

She turned just enough to see Dean’s face her eyebrows raised, but didn’t say anything.

“You’re really an angel?” Harper asked. “That’s. . . unbelievable.”

Cas shook his head, a wry smile twisting his mouth. “I’m not much of an angel anymore. I’m human now. It was unexpected.”


“I was stabbed.” Charlie and Harper winced. “I’m fine,” he added unconvincingly.

“Well, not fine, but getting there,” Dean said. “Hopefully you’ll be in good shape in no time.” He pulled out a chair for Cas and sat down in another for himself.

Cas wasn’t so sure, but he had his pride. He was a soldier. More than that, he was once commander of his garrison. He would not be defeated by a mere shoulder wound. That noted, he felt no better than he had after Dean first stemmed the bleeding, and the raw look of his skin around the edge of the gash forced him to question if he was improving at all. He cleared his throat as he sat next to Dean.

“So, why’d you call me out here anyway? It’s like two degrees out right now.” Charlie helped herself to the chips that Dean had strategically placed on the table.

Dean looked away and focused on the floor. “It’s kinda personal,” he said, his easygoing smile faltering.

Charlie stood up. “Then we can go somewhere else. You don’t mind hanging out with the angel, Harper?”

“Definitely not,” Harper said, eyeing Cas’s exposed abs appreciatively.

“Charlie, your girlfriend’s staring at my boyfriend,” Dean said without thinking.


Crowley had just walked in, looking... spiffy. That was the only word Dean could think of to describe it. His hair was damp and combed, he’d shaved, and he was wearing a suit that looked like it had been recently ironed. Dean didn’t know where he’d gotten the clothes, but the style perfectly matched the strict part in his hair, making him look like he’d walked out of the 1950s.

Dean stifled a snort. “Well, you look decent,” he managed to choke out.


Harper quirked an eyebrow. “As in the King of Hell?”

“A little behind the times, are we? I’ve been cured. No smoke. No shiny red eyes.” He poured himself a drink, smothering the sense of wistfulness that had risen up inside him. “And who is this
lovely figure of a woman?”

Harper laughed at him. Not in a friendly way, either. Mockingly. Crowley flinched. “Taken,” she said, and drummed her fingers on the table as if she were bored talking to him. He noticed silver-plated knuckle dusters on her left hand. He shivered, the feeling that she knew something about him sending chills down his spine.

Charlie had to half-drag Dean down the stairs and away from the potentially explosive combination of ex-angel, ex-demon, and total stranger.

“Who’s up for a game of cards?” Crowley asked, his voice nervously high-pitched as Charlie led him down to the basement.

“What happened here?” she asked, glancing at the black stains on the old carpeting and bare concrete.

“Leviathans,” Dean said flatly.

“Oh.”

Charlie perched on a rickety chair. “So congratulations, first of all. Never pegged you for the kind of guy to settle down.”

Dean looked away. “That’s not important.”

“Hell yes it is,” Charlie said. “Dean, I read the books. You don’t really go in for the long-term relationships. I’m happy for you. And this Castiel?” She smiled. “I think he sounds like a keeper.”

Dean smiled a little at that, but he didn’t mention how he barely even talked to Cas except to keep him up to date and fix the hole in his shoulder. He stayed quiet and leaned back against the wall.

“So what’s up?” she asked seriously. “You seem kinda out of it — I guess that’s normal. Talk to me.” She’d seen it right away. Hell, she’d known, hadn’t she, months ago, since she first heard Sam had died. Dean was mourning, but he wasn’t ready to give up on his brother yet, either. She knew how it felt to know someone was gone but not be able to give up hope. She just had to believe Dean knew what he was doing. It was obvious how on-edge he was.

Castiel watched with interest as Crowley stared at the cracked table and Harper dealt the cards. She offered him a hand, but he shook his head, more interested in finding out who would win.

Dean took a deep breath. “I deal with so much shit, Charlie, you gotta understand. I need you here because you’re not a part of it. I mean, all I’ve got is Crowley, who, by the way, is a fucking douchebag, and Cas is... he’s in as rough a spot as me and I can’t unload my problems on him.”

“You wanna elaborate?” Charlie asked.

* * *

Crowley snapped. Harper hadn’t broken eye contact with him in two minutes, and the glare was getting to him. “What is your friggin’ problem?”

Harper’s lips twitched in a cold smile.

* * *

“Sam’s... gone, but that doesn’t make him safe. You remember the ghost thing from a few months
“Yeah,” she said, perking up.

“Well, it’s this thing with the angels.”

Harper laid her cards face down on the table. “You wouldn’t even remember it.”

Crowley knew. Suddenly, he knew.

“My brother was trying to save this kid, not even eighteen yet. Something was coming after him, something only he could see. Turns out he made a deal with the devil. His mom was dying. Car crash, she was in a medically induced coma, and this seven-year-old boy made a deal to save her life. And ten years later my brother was trying to keep him safe, protect him until we could get his deal broken.”

He could see where this was going. He remembered all too well. Demons didn’t forget things.

Dean told Charlie everything. Why he needed to bring Sammy back, what happened to Heaven. He didn’t mention his relationship with Cas. *That* wasn’t the issue here.

Charlie listened patiently to everything he said. Dean knew she noticed when tears filled his eyes as he talked about Sam being tortured in fucking so-called *Paradise*. When he finally finished, she started to put a hand on his shoulder before thinking better of it. “So you’re pissed. Understandable.”

Dean rolled his eyes. “That all you got?”

“You’ve got a lot on your plate right now, Dean. And that sucks, but I’m no therapist. Sorry.” She sighed. “I’m willing to bet Cas can handle you throwing this at him.”

Dean shook his head. “No, he can’t know any of this.” His fingernails were leaving crescent scars on his palm, his hands were clenched so tight.

Harper continued coldly. “Death at a hellhound’s hands is brutal. I imagine you remember that.”

Crowley closed his eyes.

“When I found them, they were in pieces. That kid was seventeen,” she wasn’t stopping, why wouldn’t she stop? “My brother was twenty-five. And you sent your hounds to rip them apart.”

He swallowed. *I’m sorry.*

“That’s enough.” Cas’s voice cut across the icy tension.

Harper’s gaze snapped to him, but Cas responded in equal measure, matching her stare for cold blankness.

Finally Harper looked away. “Put aside your grudges,” Castiel said calmly. “Crowley isn’t a demon anymore. He was a monster then, he didn’t have a human conscience.”
“Doesn’t mean I’ll forgive him.” Harper met Cas’s gaze.

"I wouldn’t expect you to."

She pushed the stack of cards at Crowley. “Deal.”

* * *

Charlie pulled Dean into a hug. “You needed someone to talk to. I get it.”

“Seriously, no advice?”

“Um, save the world for me? I’m kind of attached to it.” She laughed, and Dean found himself smiling. “I don’t know, Dean, just do what you think is right.” As she started up the stairs, she added, “Feel any better, getting it off your chest?”

“More or less,” Dean said. He actually did feel less stressed after venting.

She opened the door. “Well, if it’s any consolation, your life really sucks.”

Dean raised a skeptical eyebrow. “Consolation?”

She shrugged. “Probably not helping.”

When they returned to the upstairs, Crowley was tugging at the collar of his suit, unsettled. From what Dean could see, Harper was talented at playing gin as much as Crowley was at drinking it. Cas watched them play intently, deeply focused on their strategy.

“Where the hell did you learn to play like this?” Crowley asked, wiping his brow. She smirked and leaned forward like she was about to share a secret.

“I’m better at cheating,” she said, her grin widening. Crowley looked away.

“I knew you were cheating,” Dean muttered, and Charlie giggled. Harper looked up.

“Are you done, then? We’ll need to leave soon if we don’t want to be snowed in.”

Dean pulled up a chair next to Cas, their shoulders brushing as he sat down.

Cas hissed with pain, grabbing his shoulder and standing abruptly. “I need to change my bandages,” he said as he rushed into the bedroom.

Dean followed him. “What’s wrong?”

Castiel was still holding his injured shoulder tightly. “It — it just hurts more than I expected. It’s nothing, I just need to change the bandages.” He crowded Dean toward the door. “I can do this on my own.”

“No, you can’t. You can barely even move your arm, how are you gonna get out of that shirt?”

“I’ll manage,” Cas insisted.

“Let me help.”

Cas shot him a sullen glare, but he didn’t argue.

Dean helped him get out of his shirt, pretending not to notice how Cas winced when his arm moved.
He carefully unwrapped the layers of fabric that bound the wound.

Finally he pulled the last of it away, and a revolting sight met his eyes. Where Castiel’s shoulder had been ripped open, the wound had gone red and puckered instead of scabbed and healing over. The swollen area looked bad enough, but when Dean put a little pressure on the spot, the greenish center of the injury oozed and Dean felt like he was going to fucking puke.

“Uh... Cas?” he said. Something in his tone must have tipped him off, because Cas twisted to look at him. His blue eyes were wide with concern.

“What’s wrong?”

“Um, this looks pretty bad,” Dean finally said. “It’s kind of... it looks gross,” he admitted. “And it’s not getting any better.”

Castiel took a deep, shuddering breath. Right. Of course he had to be debilitated by a simple wound. Dean had to have lived through worse — Castiel himself had faced much worse as an angel. Why would his vessel, his body, decide to be weak and useless now, of all times?

He leaned into the press of Dean’s hand against his back. “What exactly is the problem?”

“Looks infected to me,” Dean said, closing his eyes so he didn’t have to look at the pus as it seeped from the exposed tissue. His stomach churned. “Hey, Cas, lay down so we can take care of this.”

Dean’s hand lingered at Cas’s back as he lowered him down to be propped up by the pillows. “Hold on.” He went to the door and leaned out. “Uh, guys, we’ve got a little situation in here.”

Cas waited patiently as Dean quickly filled them in, trying not to move. He pretended the heat in his cheeks was from his body raising his internal temperature to combat the infection, but he knew better. That was more contact than he and Dean had shared in the last week.

A few moments later, Dean was back at his side, followed by Charlie, Harper, and Crowley.

“I’m a registered nurse, Dean,” Harper snapped. “Well, ‘Jasmine Lewis’ is, technically.” She grinned and elbowed past Dean, sitting down next to Cas. “Let me see.” She examined the wound, making a sympathetic face when Cas winced. “Yeah, it’s infected.”

“I told you that,” Dean muttered.

Cas watched the three of them whisper amongst themselves, Crowley standing awkwardly and uselessly off to the side. “Aren’t you going to do anything?” he asked, groaning as he shifted and his shoulder throbbed.

“We can treat the infection,” Harper said. “With the right medicine —”

“Someone’s gonna have to run into town for supplies,” Dean added. “We cleaned this place out when we moved to the bunker.”

“Just decide what to do, then,” Cas groaned, trying not to cave in. You can get through this, he reminded himself. Illness, paint, it’s all temporary. It can be fixed.

Pain as a human was so much more profound than pain as an angel, Castiel had learned.

Dean closed his eyes as Cas winced again. He pulled Charlie out of the room, closing the door. “You know, you two don’t have to worry about staying. If I’m taking care of Cas I’ll be too busy to hang out, and I don’t wanna leave you with Kerouac over there.” He tipped his head subtly toward
Crowley as he poured a drink into a glass.

“We can stay. I don’t mind, and I’ll bet Harper wants to use her doctor skills on somebody for once. Besides, I bet it will be hard enough to get out of here with all the snow,” Charlie added. “And I haven’t seen you in months. I’m down with helping out.”

Dean was acutely aware of the tension in his shoulders as he spoke. “That’s not the point. I don’t want you around for this.”

Charlie waited expectantly. Dean finally realized she wanted to know exactly what ‘this’ was, and sighed. “I don’t want to put you or your girlfriend in danger. I’m summoning Azrael.”

One way or another, Azrael had to go. Why should it matter if Dean was taken out in the process? Once she was dead, her followers would disassemble and lose their direction. Hadrianiel and Zipporah could retake Heaven with Cas and maybe, maybe bring Dean and Sam back as a reward. At the least, Heaven — and Sam — would be safe from the tyranny of another fucking angel with a God complex.

Charlie was staring at him. “Are you insane?” she whispered hotly. “You said she wants you dead. Way to stick yourself in the line of fire.” She closed the door behind them, blocking their voices from drifting into Harper and Cas’s hearing.

“I don’t have a goddamn choice. We’re never gonna get close to her otherwise.” Dean spoke flatly, brooking no argument. Cas wanted Azrael dead. Dean wanted Azrael dead. Sam needed Azrael dead. If there was a downside to killing her. Dean couldn’t see it. It wasn’t like the angels, for all their mojo, had done jack to help. He just wanted this whole Good-and-Evil chess match to be over. That had always been Crowley’s thing, and it was clear that even Crowley was done with it.

Dean couldn’t stand seeing Cas drive himself insane thinking about the damage Azrael did, the death toll in Heaven and on Earth. Cas put so much blame on himself already. Dean had his axe to grind, sure, but there were plenty of other reasons he couldn’t let Azrael keep breathing.

Charlie looked like she was about to slap him, but Crowley opened the door and stepped on her foot on his way out. He shivered in the chill and made a face at Dean. “Your boytoy will be fine,” he said, though he said it with a wry twist to his mouth.

Dean escaped to the basement. He could get ready there, then take the Impala and get out to a nice open field or something. The snow might slow him down some, but if Azrael burned as hot as she had when she torched the bunker, he’d only have to worry about slipping in fresh mud. He would do the ritual far enough from the cabin that Cas would be safe, even if he lost the fight.

It suddenly hit him that he had a very high chance of losing the fight.

The two of them facing off, and Dean with no damn backup — of course, Crowley was shitty backup generally, Cas was in no condition to fight and he couldn’t as Charlie and a near-stranger to take on anamped-up angel. It would just be Dean and the almost-invulnerable angel from the dawn of time.

On reflection, his odds were not looking good.

Shit.

He took a long, shaky breath as Charlie gave him a last warning look and disappeared into Cas’s bedroom. The click of the door closing behind her settled it for him. He couldn’t watch this angelic shitstorm go on any longer, couldn’t watch what it was doing to Cas, to Sam, to himself.
“Here goes nothing,” Dean said, a tight knot in his chest.

Cas finally persuaded Harper and Charlie to let him get up and walk out to the living room — “It’s ten feet, not the moon” — and relax. They just talked and drank from Dean’s beer stash. Harper was very interested to hear what the Bible got right and where it made some embarrassing errors.

Dean stumbled up the stairs suddenly, holding a bottle of whiskey. A fine layer of dust had settled over his skin, streaks of dirt marking up his shirt. He knocked back a fair amount of what was left in the bottle. Harper and Crowley instantly picked up the paces of their own drinking to match, but Charlie put a warning hand on Crowley’s arm and she stopped.

He kept a fast pace as he flicked through TV channels, downing the rest of the whiskey and half a beer before he settled on a show.

Charlie was about to ask Dean if he was doing okay when Castiel stood up, standing steady despite his injury. “Dean, stop,” he said. “You’re going to get drunk if you keep it up like this.”

“That’s the idea,” Dean said sharply, finishing off the last of his beer and burping. He knew he was gonna get a rise out of Cas, but he didn’t care anymore. Liquid courage, right? At least if he got hammered it wouldn’t hurt so much when Azrael smote him or whatever; at least he could blame his reckless plans on something other than hopeless desperation and goddamn exhaustion.

A new can of beer had just met his lips when Cas stood, took two staggering steps forward and collapsed.

Dean dropped the can, not even noticing as the beer spilled out and soaked his shoes. “Cas!” He tried to shake Cas awake gently, but he wasn’t responding. “Cas, come on, wake up.” Dean’s heart halted when he realized he’d done the same only months ago, when it was someone else lying on the floor. Different floor, different person.

“Dean, he’s fainted. We need to get him somewhere, lay him down,” someone — he didn’t know who — told him. Crowley pulled him away and Charlie and Harper lifted Cas up carefully. Dean swallowed back his panic and helped bring Cas to the bedroom and lay him down.

He was hyperventilating. When had that started? Cas’s eyes were softly closed, and he wasn’t moving, but Dean could make out the rise and fall of his chest. Cas was breathing, he was alive. That calmed him down a little.

Wanting to help, but too shaky to do anything, he watched anxiously as Harper unwrapped the white sheer bandages. Pus had soaked through a few layers, and when she uncovered smooth tan skin that looked pale against her fingers, the irritated red spot had spread.

He’s okay, Dean whispered to himself. It’s just an infection. We can take care of that. Cas is fine, he’s just passed out, it’s not that bad. He’ll be okay.

“I need to get moving, hunt down the meds he needs,” Harper said, getting to her feet. “Unless you have something here?” she asked. Dean shook his head mutely, unable to look away from Cas. “Then I can head into town. With a little luck, I’ll be back soon.”

“Anything we can do for him in the meantime?” Dean was surprised to hear Crowley ask it.

“Just keep him comfortable, don’t try to move him around. Don’t feed him anything too heavy, he might have trouble keeping it down. Keep the wound clean, and wrap it up when you’re not doing anything to it.” She gave Charlie a quick kiss goodbye and promised to be safe on the icy, slick roads.
Charlie started to wipe down Cas’s cut with a wet cloth. “I can do that,” Dean said instantly, stepping in and taking the cloth. He pressed the warm, damp towel gently on the inflamed area, holding it in place.

“Sorry you’ve gotta deal with this,” he said quietly. Crowley glanced up from where he sat slouched in a chair.

Charlie shook her head. “I’m here because I want to be. You’re my friend.”

Dean stopped himself from opening his mouth and reminding her that his friends had a tendency to die bloody. He didn’t need to keep unloading his crap on Charlie, like she was a genie who could make it all disappear. Instead he just mumbled thanks and kept pressure on Cas’s shoulder.

Crowley made as if to stand before settling back down. His eyes flickered up to meet Dean’s before fixing on the door determinedly. “I, uh,” he said, immediately cussing himself out for being so articulate. He didn’t bother finishing the sentence.

Dean ignored him, focusing on Cas. If Crowley wanted to talk, Dean didn’t doubt that he would. Loudly.

For maybe twenty minutes — Dean wasn’t keeping track of the time — the only sound was the wet cloth on Castiel’s burning skin and the four of them breathing in the cramped bedroom. Dean didn’t think it was fair to banish anyone from the only warm room in the cabin; he’d set up the space heater in here for Cas’s benefit when they first arrived, but now it felt like escaping the things no one was saying meant freezing to death in the other room.

Suddenly Crowley stood and grabbed Dean by the arm, dragging him out of the room. His breath smelled like that lime-flavored crap he was sipping on the other day.

“Do you really believe he’ll be fine?” he asked, and maybe he was drunk or maybe he was completely serious, but Dean didn’t care which Crowley was because the look on his face was terrifying. His skin was waxy and pale like he’d been confronted face-to-face with Death himself, his eyes wide and dark, and his hands shook with the effort of trying to hold them still.

Dean had never seen Crowley like this, and he’d seen him drunk too often over the past few months.

Slowly, uncertain about what Crowley was doing, Dean nodded. “Yeah. Yeah, I do. He’s been blown up by Raphael and Lucifer, and he’s still kicking. Something as boring as infection isn’t gonna bring him down now.” He said it more for his benefit than Crowley’s.

“What if he dies? Will he be taken to Heaven, or . . . and even if he were, it’s as bad there as it is here. Worse.”

Dean forced himself to look at Crowley properly, without flinching away. A vast empty blankness filled his eyes, like the abyss had crawled into his face and nested there. Like he could see the End Times at this very moment. Like that was all he could see. And what it did to him, it gave him the look of an animal that knew it was about to be pounced upon and devoured slowly, carved apart while still breathing.

He couldn’t speak. Whatever was going on in Crowley’s head right now, it was too much to fathom. Finally he found words. “That’s not gonna happen. Even if it did, he wouldn’t be there for long. I’d find a way.”

Crowley watched him warily, not blinking or breaking eye contact, for several seconds. At last he gave a short, curt nod and retreated to the bedroom. He doubted Dean. Perhaps it was that Sam had
been tortured mercilessly for information by Azrael’s supporters and, surprise! The moose was still up there, still in danger, and still waiting for his salvation from a brother who was too busy being smitten with an angel to do something about it. Never mind that Crowley could hold out no such hope for rescue.

Just as Dean was about to follow Crowley in, Charlie burst out and pushed Dean against the wall, her eyes bright with anger.

“You can’t summon her now,” Charlie said the instant the door clicked shut. “It’s too dangerous, and if she kills you, guess who’s gonna have to tell Cas when he waked up. You’re not walking out on him, or me, got it?”

Dean was taken aback. “You — what? I wasn’t —” Suddenly he remembered the bag lying under the stairs, filled with everything he needed for a summoning ritual and the fight that would inevitably follow. He’d completely forgotten that he’d been knocking back that whiskey for a reason when Cas fainted. The worsening infection had just sort of eclipsed everything else on his mind.

“I’m not doing it,” he said finally. “Not now, anyway. I can’t do it when Cas is... not when he’s like this. One thing at a time, right?” He managed a weak grin, even though his stomach was still churning with anxiety.

Charlie smiled wryly. “Glad you’ve woken up and smelled the coffee. I don’t want to be here when you sacrifice yourself for your brother again.” She hugged him with one arm and went back to check on Cas.

Harper came back with medicine less than an hour later. The way she smirked when Dean asked how much it cost made him almost certain she stole it. “Charlie,” he teased, “your girlfriend’s a criminal.”

“Tell me something new,” Charlie countered.

Dean smeared the antibiotic cream on the wound gingerly. Cas let out a weak whimper of pain and squirmed as the ointment touched the most damaged part of the wound, but he didn’t wake.

“He woke up for a minute while you were out, but he’s sleeping now,” Charlie said as Dean put the lid back on the little jar.

“When he wakes up again we can administer the oral medication,” Harper informed them.

“But he’s gonna be okay,” Dean said. The feeling of a python wrapped around his chest loosened, and he could breathe again.

He sat down on the edge of the bed again and just waited. Charlie used a bandage to keep the wet towel pressed on the cut so they didn’t have to hold it there all night. For several hours, Dean stayed there, his fingers tightly laced in Cas’s. There were a few times when he almost spoke to someone, but he stopped any words before they could reach his throat.

Around eleven that night, Charlie, Harper, and Crowley went off to bed, but Dean stayed up alone with Cas. For a long time, he leaned up against the wall, still sitting on Cas’s bed with their fingers loosely intertwined. He quickly lost all conception of time.

Cas smiled in his sleep, and Dean felt a surge of warmth and reassurance. They’d be okay. Without thinking, he reached out and combed his fingers through Castiel’s messy hair. The touch reminded him of when Cas did the same to him, and so much more importantly, everything that came after. The smile on Cas’s face grew a little as he mussed his dark brown hair, then Cas shifted, leaning into
the touch. Dean closed his eyes. He hadn’t realized how much he missed being close to Cas until now.

He glanced at the clock on the wall. Three-forty-five, and counting. Dean moved to the armchair, moving it until he was close enough to keep a steady hold on Cas’s hand.

The next thing he knew, Crowley was shaking him awake. “What?” he asked, blinking. “I’m up, I’m up.”

“So am I.” Dean’s brain snapped to attention. Cas was still in bed, lying under his blankets, but he was propped up by a pillow and watching Dean with drowsy eyes.

Dean let out a shuddering sigh of relief. “you’re awake.”

“I said that.”

That drew a relieved laugh from Dean. “Feeling any better?” Castiel’s hair was still a little messy from sleep. Behind him, Crowley slipped out the door without a word, but neither of them noticed.

“Marginally,” Cas said. “Did you. . .”

“Did I what?”

Cas looked away, embarrassed, and shook his head. “Nothing.”

“No, come on. Did I what?” Dean reached out and held Cas’s wrist.

He looked back at Dean, his face red. “Did you stay here all night?” he asked in a rush.

“Yeah, I. . . yes.”

Cas closed his eyes, unwilling to believe it. “you stayed with me.”

“Didn’t even think of leaving.” He was still holding Cas’s hand. Dean smiled weakly.

They stayed where they were, not talking, for a blissful ten minutes before Charlie interrupted. She gave Cas his antibiotic meds, then pushed Dean out of the room and closed the door, leaving her and Castiel alone.

“So, you okay then?” she asked. “Dean was telling me yesterday, before you fainted, and everything. He said you were having trouble with the whole Heaven thing.”

Cas frowned. “Dean told you about me?” he asked quietly.

“He knows this is hard on you, he just doesn’t know how to help. And he’s such an idiot he won’t try to talk about it with you, so here I am. I guess it can’t be easy, what with his adorably pathetic crush on you.” She sat down on the end of his bed.

“You don’t need to lie to make me happy,” Cas told her softly. “We aren’t really anything now. I don’t know how he feels anymore.”

“Trust me,” Charlie said. “He has the hots for you big-time.” Cas shook his head and protested, but she covered his mouth until he shut up. “He spent all night with you, holding your hand and being pretty much the most smitten person I’ve ever seen, including me, and you think he doesn’t love you?”
Cas closed his eyes. “He — stop, please. I know he can’t fix Heaven for me. He can’t fix me. I can’t trust my family anymore, now that we’ve — now that I’m human. And I’m not sure I want to be an angel anymore. I have everything to redeem myself for, and Dean can’t — no.”

“Yes,” she insisted. “Listen to me. Dean does not give up. On anyone. He’ll help however he can, believe me. But you have to, you know, let him help.”

Dean swallowed hard, knocking his head against the door fly. He could hear every word they said.

“Charlie, I — I have hurt him so many times. I have made so many mistakes. I should be dead. I deserve it, after everything. I can’t put my responsibility on him.” He couldn’t do that. Castiel had almost killed him not even a year ago — yes, he’d been controlled by Naomi, but it wasn’t her who beat Dean to within an inch of his life. It was his fault the Leviathans were leashed on Earth, his fault that the angels were here on Earth now. His fault that Heaven was in chaos and Sam was in more danger up in Paradise than when he was alive.

Dean had asked him to stop blaming himself. That, he supposed, was meant to make things easier.

“Funny you should say that,” Charlie commented. “He said the same thing about you.” She gazed at him with eyes full of compassion. “Trust me. He forgave Sam for some seriously sketchy stuff. I think he loves you more than you think.”

Cas shook his head. “He only wants me here to help him. I am not interested in lying to myself about this.”

The door swung open, and then Dean was standing there, tense with anger. “You’re serious?” he demanded. “You can’t do this by yourself. No one can, and I won’t ask you to. I want you here because you’re important to me, not because you’re useful. I thought you knew that.” Cas saw the pain in his eyes but refused to believe him.

“Dean, you said yourself that I’m what’s keeping you sane. How can you say you care about me when I’m just the way you cope? I can’t resent you for that, but if you didn’t need me for that, you wouldn’t promise me anything.”

Dean was hit with a realization like fresh air. “You think — Cas, I meant you’re like my rock, you know? You keep me from falling apart because you give me a reason not to. You’re not just a distraction or a coping mechanism, Cas!”

Charlie leaned out of the way as Cas sat up and threw aside his blankets. As he stood, shaking only slightly, he raised his voice in a commanding tone. “Do not lie to me.”

“I’m not lying,” Dean said. He crossed the room and grabbed Cas’s hands, holding them tightly. “You think I’d stay with you all night if you didn’t mean anything to me? You think I’d put saving Sam and killing Azrael on the back burner for you if I only kept you around ‘cause you’re useful?”

“I —”

Dean grabbed him by his good shoulder and his waist and kissed him until he went dizzy from lack of air. Cas barely managed a quick inhale before their lips met.

“Oh,” was all he could voice when they broke apart.

“Cas, I ain’t lying,” Dean repeated, before kissing him again.

The only thing that made them stop was Cas’s legs going weak and Dean rushing him to his bed,
supporting him but letting him walk himself. When Dean turned, he realized Charlie was still there, wearing a satisfied grin. “Don’t stop on my account,” she said appreciatively.

Charlie and Harper stayed at the bunker for a few more days. Castiel was up and walking around by their last day. The time passed quickly, even though Cas was confined to his room for most of it. It wasn’t like he was alone often anymore. And with all the stolen kisses he and Dean shared now, he had no reason to complain.

After Charlie and Harper left, promising to keep in touch, Crowley turned on the TV and discovered the Star Trek reruns, muttering something about finally getting to watch what he wanted. Dean was wondering what Cas would do if he kissed him right now, if Castiel would push back rough and enthusiastic or melt into the sensation and turn it smooth and sensuous - he was so unpredictable, it was always different with him.

Cas spoke, pulling him out of his reverie. “Are you okay?”

Dean blinked. “Yeah,” he said, way too quickly.

Cas set his coffee aside. “Dean?”

“He’s fine,” Dean said. He leaned over and kissed Cas’s cheek cheerfully, ignoring Crowley’s irritable, snide comment about keeping it in his pants. “I’m great.” Somehow, it no longer felt like a lie.

He’d come to a decision, these last few days. Any attempt at killing Azrael in some epic showdown on his own would get him killed, wouldn’t help Sam, and would leave Cas to survive with Crowley. It wasn’t worth it, no matter how much danger Sam was in, it was just a reckless suicide mission.

Cas was smiling at him, and damn it, this felt good. He wouldn’t die for Sam if it wouldn’t fix anything, and he knew Sam was sick of him doing stupid things like that anyway.

This was now, this was real, and he couldn’t lose what he had on a fool mission to save his brother.

He plunked himself down on the couch next to Crowley and stole the remote, tuning the TV to a telenovela he’d gotten hooked on a few years ago. It brought back some memories he’d rather forget, of black goo and a reservoir and a sodden trenchcoat, but Cas was by his side now and it didn’t hurt so much. As he settled in, Crowley sniped rude comments at him across a glass of water. When that didn’t work, Crowley mutinously attempted to steal the other half of the sofa, but Cas nudged him out of the way, playing the “my shoulder aches” card effortlessly.

The two of them wound up wrapped in a flannel blanket and curled up into each other. Dean had gone red and embarrassed that Crowley could see everything, and Cas was still unsure, but by nine at night they’d given up on boundaries. Dean was pressing quiet kisses to the back of Cas’s neck by eleven.

Near midnight, Crowley was snoring in a chair. Dean was pretty sure his friend had chosen not to put up a fuss so the two of them could humiliate themselves being affectionate, but he didn’t even care. They were comfy and Dean didn’t remember the last time he’d been so content.

Dean helped Cas to the bedroom, despite the fervent protests that he was fine, he didn’t need to lean on Dean for support. Dean sat down firmly in the chair by Cas’s bed.

“What are you doing?” Cas asked tiredly.

“I’m staying here. Keeping an eye on you,” Dean said.
“Dean, I’m fine —”

“You don’t know that for sure. If something happens, I’m right here. It’s just tonight,” he said. After a moment of hesitation, he added, “I’m worried about you.”

Cas watched him for a second, searching his face, then nodded. “Just for tonight,” he said, and turned on his side so Dean could see his face.

Dean fell asleep in that chair that night, keeping watch over Castiel like a guardian angel.
December quickly disappeared in a flurry of activity within the cabin. They’d spent Christmas surrounded by booze as Dean tried to bake Christmas cookies. Of course, Cas insisted they go back on the road the moment his shoulder was healed. January might be colder than December, but that wasn’t going to stop the monsters. They went from place to place — they ganked a nest of vampires on Dean’s birthday a few days ago, and the week before they’d taken care of a nasty poltergeist problem in a deteriorating mall.

They’d been staying at the Crimson Motel since they wrapped up the vampires, but they were ready to move on. Dean nabbed the last doughnut before Crowley could get his hands on it; Cas had a blueberry muffin in one hand and the morning newspaper in the other. Butter smeared his lips and crumbs dotted his lap.

“There are bagels in the lobby,” Dean said to Crowley when he complained. “But take a shower first.”

Crowley rolled his eyes. “You love me anyway.”

“Yeah, sure I do,” Dean snorted.

“Could I drive again today?” Cas asked absently, turning the paper to the obituary section. Dean sat down across from him. Over the last few days he’d been teaching Cas how to drive. They’d made up a fake license, just in case, and honestly, Cas was okay at driving. Dean had to work hard at controlling his impulse to push Cas out of the driver’s seat when they parallel parked, but they were doing alright and his Baby hadn’t been in an accident yet.

That was actually kind of promising, even though Cas had almost crashed them into a telephone pole when he was distracted by a patchy-furred cat wandering down a dusty road. Dean refused to let him stop to catch it and reminded him that they were surrounded by farmland and that barn cats could do whatever they wanted.

“You think you’re ready for the highway?” Dean asked.

Cas shrugged and finished off his muffin. “We won’t find out unless I try.”

“Come on, Crowley!” Dean yelled through the bathroom door. “You can’t stay in there forever!” He leaned over and pecked Cas on the cheek before grabbing his duffel and heading outside.

When the door slammed shut behind Dean, Cas turned back to his newspaper. They had heard nothing from Hadraniel and Zipporah since Dean banished them, so there was no point in waiting around for another call. Cas frowned as something caught his eye. Three mutilated bodies in nine months found in a Catholic church in Belmont, Ohio.

The door creaked as it swung open again. “Dean, take a look at this,” Castiel said. “Three corpses, all found in the same church, all between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five.”
Dean glanced through the article. “Looks like our kind of gig. I’m up for checking it out.” He hammered on the bathroom door and shouted, “Crowley, get your fucking ass out of there or we’re leaving you here!”

Several seconds passed and Dean tapped his foot impatiently. Then he heard the water turn off and the sound of wet footsteps came through the door. “Happy?” Crowley snapped. At least he’d dressed in the bathroom.

“Yeah, I’m fucking thrilled.” Dean headed in for his own shower. He was half expecting what happened when he turned the water on — it was like ice pelting his skin instead of warm rain. He turned the temperature all the way up, but every last drop of hot water had been used up.

Dean was gonna kill Crowley.

Cas was still standing in the middle of the room when Dean dressed and got ready to go. His expression was bleak, shockingly so considering how excited he usually was for practicing his driving.

“Cas?” Dean asked gently. Crowley was nowhere to be seen; he was probably grabbing breakfast or waiting in the car already. “You doing okay?”

Castiel twitched visibly, stiffening at his words. “Yes, I’m — there’s nothing wrong,” he said. “I’ll get over it. It’s not of import.”

“It sure as hell looks ‘of import’ to me.” Dean took his hand and sat him down at the end of their bed. “C’mon, Cas, talk to me.”

“I just — I haven’t been in a church since just after I fell,” Cas muttered. “And it shouldn’t bother me, but it does.” He never had told Dean that he’d prayed to him in that church all those months ago. Even now that felt like it had to be a secret. He liked to believe that Dean had heard him praying, and he didn’t want to lose that fantasy.

“Because. . .?”

Cas sighed. “I don’t know if you remember. This was months ago, just after you, after you brought me back to the bunker and I had a bad night, I lost my head and tore a —”

“Tore that crucifix out of the wall. Yeah, Cas, I remember.”

He nodded. “I just — it occurred to me that I might not —” he pressed his lips together for a moment before going on “— might not be able to handle it.”

“Being in a church,” Dean clarified.

“Yes.” It sounded so much more pathetic when Cas said it aloud. He reminded himself that warriors of God never had the luxury of excuses not to fight. He shouldn’t be so weak.

Dean had to think about that. He remembered how out of it Cas had seemed then, practically sobbing. It had been pretty much the first time he’d seen him so vulnerable.

Fuck, he’d had to comfort Cas for the first time in his life, and it had been so damn surreal; that unbreakable, unshakeable angel crying on the floor and mumbling about rejecting God.

Honestly, Dean wasn’t sure Cas would be able to deal with being confronted by all his mistakes, real or imagined, all his failures and the hatred of his family a second time. Church had to be like some
kind of hell for Cas if just being there could reduce him to tears.

But he understood. Cas pretty much told God to stick it where the sun don’t shine and that he was done seeking his approval. If Dean had ever had the guts to say the same to his old man before he died, he was pretty sure he’d be a wreck whenever he thought of the man. And God was... God. Like, supposed to be unbelievably powerful and wrathful, and Cas renounced him. How did you even begin to recover from that?

Dean finally found something to say. “So I’ll do the interviews alone. I’m not gonna make you go with me if you think it’ll do that to you again. I’ll handle it myself.”

Cas inhaled sharply and shook his head. “No, no, no. I’ll do it, I’m not giving up that easily. I just want you to be aware of what I’m walking into.” He smiled and slid his hand into Dean’s back pocket, squeezing his ass cheerfully.

That was a trick he’d learned from Dean. They’d had a lot of fun since Cas started healing.

The keys to the Impala jangled when Cas withdrew his hand. “I’ll be okay,” he promised softly, looking into Dean’s eyes and trying to reassure him.

Dean kissed him and hopped up off the bed. “Come on, key-stealer, we’d better get a move on before we lose our window to be FBI.” There was usually about a week between a death and when police stopped believing they were FBI; apparently if it was ‘urgent’ the real feds showed up within that time frame. Dean was pretty savvy about when the real deal would show up and blow their cover, but he couldn’t account for the suspension of disbelief. Some people just saw straight through the fucking badge and called him out on it right off.

Cas drove them for a good two hours, only showing tiny signs of nervousness before they pulled over at a fill-up joint to top off the tank.

Dean walked Cas through the steps again, reminding him of the right fuel type and to always pay in cash for a few days after a hunt, just in case they were being followed. Usually, the credit card scams were fine, but there was no point in risking your ass to save a couple minutes at the most.

When Cas finished up and hooked the nozzle back into the gas pump, Dean grinned. “You’re getting the hang of it. Told you so.” He clapped Cas on the back proudly.

Instantly Cas jerked, pressing a hand to his shoulder tightly.

Dean reached out to steady him. “Shit, Cas! I’m sorry, I forgot —”

“It’s fine,” Cas groaned. “Wounds are usually sensitive for a while, not your fault.” Cas took the driver’s seat again. He winced as he went to grip the steering wheel, pressing on his shoulder again in an attempt to stem the pain.

“Okay,” Dean said. “I’m driving now, you aren’t putting any more stress on that shoulder than you’ve got to.”

Cas tried to protest, but Dean insisted. “I don’t need my partner getting laid up any worse than you already were,” he told him matter-of-factly. Cas rolled his eyes.

“Seriously, Cas.” Dean smiled mischievously. “Can I kiss it better?” he asked, grinning.

Cas scoffed, but he didn’t stop Dean when he gently pressed his lips to Cas’s shoulder, right over where the blade had pierced him. He was healing slowly, yes, and Dean forgot sometimes that Cas
couldn’t just fix himself up anymore. But he sort of liked feeling that Cas was somehow more real now, more human —

Dean lost his train of thought as Cas tilted his chin up with two fingers and kissed him, a short, sweet kiss that he broke off the second Dean realized what was happening and started getting into it.

Cas’s smile turned into a smirk. He knew exactly what he was doing to Dean and he was enjoying it, the son of a bitch. How Dean could say that and still cheerfully admit that the wicked smile was eight kinds of hot was beyond him.

“Fuck you, Cas,” Dean muttered mutinously as Cas went over to the passenger-side door.

“That’s the plan,” Cas shot back. He ducked into the car before his words could sink in.

“Bastard,” Dean mumbled with a stupid smile on his face before he climbed into the Impala and shifted into drive.

For the next several hours, Dean side-eyes Cas and drummed his fingers on the wheel irritably. He knew that Cas was purposely distracting them both, but he didn’t care.

What he cared about was the fact that Cas’s shirt had inched its way up his midriff, exposing his slightly muscular stomach and sharp hipbones. He cared about the jeans Cas was wearing and how the fuck second-hand thrift store jeans with holes in the knees could hug an angel’s sweet ass and strong thighs that sinfully.

Cas was definitely doing this to him on purpose, but Dean adamantly refused to give in to temptation. He could handle that, he was sure.

They arrived in Belmont the next day. Dean was just glad the morning’s snow had already been cleared by the time they cruised into town. He coughed up the cash for their next motel.

Once inside, Crowley dumped his bag on the floor while Dean and Cas changed into their FBI threads for an interview with the priest of the church. Castiel frowned at the blatantly visible stitches where he’d repaired a hole in his coat after the poltergeist ripped into it. Dean rolled his eyes at his sentimentality, but he couldn’t talk. He’d kept the damn thing with him for months and at least twelve different cars when he was on the run from the Levis.

They grabbed their false badges and headed out right after they finished changing. Dean was more than ready to get this damn show on the road. Cas was apparently relishing the freedom he had to make Dean as sexually frustrated as possible.

Cas wrapped his hand in his trenchcoat tightly, his jaw set, when the Tree of Christ Catholic Church came into view from behind a grove of pines. Dean put a hand on his shoulder as he pulled into a parking spot out front.

“Let’s just get this over with,” Cas said, feeling like a child when Dean tried to comfort him. He was a soldier, damn it. He’d seen worse than a church in battle, and that crucifix was nothing but a bad memory now.

They passed a statue of Jesus carrying a cross on his back as they went through the first set of doors. Dean hated knowing that he couldn’t do anything to comfort Cas here, in front of people who were probably conservative and more than likely would be suspicious of two ‘FBI agents’ holding hands.

Dean stopped short in the middle of the second doorway. “Shit,” he breathed. “Shit.” He grabbed Cas’s arm — thank God it wasn’t the one with a hole in it — and dragged him the hell out of there.
“Fuck. Goddamn useless bastards finally decide it’s time to do their job, and of course it’s our fucking case.”

“Dean?” Cas asked.

“Did you see those guys in there?” Dean asked, catching his breath. “FBI. Real FBI. We’d be made in a heartbeat if we walked in there and flashed out badges.”

Cas let out a sigh and let his head fall back against the stone wall of the church with a thump. “Wonderful,” he said dryly. “Do you have a plan B?”

“We could send Crowley in as bait,” Dean said.

He snorted when Cas poked him in the stomach. “Don’t be rude,” he reprimanded. “Crowley is —”

“A lazy jackass?”

“— our friend,” Castiel finished, glaring at him. “No matter what you might think of him.”

Dean laughed. “Be real, Cas.”

“I am being real,” Cas said. Dean could hear the intended air quotes around the phrase. “He fought and protected me when I was wounded in the desert. Not even Zipporah or Hadraniel did that. He could have taken the cowardly choice and stayed in the car or run away.”

Dean rolled his eyes, but he gave up on arguing. “Come on, Cas, we’ve gotta get going or the real feds are gonna catch us. Don’t think I forgot you’re on the radar for killing Hael.”

“That was months ago,” Cas muttered.

“Yeah, well, they keep better track than us,” Dean pointed out.

They headed back to the motel. “So now what?” Cas asked.

“Check it out tonight. We’ll go in with an EMF detector and look for evidence,” Dean said firmly.

At eleven-thirty, Dean waited by the door as Cas finished concealing a pure iron knife in his flannel sleeve and slid a gun loaded with silver bullets in his thigh holster. Dean already had two knives on his person along with his sawed-off shotgun. “Cas, get your ass moving, we don’t have all night.”

“Why’s that?” Cas asked absently. He brushed his shirt out flat and followed him out the door.

“Cause I’m willing to bet Crowley’ll ditch the motel for a bar by the time we get back, and then we can finally take some time for ourselves,” Dean said. God, he was loving having Cas acting like himself again, without their shitty communication skills fucking everything up. They were still waiting on sex for now, but they’d had just enough heated bathroom makeouts to know that it wasn’t for lack of desire. Dean found that both reassuring and fucking awesome.

Cas raised an eyebrow. “As long as you think with your, ahem, ‘upstairs brain’ while we work,” he said, but his smile betrayed him.

They walked the few blocks to the church, not wanting the sound of the Impala’s engine to raise any suspicions.

As they passed the cemetery next to the church, Cas felt the EMF detector in his pocket vibrate as it sent out a whirring noise. He glanced at Dean and pulled the gadget out, but the whirring had already
stopped. “Power lines?” he suggested, gesturing up at the wires overhead.

Dean shrugged. “Could be.” He pushed the church doors open and let Cas through first.

The whole building was eerily quiet, the dull beige tiles glimmering in the dim light from the candles in the corner of the hall. Their footsteps echoed off the walls and into the high ceiling. By the front of the church rested a baptismal font.

Cas didn’t say anything; Dean didn’t know if that was good or bad. “Okay, you check for EMF. I’ll see if I can find anything witchy in here.” He started to head off to one side, then turned back to see that Cas hadn’t even moved.

Clutching the EMF detector tightly in one hand, Cas stared up at the crucifix that rested front and center behind the altar. His breathing was erratic and Dean almost went back to pull him back to reality, but then he seemed to come back to himself. Cas shivered and jerked his face away from the cross, focusing on the machine in his hand.

Dean watched him walk through a small door in the wall and turned back to his own job. He wasn’t sure what he was looking for, anyway. The ritualistic mutilation and the dump site suggested a vengeful spirit. Anything living would know better than to leave its victims in the same place every time. But Cas had the EMF detector, not him, so he had to look around and see if he could find any evidence.

“Hello?” The voice startled him and he spun around, raising his sawed-off. The man behind him jumped and put his hands up.

“W-we don’t keep valuables here,” he stammered. “But I c-can b-bring you to them.”

Dean could just make out in the candlelight that the man wore the white collar and black clothing of a priest.

He just stopped himself from swearing. He didn’t want to get into any more hot water.

“S-sorry,” he mumbled, backing away. “I’ll just —”

He ran out of there and onto the lawn of the church. The only good thing was that he’d had his back to the candles; the priest never saw his face.

Or at least he hoped not. It wasn’t like he could explain himself and say, “No, no, it’s okay; I’m kind of a man of God myself, you know, fighting Hell and beating Satan and fucking an angel.”

He had to stifle a laugh at the thought of saying that to the young priest. Then his stomach dropped. Cas was still in there. the priest could be calling the police right now and Cas was still inside and they were gonna get caught —

“Dean,” Cas hissed. Dean sighed with relief. Cas had rounded the corner of a wall and almost crashed right into him.

“Cas, we’ve gotta go, the priest saw me.” They took off running and didn’t stop until they were in sight of the motel.

“Well,” Castiel said, once the door to their room closed behind them. “It’s a spirit.”

“EMF?” Dean asked.
Cas nodded. “More than what power lines alone could make. Most of the energy seems concentrated around the cemetery.”

“Makes sense,” Dean said. Ghosts haunting the place where they were buried was pretty common. “Any idea who’s doing the killing?”

Cas looked away. “No,” he admitted quietly.

Dean frowned — why did Cas look ashamed, of all things? “Cas?”

“I’m sorry, Dean, it’s just. . . I found myself in a room that held the church’s more historic possessions. A whole room devoted to Christian images. My father’s images.” He shook his head. “I almost — I was so angry, Dean, and I don’t understand why. I haven’t seen my father, ever, and yet I still. . . I. . .”

Dean turned the lights on and sat down on the bed. After a moment, Cas joined him. “I’m not surprised, Cas. For a long time, thinking about my dad, what he did, made me wanna puke. So I get it. You’re pissed at him, but you still kinda wish he was around.”

Cas smiled sadly, but didn’t speak. Dean took his hand.

“And you know we can call someone else, put them on the case if you don’t think you can —”

“I can do this, Dean, I’m not weak,” Cas snapped.

Dean let out a sigh of exasperation. “Not what I’m saying. I’m saying, take care of yourself first. If you can’t do this, then you shouldn’t force yourself to. That’s all I mean.” He rubbed circles into the back of Cas’s hand reassuringly.

Cas considered it. His body was sweating and cold at the same time, and his stomach felt like soup inside him.

But he knew he would do it. If he let himself bow out now, he would never forgive himself for giving up. This wasn’t as bad as his human physiological, fight or flight response was making it out to be. That thought decided it.

“Dean, I have to do this.”

“Cas,” Dean began.

He interrupted Dean. “I need to. You don’t understand, but it’s means everything to me. If a memory can control me, then what kind of human am I?” Castiel asked, only half joking. He was stronger than some irrational, pointless fear, he would have to be.

Dean laughed. “Yeah, I guess so.” He started to climb into bed when Cas coughed pointedly.

“Wha’?” he mumbled, his face already pressed into the pillow.

“I believe you promised me a ‘night to ourselves’ before we left.”

That drew a snort from him. “C’mere, Cas,” he muttered. “Come on, angel, I don’t got all night.”

Heat rose in Castiel’s cheeks at the word. “Not an angel,” he reminded Dean softly as he joined him beneath the blankets.

“My angel,” Dean said, kissing his neck. Cas let out a tiny, breathless moan without thinking.
A few quiet moments later, Cas asked, “So what are you? My hunter?”

Dean shut him up with another kiss.

The next morning came far too quickly. Crowley had stumbled in around four in the morning, barely making it to the bathroom in time to throw up in the sink.

Dean and Cas dressed before Crowley woke up from his post-drinking stupor, Dean eyeing Cas’s body with exaggerated lasciviousness and Cas making a face but returning the sentiment the moment Dean’s back was turned.

“Did you know you have freckles all across your back?” Cas asked him as he tugged on a loose cotton t-shirt.

Dean shrugged. “I’m out in the sun a lot.”

Castiel smiled, a wickedly teasing glint in his eyes. “In all my *extensive* education as a human, I’ve heard that freckles are sometimes called angel kisses.”

Dean pushed him playfully. “Shut up, you jackass. We don’t have time for that today.” He wriggled into a long-sleeved shirt and slid on a flannel and a jacket to ward off the cold.

The snow from that night lay in a thin layer across everything. Dean was just glad no ice formed on the Impala’s windshield, because that was a pain to clean off.

“Anywhere you got in mind?” Dean asked as they eased out of the parking lot.

“All but the church,” Cas said dully, gazing out the window at the frosted trees and peaked eaves of snowcapped houses. The wind blew the top layer of snow across the ground like desert sand. The streets were as empty as the surface of the moon.

Dean stopped them at a heart-attack diner, the kind that served up bacon with about three thousand grams of fat and fried its hash browns in the grease. He leaned up against the counter, chatting with the waitress as Cas practically chugged his coffee.

“So yeah, heard about the murders over the last couple months. Police have any idea who did it?”

The woman — Elaine, by her nametag — shrugged. “I don’t keep up with it. Their money’s on serial killer, but what kind of idiot keeps murderin’ in the same town for months?”

Dean shook his head. “Yeah, I don’t know. Me and my, uh, *buddy* here, we write a news column on the freaky stuff that happens in rural towns like this. You’d be pretty shocked to know what’s out there in the dark.”

“What kind of stuff?” She refilled his coffee and slid him his plate of bacon and pancakes. Cas stabbed his hash browns impatiently, fully aware of the subtle winks and seductive tone Dean used to draw information out of this girl.

“Mostly urban legends,” Dean said. “You have any of those around here?”

Elaine nodded and leaned forward confidentially. “There’s a story everybody ‘round here knows. This nun, she had an affair with a priest, and they were doing it in the pews one night when the nun stabs the priest to death and chopped him up. Then she turned the knife on herself, slit her throat. That’s why the nunnery’s all closed up nowadays. Kids still say that her grave in the cemetery doesn’t have any snow on it, even in the dead of winter. It’s all melted away from the heat of the nun
burning in Hell.”

She grinned and poured a mug of coffee for another customer. “We used to dare each other to touch her headstone, some nights. I don’t know anybody that ever did. That the kind of story you’re looking for?”

Dean smiled charmingly at her. “I think that’s exactly what we had in mind. Right, Cas?”

Castiel scowled at him. It was obvious that Dean’s flirting was a tactic, but Cas was well within his rights to be annoyed.

Dean rolled his eyes. “Right, sweetheart?” He stood up, ignoring Elaine’s murmur of surprise. “You’ve got a little syrup on your face,” he added to Cas.

In the car, Cas cheered up. “If it’s the nun, it shouldn’t be too hard to find out if she existed,” he said.

“Thought you knew the name of every holy figure, like, ever,” Dean said.

Cas rolled his eyes. “Do you know how many nuns there have been in this century alone?”

“Okay,” Dean said. “But why now? I mean, from the way she told it that legend’s been going around for years. These murders have only been in the last few months.” He pulled into a parking spot next to the small town library. “We can look for records of something like this, but why would she start killing now?”

“A highway is being put in where the cemetery is now. In the spring, every grave will be relocated to make room for it.” Cas pushed the library door open. “There was an article in the paper that brought us here.”

“Huh.”

“It does explain why she’s attacking now. Her grave was probably disturbed by surveyors when the road was being planned.”

In a town this small, there was no trouble finding records of a double deaths of a priest and a nun. Dean raised an eyebrow at the sensational headlines and the gory, black-and-white photos of the church floor, cleared with corpses but still streaked with the shine of not-quite-dry blood.

“Father Charles Angler, age thirty-five, and Sister Sarah Catharine, age twenty-four, were found dead Thursday morning in the Tree of Christ church,” Dean read off from the yellowed paper. "But hold on, the murder weapon was never found. There's no way she did it." He squinted harder. "Hold on -- I think I've got something. Father Elias Reynolds, the junior priest, said that God had passed judgment on their sins."

Cas frowned. "Do you think --"

"What, you think that holy roller would be down with his boss bangin' the hot nun while he keeps his chastity vows?" Dean snorted and got to his feet. "Come on, we're torching this sucker."

Cas agreed that they couldn’t salt and burn the priest until that night, and even then they ran a risk, going back the night after Dean had been seconds from being properly caught. They both knew that if they were stopped there, the recent murders would be pinned on Dean Winchester, infamous serial killer, and his new partner-in-crime, James Novak.

At the motel, Dean slumped on the bed and flipped on the TV, opening a beer as he did so. Crowley
made a half-interested sound. “Soap opera?”

“Telenovela,” Dean answered.

“Mm.” Crowley rolled over and watched the young couple on screen make eyes at each other.

“We’re not going out ‘til tonight,” Dean said, turning the sound down. “Guess you’ll have plenty of time to get smashed.”

Crowley opened his mouth, but he was interrupted by Cas leaving the bathroom. “I’m going out, I’ll be back before five,” he said, slipping on his coat.

“In this weather?” Dean was too tired from last night to even stand anymore, much less go for a walk in the frigging snow.

“I’ll be fine,” Cas said.

Dean groaned. “How do I know you’ll be okay?”

Cas sighed and put his hand on the doorknob. “I’ll be okay.” He was gone.

Dean huffed. “Well, okay.”

A few minutes of awkward silence later, Crowley stood up. “Why the fuck can’t you give me a break?” he demanded.

Dean switched off the TV. “What?”

“Do you have any idea what it’s been like? Do you? You bastard, you think you’re so special, so smart, that you have any idea what the hell I’m dealing with! You treat me like I’ll have red eyes back any second, you sodding wanker!” He was shouting just enough that the people in the adjacent rooms wouldn’t make out what he said.

“I protected your frigging angel in Arizona, I stayed and watched him while he was sick — bet you thought I didn’t give a shit, didn’t you? And the only thing you think I care about is the booze you so helpfully provide me with. I seem to remember hearing you didn’t go too easy on the liquor when you came back from Hell, when you were inches from being a demon yourself.”

Dean stared at him. Where the hell had all this come from?

“I try, do you understand? I stay with you pricks even though I’ve gotten a shitty deal so far, I pretend I don’t envy Castiel for everything he has, everything I wish I could be — he’s got everything, he’s adjusting, he says he’s pounded with guilt but it’s all just fucking talk to me, and you think I’m the trash you picked up off the street.” He shook his head.

To Dean’s shock, there were tears in Crowley’s eyes. “You don’t see past your own nose. I’m here, trying to be your goddamned friend, and all you do is bitch and moan about how I’m sucking down all your beer.”

Dean was completely taken aback by that admission.

“So fuck you, fuck you and your fucking boyfriend,” Crowley rubbed at his eyes forcefully, “and fuck your fucking shit music that I listen to day in and day out and your fucking bacon cheeseburgers and your fucking —” He stopped abruptly. Slowly, he straightened up and set his face in a completely neutral expression.
“I’m coming with you tonight. It’s non-negotiable. Unless you’d like me to continue being deadweight and a waste of good alcohol.” He disappeared into the bathroom, slamming the door behind him.

Dean stared after him, openmouthed. He hadn’t even said anything. What the hell. What the hell.

The wind whipped at Castiel’s coat, pulling it up until it resembled Superman’s cape. Cas had seen the first movie with Dean back before the bunker was destroyed. He was almost reminded of his angelic self in Superman — and now he understood the Kryptonite Dean had made, once upon a time.

Tree of Christ church was open. Castiel entered without knocking, hoping to catch the priest at a moment when he was unoccupied. Even now, he wasn’t sure why he’d come here. The crucifix seemed to be staring down at him accusingly.

He shivered as the door closed behind him with a thump, letting in a last icy breeze. Human things again, he thought wryly. When he’d raged at his father he hadn’t even truly understood what cold was like. Now he couldn’t shake the ache it put into his bones.

“Can I help you, sir?”

Castiel turned sharply. It was the priest, a middle-aged man with graying hair and broad, worn features. “F-father,” he said, his tongue tripping over the word. Well, it was why humans called their priests that. They were the very representatives of God himself. “I . . . I need to speak with you.”

The priest nodded. “May I ask your name, my son?”

“Ca — Clarence. My name is Clarence.” Castiel smiled sadly. The name reminded him of Meg; he’d learned of her death months ago from Dean. She’d been kinder than a demon ought to be.

“I’m Father Henry. Clarence, why don’t you come with me?” The priest led him to the last row of pews in the church and sat with him. “Tell me what’s on your mind.”

Cas let out a wry laugh, feeling ridiculous. “I suppose you could call it a crisis of faith,” he said. “I was always taught, my f— God is watching over me but I cannot see him. I knew what God wanted of me, who I had to be to please him.”

The priest nodded encouragement, and Cas continued, “But in recent years, he has felt . . . so much more distant, so unknowable. I prayed in my time of need, but he never, never answered. I don’t know if I can believe he cares for us, if he ever cared at all. My faith is . . . how can you call it faith? I know he exists, but does he . . .”

“God loves all His children,” Father Henry began. “But he works —”

“In mysterious ways,” Castiel finished for him. “I’ve heard the speech before.” He’d given the speech.

Father Henry laughed. “Sometimes it’s hard to see his hand in our lives.”

“But how do you see it?” Castiel asked. “How do you find your faith?”

“Well, prayer is a sign of faith,” Father Henry said. “So you must have something in you that believes.”

Castiel shook his head. “You don’t understand. I believe in him. I just can’t believe that he is
watching over me.” Not anymore.

Father Henry placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. “Look into yourself and see what he’s done for you. He has more of an influence that you think.”

Castiel stood. “Thank you, Father.”

The priest stood with him. “You should be careful out there. God may be watching, but he will let you fall if that is where your choices lead.”

The words hit Castiel as if he’d been punched in the throat. “Y-yes. I’ll try to remember that.”

He hoped that Father Henry wouldn’t interfere tonight. If he was trapped in the crossfire, the spirit of Elias Reynolds could kill him.

Back at the motel, Cas hung up his coat to see Dean and Crowley conversing quietly at the table, sharing a couple beers. Rather than disturb their conversation, he picked up his journal and slipped into the bathroom.

This was an unexpected development. Dean had always been hostile to Crowley, no matter if he was friend, ally, or mortal enemy. If they were lucky, they might even clear the air between them after this. Cas supposed it was Crowley’s feelings for Dean that made it difficult for them to get along.

How the man had managed to ‘crush’ on a hunter that was nothing if not abrasive in the little quality time they spent together was beyond Castiel. Then again, Dean had stabbed Cas when they first met, and now here he was.

That night, Crowley put on his own fleece-lined jacket and joined them with an iron crowbar. Cas and Dean were already set and armed with rock salt rounds and Cas’s iron knife, along with a bag of rock salt, the shotguns, and two shovels packed up in the bag.

Dean made sure the church doors closed quietly instead of shuddering back and echoing through the halls. “We can’t let the ghost get in here,” he said quietly. “If this is where she kills people, then we’ve gotta seal off the doors through to the cemetery.”

He and Cas poured out a line of salt in front of the door before sneaking out into the graveyard.

The wind howled around them, blowing straight through their clothes. “Shit,” Dean muttered. “Cas, next time we hunt ghosts, can we do it in Hawaii?”

“Sure, Dean. Once Azrael is taken care of we can go anywhere you want.”

“Guess I won’t be invited. The honeymoon’s usually reserved for the happy couple, yes?” Crowley said, smirking.

It wasn’t difficult to find Elias Reynolds’s grave — it was practically a shrine to the guy, full-on angel statue, granite headstone, the works. Dean tossed the duffel on the ground next to the grave marker and grabbed the shovels. He tossed one to Crowley. “Come on, let’s dig up this bible thumper. Cas, you keep an eye out for him, or the priest that’s still breathing.”

They got the coffin uncovered in record time for the winter, working doubly fast to get it over with so they could escape the damn cold. Dean cracked the coffin open and salted the body as Cas took over dumping lighter fluid in the grave.

“Adios, Padre,” Dean said as he winkled his lighter from his pocket. His numb fingers instantly dropped it, and he swore, dropping to his knees and feeling for it in the heaps of snow. "Gimme the
flashlight, Cas, I lost my lighter."

A loud thud broke the quiet, followed by a crack. Crowley shouted.

Dean spun around. Crowley was sprawled in the snow next to a headstone, rubbing his head. “Fuck,” he said, grabbing his shotgun from the bag. “Cas, make a circle, fast.” Immediately Cas grabbed the rock salt, but he didn't have a chance to form a circle as the bag was immediately ripped from his hands by an unseen force.

“So much for a simple salt and burn,” Dean muttered. “Why can’t we ever take the easy cases?” he asked plaintively, staring at the clouded sky as if it was the weather’s fault.

“Did you see what it was?” Crowley asked, rubbing his head where it had hit the headstone.

“No,” Dean snapped. “If I did, you think I’d be hiding behind a goddamn headstone? I’d be digging its ass up.”

Suddenly there was a crackling sound, and Dean smelled ozone. “The whore deserved to burn,” a voice hissed.

Dean let out a stream of curses under his breath.

“She slutst about and seduces true servants of God,” the voice continued. “Her lover, too. He earned God’s wrath, giving into her sinful persuasions so easily. He deserved to have his wicked flesh ripped apart.” The spirit flickered into sight, his face pale and shockingly frightened. “Their desecration of God’s House warranted punishment, I had to do it.”

“Fuck,” Dean breathed. “Cas, remember I said the priest caught me when we were searching the church?”

“Shit,” Cas muttered. “Shit, Dean.”

“Watch your language, angel,” Crowley said.

Dean then had one of his stupidest plans ever. Even as he started talking he knew he had a ninety percent chance of getting killed. “Father Reynolds!” he called out. “You, uh. You should get a medal for, um, doing a service to the church. I-in fact, there’s an angel here to reward you. Cas, go on.”

“Dean,” Cas hissed. Then he saw what Dean wanted. He drew himself up to his full height, wishing he really could produce angel wings to awe this spirit. “That’s exactly right. God himself has sent me to raise you from, um, this earthly plane.”

The priest looked truly shocked. “I-- Truly, I'm honored,” he said.

“Father Reynolds, God chose you for the mission of purging the church of unworthy souls. You have served him well thus far.” Dean was gone from his side, disappeared into the dark and whirling snow. “But — but you must prove yourself to me. Can you see my...” He thought quickly. “My holy aura? My halo, my wings? Only the truest servants of Heaven, the most loyal and obedient and faithful can see their power; any others would be blinded by God’s glory. Do you see them?” he asked. He pulled the feeling he’d once had, that unflinching certainty and righteousness that had shattered under the influence of Dean Winchester, back into his voice.

Crowley began to sneak away from behind him as Father Reynolds strained to see what wasn’t there. Just as Cas saw that the Father was doubting Castiel’s authenticity, he reached and arm toward Crowley and commanded, “Halt.”

“Play along,” Cas breathed. He raised his voice again. “You see this demonspawn? He is Lucifer’s most loyal servant, and I am bringing him to Heaven to be interrogated. I do not have all eternity to waste with you.” If his life wasn’t on the line, this would almost be hysterically funny.

As Cas attempted to distract the Father, Dean stumbled through the snow in search of the salt. The wind whipped at his face, and he had the wild thought that if they died here, they might not be found until their corpses were frozen stiff.

At last he found the bag of salt, slung against a marble cross engraved M.A. Shepherd -- Mission Accomplished.

He grabbed the rock salt and broke into a run; there would be just enough to encircle the entire grave of Father Elias Reynolds, 1845-1908.

“Cas!” he shouted once he was within sight of the angel statue marking the Father's grave. There was a crackling sound and the Father manifested next to him, eyes almost burning with rage.

“What are you doing?” he screeched, voice warped with rage.

“I’m torching your ugly bones,” Dean said. “What’s it look like?”

Cas shouted and ran to Dean, carrying the second shovel. He swung it through the ghost's midsection and he dissipated. Wordlessly Dean thrust the salt into Cas's hands and felt through the snow for his lighter again; note to self, bring spares next time. Cas spilled the salt out in a crooked circle and closed it just as Father Reynolds reappeared. The spirit paced around them in rage, screaming wrath. Then the spirit realized that there was a third target to go after. Crowley was still huddled behind the statue with the lighter fluid and the duffel bag.

Dean shouted for him to run with it, but the spirit let out a hiss and blocked Crowley’s path.

A bang echoed through the quiet and Father Reynolds vanished, blown into smoke, as Crowley held one of the sawed-off shotguns tightly, the duffel slung over his shoulder. He immediately took off.

He stumbled suddenly, the snow around him steaming and melting away to nothing as he shouted in pain. The spirit had hands clenched in Crowley's chest, burning through his coat and shirt.

Without thinking Dean grabbed the iron knife from Cas’s belt and ran out of the salt circle, stabbing Father Reynolds in the neck and reaching out to help Crowley stand. Together they reached the circle, even as blood soaked Crowley’s clothes.

The spirit hissed, reappearing behind his gravestone, but he was too late; Dean finally wrapped ice-cold fingers around his Zippo, got to his feet, and lit it up, letting the fire do its work. Even with the snow, it burned bright and proud.

Father Reynolds screeched, “God will smite you for your wickedness! He will bring all his wrath down upon you! You will burn from the inside out, and worms will writhe on your corpse!”

His coat caught fire and he was gone.

“Cas, run to the road, see if there are any cops on the way,” Dean said. “We’ll stay back and pack up.” Cas took back his iron knife and headed toward the church.

Dean clapped Crowley on the back. He hesitated only a moment before saying, “So, uh, you didn’t
“fuck it up as much as I thought you would.”

Crowley snorted. “Don’t lie, I saw how worried you — ah — looked.” He pressed a hand to his chest and it came away streaked in blood. “A little help would be nice,” he said.

Dean took up the duffel bag after he tucked away most of the weapons and passed the shovels off to Crowley. He started after Cas, trudging through the thick snow.

A shout pushed him into a run. “Cas?” he called.

Castiel grunted, pressed against the wall by a woman in a dark blue uniform. “I’ve run into some trouble.”

The other police officer looked up from where where the church’s priest stood speaking urgently with him and ran at Dean, pulling a gun. Before the officer could do anything, Dean kicked him in the crotch and punched the side of his head as he doubled over in pain. The officer collapsed to the church floor, unconscious.

Dean turned to deal with Cas’s captor, but she was already wheezing, having been punched in the stomach.

They dashed for the front doors, letting them slam shut behind them. Dean whipped around, eyes scanning for where they’d left the Impala. The squealing of tires made him turn to see his car half-skidding toward them, Crowley at the wheel.

Dean felt for his keys in his pocket, but they were gone. “You fucker,” he breathed, but he didn’t hesitate to leap into the passenger seat as Cas slid into the back.

Crowley got them a few miles out of town before Dean demanded he pull over and get into the back.

“Are you insane?” Crowley asked, but he did as Dean asked and turned off the light once they were parked.

Dean and Cas moved to their places and Crowley took the backseat. A moment after Crowley’s door slammed shut, they heard the call of sirens and saw the flash of blue and red lights as a police car sped down the highway.

After they’d passed, Dean gunned the engine and turned them around. They needed to grab their stuff from the motel, and then they’d be gone. There wasn’t much left, except their clothes and other weapons.

It took Dean only a minute to grab their packed bags and get the hell out, tossing them into the backseat with Crowley and getting back behind the wheel.

Soon they were on the highway, heading away from where the police had gone. Dean breathed easier once the town was well behind them.

Cas reached out with both hands to turn on the radio. Dean raised an eyebrow, then realized that Castiel still wore the handcuffs the police had him in.

“Seriously?” he asked.
They jingled as Cas put his hands in his lap. “It’s not as if I had time to take the key,” he said defensively. “We’ll pick the lock once we stop for a rest.”

“No, no, wouldn’t dream of it,” Dean said, crooking a smile. He was starting to feel slightly drowsy — he needed a coffee or something, but they deeded to get some distance between them and the town first. “In fact, what say we keep those cuffs on just a little longer?” he added.

Cas raised his eyebrows. He had to admit that the idea was in no way unappealing.

“You’re disgusting,” Crowley piped up from behind him.

“What else would I be?” Dean asked. “So I was thinking, Cas, we can get Crowley a separate room this time, and then we can. . .” He trailed off, forced to stifle his laughter as Crowley made pointed gagging sounds.

The snow continued to fall lightly down on the windshield as Dean drove them through the black night.

Chapter End Notes

That story about the nun and the priest is taken from a real small-town myth from when my mother was a kid. Also I'm so pleased these assholes got their shit together and worked out feeling like they don't deserve each other (because you know that's like 80% of why they're not together in the show)
Cas and Dean traded off control of the car so they each could squeeze in a little sleep. Dean had managed to doctor Crowley up somewhat, and although he was now passed out Dean was confident he’d be okay. They stopped for gas twice, each time waking Crowley and letting him stumble to the public bathrooms. The place across the street sold pretty decent-smelling burgers, so Cas bought three and brought them back while Dean refilled the tank and Crowley found his way back to the car.

Crowley accepted his burger with a look of vague confusion, devoured it, and went straight back to sleep.

“You know he’s not going to just ‘bounce back’ from this,” Cas reminded Dean at one point, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder as they switched lanes. Dean jumped; he’d thought Cas was as asleep as Crowley by then. “Physical pain isn’t as easy to deal with when you cannot heal instantly. And he lost a lot of blood.”

“Give him time, he’ll get better.”

“Like he did with being human? With ‘repenting his sins and asking forgiveness?’” The cool tone of Castiel’s voice made Dean glance at him, confused.

“What’re you talking about?”

“Repenting his sins? Of course, he wouldn’t tell you —”

Dean waved his words away. “Cas, yesterday he told me that we’ve — that I’ve — kind of been pretty shitty to him.” He cleared his throat, rubbing the back of his neck to hide his discomfort. “That’s why he came with us on the hunt. He was trying to prove a point, that he could help, I guess.”

“I thought you were just hoping he’d get killed,” Cas said, his voice so even that Dean had to glance at his face to make sure he was joking.

“He kind of opened my eyes to how I’ve been treating him. Cas, why the hell didn’t you tell me I’m a fucking douchebag?” Dean pulled onto the highway exit ramp.

“Dean, it’s not realistic. Crowley is at least twice the douchebag you are just on principle. I’ve always felt your behavior was more or less justified.”

Dean nodded absently.

“Dean, where are we going?” Cas asked at last, watching the telephone poles whip past in the early morning sunlight.

“Bethany, Pennsylvania. I figured we should check in with Kevin and his mom, make sure they’re doing okay.” He downshifted to accommodate the slower speeds in the residential area they were entering.
“What brought this on?” Cas asked.

“What brought this on?” Cas asked. “Nothing,” Dean said. “I just... think I should stop forgetting about my friends just ’cause I want to believe they don’t need my help.” Charlie was one — he hadn’t called in months, and when he needed her help he met the girlfriend he’d never even heard about. And Crowley. Not that he was completely sure he could call him a friend.

They arrived in Bethany around seven a.m. Crowley was fortunately still breathing, and the bandages wrapped around his chest were at least stopping the flow of blood.

Dean pulled up to the Tran house, eyes taking in the red-tiled roof and the worn and paint-stripped siding.

The three of them — Crowley was practically asleep on his feet — stood on the porch awkwardly until Dean finally worked up the nerve to ring the doorbell.

“Just— just a minute!” Mrs. Tran’s voice echoed through the open kitchen window. The security camera in a corner of the porch stayed fixed on Dean’s face, the black eye staring at him as if in accusation. A few moments later the lock clicked and the door swung inward. “Dean? Is everything alright?” Her expression went from wary to worried in an instant. Then she caught sight of Crowley. “Did you really have to bring him here?” she asked.

Dean sighed. “Sorry, Mrs. Tran. But trust me, he’s not killing anybody. He’s in recovery mode.”

“Why are you here?” she asked, leading them into the living room, speaking in a hushed voice.

“Don’t worry, there’s nothing happening here. I just wanted to check in with you and Kevin. You know, make sure you’re adjusting.” He glanced around at the flowered curtains and ancient wallpaper.

Mrs. Tran sighed in relief. “Good. We’re doing good.”

“Linda, dear, why don’t you bring your friends in here? The more the merrier,” a voice said from the kitchen. It had a lilting, airy quality, and for some reason it sounded familiar to Dean, though he couldn’t place it.

Crowley let out a gasp of pain as he tried to stand, and instead he sank into the soft sofa cushions.

“I’ll pass,” he said. “Sorry.”

Dean glanced at Cas with raised eyebrows, then followed Mrs. Tran into the kitchen. A black woman in a pink-orange cardigan sat at the small kitchen table, smiling as they walked in. “So, Linda,” she said. “Your Kevin, is he doing alright with his coursework?”

“He’s doing amazing. You know, I thought he’d be disappointed, Lazarus College isn’t exactly what anyone would call Ivy League, but he’s acing most of his coursework,” she said proudly.

Dean opened his mouth to ask for an introduction.

“Dean Winchester, if you interrupt us I swear I’m’a smack you with a spoon.” The woman turned her gaze on him, eyes twinkling with humor.

His jaw dropped. It had been years, the odds of it after all this time... “Missouri?”

“You know, you boys told me you’d stay in touch.”
“S-sorry, some things came up. God, I haven’t seen you since Dad was missing.” He pulled up a chair. “Why’d you leave Lawrence?”

Missouri smiled. “Oh, some silly boys from around there got themselves into some trouble. Maybe you know ‘em,” she added, amused. “Never would’ve guessed you’d be the ones to stop the end of days, and in our town too.”

Dean laughed. Cas hovered behind him awkwardly.

“Castiel,” Missouri said. “That is your name, honey?”

Cas slowly settled into the chair next to Dean. “You’re a psychic?”

“Of course,” she said. “I’m the one that told John Winchester the truth about what’s out there.”

They chatted with her and Mrs. Tran for a while as Crowley slept in the living room. Mrs. Tran said that Dean and Cas could use the guest bedroom “if you don’t mind sharing a bed.”

Dean and Cas looked at each other. Dean struggled to hold back a laugh and failed. They explained that they shared a bed regularly, that they were together, and that Kevin knew and apparently never bothered to mention it. Missouri smiled into her coffee, obviously aware of what they were thinking.

Missouri stayed long after the morning coffee was gone, catching up with Dean while Cas worked on the Friday crossword with Mrs. Tran. Around noon, the front door swung open to the jingling of keys. “Mom? Mom, is Dean here?”

“I can… come back later,” a voice said, carrying a heavy accent. “If you have the — if you have company,” she said.

Kevin appeared in the kitchen. “Mom, you didn’t call to tell me Dean was here.” Behind him stood a girl with curly dark brown hair and olive-toned skin.

“Kevin, who is this?” Mrs. Tran said. Her raised eyebrows clearly asked the question, is she your girlfriend? Dean smothered the urge to snort.

“I am called Katina Spiros,” the girl said. Her eyes were full of blue and framed by long, dark lashes.

“She’s from Epirus, in Greece, Mom. She’s in my computer programming class, we’re working on a project together.” Kevin gestured for Katina to come in.

“Hi, Mrs. Linda,” she said cheerfully. “It’s nice to meet you.”

Castiel said something that Dean didn’t understand, in a language he didn’t recognize. The only word he knew was Cas’s name. Clearly Katina understood, though, because her face lit up. She answered excitedly.

“Cas? Can you put that in English for the rest of us?” Dean asked.

“I introduced myself, Dean, calm down.” He added something to Katina, sounding apologetic.

She laughed and answered in English, “I do not mind.” She turned to Mrs. Tran to tell her about their project.

Dean turned to Cas. “Since when do you know — Greek?” He glanced at Kevin for confirmation. “Since when do you know Greek?”
“Since the language first began,” Castiel said. “You forget that I was angel.”

Katina turned around and saw, “Kevin, we should be working on our project.” She followed him out of the room and upstairs, but in the living room, she sneezed several times and knocked over a lamp.

They disappeared up the stairs after Katina apologized profusely for knocking over the lamp, even after Mrs. Tran assured her it was fine.

“Something strange about that poor girl’s aura,” Missouri said, “but I just can’t place it.” She stood up. “Well, I’ve got to get going, Linda, I have a reading at twelve-thirty.”

When the door closed, Dean asked, “So what have you and Kevin been up to?”

“I have a job as a manager of a local clothing store,” Mrs. Tran said. “Kevin’s been busy with schoolwork and his job as a bartender.” She rolled her eyes. “When he’s not working there, he’s hustling guys at pool. I can’t imagine who would teach him that.”

Dean laughed nervously. “Yeah, who would do something like that?”

She smiled. “I don’t mind. We make good money and we go to the archery range in town once a week. Kevin’s majoring in linguistics with a focus on ancient and dead languages.”

That drew a sincere laugh out of Dean. “That’s my boy.”

“We’ve got one foot in, one foot out of this hunting business, and that’s how I like it,” she said.

Dean nodded. “That’s a good place to be, I think.”

“Of course, I keep an eye out for things that look like hunts in the news, and being able to talk to Missouri’s been really great. She saw Kevin was a prophet right away.”

A few hours passed, with Mrs. Tran asking about their relationship, their hunts, advice on weaponry, and the details of angel-proofing. Crowley woke up and politely asked Mrs. Tran if he could watch TV or something. It was almost hilarious that Crowley, hundreds of years old Crowley, needed to ask permission.

There was a funny noise from upstairs around four. Dean stood up, confused. Kevin was walking Katina down the stairs. She was shaky and pale, her eyes slightly unfocused. “She threw up,” Kevin explained in a whisper. “I’m gonna drive her home, the project’s not due until midterms, we have plenty of time. We can always work on it in class on Monday.”

Dean followed Kevin to the door and called out that they’d talk once he got back. It was then that he noticed something else. The security camera tucked in the corner of the porch roof wasn’t an isolated protection; there were at least four locks on the door, one made of iron and another a silver chain.

“Huh,” he said. He glanced over at the windows and noticed that they were locked tight. Not that it was unusual for the winter. But now he took note of the spyhole in the door, and a few other security features in place around the house.

“Is something going on that I don’t know about?” he asked.

Crowley muted the TV, interested. They’d long since had his bandages changed — fortunately, it didn’t look like he’d need stitches or anything. The shallow cuts were already starting to scab over at the edges, but Dean had him smear on antibiotics just in case.
Linda frowned. “What?”

“You’ve got enough security on this house to be a bank,” Dean said. “Are you scared of something?”

Linda sighed. “Oh, that. It’s not your kind of trouble. Crime rates have gone through the roof the last few months. The locks and alarms are just... an extra safety precaution. I’m not losing my son to something as ordinary as a burglary gone wrong after everything he’s been through.”

“Hmm.” Dean pulled his laptop out and started typing. “What’s your wifi password?”

She rolled her eyes. “Metatron96,” she said. “Consonants lowercase, vowels uppercase.”

“Who came up with that?” Dean asked, smirking as he typed it in and hooked up to the Internet.

“Who do you think?” Linda answered dryly. “At least we’re not going to forget it.”

According to Bethany, PA’s foremost online news site, also known as its only online news site, the rise in crime began abruptly in mid-October, shortly before the college term started. Dean read the article incredulously. Arson in a town that only had the occasional oven fire, seven murders last month alone, twelve successful drug busts and a hell of a lot of break-ins.

“Holy shit, this isn’t normal,” Dean said. Cas leaned over his shoulder.

“Can I look at something?” he asked. Dean passed him the laptop. Quickly he searched the site for disease. Sure enough, a surprising number of people had caught pneumonia in the last few months — the first case was reported on the same say as the first murder that kicked off the rise in crime.

Cas followed up with homelessness. Then unemployment. “The rates of crime aren’t the only problem. The rates of everything are going up.”

Dean glanced at Mrs. Tran. “You’ve been living here since before then. Any idea what could be doing this?”

“It’s nothing,” she insisted. “We’re safe here, you said we were. I can’t pick up and move again — maybe someone moved into the area and they’re just causing trouble.”

Dean closed the computer and slid it into his bag. “Sorry, but I really don’t think it’s just a coincidence.”

Mrs. Tran shook her head in silent protest. “Are you telling me we have to leave town?”

Dean shrugged. “Depends on what’s here, I guess. I’m betting we’ll be able to take care of it and your life can go back to normal, whatever normal is.”

“You know, you don’t have to lie to me,” Linda said.

Dean raised his hands up. “Scout’s honor. We’ll do what we can and try to keep you and Kevin out of it.”

The door closed loudly and the locks clicked. Dean looked up to see Kevin walk in, carrying a book bag. “I’m gonna get to work on translating that Egyptian curse manuscript for Dr. Anderson.”

“Kevin?”

He stopped, sighing. “Yeah, I know we have company over, Mom.”
“Kevin, we need to talk.” Dean leaned back on the couch.

The smile slipped off his face. “W-what? What’s going on? Is it angels?”

“Nothing you should have to worry about,” Dean said reassuringly. “Something came up, and we wanna know if you know anything that could help.”

The jump in crime was too uniform to be coincidental, he explained, and they just wanted to check it out and stop anything supernatural that was going on.

“When did it start?” Kevin asked.

“The first murder, what looks like the start of all this, was on October fifteenth,” Cas answered.

Kevin’s shoulders sagged.

“What?” Dean asked, instantly on guard. He could tell Kevin was trying to decide whether to share something, and it could very well be crucial.

“It’s — it’s just — don’t worry about it. It’s nothing.”

Dean put on his best calling bullshit expression. “Look, Kevin, I’ve been in this business long enough to know when somebody’s lying, and honestly, you are not that good at it.” He sat back and waited patiently. “You can tell me or not, but rest assured I will find out, and it’s probably better to protect your ass while you have the chance.”

Kevin stared at him in shock. “I…”

Cas elbowed Dean. “Kevin, you know what the stakes are if we don’t know what we’re dealing with.”

“Seriously, guys, it’s nothing. It’s just, you know, one of those things.”

“No.” Dean frowned, trying to fathom what Kevin was saying.

Kevin sighed. “It’s not for me to talk about.” He sighed. “Besides, you act like every little thing is an emergency. Ever hear of a coincidence?” He stalked off, vanishing up the stairs.

Crowley slept out on the couch that night, while Dean and Cas deeply enjoyed having a bedroom to themselves — though not as much as Dean would’ve liked, knowing that Kevin was only a thin wall away and would be able to hear if they did anything really interesting.

The next morning brought with it a conversation around Mrs. Tran’s kitchen table. Crowley listened, silently sipping his coffee, his eyes wide like he was expecting to be slapped any moment now by Linda Tran on an admittedly reasonable rampage.

Cas and Dean were both barely awake, somehow having switched shirts in the night. Dean’s angel had poured small doses of coffee into Mrs. Tran’s stock of shot glasses and was sampling each with a different variety of creamer, and she advised him on how to get the proportions right when he added Irish cream and peppermint flavoring.

Dean smiled fondly. Outside the snug house, the cold had left frozen patterns on the windows, though it looked like it was beginning to thaw.

A knock rattled the door. Mrs. Tran went to let Missouri in.
“Morning, boys. Linda called me last night. You’re looking into the trouble that’s been going on ‘round here?” she asked, pouring herself a generous cup of coffee and smiling at Cas as he knocked back a dose of cinnamon bun coffee, followed by French vanilla, one right after the other.

She continued, “You know, this used to be such a peaceful little town. Most of my customers just want to know if they’re gonna get a promotion or if their mama’s cancer is really in remission. Now it’s questions about whether or not their lives are in danger.”

“Do you know what’s causing this?” Cas asked.

Missouri paused. “Well, not quite. I know that a new energy came into this town last fall. I felt it, right away.” She shook her head. “But no, I don’t know what it is.”

Dean asked, “Mrs. Tran, when’s Kevin getting back?”

“It’s Saturday, he doesn’t have class,” she said.

Awesome. Kevin wouldn’t want to hear what they needed to talk about. “Then we’d better talk fast. Missouri, you said there’s something strange about Katina. Can you tell me what it was?”

Missouri frowned, pausing. “Well, now, let’s see.”

“What?” Crowley asked. Dean shot him a halfhearted glare.

She sipped her coffee. “Well, now that I’m thinking of it, it felt a little like the new presence I’ve been sensing since the first murder. Like something’s weighing on everything in this town, especially her.”

“Are you talking about Katina?” Kevin demanded. He stood in the doorway, arms crossed. “Dean, what the hell is wrong with you? She’s just some girl, not a demon or an angel —”

“Kevin, there’s more out there than demons and angels, and you know it. We just want to get to the bottom of this. If she’s not involved, she’s not involved. “ He turned back to Missouri. “What do you mean?”

“It felt like black poison was in her veins. I couldn’t quite recognize it at first. but whatever it is, it’s sheathed in shining white like, like a disguise. I’ve never seen any natural aura do that.” Missouri politely declined a refill of coffee.

“So you think she could be involved,” Castiel said.

“She’s not,” Kevin said.

“I’m saying she might be. Or she might just be a victim of an evil force, or it’s acting as a parasite and she carries it with her without knowing. I would have to speak with her to know for sure.”

“Damn it, Dean, will you give it a rest?” Kevin demanded.

Crowley stood up and pulled Kevin into the living room. Kevin looked like he was about to punch him, but stayed his hand. “Listen, Kev. Dean’s thinking about a lot more than this at the moment. There’s the angels, and his damn boyfriend, and his moose, and a shitty life in general. There’s no point in making things more difficult for him.”

“You don’t — you don’t understand. Katina’s just a nice girl. They’re only going after her because they think anybody they don’t know is the devil.”
Crowley laughed wryly. “Well, better the devil you know than the one you don’t,” he pointed out. “Honestly? I’m worried you’re being too protective of her. How do you know she’s not pulling the wool over your eyes?”

Kevin gritted his teeth. “She — she wouldn’t do that.” He shook his head. “Look, Crowley, I shouldn’t have to tell you this, but — Katina is, she’s depressed. That’s all. She told me, she almost killed herself on October fifteenth, that’s it, okay? And they’re trying to burn her at the stake.” He hung his head. “Fuck this.”

He felt sick. He shouldn’t have had to violate her privacy to tell them to let it alone.

“Listen, Kev, they won’t do anything unless they know it’s her. They let me live, piece of shit that I am, right?” He gave Kevin a brittle smile.

Dean led Cas out of the kitchen when Kevin came back, still sulking. He was completely uninterested in a confrontation, especially when there was something else he’d really rather be doing.

He pulled Cas into the guest bedroom; the sheets were still rumpled and the curtains were open. Dean closed them and then turned to Cas. “Good morning, angel,” he said.

Cas leaned against the doorframe. “It’s been morning for hours --mmf!”

Dean cut off his dry remark by pressing his lips Cas’s, hard. Cas pushed him backward.

“Come on, we haven’t done anything really fun for months!”

“Dean,” Cas said. “There is a psychic right beneath us. Even if no one heard — she would know.”

“So?” Dean asked, and he didn’t know how the worry of judgment had been lifted so easily from his shoulders, “It’s a beautiful act, Cas, not a fucking shame.” He kissed him again, and this time Cas returned it. “You’re so amazing, sweetheart,” he teased. “Is it so bad that I want to take advantage of the chances we have?”

Cas groaned and grabbed at Dean’s hips, pulling them tight against his own just to grind against him.

“Holy shit, Cas,” Dean moaned, his mouth finding the sensitive place where Cas loved to be kissed, where his neck met the curve of his jaw. He started to suck a bruise onto that stubble-rough, tanned skin.

His hands pulled on Cas’s shirt until it was half-up, showing off his tight abs. Dean didn’t give himself a chance to think before he pushed Cas tight against the wall and quietly closed the door, bringing their mouths together again the moment it was shut tight and running his tongue along Cas’s lower lip before pushing it past.

They pulled apart for air a few moments later, Cas breathless and Dean almost shaking with lust. “God, Cas, you’re so hot.”

Cas grabbed Dean shoulders and held him at arm’s length, his face suddenly serious.

“Don’t blaspheme, Dean,” he said, his voice flat and distant.

Dean stared at him. “What? Cas, you never — you’re only saying something now?” When did Cas turn into such a tightass? He’d never had a problem with it— Then Dean caught the tiniest twitch of a smile at Cas’s lips. “You fucking bastard!”
“Got you, didn’t I?” Cas said victoriously. He was still laughing when Dean kissed him again.

“Fuck you,” Dean breathed, but he had to admit it was a little funny. Cas snorted and tilted his head to play with Dean’s earlobe with his tongue, sucking on it and drawing out a delicious involuntary whimper from him.

“So beautiful, Dean,” Cas said. Even in the midst of such a wild, human act, he felt centered. Calm.

They quickly discarded their shirts and Dean pushed Cas onto the bed. “If you’re so worried about broadcasting it to the world, then you can have the job of keeping quiet,” he murmured in his ear, then moved back and undid Cas’s jeans.

“Dean, what are you —”

“Jesus, Cas, calm down. Nobody’s gonna ask if we were screwing like bunnies while they were having their morning joe.”

“I mean, what are you going to do?” he persisted.


Cas nodded slowly, but the moment Dean’s lips slid around the head of his cock he gasped, throwing his head back. “Fuck, fuck. Shit, Dean, warn me next ti— ah!”

With every moment Dean licked and sucked at him, he was less able to contain gasps and moans of pleasure. Until now, they’d never gone beyond what they did the first time. Castiel knew it was for his sake more than anything — Dean couldn’t predict how far he was ready to go, and he had asked not to move too quickly.

Dean was smirking ridiculously, his expression filled with pride. He slid off Cas’s dick with a wet, slick pop. “How long can you even last, huh?” he asked, his voice low and enticing. “Look at yourself, baby, you’re a mess and I’ve barely even done anything for you yet.”

Cas’s response wasn’t even intelligible as English. Dean grinned and returned to his work, licking down Castiel’s cock until he reached the base. Castiel’s balls hung heavy and Dean knew they had to be as sensitive and desperate as the rest of him. Dean had to truly wonder how often Cas actually touched himself, or if the thought never crossed his mind.

He played with Cas’s balls, enjoying the soft sounds of need that Cas made, until he felt Cas’s hand in his hair. “Stop f-fooling around,” he said, struggling to keep it together. “P-put up or sh-shut up.”

Dean laughed and drew back. “That’s my boy,” he said, and went down on him again.

He soon had Cas gasping and moaning, his entire body shaking with the effort of holding back the sounds.

Cas barely managed to articulate a warning before he came. Dean didn’t even try to pull away, letting his angel fall limp even as the heat in his groin mounted, his hand worked in his pants, and he hit that peak, gasping as he spilled over his hand.

“Dean,” Cas mumbled. “Dean, we should — get up.”

“Fuck, Cas, I just swallowed another dude’s jizz, give me a second to process, huh?” Dean said. Then he snorted. “God, that sounded fucking weak.”
“Mmm,” Cas hummed lazily. “Get off me,” he said. “Did you, um, did you —”

“I should change my pants,” Dean interrupted, thinking quickly. “Yeah, that’s probably . . . what I should. . .” He stood up and changed quickly as Cas lazed on the bed, his dick still out.

“We should do that more often, is what I think you want to say,” Cas pointed out. He was more than a little fuzzy in a post-orgasm haze of hormones. “Much more often.” He rolled off the bed and cleaned himself up, knowing his hair was probably a mess by now and everyone downstairs would immediately realize what they’d been up to but somehow not caring anymore.

They stumbled down the stairs together. Missouri was still at the table, talking with Mrs. Tran while Crowley chatted with Kevin about his translations of a poem from the Middle Ages. She raised her eyebrows at their disheveled appearances, but said nothing about it, turning to listen as Dean sat across from her with Cas standing just behind him.

“So we gonna get to tracking Katina — or,” Dean added at Kevin’s cold stare, “or at least tracking whatever’s causing all this?”

“You know, it’s an ancient evil. Tracking that thing will be difficult, but you’ve got to be ready to face it once it’s found.” Missouri put her cup aside.

“Hey, Kev, what say you and I go play chess?” Crowley asked, in an attempt to distract him.

Kevin stared at him flatly, and Crowley seemed to deflate in Cas’s vision. “Well, screw you too,” Crowley said irritably, but quietly enough that only Cas caught his words.

Castiel glanced at Dean, who was now in deep discussion with Mrs. Missouri Moseley. The light streaming in through the kitchen window seemed to catch in the strands of Dean’s brown hair and reflect off those green eyes, and Castiel felt a surge of possessiveness run through his body.

Father be damned, Cas loved Dean Winchester. Loved his smile, loved his freckles and his references and his hunting skill and his stupid jokes that Cas didn’t always get right away. And after months of trying to prevent him from deluding himself and living in some idealized fantasy, he was starting to believe that Dean might really love him back.

And oh God, did he want to believe it.

“So let’s just go,” Dean suggested. “We have an arsenal in the trunk, why not?”

Missouri pursed her lips. “Because if something like that can hide its presence in Katina, it won’t be easy to see through the mask it will lay over its source.”

“Then we should get started,” Dean insisted.

She glanced at Cas. “Could you cuff your boy ‘round the head for me? Dean Winchester, you aren’t the boss of me, so don’t go thinking you can rush me into doin’ something stupid. Put that head back on your shoulders.”

Cas’s stomach was flipping at Missouri calling Dean ‘his,’ like she knew for sure. As if there were no doubt that they belonged with one another. “Dean, be polite,” he said quietly.

“As it happens, I live two blocks down the road. You boys can come with me and we’ll take a look at what this energy is.” Missouri stood up. “Thank you so much for the coffee, dear,” she said to Mrs. Tran. “It’s lovely to spend these mornings with you, but we’ll get out of your hair.”
“I’ve got to head to work anyway,” she said. “Don’t wait for me, I’ll be back around six. Kevin, are you going along with them or staying here?”

Kein narrowed his eyes at Dean and shook his head. “I’ll stay here,” he said. “I actually should get back to my homework.” He disappeared up the stairs.

Dean, Cas, and Crowley followed Missouri to her comfortably small home at the end of the street. The furnishings were almost identical to those in her old home in Lawrence, nine years ago. Dean even recognized the smell of cat and vanilla from just opening the door.

Missouri led them to the living room, where she had a circular table that fit the four of them. “Crowley, dear, could you bring me a bundle of dried anise from the back room? Thank you.” She instructed Dean to light her vanilla candles and had Cas pour out tap water into a hand-carved wooden bowl.

She sprinkled the anise into the bowl and pulled a pouch of herbs from a drawer, stirring the contents into the water. Then she let the mixture settle. “This is an old trick to enhance what I can see. I’ll be able to look past this force’s disguises and see where it’s hiding.”

Cas put a hand on Dean’s shoulder. “This is likely to take time,” he said softly. “We can wait outside.”

They lounged for a good two hours in Missouri’s sitting room, flipping through magazines on cooking and housing design. Cas dozed, curling up on the couch and resting his head in Dean’s lap as he slept. Crowley raised his eyebrows at the scene, but Dean murmured, “Chill out, Crowley, it’s sweet.”

As they entered their third hour of waiting, Missouri poked her head in. “I found the source of this energy,” she said. “Kevin isn’t going to like it.”

Dean woke Cas and Missouri continued, “I saw Katina in her apartment. This energy was flowing from a jar in the corner, about this high.” She held her hand at her midriff to approximate. “This force, it is dark and powerful, and ancient.”

“Okay,” Dean said. “So whatever this jar is, it’s got some serious evil inside?”

Missouri nodded. “That’s what I believe.”

Cas mumbled through the last vestiges of sleep, “Then we can go as soon as we know she’ll be gone.”

“Monday,” Dean decided. “Katina and Kevin will be in class together, and while she’s gone, we break in, steal the jar, and then figure out what to do with it. Kevin never even has to know.”

They walked back to the Tran home, leaving Missouri behind. “We can stay a couple more days,” Dean figured. “If we find a big enough curse box, we can lock that jar away and it’ll be out of sight, out of mind.”

Crowley rolled his eyes. “You’re proposing theft, again?”

“What do you want to do?” Dean wanted to know. “Just walk up to her and say, ‘Hey, this jar in your house is giving off seriously evil vibes and causing murder and chaos, I ne’ed to take in and lock it up.’ You think she’s gonna buy that? Either she won’t believe me, or she knows what it’s doing and just doesn’t care.”
They spent the rest of the weekend carefully avoiding Kevin’s suspicions. Dean and Cas went out to talk to witnesses, investigated other leads. But everything except Katina was coming up dry.

Whatever was in the jar, it has some major mojo, though. An arsonist they spoke to couldn’t remember half her life after being released from the compulsion to watch a dentist’s office burn. She was piecing the memories back together slowly with the help of her therapist, but this was some awful shit, and Dean couldn’t put the truth aside to spare Kevin’s feelings.

On Monday, Kevin went off for his morning computer programming class, and the moment the car was gone, Dean, Cas, and Crowley prepared themselves with everything they would need. Missouri had hooked them up with protective amulets just in case the jar’s power put up a fight. They’d thrown the biggest lead-lined box they could find into the backseat of the Impala, hoping it was large enough for the jar to fit.

Crowley hadn’t breathed a word of Katina’s other problems to the other two, even though he’d been constantly debating doing so. They had a right to know, part of him argued, they were putting their lives on the line and they should know everything they need. The other side of him reminded him that some things were meant to be kept private.

The three of them slipped into Katina’s apartment quietly after Dean coached Cas through picking the lock.

The apartment was tiny. A curtain hanging in the middle of the place divided it into the bedroom and everything else, with the bathroom through a lightweight plywood door.

Sure enough, in a darkened corner of the living room-slash-kitchen was a tall clay jar with a lid. The crack around the lid was letting off an eerie red-violet glow that made Dean uneasy.

They crowded around it, sliding it out toward the center of the room and trying to keep it from tipping. If the lid fell off, there was no telling what could happen.

A crash almost made them drop the jar — it wobbled, but didn’t fall. Crowley steadied it as Dean put a hand on his belt, fingers brushing the cool metal of his handgun.

Katina stood between them and the door, holding — was that a fucking sword? The bronze blade shone bright in the glow of the jar.

She said something in Greek, her voice hoarse but angry as she brandished the weapon. Only Cas understood, and he thought quickly. “Listen to me, this jar is dangerous. To you, and everyone else.”

Katina coughed before answering. As she spoke, Castiel realized there was blood on her lips. “Please. I need it, you do not understand. I can’t lose it, I need it.”

Dean glanced at Cas for translation, but he went ignored. “Katina, what is this thing?”

She bowed her head, and Cas understood that it was in reverence. When she answered, it was in English. “It is a pithos. It has been — sent down. My ancestors carried it for thousands of years. Inside it is — the word is hope.”

Crowley opened his mouth, but no sound came out. “Hope,” Dean said. “Like, Pandora’s box, hope?”

“It was never a box,” Katina said disdainfully. “Box is a mistranslation. My family protects it from harm.”
“Well, you aren’t doing a great job keeping it from harming anyone else,” Dean pointed out. “There’s been death, sickness, crime, accidents — that can’t be a coincidence.”

She closed her eyes. “I should not have done it,” she said. “But I had no choice, I had no choice. It would kill me, otherwise.”

“Kill you?” Dean asked. Crowley flinched.

She bowed her head. “I — I have the depression,” she confessed. “I tried to kill myself. I used Hope, to keep me safe. But Hope demands a price — in lives, in safety — there is no hope if there is no risk.”

“So you sacrificed other people’s lives, careers, and homes?” Crowley said in shock.

“No!” she said. “I didn’t know the effects then, I just knew I couldn’t live in that way anymore. So much depends upon my success here, I cannot lose to this. I need Hope.” She shook her head.

A drop of blood slipped down her chin.

“A drop of blood slipped down her chin.

“Look at yourself, Katina,” Cas said in Greek gently, taking a step toward her. Her hands were shaking. “You’re bleeding internally. Whatever power Hope has, it’s killing you anyway. There are things humans were not meant to do. I — I more than anyone know that much.”

She jerked backward involuntarily, her face pale. The bronze sword — a *xiphos*, if Cas remembered correctly, was slipping from her grasp.

“Don’t do this. You don’t want more people to get hurt.” Dean took a step closer. “And if you don’t let us do our job, you aren’t gonna like what comes next.” He pulled his jacket back just enough that she could see the handle of his gun.

“We just want to keep Hope from hurting anyone else,” Cas said. He put a hand on the tip of the sword and pushed it gently aside. “You don’t have any reason to worry. We’re going to lock it into a lead-lined curse box. Its power will be blocked from there, and it will be safe.”

Katina swallowed nervously. “I do not have a choice.” The magenta light pulsed, and she dropped the sword and doubled over, holding her stomach like she was about to puke.

“That jar doesn’t care who it hurts,” Crowley said. “It just wants to be opened and kill everyone.”

Katina managed to straighten up and nod. She stepped forward, barely able to stand straight under the influence of Hope. She whispered a phrase in Ancient Greek, one that not even Castiel was familiar with — pagan rituals had never interested him as an angel.

The light flared, and then the lid snapped shut, blocking off the glow. “Take it,” she said. “My family will disown me, but it must go.”

“We just need to lock it down and neutralize it,” Dean said. “You can still keep it safe if it’s in a box, right?”

She wiped her hand across her mouth, seeming surprised at the smear of drying blood across it.

“Thank you.”

Dean and Crowley hauled the lead-lined box up the stairs and carefully slid the jar into the curse box as Cas spoke to Katina, talking her down from her distress. He reassured her that they only wanted to protect the other people Hope was hurting, not to frighten or attack her. She seemed to accept that.
Once the jar was safe inside the box, the three of them took off, already debating whether or not to tell the truth. Cas was firmly on the side of truth, but Dean insisted that lying was better. Kevin didn’t want to hear that Katina had done anything like that, but Castiel said that if the truth would hurt him, lying was far worse.

At last, Cas convinced him to be honest with Kevin; Dean couldn’t hide the truth, so the young man would have to choose how to deal with it.

When Dean broke the news that afternoon, Kevin almost refused to believe it. It took some convincing, but Dean finally admitted that Missouri had found the source and they’d confronted Katina, where she confessed to it. He apologized for investigating without telling him, but despite Kevin’s coldness, Dean realized he would eventually understand why they did it.

Of course, Kevin refused to speak to them after that. Dean apologized again, to Mrs. Tran for visiting only to fuck everything up again when they left — they’d stayed long enough and Kevin obviously didn’t want them there anymore. They just had to hope Kevin would realize that they did the right thing.

Mrs. Tran smiled sadly, and didn’t argue. She sent them off warmly, thanking them for at least stopping the mindless violence and struggles Bethany was facing.

They left Bethany, Pennsylvania behind them and headed west. Castiel gazed out the window as they sped through mountains until those mountains gave way to plains and cornfields.

Katina had been desperate. Cas understood that. Desperation could make a person do horrible things, deal with devils and abandon your closest friends to keep them safe. He couldn’t understand what had made her willing to suffer just to fight back a different kind of suffering. That kind of pain had brought her nothing but sorrow and grief. He didn’t know if Kevin would even be able to trust her again.

Castiel hoped she would be able to find happiness again, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that there was no way to win, this time.
Schism

Schism: a division between strongly opposed sections due to difference in belief

Dean wiped down the blade that had just cut off the heads of several vampires. “Glad you called us in on this one, Jody,” he said as he wrapped the sharp metal in a rag and tucked it in his belt.

Jody gave him a wry grin. “Good thing you knew about that cure, and I’m not ashamed to admit I needed the backup.” She was cleaning blood off a machete. They’d half-collapsed in the motel after that fight. Vampires weren’t fun on a good day, forget a bad one.

They’d had a good month since visiting Kevin to hunt. They took care of some witches in Louisiana, a lone spirit haunting a back road in Michigan, a pack of Black Dogs in Iowa. Dean and Crowley had worked out a system of hustling pool. Then Jody called, and Dean dropped everything to help her out. These vamps living near Sioux Falls had broken into the police station to come after some girl, who turned out to be a kidnapping vic, raised as family by the vampires. Thank God, Alex turned on them after having a chance to talk with Jody and see her life with clear eyes.

Dean personally felt it was fucked-up, how loyal she’d been to him. He remembered, suddenly, a leather-bound journal and a beat-up jacket.

Cas had a katana in hand and was sharpening it carefully against his angel blade. “Silver,” he mused, balancing its weight. “Jody, where did you find this?”

She stiffened. “Bobby gave it to me,” she said.

Jody loved Cas already, even though she’d only known him for a few days. “If you make that sorry sack happy,” she’d said, “then that’s good enough for me.” She still avoided Crowley like the goddamn plague, but Dean was more than willing to admit that was fair, after their first meeting.

“But, you know, he left me plenty of weapons,” she added briskly after a moment. “You can have that one.”

Cas smiled sadly as he hung the katana from his belt. He missed Bobby. He would have been a wonderful guide through this process of learning humanity. Dean never spoke about him, and Castiel wasn’t even certain of how he’d died.

Dean helped Jody cook up the cure, but he left her to give it to Alex alone. He hoped Jody knew what she was getting into and that she was ready to deal with the poor kid’s issues. Alex’s ‘mother’ had turning her into one of them, but soon, Alex would be human and safe with Jody. What happened then would be up to the two of them, but Dean had to hope things would work out.

“Hey, Jody,” Crowley said as they were packing up and getting ready to head out. Cas was thanking Jody again for the katana, but he broke off the conversation once he heard Crowley.

“What do you want, Roderick?” Jody asked bitingly. He hadn’t spoken to her once during the last few days, and for all he did a good job with the vampires, so far Crowley did nothing to endear himself to her.

Crowley winced, but he had to push himself forward. He couldn’t stop now. “I wanted to apologize to you,” he said. “Not — not long after I tried to kill you, Sam cured me. Of being a demon,” he
added. “I saw everything I did, and I— I’m sorry. I wasn’t in control, not me. I was twisted into that, that thing, so I need to know that even if you can’t forgive me, you understand.”

He paused for breath, and Jody stared at him. “You want to apologize,” she said in disbelief.

Crowley braced for the inevitable verbal castration.

It didn’t come. “I get it. You didn’t— you knew what you were doing, but it wasn’t the real you doing that to me.” Jody stayed a respectable distance away, carefully observing him. She’d seen it before, when all humanity was stripped out of someone and they turned into a monster. She’d seen it in her son. “Not that it makes it any less scarring,” she added. “But I guess I can forgive you.”

Dean shouted at Crowley to wrap it up. He shifted uncomfortably, finally settling on a nod and a brief handshake before following Dean and Cas to the car. “See you around, Jody,” he called over his shoulder.

“Take care of yourselves, boys,” Jody shouted back, turning to go check on Alex. She planned to take Alex in and get custody, assuming she agreed with that. Dean had been wary, but Jody was set. Alex needed someone who understood exactly what she’d been through, monsters and all.

They crashed in a motel in Montana, on the way to investigate a possible haunting. Dean was only half watching the late-night game show flickering on the TV, considering. Crowley snored in the other bed, and Cas was barely awake himself, curling up against Dean’s warmth and struggling to keep his eyes open.

Dean heard Cas mumble something into his chest. “What was that?” he asked softly, but Cas only made a contented noise and tugged on the covers.

CRASH.

Dean was on his feet in a second, grabbing for a weapon— he found his angel blade on the floor and stood, bracing himself. Cas was suddenly alert, lifting his new katana effortlessly and taking a fighting stance.

A few moments later, Dean’s head caught up to what he was seeing and he lowered his blade, but only slightly.

Hadraniel stood in the doorway. They no longer wore their vessel’s teenage fashion choices, because apparently the angel had found army fatigues somewhere. They were now heavily armed. Behind them stood Zipporah, dressed much the same, but her weapons were either concealed or nonexistent.

“Castiel, we need you,” Hadraniel said brusquely, as if they hadn’t just barged in unannounced. “You may bring your ‘friends’ if you wish, but you will come with us.” Zipporah elbowed them in the back and they amended, “You must come with us. Azrael is growing ever stronger, and you once led Heaven’s garrison on Earth. You know the ground on which we fight better than any of us. You will be valuable among our strategists, and in our council of leaders.”

Dean glanced at Cas, his mind running a mile a minute. He turned back to the angels. “Last time we trusted you, you brought us into a death trap.”

“And you expelled us from that place. We were trusted to find the last path to Heaven,” Hadraniel said coldly. “You seem to be under the delusion that this is anything less than war, and in war we must take risks.” Dean realized that Hadraniel had a long scar down the side of their face now; he’d never even seen a weapon that could leave a scar on an angel’s vessel. They were playing with the big guns now, for certain.
“Dean.” Cas’s voice was soft. “This may be our last chance to bring Sam home.”

And God fucking damn it, that was it. Fuck.

He stepped back. “It’s your call, Cas,” he said, almost reached out to touch his shoulder before he caught himself.

Cas shook his head. “It’s our call. Crowley?” he said.

The man was pressed against the opposite wall, a shaking, disheveled mess. “’s long as it’s over once Azrael is gone, I’m good,” he managed to say, trying to control his breathing.

Dean closed his eyes. He knew what they had to do, but he didn’t have to like it.

“Let’s get going.”

Hadraniel insisted on taking Cas’s place in the passenger seat. “To guide you,” they said, but Dean suspected they just didn’t trust him. Zipporah was directly behind them, Castiel behind Dean, and Crowley situated in the middle. Dean hoped the arrangement would keep Zipporah from setting Cas off — His boyfriend looked like he might actually be sick if someone spoke to him.

He could feel Hadraniel’s eyes fixed on him, like they were trying to burn a fucking hole through his skull.

*Hot blooded, check it and see.* . . Dean hummed along. *Got a fever of a hundred and three.* . . It was the worst attempt at distraction ever. He felt as though a constant drumbeat thumped through his head — focus on the road, focus on the road, don’t look at them, don’t think about them. He was doing this for Sam and Cas and the whole goddamn world, not for this stuck-up angel in old fatigues.

No. Nope. The night was just getting to him, especially after the full day of driving he’d *already* gone through, but one look at Hadraniel and he knew he didn’t have a choice in when they were leaving.

“We are based in Michigan. What your people call Detroit.” Hadraniel had said it derisively, as if the idea of even naming places was stupid. Dean had to bite his tongue to hold back the impulse to snap back at them.

The sky began to lighten as they passed into South Dakota. Zipporah had been murmuring under her breath for the last hundred miles, and the quiet, almost giggly noises were making Crowley uncomfortable.

“What in Hell’s name are you doing?” he hissed under his breath; Hadraniel’s attention was fixed on Dean, Dean was struggling to stay awake, and and Cas was breathing with the steady rhythm of sleep, but there was no guarantee they wouldn’t hear and get involved.

Zipporah just smirked at him and rolled her shoulders. “D’you have any beer?”

Crowley stared. “Right. Sanity first, beer second.”

The angel snorted. “You want some?” She offered Crowley a small, translucent orange bottle with a white printed label. “God, almost feels just a little like flying, could you believe it?”

“Are you. . .” Crowley looked from her to the bottle of pills. “Are you — high?”

Zipporah swept her shiny hair back from her face with a vaguely delighted expression. “And he wins
one hell of a prize! Ladies, gentlemen, so on and’ so forth, give the bastard a hand.” She popped open the green travel cooler at Crowley’s feet and grabbed a can of beer. “Naturally I’m high, dear. Who wants to feel wings withering into dust while you walk on a vessel’s feet like some stupid warrior? I was a damn executive,” she breathed.

Her pupils almost eclipsed her irises, leaving only the thinnest ring of washed-out color. “I was a damn executive, managed a fourth of the frigging administration. Those souls were tight in their heavens while I was in charge. But you know, coming down here, I found out it doesn’t fucking matter. All that matters, really, really matters, is the wings I lost.”

She sighed contentedly and drained her beer. “God, this is so much better. I spent four hours at a human restaurant, a buffet, last week. There’s no point to any ‘f this anymore. I say just go for the good stuff and let the heavens and the Earth be someone else’s problem. ‘S not mine anymore, baby, I’m just here for the excellent liquor.”

“And Hadraniel?” Crowley asked. The angel hadn’t even turned to look, though Zipporah hadn’t bothered to keep her voice down. He didn’t want to draw their attention.

She stretched her legs out and threw an arm around his shoulders. “Gotta have something to do,” she murmured. “Angels aren’t interested in most of the... fun things, but ‘Draniel lets me do what I want if I sober up as needed.” She hooked one leg around Crowley’s. He raised an eyebrow, schooling his features so they couldn’t betray his surprise at a goddamn angel coming on to him like this. “You look like the kind ‘f man who knows how to have a little fun.”

“Zipporah.” The warning came from the front seat. “I do not ask so much of you, but I demand that you not consort with the King of Hell.”

“Shut up,” Zipporah groaned just as Crowley muttered, “Ex-King of Hell.”

“Now is not the time for your human games,” they added sternly. “Sober, now, or I will revoke your permission to touch humanity’s vices altogether.”

“Fuck you,” she muttered, but her eyes seemed to clear of the drug- and alcohol-induced haze, and she straightened her rumpled fatigues. “Killjoy.”

“Interminably so,” Hadraniel said dryly.

Dean finally convinced Hadraniel to let them get a motel and at least a couple hours’ sleep around seven a.m. When they were shaken awake, it was only noon, but at least Dean felt awake enough to keep driving. He and Cas shared the bathroom as they changed clothes and brushed their teeth, using their narrow chance to be together to the fullest. Cas didn’t mind that Dean tasted like mint.

It was admittedly a little exciting, getting away with this right under their noses. On the other hand, Castiel had to remind himself that they wouldn’t have much opportunity among all Hadraniel and Zipporah’s allies, and they couldn’t afford to lose their last chance to stop Azrael and save Sam.

Dean stopped them, against Hadraniel’s pointed remarks about wasting time, to pick up lunch at a diner. Crowley and Cas needed no convincing, but Zipporah had to half-drag Hadraniel into the restaurant. “Come on. You don’t have to ‘sink to human indulgence,’ or whatever it is you moralizers say, just don’t sit in the car like a sanctimonious prick while the rest of us have a good time.”

Dean could have done without Zipporah saying that.

Zipporah, Cas, and Crowley chose to share a booth in the corner, while Hadraniel and Dean sat up at
the counter in the crowded little diner. This was the kind of place that attracted truckers and road trippers alike — the nostalgic *Americana* vibe seemed to ooze from the vinyl seats and the cheesy chrome trim, the menu featuring heart attacks on a plate and the waitresses stuffing their bras for tips.

It was the kind of place he and Sam used to stop at, chase a little tail between hunts.

“Why do you insist on this?” Hadraniel demanded in a whisper, warily eyeing the civilians as they enjoyed their grease-soaked french fries. “We should be making haste to reach our base before Azrael can track us,” they added.

“Calm the hell down,” Dean said, quietly. “It’s not the end of the world.”

“How sure are you of that?” Hadraniel said, but before Dean could respond, a middle-aged man tapped Hadraniel on the shoulder. Hadraniel’s hand snapped to touch the hilt of their angel blade.

“Excuse me, sir,” the man said. “Just wanted to say thank you for serving our country.” He cracked a smile and removed his trucker’s cap for a moment in respect, then went to pay his bill at the register.

Hadraniel narrowed their eyes at him until he left the diner.

“Stop laughing at me, Winchester. How do you know that man is not a human agent of Azrael?” they snapped.

“Because Azrael’s not gonna have random truckers on the payroll,” he said. “She’s a little busy dealing with the fucking veil.” As far as he knew, the veil was still deteriorating; he’d heard of six or seven more breakthroughs from fellow hunters. Fortunately, the news hadn’t picked up on the mystery ghosts, probably writing it off as fever dreams and weirdos making up stories to kill the boredom of winter.

The angel slumped slightly, the first remotely human action Dean saw them make. “It’s breaking down more quickly than I anticipated,” they said. “More humans must be seeking to dismantle Heaven than we believed possible. What should be a fortress wall is becoming hardly more than a thin membrane.”

Dean personally wondered what they expected, considering more people were separated from their loved ones and merely reliving their memories instead of experiencing some divine bliss or hanging out with Freddie Mercury.

Hadraniel refused the waitress’s offer of coffee with a wave of their hand. “I should be there, maintaining the boundary. Because of Castiel and Metatron, I am trapped here, in a vessel and with no way home. I have to heal what has been damaged. Few of Heaven’s ophanim — gatekeepers — have sided with Azrael, and her followers lack the power to retain the veil’s strength. All of our supporters want Heaven to be secure and safe. Azrael only kills those who do not want her to lead.”

Dean almost reached out, as if to comfort them, before remembering who it was he spoke to. “Well, odds might be stacked against us, but hell if I’m not going to kick it in the ass until we either win or take those fuckers down with us.” He allowed himself a thin, crooked smile. “That’s the thing about humans. We’re so determined, we shoot right past being reckless and come back around to dedicated.”

“I fear that if we do not repair the damage soon, the wall will be permanently destroyed,” Hadraniel said under their breath.

Dean didn’t like the sound of that. He wasn’t sure how to reassure a fucking cosmic entity that worried about a metaphysical boundary in the space-time continuum, so instead he glanced around
the diner. At Cas’s table, they were already digging into butter-soaked pancakes and strawberry milkshakes. Zipporah had twelve plates around her, stacked with bacon, fries, eggs, a chicken sandwich, even, and Dean had to wince for the sake of his poor wallet.

Castiel watched as Zipporah shoveled food into her mouth. “I bet humans have a better time of this,” she mumbled through a mouthful of hash browns covered in cheese. “Delicious, but God, everything else must be so much more fun without Grace fucking over human perception into this abstract mess.”

Crowley breathed a word that sounded like stoned, and Zipporah drew herself up to a formidable height. “Scuze you,” she said, her voice haughty. “Even if I were, I could sober anytime I want, but why the fuck would I? I’m halfway human by now anyway. Why the hell not enjoy the decadence when I’ve got the chance?”

“Maybe because Dean’s the one paying for your frigging decadence,” Crowley said good-naturedly. “Then again, it’s not me paying, maybe I should follow your lead.”

He stabbed a slice of her bacon with his fork and bit into it before she could protest.

Cas wasn’t paying attention to their exchange. He wanted to have a chance to speak to Zipporah without someone listening in. He knew he wouldn’t be able to have this conversation with Hadraniel, not with their relationship this strained already.

At last, Crowley slipped off to the bathroom. Zipporah polished off her peach cobbler, and Cas took advantage of her occupied mouth to get a word in edgewise.

“You and Hadraniel. . .” he began awkwardly. “The two of you are handling the Fall very differently.”

“Hmm?” Zipporah said. She swallowed. “What do you mean?”

“You are.” Cas cleared his throat. “You’re using drugs, drinking — you are flirting with Crowley, of all people. What happened?”

“Life, more or less,” Zipporah said. “If I didn’t know how it would hurt, I’d carve my wings out now rather than watch their power drain out of me like this. Don’t you know, Castiel, without a firm connection to Heaven, we’re all losing strength. Azrael’s angels have that, they’re stronger than we are, besides using human souls directly.

She shook her head. “It hurts, Castiel,” she said. “You have no idea how badly this hurts. It feels as if my wings are crumbling into dust, and my grace dying with every second.”

Cas smiled wryly. He did know, though Zipporah likely didn’t realize. Something very similar had happened to him, when he first rebelled from Heaven.

Back then, he’d never sunk so far as to intoxicate himself except the unfortunate incident with the liquor store, and he’d never used drugs, not until those first months after joining the ranks of humanity. Then again, if alcohol could dull the pain of hearing his Father had abandoned them, he imagined the effect of pills and powders would be substantially stronger.

“You’d want to smother that, too, if you had the chance,” she pointed out. “Most of our kin, they still believe we can win Heaven.”

“Not you,” Cas said softly.
Her smile was raw and empty. “No. Never me.” She put a bottle of small white pills on the counter with a clack. “Not with our own family at war with itself for years after you slaughtered Raphael’s supporters. Not with my wings gone and my home in ruins. There isn’t even a Heaven left to win.”

Cas forced down the urge to vomit that rose in his throat, swallowing the sensation back. Zipporah noticed and pushed the bottle toward him. “God, take it. I bet you need it more than me.”

Cas twined his hands in his coat, shifting in discomfort. The shirt he wore — one of Dean’s, he realized distantly — felt unnaturally tight over his skin, and despite the chill of early March, he was over-warm. “I — uh, no thanks,” he said, stumbling over the words. “I couldn’t.”

“When not?” Zipporah sounded like she genuinely wanted to know why he refused. “You could really use a relaxant, get you to unwind some. No different from drinking in your downtime, really.”

Cas shook his head. “I can’t afford to be impaired, not now. And drugs…” Looking back on his experiences with sleeping pills and medication, he was glad to have had the distraction of Dean; drugs were looking more and more like a slippery slope, one he had very nearly escaped. He didn’t want an addiction. He couldn’t afford to lose what he had. “I’m human. I can’t just clear it from my system. The effects would be more dangerous.”

Zipporah shrugged and sipped her milkshake. “Suit yourself.”

If he were being completely honest with himself, Cas knew he was more tempted by the offer than he’d like to admit, despite the cost he knew would go with it. He’d come too close it already. It was so appealing, the thought of not having to worry, just sinking into the dreamy state that Zipporah was offering him. But he couldn’t do that to himself or to Dean.

She spoke again, rousing him from his thoughts. “You’d think angels would learn loosing up is a good thing. I suppose they think if they try to bend the rules, they’ll break.” She huffed a sardonic, absent laugh. “Suppose breaking is the only thing we can do, anyway.”

Cas frowned. Was she still talking about drugs? The sad note in her voice sounded strange, nothing like the easy, vaguely entertained lilt in her voice when she talked about popping a pill or smoking some suspicious substance. Not did it carry the regret he sensed when she spoke of Falling, or the war.

This sounded… mournful.

He felt a hand on his shoulder. Dean’s. “Come on, buddy, we gotta get a move on.” Crowley was with him, and Hadraniel waited impatiently by the door.

Cas got to his feet as Zipporah slipped her pills back into a pocket of her military uniform, casting a longing gaze over the food she hadn’t had the chance to finish.

The tension between the five of them seemed even tighter now than before, if that was possible. Perhaps, Cas thought, it was the tight quarters and the fact that now everyone was fully awake and on edge.

Then again, here were a former angel, the ex-King of Hell, two fallen angels, and Dean Winchester sharing a very limited space. Castiel couldn’t have imagine a more strained, volatile scenario unless they were accompanied by Lucifer himself. Or God. Now that he thought on it, God’s presence would probably piss them all off, for vastly different reasons.

And it stood to reason that God would have harsh words for all of them, for his part.
Their next hotel, the Scarlet Rose, was probably a popular no-tell motel a decade or so ago, but now it was decrepit and obviously on its last legs. Dean would rather have the bunker any day, burned-out shell or not. But they didn’t have much choice. They would have to just deal with the decaying wood paneling and the carpet Dean was sure had one hell of a bloodstain discoloring its ugly yellow dye.

Cas worked on his journal quietly and intensely. Dean got the feeling he was trying to block out the presence of their charming new companions.

He flipped through TV channels as Zipporah vanished into the bathroom. He pretended he couldn’t smell what she was smoking through the thin wall. Crowley examined his own bed, exterminating every cockroach with a can of bug spray the motel provided for their benefit. At long last he pronounced it fit to sleep in, for all it smelled like Raid.

Cas flinched as nails dug into his shoulder and a tight grip pulled him to his feet. Hadraniel’s chilly green eyes stared back at him. “Come with me,” they said. “I must speak with you.”

He held back the desire to say something very rude in response. Hadraniel wouldn’t want a private conversation unless it was important.

“Yes?” he asked once they stood outside the room.

“I must ready you for what will happen when we return to our base,” they said stiffly. “Our allies will most likely distrust you.”

“I have been telling you that since we met,” Cas pointed out. He was tiring of this line of conversation quickly, and he would really rather be in bed and asleep next to Dean instead.

“You will have to prove yourself to them,” Hadraniel continued, as if Cas hadn’t said a word. Cas sighed, but he still went unnoticed. “What angel will trust you now except the loyal few?”

“What are you suggesting?” Cas asked. “I’m not even an angel anymore. Why should I prove myself to my— to your family?”

“That is why I so badly needed to speak to you. There is a solution, Castiel,” Hadraniel said, eyes almost shining with fervor. “We fight our enemies regularly, it would be no trouble to take the grace from one of them and bring it to you —”

“What?” Cas shouted. He lowered his voice self-consciously. “You — you would have me take the grace of another angel? Kill one of them, just to ease your followers’ minds?”

Maybe once, Castiel would have done it. If he hadn’t had Dean, if he were desperate and scared and didn’t have anyone to support him, he might have chosen a path not unlike that. It told him far too much, knowing that Hadraniel considered that a viable option.

“No. I won’t do it.” For a moment, the thought pricked at him. You could be yourself again, a holy Angel of God with all the power to help Dean and Sam. He dismissed it. Unacceptable. He didn’t want to kill any angels again, though he knew he would have no choice, but even worse would be to kill one for his personal gain, and not for the safety of millions, billions. “If that is your condition for accepting my help, you can leave now.”

“It would be easy. We could summon an enemy angel, it would be over quickly, and you would be an angel again. You wouldn’t have to rely on slow human healing, or waste time eating and sleeping. One of us again, Castiel. You could be amongst the Heavenly Host once more,” Hadraniel said.
He could almost see it. No more indigestion, or urination, or taking weeks to heal, or.

Or Dean. His kin would never permit it, for all their leniency in these conditions. Once they were we restored to Heaven he could never stay with Dean.

“I said, no.” The words came out sharper than Castiel intended, but he wouldn’t back down now. “I will not fucking steal grace from another angel.”

He began to turn, to stride back into their room and fall into a sleep that skated past grace and war and blood, but Hadraniel grabbed him and pulled him back.

“What the hell do you want now?” Cas demanded.

Hadraniel sighed. “There is one other way,” they said, obviously still trying to wrap their head around the idea that Cas may not actually still want to be an angel.

“And what is it? Sacrificing a child on a mountaintop to prove my faith?” he asked sarcastically.

“Popes and some would-be saints, humans who wanted to show they possessed God’s favor and power, used this method. You would have every appearance of an angel, a true angel. You would have our powers, our healing, everything, but you would still be human.” Their mouth twisted even saying the word.

*Human? Blasphemy,* Cas thought irritably. “Spit it out. What would I have to do?”

Hadraniel glared, apparently finally noticing how little Cas was interested in listening to their proposals of power and the glory of Heaven.

“It is a potion,” they snapped. “Drunk once daily, it will give you the abilities of angels and convince all our brethren that it is exactly what you are.”

Hadraniel smiled, placing a comforting hand on Cas’s shoulder. “Think of it, Castiel. They wouldn’t question your companions and sympathies so long as you have the support of both Zipporah and myself, and you have the seeming of an angel yourself.

“It just comes at the cost of endless lies to all your allies. And what would I tell Dean? That I’m willing to, to sell my integrity in exchange for power in your army?” Cas knew Dean would say it wasn’t necessary. He thought of Sam, trapped in a cruel and unforgiving Heaven, and of Azrael, letting human souls be devoured to further her own power.

“This is war, Castiel. And in war we must make sacrifices,” Hadraniel said. “And what sacrifice is this? No one will die for you to become stronger and seem as holy as any other angel. This is for Heaven and for Earth. Even for your... friends,” they added delicately.

Cas stared at the door to their room. On the other side of those thin walls Dean was flipping through shitty TV and wondering how in Hell he was going to keep his brother safe. He wouldn’t want Cas to do this, to change himself for the angels.

He wouldn’t want Cas to endanger their chances of fixing everything, either. Crowley just wanted this over and done, and the only way to do that was to make nice with Hadraniel’s angels and fight on their side.

The angel smiled encouragingly at him, in a way that made their face look as if it didn’t quite fit. “What will you do, Castiel?” they asked, the hand on Castiel’s shoulder squeezing ever so slightly.
Dean glanced up when the door clicked shut behind Cas and Hadraniel. He hadn’t even noticed they were gone.

“What was that about?” he asked as Cas pulled his t-shirt off and slid into bed with him.

“They, uh, they wanted to talk to me about how best to win over their supporters. Having their help won’t do any good if they secretly doubt my loyalty, and I did help Metatron.”

“You didn’t know —” Dean began, but Cas sighed.

“Can we talk about something else?” he asked. Zipporah had just followed Hadraniel back out into the hallway, and the door closed behind them.

Dean took his chance. He kissed Cas gently, pulling him close and ignoring Crowley’s annoyed snort. The clock read ten past midnight, but it wasn’t too late.

“You hate having them here, don’t you,” Dean murmured in his ear.

Cas was quiet for a few moments. “Yes,” he finally breathed.

Dean’s lips brushed the back of Cas’s neck, and he shivered, sitting up. “Stop that,” he ordered. “It tickles.”

“You love it,” Dean said playfully.

“Oh, God, get a room already,” Crowley groaned.

Dean’s smile never faltered. “Go the fuck to sleep, Crowley.” He tugged Cas back down to the mattress. “You know we don’t have to do this if you don’t want to,” he said. “We kick them out right now, and we’ll just figure out another way to bring Sam home.” His words sounded falsely hopeful even to him. What other chance did they have, really? “I mean, Crowley’ll probably never get laid if we ditch Zipporah, but I can live with that.”

Cas laughed. “And you having me all to yourself, that makes up for everything.”

Dean rolled over and turned out their light. In the darkness, he kissed Cas again.

“I’m serious,” he said. Dean’s hands played across the warm skin of Cas’s muscular back, feeling every inch of tension. “There’s gotta be some other way I’ll summon Death if that’s what I have to do to get my brother back, but I’m not gonna put you through this just because I want him home. I’m not that selfish.”

Dean snuggled close with him until the door creaked open and the two angels returned. They pulled apart as Hadraniel strode in.

Dean wouldn’t let them know he had an angel blade tucked under his pillow, just on the off chance they changed their minds.

Dean and Cas were willing to work alongside them, but there was no trust, and Dean wasn’t looking for any, either. They would work together, and then they would be done. Him and Cas and Sam and Crowley, they’d find someplace to turn into a new home base, or rebuild the bunker maybe, and the angels would be out of their lives permanently. Dean didn’t want them ruining his life any more, and he was thinking more and more that Cas felt the same.

Cas knew when Dean was asleep from the way his breathing deepened and steadied, losing the
paranoid quickness of the man who was wary of his companions. He never let on to Hadraniel and Zipporah that he was anything but sleeping. He stared into the blackness of his eyelids until at long last sleep came to him, the sounds of rustling clothes and hushed voices following him into his dreams.

The rest of the drive to the angels’ base camp took the best part of the next day, though Dean insisted on stopping for food.

“Humans need to eat,” he reminded Hadraniel for the thousandth time. You don’t want us weak because we’re not getting any energy. From what I hear, you’re having the same problem with your mojo, being cut off from Heaven like this. So I wouldn’t be complaining if I were you.”

That had shut Hadraniel up, but they still pressed him to push the speed limit as they approached their destination.

A large, if disused, office building greeted them when Hadraniel and Zipporah directed them to pull up to the curb. But Dean couldn’t look away from the crumbling derelict across the street. Even the vague proximity to it was sending chills down his spine, chills that he would guarantee were not natural in origin. Apparently the angels had tactically chosen their base as the neighbor of Lucifer’s own home away from home.

Dean could appreciate the sensibility of choosing the ghost town part of Detroit’s auto manufacturing industry, a place where no one would go looking for a secret rebel angel base. But fuck him, he wanted to run.

Maybe the manufacturers wanted to run, too. Detroit itself was dying, Dean could feel that too.

Cas stared up at the forbidding structure Hadraniel led them to. Just inside the first set of doors stood a pair of angels, clearly guarding the entrance.

“Remember what we discussed,” Hadraniel reminded him softly, before they took the lead and swept through the glass doors.

Advice was one thing, but Cas just wanted comfort at this point. What lay behind these doors was unknown. His former family could choose to separate his head from his neck, and he wouldn’t stand a chance. Or they could hate him in secret instead of taking a confrontational approach, and Cas would have to live in fear of when his actions would come back to knife him in the back.

He instinctively reached out for Dean’s hand, but before they could touch he remembered the last caveat of this alliance and withdrew his hand. He swallowed hard, gathering his strength to face what was coming.

When they walked through those doors, Zipporah spoke briefly to the guards about Crowley and Dean, telling them, “Don’t damage them. You do, and we lose the one that actually matters.”

Dean winced. Cas gritted his teeth, prepared to defend them, but Hadraniel grabbed him by the arm and pulled him away to the elevator, Zipporah bringing up the rear.

“Hold on,” Dean said, as the guards turned to him and Crowley. “What the hell’s going on here?”

“You’re due to go to the fourth floor. Ask for Hannah. She’ll find you someplace to sleep, and do your human things somewhere out of the way,” one of them said. She wore armor, and her thick brown hair was cut short. “Not my lookout.”

“And Cas?”
The angels exchanged a glance. “You’re with Castiel?” the other angel asked. “The Castiel? That’s who Hadraniel is bringing in?”

“Apparently we’re allies or something,” Dean muttered. “Fourth floor? Awesome.”

He headed for the elevator, but the angels called out that he would need a passcode to use it. Dean groaned, but he stiffened his resolve and started up the stairs, Crowley trailing behind.

“We’re looking for Hannah?” Dean said to the angel who greeted them suspiciously at the fourth floor. “Someone said she’d get us a place.”

Turned out Hannah was waiting for them; apparently Angel Radio was good for something after all. She showed them to the back of the building, where a pretty large area was partitioned off just for them. Three beds, three file cabinets that Dean guessed were for clothes and stuff. Then Hannah turned, dark hair swinging, and called in two other angels.

“Check them for concealed weapons,” she said. “We don’t want them turning on us the moment they find an opportunity.”

Dean sighed. “What, now you don’t trust us? What is this?”

Hannah smiled tightly. “I have my orders,” she said. “We must search you for weapons. Any that you carry will go into our own armory, where they will be safely guarded. Trying to conceal them is pointless. And more importantly, it would prove that you cannot be trusted.”

“So it’s just a bullshit Catch-22, yes?” Crowley said. “Say we don’t trust you; we hide weapons from you, but if we hide weapons from you, you have a reason to hurt us and we shouldn’t trust you.”

“Will you stop talking?” Hannah snapped. “You don’t get to speak that way to me. You may be here on Castiel’s request, but not even he has authority here.” She put a hand on her belt, where an angel blade rested. “Ever since you took power in Hell, you have worked to unbalance the natural order.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not in power anymore, darling. And I think I do get to speak, since I’m here. Unless your little army is controlled by a dictatorship.”

The angels who were supposed to check them for weapons drew their own blades.

“You,” Hannah began, but Dean stood between them.

“Shut the hell up,” he said angrily. “He’s my friend, and Cas’s friend, o you damn well better treat him with respect. The same respect I’m betting you’d show Cas. What he did, that ain’t who he is. If you have a problem with it, you can find yourself some new allies.”

Hannah made as if to shove him out of the way, but Cas was suddenly there, barrelling through the door. “You’re not searching them. Get out,” he snapped at the roughs Hannah had brought in. “Listen to me closely, Hannah. They have more than earned the right to be here. I will not tolerate this from any of your people.”

Hannah looked outraged. “The King of Hell does not deserve my respect!”

“Ex-King of Hell,” Crowley muttered.

“Then neither do I.” Cas turned on his heel, fire in his eyes. “Come on, we’re leaving.”

Dean made a mental note to kiss him for this later. Cas being badass was somehow unbelievably hot, and also completely unfair.
“You can’t leave,” she said, grabbing his arm. Hadraniel, standing in the doorway, gazed at Cas stonily.

“My friends are not second-class, not to any of you, understood?” he asked, a threat in his voice.

Cas apologized once the angels were gone. “I met Hannah a few minutes before you were brought here,” he said. “I didn’t know they would do that. We should leave anyway.”

“No, Cas,” Dean said. “That’s like letting them win.

Castiel nodded absently. He knew he’d committed to this course. He couldn’t be swayed now by petty arguments and minor disagreements.

“She’s on the council of leaders, with Hadraniel and Zipporah, and a few others,” he added. “As I understand it, I’m to be part of that council whether I like it or not.”

Dean rolled his eyes. “Maybe you’ll be able to get their fucking asses to work on a goddamn plan.”

Cas smiled wryly. “I’ll do what I can. In the meantime, the two of you will be working with their soldiers. Try not to embarrass me,” he said, a teasing glint in his eye. He pressed a kiss to Dean’s cheek. “Hadraniel will get impatient if I don’t hurry, but I’ll see you tonight for sure.

Dean barely managed to say he’d see him then before Cas was gone.

On the top floor, Castiel gazed out a large window that overlooked the shoreline of Lake St. Claire. “Is this really necessary?” he asked Hadraniel.

“What do you want them, any of them, to know the truth?” they responded. Castiel turned away.

Zipporah brought in a large pot — practically a witch’s cauldron. Hadraniel handed Cas the appropriate ingredients. “This is something you must do yourself,” the angel said.

Cas stared into the bubbling water, heated with the angels’ grace. He would give anything not to have to do this.

“Zipporah, if you could excuse us,” Hadraniel said softly. “I believe Castiel will want to keep this private.”

Cas didn’t even look up as Zipporah left the room, completely immersed in his own thoughts. It was just for Dean and Sam. It wouldn’t hurt anyone, Dean wouldn’t really mind, it was all for the greater good. He wasn’t like the selfish political popes and grasping false saints, he did this with aims toward a higher purpose. He could make amends for his mistakes.

He poured out a handful of dust — the remains of a deceased true saint. Hadraniel had the rest of the ingredients laid out on a table.

“I can’t do this,” he said when he reached for a multicolored feather, and his hand refused to grasp it. “Whose feather is this?” he asked.

“Hannah’s,” was the answer. “Given freely. She admires you greatly.”

“I think I’m going to throw up,” Cas said after dropping the feather in. It shriveled up and released a smell that Cas could only describe as holy, but it made his stomach turn.

“It’s alright, Castiel, Hadraniel said soothingly.
Cas shook his head, but he added the next two ingredients, wincing as they dissolved and turned the potion a dark violet color.

Hadraniel’s voice became a constant encouragement as he followed the instructions they’d given him. “This is better, Castiel. Don’t you see, you will help us save Heaven.”

He stirred the rapidly bubbling liquid, then added seven leaves from an ash tree and a pair of fairy wings. They released a cloud of cinnamon-colored smoke that dissipated and left him dizzy.

“This is good and righteous and strong, you will be holy again, Castiel.”

He finished the potion to Hadraniel’s gentle, fervid encouragement. Anxiously he paced — it had an hour to cool before it was drinkable. Somehow he found himself in a soft armchair, Hadraniel clasping his hands with a feverish gleam of excitement in their eyes.

“It’s ready,” they told him at last.

Castiel felt a glass being pressed into his hands. The heat from the brew and the scent of it had left him feeling fuzzy and unfocused.

He gazed into the murky violet-brown liquid. He excused the sick feeling in his stomach as being an effect of watching the viscous potion bubble, but he knew the majority of it came from knowing what he was about to do.

Suddenly Castiel frowned. For a moment — he could have sworn the potion smelled exactly like Dean.

Without a second thought, he drained the entire cup. It was immediately followed by Zipporah appearing at his arm, offering him a shot of something clear and alcoholic, which he took and knocked back.

He was doing this for all the right reasons, he assured himself.

But he couldn’t wondering, if that was true, why the fuck did Castiel hate himself for it?
Apostate

Apostate: a person who renounces a belief or principle

Cas stumbled out of the bathroom, feeling both hot and cold at the same time. A week or so had passed since their arrival, and not one angel had guessed the truth about Castiel.

Neither had Dean. Cas hated the burn of the lie on his tongue when he told Dean he’d already eaten in meetings with the council, and that he was ‘fine, I’m just fine.’

“Hey, Cas, you doing okay?” Dean sat cross-legged on his mattress. He and Crowley were playing poker with Doritos instead of poker chips. Cas half-wished he could join, but there would be questions asked, lies told, and he didn’t need or want that weight any longer.

“I’m fine. I’m just fine.” He coughed hard, shaking with the force of the heavy hacking. Cas steadied himself on the filing cabinet that served him as a dresser, and Dean rose from his place on the floor, looking concerned.

“Seriously, man, you need anything? Time off, meds, hell, I could kiss you better if you think it would help.” Dean put his hands on Cas’s shoulders. “Couldn’t your angel buddies fix you up, at least?”

Dean refused to admit that he was slightly jealous, with all the time Cas spent with the angels’ “council” every day. They barely ever saw each other, and his own angel was so worried the two of them would be found out that he insisted they sleep in separate beds. Of course, Dean noticed how Cas flinched whenever an angel came up to them, whether it was to make a report or to tell him he was needed elsewhere. He didn’t like that at all, and he sure as hell didn’t put it past Hadraniel’s people to give Cas a rough time. But of course, Cas wouldn’t admit to being harassed.

He was as supportive as was possible when he maybe got half an hour with Cas in the morning, sparse moments throughout the day, and possibly an hour or so before they slept. They way these goddamn angels were pushing him, Dean wasn’t surprised his Cas was getting sick.

“I’ll be fine, Dean. I’m sure it’s just a cold,” Cas said, in a weak attempt to reassure him that everything was alright.

The knowledge that he was supposed to have an angel’s immunity to illness stuck fast in the back of his mind, but Cas had to push it aside.

Dean had always told him that lying wasn’t his strong suit, that he couldn’t fool anyone without the intensive practice they’d gone through. It felt as if years had gone by in mere months, that the days of learning how to bluff his way into a morgue were so distant. Cas thought wryly that it would be so much easier if Dean could still see right through any of his falsehoods.

Every day brought more lies and more responsibilities. Hadraniel had put him in charge of collecting reports from their agents outside the base who tracked Azrael’s movements and sought the door to Heaven. Having so much information made it almost a requirement that he lead their meetings, for all he insisted he didn’t want to have so much power.

Hannah gave updates on the training of most of their followers, those who had never had to play a role in battle. Since the Apocalypse, the number of trained fighters in the host of Heaven had nearly
been cut in half. Hannah herself had worked mostly in secretarial departments in Heaven, and knew many of the others who needed to learn real fighting strategy.

Dean and Crowley were assigned to work among those angels, with Hannah. Cas heard more of Dean’s day from her than from Dean himself, nowadays. He was a good help on showing the angels basic swordplay, according to Hannah’s updates, and Crowley was working hard as any other angel. One of the few things Cas knew firsthand, and not from Hannah’s meticulous observation, was that Dean no longer slept well.

Fast, almost ragged breathing haunted him all night; he didn’t have to sleep as long as he drank Hadraniel’s potion, so he was free all night to hear the late nights Dean kept, knowing that his partner stared up at the high ceilings blankly for hours before finally drifting off.

That was almost definitely his fault, and Cas knew it, too. He insisted they sleep on their own respective mattresses. He couldn’t make himself slip under the covers with Dean; he tried that first night, but the feeling that he was betraying Dean refused to disappear, and Cas was forced to make some excuse that if the angels caught them sharing a bed, they would put the pieces together and he would almost definitely be killed.

Humans and angels falling in love had resulted in the Nephilim. Despite his and Dean’s lack of the appropriate parts, Cas was sure that no exceptions could be made, especially if they still thought of him as a full angel. And he and Hadraniel had worked very hard to ensure they thought exactly that.

“I’m sorry, Dean,” Cas said. Immediately he regretted the impulse to say it. It was a betrayal, Dean didn’t even realize it yet that’s what it was. He couldn’t explain that he lied to Dean for reasons he would never understand, he hadn’t been created into a life that demanded absolute conformity and obedience. And God, he was so fucking sorry that he’d agreed to Hadraniel’s stupid idea, but it was too late for him to back out now, and he needed the angels’ trust in order to convince them to rescue Sam Winchester.

Dean frowned. Cas really looked like something was wrong, his face caught up in a mix of worry and sadness that left Dean feeling unbalanced. Was something seriously wrong here? “What are you sorry for, getting sick? It’s not your fault, man, it just happens.” He made as if to lean forward and kiss his cheek in some kind of reassurance, but he caught himself just in time.

“Castiel?” A skinny-vasseled angel peered into their partitioned-off area. “The leaders need you, right now. You are dismissed.” He ran a hand through his hair, leaving it spiky and wild. Dean really wished he could have kissed the concern from his face and tangled hands in that messy hair, but everything these days was urgent and Cas’s precious time couldn’t be squandered in the company of Dean Winchester. At least he knew Cas didn’t agree with Hadraniel, Zipporah, and Hannah’s assessment of his value.

Right?

Cas slipped into his heavy coat and was gone. “Sit down already,” Crowley said, bringing Dean back to reality. “We need to finish the game before they call us down for frigging training again.” He began to deal out the cards. “I’m so fucking sore right now.”

Dean sighed. “He won’t even talk to me anymore. I don’t know what’s going on.” He settled down on the mattress and picked up his cards. “You deal like shit.”
Crowley smirked, but the smile wavered, as uncertain as Dean’s own faith at the moment. “My specialty,” he murmured. “I’d rather play chess, honestly. Wouldn’t it be nice to make your own goddamn odds and just have to predict what the other player will do, not what ace he has up his sleeve?” He met Dean’s eyes and knew that Dean understood he wasn’t talking about poker.

“Never was good about figuring my goddamn odds,” he admitted, and dropped his cards. “You keep the chips,” he said. “I’m going to see what’s so important that Cas can’t even have five minutes to rest.”

He knew where the meeting room was; top floor. He still had to take the stairs, unfortunately, but he’d survive. The climb wasn’t so bad when he had all his fucking problems, worries, and suspicions to distract him from his aching legs. He finally reached the top floor just as Cas was settling into a chair in the meeting room, and he stood just outside the open door to listen in.

“What do you want now?” Cas asked tiredly. He’d been stopped three times on the way here, by Zephaniah, Issachar, and Miriam, who all had reports to give him. Their information had been worrying; some smaller fringe groups of angels had been absorbed into Azrael’s forces with almost no warning.

Hadraniel, Zipporah, Hannah, and the others watched in silence as he sat. It was obvious to him that he wasn’t trusted, even though the most he’d done was believe Metatron — Metatron — had good intentions.

Judith, whose voice bore her vessel’s distinct Korean accent, rose from her seat between Jeremiah and Ezra. “We have been watching the omens for months,” she began. “There are certain ones that always precede a breakthrough of human souls from Heaven. We now have a reliable prediction. In the place humans call Washington, near the ocean, over two hundred thousand souls are expected to push through the boundary in three days’ time.”

Zipporah sighed. “What is your suggestion?” she asked Judith.

“We have no choice,” she said. “If we don’t go to stop it, or reduce the damage, this breach may destroy the veil entirely.”

Dean swallowed hard. On one hand, if no one could be brought back to Heaven permanently, those souls would probably go insane and life would be ruined. On the other, Sam would be home. He hadn’t had a dream of Heaven since before Cas’s shoulder injury, and he wasn’t sure if that was good or bad. He hoped the explanation was simply that they hadn’t had time to do it, and not that Sam was — no. He wasn’t thinking about that.

Cas leaned forward. “I don’t see another solution,” he said flatly. “Heaven is in chaos already. Whatever Azrael does there, she has failed to fulfill the purpose of Heaven. If she can’t even safeguard Heaven, what’s the point in being there?”

“She uses it only for its power,” Ezra pointed out dryly. His vessel’s white-blond hair was cut military-short; he was in control of the armory, and issued the regulation angel blades as well as custom swords like those the ancient, long-since-extinct Grigori once used. “We all know where she learned that strategy from.” He glared at Cas.

Ezra rightfully blamed him for carving out the new path for power-hungry angels to take, one of both rebellion and war. Azrael killed as indiscriminately as he had with all the souls of Purgatory at his disposal.

“Then we go to war with human souls,” Jeremiah said, their dark skin flushed with anger. “Our
Father would never —”

“Our Father is not here,” Cas said firmly. He refused to discuss God. “What he would do, or want, or ask of us doesn’t matter anymore.” He stood, meeting Judith’s calm gaze with only a ghost of pride in his eyes. “We will take this into our own hands if we have no other choice. And I cannot allow Heaven’s boundary to collapse.”

“Nor can I,” Hadraniel said, their jaw going tight. “We cannot allow the gates of Heaven to be open to any who desire to pass through them.”

“Put it to a vote,” Zipporah said, examining a clear plastic bag of ground greenish leaves that Castiel was almost sure was filled with drugs. “All in favor . . . ?”

He raised his hand, along with Hadraniel, Judith, and Hannah. Zipporah lifted hers lazily, and Ezra gritted his teeth with a glare fixed on Cas as he reluctantly raised his own. Cas was well aware that it was his approval that nearly made Ezra compromise his convictions, rather than agree. He kept his hand up confidently, meeting Ezra’s gaze with a challenge in his eyes.

Jeremiah alone dissented, steadily gazing at Hadraniel, who had taken the role of leader among them.

“Then it’s settled,” Judith said, still aloof. “Prepare our troops,” she said to Hannah and Ezra. “We’ll leave at noon.”

Dean moved as quickly and quietly as he could back down to the fourth floor and the small area he, Cas, and Crowley occupied. Moments after he settled onto his mattress, Cas came in, looking wan and thinner than usual. “Are they even feeding you?” Crowley asked, a note of concern in his pseudo-careless voice.

“Get ready,” Cas said. He avoided the question. “We’re going to Washington. Judith says we’ll have to fly or take the train, we won’t have enough time to drive.” His voice was flat and almost emotionless. Dean frowned. Even in that meeting, Cas had sounded colder. More like the angel he met in 2008 than the man he was in lo— Well.

“Shit, we’re gonna take a plane?” he asked. He knew Cas would just sidestep any comment about his health, so he didn’t even bother. “Cas, you know I can’t —”

“Or the train,” Cas said softly. “Dean, don’t worry about that. It’s just, there’s souls breaking through out there, and we need to keep Heaven in one piece if we want to bring Sam home and safe.” He sounded almost regretful. “I wouldn’t even ask you to go, but over two hundred thousand souls are going to pass through the veil and we need everyone.”

“What good are we?” Crowley asked dryly. “No grace to hold back the invading ghost-people and no powers to seal the bloody pearly gates.” He didn’t want to admit he wouldn’t trust these angels not to jam a knife in their collective backs, when Castiel was getting along so frigging swimmingly with the. They were the featherbrain’s family, he thought, and there was no point in voicing a ridiculous doubt like that.

Castiel sighed. “We don’t know what we will face,” he admitted. “If we can even prevent these people from hurting the living, we will have made a difference. You saw the spirits in Texas, how dangerous they were.”

“A few hours.” Cas slumped down on his own mattress. “They need to get the word out, and most of our people need to arm themselves before we go.”

“What about safety regulations? They won’t let you on a plane with — right. Most of our feathered
friends have the mojo to sneak us past.” Crowley shook his head, berating himself for missing such a
key detail.

Cas sat on his bed and stared up at the high ceiling. “I don’t want to do this,” he breathed. “But it, it
must be done.” His face twitched, flickering between a sick, wry smile and an empty, dejected look
that was fucking breaking Dean’s heart to see.

“Just tell them you’re sick,” Dean suggested. “Since you won’t let them heal you —”

“I can’t,” Cas snapped, and Dean recoiled from the harsh sound. His Castiel sounded raw and
hollow, and Dean couldn’t shake the feeling that there was something he wasn’t being told.

“Let’s play a round of Go Fish,” Crowley suggested brightly. Dean almost snapped that it was no
time to play games when he saw Crowley’s expression.

“Yeah,” he said, understanding. “Come on, Cas. We can squeeze in a quick round before we hit the
road.”

Cas sat up wearily. There were lines around his eyes Dean didn’t remember were there before. He
managed to put on a weak, shaky smile, and blinked hard.

Dean knew the look he had now; it was one he’d worn too many fucking times. It felt like being
stabbed in the gut to see Cas trying to hold back tears.

Cas kicked their asses soundly, even though all three of them were playing crooked. Dean had two
identical decks of cards, and it wasn’t hard to sneak cards up his sleeve and into his hand to make
pair after pair, but somehow he was still whipped by his beautiful angel.

Knowing Cas, he’d invented a new goddamn way to cheat. Which would make him smile if he
wasn’t so worried.

Maybe he was just wearing thin from all these angels around him. God, Dean could sympathize. He
was pulled this way and that most days, correcting a grip here and adjusting a stance there in the
training halls, watching angels spar until they went from administrators and healers to warriors in
their own right. He wished Cas had the time to do some teaching himself; Dean would bet that it
would be less hard on him than what the council had him doing. Maybe Cas was right; they could all
use a good fight.

Dean was itching to get back out there and hunt Azrael down, catching cabin fever from being
trapped here for days, but he knew it had to go one thing at a time and keeping Heaven together took
priority.

Fuck, he wished Sam was here to fight with him. Maybe, if Sam never died, things would have gone
a totally different way.

Cas went off to do his oh-so-important job again a few minutes later, and Dean tried to distract
himself. “So what’s up with you and Zipporah?” he asked Crowley.

“No idea what you mean,” Crowley said. He rolled his shoulders and shuffled the cards absently.

“I mean this thing you’ve got with her,” Dean said. “Don’t play coy, Crowley, you want her or
something?”

The other man sighed. “Hell — and I say this in complete seriousness — Hell would be easier to
understand,” he said. “She’s constantly high and drunk. She’s trouble looking for a place to happen.”
He smirked. “Thank God I’m always interested in a little trouble.”

Dean sat up. “So are you gonna...?”

Crowley snorted. “God no, not so long as we’re stuck here. I know why you and Cassy aren’t doing so much as holding hands anymore, and there’s no chance I’m risking my ass, even for sex.”

“Would you?”

Crowley shrugged. “Honestly? No idea. She’s hot, for whatever that’s worth. If things were different.”

“If you weren’t the King of Hell and she wasn’t an angel,” Dean finished for him.

“Fuck you, I’m not the damn king anymore, you’d think even you could tell the difference by now.”

“Whatever.”

They were called down to the first floor to leave around noon, meeting Cas there. The crowds of angels surrounded them, but Cas looked slightly better for the chaos. Some color had come back into his cheeks. “Dean. Come on, we’re in a hurry.”

Aside from the unhealthy pallor of his skin, Dean thought Cas looked pretty hot at the moment. He was all trench-coated up, and he had a challenging, commanding look on his face that reminded Dean of the Cas he’d first met in that barn, one that would take no shit, but it was still Cas, the human who wanted a life, not just a mission. The one who wanted a life with Dean.

And okay, so the gun loaded with bullets made from melted-down angel blades and strapped to Cas’s thigh wasn’t actually making it hard for Dean to want him.

Crowley poked him in the side. “Come on, Winchester, keep it moving.”

The three of them were lost in the undulating mass of angels around them, hundreds of voices chattering and drowning out anything Dean could say. None of them would even notice if he just grabbed Cas and...

He pressed their lips together chastely, keeping the kiss brief as possible. Even so, when he pulled back Cas stared at him, a conflicted expression in his eyes. “Dean,” he whispered. It was almost a sigh. His soft pink lips were only inches from Dean’s own, but he knew neither of them dared risk it again.

“Shh, Cas. We have to go.” He grabbed his angel’s forearm and tugged him along, his grasp gentle despite how urgent the situation was. Dean swallowed hard, smothering the desire that made him warm. Now was really not the fucking time.

He had to drive them, along with two other angels he didn’t know, to the nearest airport. When they arrived, Dean gave Cas a pointed look, but his partner refused to act like he noticed.

Planes were shit, Dean decided as another round of turbulence shook the seats. Crowley sat on his left, gazing absentmindedly out the window at the endless expanse of sky and clouds. Cas was on his right, blocking Dean’s access to the aisle. He could hardly breathe, but apparently no one thought that was a big enough concern to bother with. Even Cas had done nothing other than say, “You’ll be fine,” and pull him into a one-sided hug for comfort.

Cas stared across the aisle and forward, at the back of Jeremiah’s head. They’d coordinated flights
and train stops, despite their reservations about the coming fight.

Speaking of which, Castiel had to remind himself that these souls could not simply be killed or smote. They would still exist if that was done to them; the best they could do would be to hold them off and keep human civilians safe, as former gatekeepers like Hadraniel and those seraphim whose graces had more power sealed Heaven and kept it together.

“I’m gonna throw up,” Dean panted, and Cas was shaken from his thoughts. Dean was looking very pale and his eyes were shut tight.

Cas shifted his position so that none of the other angels on board the plane could see and kissed Dean’s cheek. The hunter’s eyes remained squeezed shut, and Cas bit back the urge to vomit himself as he placed his fingertips an inch from Dean’s queasy stomach. Dean didn’t catch the soft glow around Castiel’s hands with his eyes closed, but he sighed in relief as his air sickness subsided.

“God, Cas, you’re like fucking magic,” he breathed, opening his eyes. “You should kiss me better more often.” Dean kept his voice hushed in case some prying angel tried to overhear.

“We still have a few hours up here,” Cas told him, but Dean closed his eyes again and curled up in his seat. Cas spent the rest of the flight watching a dozing hunter as the guilt weighed heavier and heavier upon him.

Washington air still carried the chill of midwinter, for all early March promised warmer winds. Dean tried to convince Cas to let him warm them in his comfy coat, but finally gave up and breathed on them, passing heat into his skin for only brief moments. Then he realized painfully what had to be bringing down this cold. The angels said there had been omens.

“And to think it was getting boring in that damn base,” Dean muttered. “This is where all the fun is.” Crowley shivered beside him. “You call this shit fun?” Cas had gone on ahead, probably to chat with his goddamn angel buddies.

“I’d call it better than nothing.”

Cas reappeared beside them. “It’s beginning,” he said, sounding oddly nervous. Dean couldn’t quite put his finger on what seemed wrong with this picture; besides Cas looking like he was about to pass out or puke any second, something else was off.

Crowley nudged Dean and spoke quietly in his ear as Cas turned away to gaze out over the beach; the breakthrough would happen at any moment. “Since when does he use one of those?” he murmured.

In Cas’s hand, held loosely, was a small silver flask. As Crowley whispered to Dean he’d uncapped it and taken a drink, coughing hard afterward. Dean knew that Cas needed a little liquid courage right now. Fuck, he wouldn’t turn down a drink right now either.

He did a sudden double-take. Between him and Cas was another figure, but this was no angel. More like a seriously pissed-off spirit.

“Cas!” he shouted as the ghost began to take form, shifting from a blurry mess of colors into a human that looked like solid mist.

Cas spun around, his hand already on an iron crowbar tucking into his belt. He was too late, as an angel Dean didn’t recognize pressed a hand to the ghost’s forehead and it glowed, then dissipated into a shining bright light and vanished.
“What just happened?” Dean demanded, grabbing the back of Cas’s coat to slow him. “Did he just —”

“Asher sent the spirit back ‘into the light,’ as you call it,” Cas tried to explain. The mechanics of it were difficult to say the least; even in scientific terms it would be too complex for most physicists. “It’s best explained as transmitting its energy in an ethereal form back to its place in Heaven.”

Dean made a face. “Less Spock-speak?”

“Turned the soul into a form he could shove back through the veil.” Cas gave him an apologetic look. “Dean, I’m sorry, I’m needed elsewhere.”

“With who? Douche-iel?” Crowley said. “Right, ditch us again.” He sighed. “Don’t ask me to keep your hunter safe. I’m not his frigging babysitter.”

Cas looked hurt. “I trust him to take care of himself. The same is true for you. Please don’t die without me,” he said, and he vanished into the undulating crowd of angels who’d begun to give off waves of heat as they held back masses of shifting spirits.

“Bastard,” Dean muttered. “Can you believe him?”

“Bet you love him anyway,” Crowley said, a note of bitterness in his voice.

“Yeah, I —” Dean realized what Crowley actually said, and shuddered. That cleared some things up for him, then.

He was considering the wider implications of what he’d just said when a punch came out of nowhere and hit him between the shoulders. Dean tumbled forward onto his knees and gasped as sand ground into his jeans. That fucking hurt.

Glancing up as he got to his feet, he realized that all around him angels out-and-out brawled with spirits that had escaped the veil. The ghosts were resisting powerfully, able to push the angels around like they weren’t pure energy contained inside fragile human bodies. Dean had only ever seen Leviathans capable of doing anything like this.

Crowley shouted at him to get up and fight. Dean got to his feet and whipped out an iron knife, ready to take out anything that came for him. It had to be too much to hope that Sam would be out there in the crowd, trying to find him.

Then something terrible caught his eye. An angel with a thin face and wavy brown hair gripped a spirit by the throat, but didn’t do what Asher had, sending the spirit back to Heaven.

A thin tendril of that glowing mist swirled out of the spirit and entered the angel’s mouth. He grinned and flicked his wrist in a beckoning motion, calling the mist closer. The spirit was frozen with a look of utter terror fixed on his insubstantial face, lips parted in a voiceless scream.

Dean was rooted to the spot, unable to move or look away. The angel seemed to drink in the spirit, and it faded as the mist flowed into the angel’s mouth. Suddenly it was completely gone, and the angel turned with a satisfied smile on its fucking face.

This is what could happen, could have already happened, to Sam.

It didn’t matter that this angel was supposed to be on Dean’s side here. He drew his blade, ignoring the sounds of angels and spirits fighting all around him, and stabbed the bastard through the throat without a second thought.
Dean staggered back, bile rising in his throat. *Oh, fuck,* he thought, and then he found himself double over, blowing chunks in the weeds at the edge of the beach.

Moments later there was someone by his side. “Cas?” he asked dazedly.

“No,” came Zipporah’s voice from somewhere above him.

“Sorry,” he murmured, even though he wasn’t. He was barely able to keep it together. Sam could be as erased from the world as the poor sap who just got swallowed down.

“Don’t be.” Zipporah pulled him to his feet. “You’ll need that blade. Azrael — Azrael is here.”

“What?” Dean said, dizzily reaching for the weapon.

“You killed one of her supporters,” she explained quickly. Dean realized dimly that there was a trace of a slur to her words, like she’d come to this battle half-drunk.

“Gonna kill her,” he growled. “Where’s Crowley? And Cas?”

“Here,” Cas called, sprinting across the sand with Crowley a step behind. “Dean what happened?”

“I lost my shit,” he said flatly. Cas understood, and didn’t question him further. “We don’t have time to chat, let’s kill this Azrael bitch and get it over with.”

Crowley helped him stay standing until he regained his composure. Then the three of them threw themselves into the fight.

Dean slashed and stabbed indiscriminately. Any one of these bastards could have been the one to take out Pamela, and without any news from upstairs in months, any one of them could’ve done for Sam.

Crowley fought like he hadn’t since he was a scrap of a new demon fighting his way to the surface world to make deals and get on the rise. He struck and killed like he fought to reach Lilith’s right-hand side and win her trust; it was always smart to be on the good side of the one in power, until you were ready to take it from them. But now, Azrael held all the power and Crowley didn’t have a damn option but to fight like his life depended on it.

The feeling of being nothing but a pawn when he’d once been King sat uneasily with him, but he couldn’t change these fucking circumstances. Pawn, king, or queen, he frankly just wanted the game to be over. At least he felt like himself in these moments killing angels like the old days were only a week gone.

Castiel stood in the center of a host of angels, all trying to get their grabby holy hands on him. He wouldn’t be surprised if Azrael had a price on his head.

For each angel he dropped he felt more and more *sick,* grim reminders of his promise, his mission, to stop the killing. Every time he saw his kin gut another angel, or fall at the hands of Azrael’s fighters, Castiel felt the rising urge to vomit. But he was supposed to be above physical illness. He was, in nearly every way, an angel, wasn’t he?

The silver blade he fought with was stained already with blood, and he was ringed by bodies of angels who had next to no combat training who he was certain had once been secretaries and guardians and intelligence operatives like Naomi. They may never have held a weapon before this, and he killed them in cold blood.
A dizzy feeling overtook his mind, but a moment later it dissipated, crushed by the mockery of a grace that burned in his veins.

“Cas!” Dean saw him swaying amid the slicing blades, and he knew he needed to get to him. Half an instant later he understood why. Coming up behind Castiel, wielding a long silver sword, was an angel he’d seen once before. That face was something he couldn’t forget.

Azrael’s vessel was as well-maintained as it had been when she burned the bunker, for all she blazed with a fire that burned hot through her hair and around her hands. Her broadsword flickered with the same deadly fire as she hefted it, bringing it down on Cas.

Before he knew what he was doing, Dean threw himself at her, hauling up his blade to block her strike. The swords clanged as they hit, sparks scattering and winking out in the sand.

Dean stared straight back into the blazing, cold light in Azrael’s eyes. “You fucking bitch,” he growled, his voice so empty and cold that it sent shivers down Crowley’s spine from twenty feet away. “What else do you want to take away from me? My life?”

He struck out, slicing a bright red line on Azrael’s collarbone and chest. “You can have it,” he panted as he stepped away, out of her immediate range. “You’re a goddamn coward,” he hissed, and barely managed to block her next strike. He needed to stop talking, it was a distraction.

If Cas noticed the angel he fought, he wasn’t doing anything to help yet. Good. Dean didn’t want to worry about Cas getting hurt. This wasn’t his fight, not the way it was Dean’s.

Azrael swung the broadsword at him — if he hadn’t seen her prepare to move, it would’ve taken his head off. As it was, he hit the sand hard, badly enough to knock the breath out of him.

The angel towered over him, her hair whipping around her in a wind that seemed to be conjured from nowhere. “Coward?” she asked. “I’m the Angel of Death. I have nothing to fear from an insect like you.”

Dean gripped the hilt of his shining, blood-wet blade tightly and thrust up.

A moment later, Azrael wrenched the weapon from his grasp and tossed it aside. She raised her fiery sword and brought it down.

Dean barely had time to turn on his side and keep from getting stabbed through the heart. He gasped in pain as the sword pierced straight through his shoulder and pinned him to the ground. Azrael pulled her weapon free and held it high above him. Gasping, he thought suddenly of Sam, wondering wildly if he’d find him in Heaven. Then the pain flared and he blacked out.

Crowley saw Cas spin around when he heard Dean groaning, to see Azrael about to run him through. He didn’t think; if he had, he wouldn’t have had time. Crowley lunged forward and hit her sword at the hilt, jarring the angel enough that he could knock the blade from her grasp and kick it away in the dirt.

She pulled herself up to her full height — taller even than Dean, Crowley thought madly. He stood over Dean, his heart pounding. He was dead. There were no two ways about it. She was gonna kill him.

Then she stumbled, dropping to her knees in the sand. “Get him out of here!” Cas shouted, standing behind her. He’d cut the tendons in her knees, but with the power of the souls in Heaven to aid her, she would heal rapidly and be ready to fight in minutes if not mere moments.
Crowley grabbed Dean by the wrists and started to pull him toward the weeds at the edge of the beach, but he let out an unconscious cry of pain. His shoulder had a clean hole straight through it; Crowley didn’t know if he’d be able to use the arm again if he agitated it any more. Instead he stood over Dean’s limp form with his stained angel blade held ready to defend them.

To his shock, Cas stood over Azrael, staring wide-eyed at her as she began to heal and rise to her feet. “What are you doing?” Crowley screamed at him.

He couldn’t do it. Cas tried to force himself to drive his blade through her back, let her collapse, but suddenly all he could see was Rachel Albricci, the young attorney Azrael possessed. He wondered if she knew what was happening to her, if she was aware that the angel she’d let in had killed hundreds.

He stumbled backward.

A hand clamped on his shoulder. Jeremiah muttered in his hear, “The spirits are returned to Heaven. We have to leave, now.”

“A-Azrael,” Castiel began, but when he turned back, she was gone.

Out of nothing, a terrible heat seared above them, flames spreading fast over their heads and then flaring out. As if commanded by some sign, half the angels around him vanished with the sound of wings, and Cas sagged to his knees, exhausted. Then he remembered Dean’s injury — he needed to heal him before he woke.

He somehow managed to work his way over to where Crowley stood over Dean. “Crowley, I need you to take a message to Hadraniel,” he said. “Tell them, Azrael was here, in person. If she fights alongside her followers, she might do it again, and give us our chance to kill her.”

“You had a chance,” Crowley hissed. One solid strike and this would have been over.

A pained expression crossed Castiel’s face. “I know,” he whispered, and Crowley shut up. He knew better than to press the issue.

“Now go,” Cas said, kneeling next to Dean. “I’ll get help for Dean.”

Crowley darted off amongst the angels, giving Cas the precious moments he needed. He pressed his hands to where Dean’s shoulder was run clean through. It would be work to bring his muscles and nerves back to top form, but he didn’t have to clean the wound of anything but sand; the fire of Azrael’s blade had immediately cauterized it, though blisters swelled around the torn flesh.

Castiel strained to heal him completely, though by the time skin knit over the mended gap, he had a burning headache. Dean was still unconscious when he finished, thankfully. A few minutes later, he stirred.

“Cas?” he murmured dazedly. “You’re okay?”

“Yes,” Castiel breathed. “You needed healing, don’t move.”

“Is she dead?”

Guilt swamped him. He bowed his head. “I’m sorry, Dean. I tried, but — I could only think about the woman she’s possessing, and I . . .”

Dean grabbed his hand. “I’m just glad you’re safe.” He frowned and touched his shoulder, noticing
the lack of pain. “How bad was it?”

A funny look crossed Cas’s face. “Pretty — pretty bad, Dean. You could’ve been paralyzed, if we weren’t surrounded by hundreds of angels who could patch you up.”

Dean glanced around; no angels were near enough to see. And for God’s sake, he was willing to risk it. He grabbed Cas by the collar and pulled him down for a kiss.

When they came apart, Dean sat up. “God, I was so close,” he said. “I was fucking inches away, I could’ve killed her, this would have all been over.” He could see those moments in his head clear as day. How she grabbed the blade before it could enter her chest and end her life.

How he could’ve done something, anything, to distract her so she couldn’t stop him. Thrown sand in her eyes, maybe, or knocked her feet out from under her. And thanks to his failure, she would probably go right after Sam just to hurt Dean.

That thought almost made him vomit again, but there was nothing left to come up.

“I could’ve done something,” he said, but Cas shook his head.

“You did what you could. She has more power than we thought, you couldn’t have known —” Cas stopped. None of that would make Dean feel any better. “I need you here and safe,” Cas said. “I much prefer kissing you when you’re alive.”

Dean laughed in spite of the wet shine in his eyes.

Castiel managed to crook a smile himself.

“That all I’m good for?” Dean asked him, a mischievous glint in his eyes.

“Mmm,” Cas said. “Give me a minute to think.”

Dean whacked his arm playfully. “Bastard.”

“Of course.” Castiel almost leaned in to kiss him again, but Crowley had returned with Hadraniel and Hannah.

“We must leave, before this place is swarmed by police,” Hadraniel informed him. As Dean watched, a long cut along their arm healed.

Cas helped Dean to his feet. Crowley had a cut across his forehead and down his right cheek that Castiel hadn’t even noticed. It bled sluggishly, obviously not deep enough to cause any major blood loss. He said something to Zipporah, who gave him a look of mild confusion before healing it with a touch, and Crowley looked surprised by the gesture.

The flight home was thankfully uneventful. Dean fell asleep before takeoff, and woke only when they were already halfway to Michigan. He was slightly panicky for a while, but eventually he calmed with Cas next to him and Crowley on his other side.

It was late by the time Cas finally got out of meetings the next day with the council, to Dean’s frustration. Dean and Crowley had played at least eight games of Monopoly after Dean snuck out and bought the game, then smuggled it back in. They’d completely skipped their weapons and tactics training in favor of vying for Boardwalk and railroads. Dean was not in the mood to deal with angelic douchebags, especially not now.
“Nice to see you’re still alive, Cas,” Dean said. “When was the last time you slept? Or ate?” They’d whisked his angel off to the meeting rooms just after they arrived, and Dean hadn’t seen him come back that night, or all day. “Tell me they at least got you something to eat.” Someone of Hannah’s division supplied them with pizza and cereal and not much else. He hadn’t even had a drink all day.

“I’m fine, Dean,” Cas said, the most painfully generic answer ever. He wanted answers, not this ‘I can muddle through’ crap.

“No, seriously. Talk to me,” he snapped, standing up and accidentally knocking half of Crowley’s hotels across the floor.

“Dean, I am not interested in talking at the moment.”

“Well, tough shit. You’re gonna talk to me, I haven’t seen you all day and you can’t even tell me your piss-poor angel buddies got you a decent meal. No way in Hell am I letting you walk away without promising that you’re gonna take care of yourself.” The last thing he needed was to watch Cas kill himself trying to keep up with goddamn angels.

“Fine. You want me to tell you what it’s like up there?” Castiel turned on his heel, his blue eyes filled with something Dean couldn’t name. “I’m afraid of my own family. Every minute I’m with them I worry they’re about to stick knives in my back. I can’t walk out now, not without losing our shot at bringing Sam back and putting Heaven back together.”

He took a deep breath. “How can I fear them and hate them and want to help them at the same time?” he asked, and his voice was small and scared and struck something within Dean.

Dean took his hand and rubbed gentle circles into it. “It’s okay,” he said quietly. “I know you’re not gonna want to hear this, but it’s part of being human. Like not knowing everything and…” he hesitated. “Falling in love. You’ll be okay, Cas,” he said, and he knew Castiel wasn’t the only one who desperately wanted to believe it.

Castiel gazed at him. He should kiss Dean, or hug him, or promise him that he would take care of himself. But the flask he had tucked into his belt felt far heavier now, and instead he turned and vanished into the bathroom without a word.

The door locked behind him, but Cas triple-checked it before uncapping the silver flask. The liquid inside seemed to gurgle in anticipation and Cas hesitated, not for the first time.

He gazed absently at his reflection in the mirror. A crack in the corner spread out and reached his chest in tendrils that branched like the limbs of a tree. His hair was a mess and he looked sickly pale, dark circles under his eyes giving him every appearance of an insomniac.

The potion’s swishing sounded more insistent now. He had to drink it, or risk being found out as a fraud by most angels. Only Hadraniel, Zipporah, and Hannah knew the full truth of the potion; he would almost certainly be killed should Ezra learn what he was doing, or Judith.

He steeled himself and pressed the flask to his lips. He tipped it back and let the viscous liquid slide down his throat as if it knew what to do, as if it had a mind of its own. He shuddered and squirmed as the dose slipped down to be absorbed into his bloodstream.

A cough had Castiel doubled over without warning, throwing him into a fit of hacks and gasps. He couldn’t stand up straight, barely able to keep breathing as the bout of coughing overtook him. Was he really getting sick? Was the potion losing its strength?

At last he could stand upright and breathe properly. He tried to calm himself, straightening his shirt.
and combing shaky fingers through his hair, but he froze when he saw his hands, streaked with the shiny wet red of blood.

His reflection had the same sticky scarlet staining his lips and dripping down his chin, some clumps so thick the red had gone almost black. Castiel’s hands had caught gobs of the stuff during his coughing fit.

Maybe trusting Hadraniel’s judgment was a grave mistake.

Castiel hurried to wash his hands and face clean of the red stain, before it could set and leave red-brown marks on him. The blood clumps melted away in the water, turning it a sour yellow color before swirling down the drain.
Crowley’s shirt was soaked through with sweat, and his hair stuck obstinately to his forehead, the damp strands refusing to be pushed out of his eyes. He had to have been at this for half an hour; it was exhausting, but he had to keep pushing himself. Fuck Castiel and signing him on for frigging angel combat sessions.

His opponent didn’t seem to have any issue with the extended fight. Her vessel’s long red hair was pulled back in a ponytail. Apparently angels couldn’t sweat, either, because her skin wasn’t sticky or shining. She hadn’t slowed down, even as the sparring grew more heated. Crowley, damn his humanity, was aching and sore from the intensity.

Finally the fucking angel disarmed him. He panted as he retrieved his blade and walked out of the makeshift area to cool down. “Throw me into a snowbank,” he said to Dean as the other man passed him a towel. “How much you want to bet she was cheating?”

“Are you that desperate for an excuse?” Dean taunted. “You’re just out of practice, old man. I took her down in ten minutes.”

“I call bullshit.” Crowley poured water over his head, sighing as it cooled his skin.

“Swear to God, did it just before you came downstairs. There’s a reason you’re training. You need it.” Dean shrugged. “Keep at it, you’ll get in shape.”

He saw Cas at the bottom of the stairs, waving him over. “Gotta go,” he sighed. “Duty fucking calls.”

Cas smirked when Dean met him. He wasn’t wearing a shirt, and there was no reason not to appreciate the view. He didn’t have the energy to comment on his strong biceps and soft stomach and beautiful skin — no. “I need you to come with me to a meeting,” he said, dragging his attention from where Dean’s hipbones disappeared under his jeans. “You’re more or less in charge of training our recruits by now, you may as well come to the meetings.”

“You want me to be a goddamn pencil pusher now?” Dean asked irritably. Then he caught Cas’s eye and understood what he was actually asking. And hell, if Cas wanted to be able to spend time with him, who was he to argue? “Give me a minute to put a shirt on.”

“Don’t,” Cas said, his voice low to avoid being overheard. “I want them to be uncomfortable. By all means, make them squirm.”

The two of them reached the meeting room just in time to be late, earning glares from all around the table. “Sorry about my, uh, state of undress, or whatever,” Dean said coolly, directing his words at Hadraniel and their steely gaze of disapproval. “If I knew this was a black-tie kind of thing, I might’ve put a shirt on.”

Castiel hid a smile as Dean took the seat across from him. If Cas couldn’t afford to cause trouble himself, Dean would have no such problem. His nerves hummed.

They went over the current weapons stocks, recruitment data, and Cas had the chance to stand up
and talk about his agents and what they had uncovered about the location of Heaven’s door and Azrael’s forces, finally. In the week since their return from Washington, Hadraniel had headed off anything Cas tried to say, like they know about the kissing, and his secret healings of Dean.

As it was, Zephaniah had brought him a report claiming that the door’s location was narrowed down to the Mojave desert; the very same that Hadraniel and Zipporah tried to mount an attack on months ago. Nemuel, a double agent who infiltrated Azrael’s Earthly garrison, estimated at least a hundred angels guarded the place where the door lay and the land around it.

He ended by asserting that they needed to recruit more angels if they wanted to take the fight to Azrael.

The meeting finished like it began; with Dean putting his feet up on the table and demanding to know when this would be over. Dean had made a point of interrupting every angel but Cas; he was making himself a target, but it pulled the eyes of the other members of the council away from Cas, and they agreed that it was hilarious to watch their growing frustration with one stubborn human.

The boardroom had cleared out, but Castiel and Dean were still there; Dean lounged in a swiveling chair, bored.

“Has anyone offered to pull the stick out of that Judith’s ass by now? I’d be glad to help.”

Cas shuffled through a stack of paper, barely listening.

“Wait, it’s almost eight by now. Are we gonna eat or what?” Dean tried to get Cas’s attention.

“Dean, I have ten reports to get through tonight. You and Crowley go on without me.”

Dean frowned. “You sure you’re doing okay?” he asked. He’d been paying attention, and he was pretty sure Cas hadn’t been sleeping. And now he was skipping meals, acting like it was no big deal? “Don’t want you to work yourself to death.”

“I’m fine, Dean, don’t worry.” Castiel sat down at the long table and started combing through a report on a search for double agents within the base.

Dean hovered over his shoulder, hoping Cas would at least talk to him, but he finally just gave up. He needed to eat, even if Cas refused. He headed down to the fourth floor and mentioned food to Hannah.

“I’ll send someone with dinner for you,” she assured him tightly, glaring at him and his still completely bare chest.

He swung by the arena to grab his shirt, then returned to the private partitioned room. Crowley lay on his mattress with half-open eyes. “Go ’way, I’m too fucking tired,” he groaned on seeing Dean.

“Food’s on its way, I think,” Dean said. “Got to be eye candy for Cas today,” he added, sitting. Cas’s bed looked just as it had the night before when Dean fell asleep; if he’d gotten any rest at all, then Dean was a demon. “You think Cas is doing okay?”

“I don’t know,” Crowley said, shrugging. He rolled over, facing away from Dean, and yawned. “I’m exhausted, can you stop chattering in my ear?”

“He hasn’t been sleeping, and I don’t remember the last time I saw him eat.”

“Stop mothering him. He should know his limits by now.”
But Dean couldn’t help being worried. He hadn’t been able to admit it to Cas, but he could see something was wrong. These days Cas seemed to oscillate between loving, clever, wonderful Cas and angelic d-bag killjoy Castiel. How the fuck was Dean supposed to tell which was the real Cas?”

Honestly, the reason he couldn’t just up and ask Cas about it had a lot less to do with the angels around them and a lot more to do with how he felt about him.

Dean still couldn’t put the word out there in the open — he’d only felt this way a couple other times in his life, but it was the intensity this time around that was scaring him. His emotions were only this strong when it came to Sam, normally, but with Cas... it was a different feeling, but he felt it in his bones the same way he did with his brother.

He just wanted his angel back and happy and healthy. Cas would work himself to death before he failed these angels, but Dean knew it could never be worth Cas’s life.

“I don’t want to watch him burn out,” he said, and his voice broke embarrassingly on the words.

Crowley sat upright sharply. “You really love him, you bastard.” His tone was full of shock and disbelief.

Dean shook his head, closing his eyes — to hide from Crowley or to stop tears, he didn’t know. “Thought you already knew.”

“Of course you had to fall for him,” Crowley said bitterly. It was impossible to deny that he felt more than lust for Dean, but frankly he’d never even bothered to waste time thinking about the possibility. But there was Castiel, the son of a bitch who became fucking God trying to keep Dean safe, winning the hunter with Star Wars marathons in musty motels and kisses stolen in bar booths when they thought he wasn’t looking.

What a jackass.

Crowley frowned. There was some kind of a commotion going on outside their thin partitioned walls. “What’s going on out there?” he muttered, too exhausted to bother standing.

Dean narrowed his eyes and got to his feet, but before he had the chance to poke his head out, Cas ran in. “Dean, Crowley, arm yourselves, now,” he ordered, and ran back out as he drew his own blade.

They stared. Dean didn’t think Cas had ever used that tone with him before, one that sounded strained and forceful and almost like a general giving commands. He grabbed his blade and ran out from the makeshift bedroom as a crowd of angels gathered near the center of the open space. Crowley was right behind him, dragging his feet.

“What’s going on?” Dean asked breathlessly.

“We’re being attacked, Winchester,” an angel near him said scathingly.

Dean stuck his tongue out at them, knowing how childish he looked and not caring. His hand clenched around the hilt of his sword. “Awesome,” he muttered. Crowley groaned.

Weaving between the angels for a closer look, Dean came upon a small cluster of council angels who crowded around a blurry black-and-white screen. Surveillance camera.

Angels gathered around the outside of the base, crowding up close to the doors and forming groups. “Benjamin?” he heard Hannah say. Her voice was filled with the sound of betrayal, outraged.
At the front of the mass of enemies, one angel stood out to Dean. An angel with brown skin, thick curly hair, and a fiery sword.

“Shit,” he said under his breath. He grabbed the back of Cas’s coat; he was among the angels inspecting the screen, but he moved just out of Dean’s reach and climbed up onto a table. “They’re coming,” he said. “When they attack, don’t hesitate,” he called out above the hushed whispers of angels. “Remember, we are defending, not attacking. Keep yourselves alive.” His clear blue eyes met Dean’s jade green. “I want to see all of you safe when this is over.”

That was asking a hell of a lot in Dean’s opinion, but the message got across: they couldn’t afford to lose too many followers.

They all readied their weapons, preparing for the inevitable.

For once, the entire base was dead silent. No one could raise their voice for fear of drowning out the sound of a door creaking open or footsteps on the tiles.

The doors burst open, and the base dissolved into chaos. Total silence erupted into a dull roar of battle, and there was no way of keeping control of the rallying soldiers around them.

Dean pushed past several angels, running away from the fighting and toward Cas, who had slipped from the tabletop and removed his coat.

“Cas!” he yelled, trying to get to him. Angels ran in every direction now, cutting him off and letting Cas disappear into the crowd. “Cas, where the fuck are you? Castiel, you get your ass here right now or I’m never speaking to you again!”

He caught sight of him again, mirror-bright sword in hand. “That’s a little harsh, don’t you think?” Cas said, grabbing his shoulder. “What is it?”

“Azrael. Cas, she’s here.”

His eyes widened. “Are you —”

“What do you think?” Dean asked. “Of course I’m going after her.”

“Her right-hand man, Benjamin, he’s here too. He was in interrogation - Dean watch for him, he’ll kill you without a second thought. Horribly.”

“So would Hadraniel,” Dean joked halfheartedly, then turned to enter the melee.

“Dean, be careful,” Cas whispered, but Dean was already lost in the fight. Everything had turned into a mess of vessels and flashing silver blades. He could hardly tell who was ally and who was enemy in the cramped space.

Castiel killed two angels before he stopped trying to count, forcing himself to forget. The guilt might kill him if he knew how many died at his hand.

A burst of heat near him made Castiel drop to the floor. Holy fire scorched several angels, but thankfully missed him. Cas stood and kept fighting his way toward Benjamin, an angel whose vessel was broad-shouldered and taller even than Sam, with pale skin that stretched tight over hard muscle. Like he was only barely contained by the huge man’s body.

Across the room, Dean had uncovered a niche of weapons storage. He grabbed a contained of holy oil and pulled his lighter from his pocket. He lit the oil up and threw the clay bottle at an angel
coming at him. He went up in smoke in less than a second.

Dean could just make out Crowley through the smoke from the burning angel, stabbing his blade through an enemy angel’s head. Crowley ducked a wicked silver sword and thrust into his new attacker’s stomach, running before anyone else could come for him.

Fumbling for another bottle of holy oil, Dean managed to get it open and spilled it on the floor in a straight line. He tossed his lighter into the oil and it immediately went up in flames. He smiled at his work before running off into the fight.

Castiel swung his blade into the throat of another enemy, pulling it loose in time to see another angel bearing down on him. He sliced their chest with a backhanded stroke. There were cuts all over Cas’s skin, bleeding, but he didn’t think any were too deep.

“Castiel,” Benjamin said, sounding almost surprised to see him. “I heard you were dead.”

“I’m not as incompetent as so many of my kin seem to believe.” Cas lunged for him, blade ready, but Benjamin countered him roughly and sent painful reverberations into his hand. Cas swung back without hesitating, and there was an awful clang when Benjamin blocked again.

Dean was fighting some angel off when he saw her. Azrael was fighting Hadraniel and Zipporah, her vessel almost glowing with the heat of her fire. Dean imagined the entire base going up in smoke, and Cas with it. He couldn’t let that happen.

He ran toward the three of them without a second thought, coming up behind Azrael. He winced as his breath came heavy with effort, giving away the element of surprise. Azrael blocked his attack easily.

Panting, Dean raised his blade again and struck. Azrael continued to deflect him effortlessly. Dean was already exhausted, but this shit was fucking impossible. He hit the drown when Azrael’s sword cut after him, but it hit his side hard. He fell to the floor as blood spilled from the wound, and Azrael stood over him.

Hadraniel attacked Azrael again, and Dean forced himself to his feet, but he knew he was in no shape to go on fighting. God fucking damn it, she was right there and he could do nothing about it, dizzy from blood loss already. He stumbled toward a wall, his blade ready to fend off any other attacker, though he had a .01 percent chance of actually being able to fight. He needed to be healed, fast.

Near the center of the room, Cas whipped his blade around quickly — one of only a few advantages to the shorter weapon was its lightness. Hannah had joined him, her dark hair flying around her as she darted in and stabbed at Benjamin’s back and lags. Focused on taking Castiel, Benjamin didn’t have a chance to bat her away.

Suddenly, he brought his long, weighty sword up to clash against Cas’s blade and then turned, smacking Hannah with the flat of the blade and pushing her aside. Cas saw at least five large gashed in the taller angel’s body when he turned.

Cas struck again, trying to catch him off-guard. He met Benjamin’s blade on the crossbar at the hilt. The force sent more tremors into his hand, and he nearly dropped his blade.

In that moment of hesitation, Benjamin shoved, forcing Castiel’s blade aside. It skittered across the floor, and Benjamin kicked out, knocking Cas’s legs from under him.

“Fuck,” Cas gasped, winded.
Benjamin smiled. “The famed Castiel doesn’t seem so wonderful now.”

Castiel fumbled at his thigh hurriedly as Benjamin leaned on his sword. “Whatever you say,” he said, and pulled the gun loose. He cocked it and pointed straight at Benjamin’s chest.

The angel scoffed. “Desperation. You’re weak, Castiel.”

In a split second, Castiel aimed just a little higher and pulled the trigger.

*BANG.*

Ears ringing, Castiel stared at the angel standing over him. A perfect round hole oozed blood from Benjamin’s throat. He stared at Cas in utter shock before dropping to the ground, obviously in pain. Cas staggered to his feet and grabbed the angel’s shoulder, holding him upright. No exit wound; the bullet was still in there. He was suddenly incredibly fucking glad that Crowley had come up with the idea of melting down angel blades into more convenient ammunition.

Even if he’d been the first target.

Benjamin swayed, gurgling horribly on the blood that bubbled from his neck. Cas felt his stomach twist; he forgot, somehow, that Benjamin shared this body with an innocent human whose only crime was faith. He knew what Hadraniel would want him to do; keep Benjamin alive for interrogation, and wouldn’t it be ironic for the one who did such work for Heaven to go under the knife himself.

He cocked the gun again, pressed the muzzle to Benjamin’s temple, and fired.

The body hit the floor and blazed with ethereal light. Castiel closed his eyes against the heavenly brightness. When he opened them, he was met with the sickening image of two crumbling, broken wings imprinted, seared into the floor.

Dean saw it, he was close enough Cas and Benjamin that he could hear what was said between them. More importantly, he could have sworn that Cas’s eyes had... that was impossible. He wasn’t an angel anymore, so how the fuck could his eyes have glowed with grace?

He’d kept a hand pressed against his wound throughout the battle as he watched angels on both sides fall. Then he made the rookie mistake of lifting his blood-smeared hand to check it. The sudden lack of pressure on the cut let blood gush freely, and Dean lost consciousness.

His eyes opened slowly. The whole place was a mess. A few angels were attempting to douse the fire he’d set. Papers were strewn everywhere, and bodies littered the floor. Some had wingprints scorched into the tile around them. Dean began to hyperventilate as he scanned those nearest to him for Cas, only relaxing slightly when he couldn’t find him.

Crowley — when had Crowley even gotten here? — put one hand on his chest, making him settle back. “Sorry, everyone’s busy, but I’ve got you for now.” He was binding Dean’s wound with what looked like strips torn from his suit jacket.

“Cas,” he managed, but his throat was too dry to say anything more.

“He’s okay,” Crowley said. “He killed Benjamin, and Azrael and her followers left.” He tied off the bandage.

Dean nodded his understanding. Cas was alive. That was good, at least. He wanted to ask about the other leading angels, but his voice refused to cooperate.
The angels were fumbling to reorganize. Many had been killed, but Castiel could see that more than half had survived. He was with Hannah, who bounced around him with admiration in her eyes. She acted like he wasn’t the asshole who dragged Dean to a meeting simply to disrupt it, but a hero.

Worry for Dean filled his mind, no matter what Hannah did to grab his attention. Was he okay? Was he even alive? He didn’t know if he would be able to keep going if Dean was one of the bodies on the floor.

His cuts were already gone, leaving behind unmarked skin. He slipped his trenchcoat back on.

“What do you want?” he asked Hannah. “I could be doing something useful right now.” She ignored him, talking about the honor he had earned from this battle.

“I know, I know, glory and favor,” he muttered, but he couldn’t help casting his eyes over the bodies on the floor, wondering if Dean lay there, or Crowley.

Castiel saw movement at the opposite wall. Crowley was there, so at least he was alive. He was bent over something, or someone. When he moved away for a moment, Cas let out the breath trapped in his chest. Dean sat against the wall. He looked injured, but he was still moving. Dean was alive.

Hadraniel appeared by his side, moving in silence. “Come with me, Castiel,” they said, sounding almost proud.

He cast a look back at where Crowley tried to heal Dean with human methods while surrounded by angels, and felt Hadraniel’s nails digging into his arm. “Come on, Castiel.”

Dean struggled to his feet, gasping in pain as his side ached. “Shit,” he muttered. “Can’t you grab an angel and lay some mojo on me?” he asked Crowley.

“They’re busy,” Crowley said mutinously.

Dean staggered over to an angel and tapped them on the shoulder. “You wanna fix me up?” he said, pointing at his side. The angel ignored him and swept past. He sagged. “God fucking damn it.”

He needed to get to Cas, but he wasn’t keen on passing out before he could talk to him. He knew he saw Cas’s eyes blaze with grace right before he passed out, no matter how crazy that was. Dean just wanted to get the facts. It had to be a trick of the light, right?

But he thought of how weird Cas had been acting, and he wasn’t so sure what was real anymore.

There he was, standing in the center of the room amid the other council angels. All except Ezra, who had his throat slit in battle. Together they went toward the stairs, and Dean knew they were going to the meeting room.

He gathered all his will and began the long, stumbling walk to follow Cas.

Castiel shifted uncomfortably as Hadraniel praised him. “We knew you had some angel left in you,” they said, voice filled with pride.

“I didn’t,” Cas murmured, rather than try to deny it.

“Your strength in this battle only cemented our faith in you,” Zipporah said, though she didn’t have as much conviction as Hadraniel, and she was already drinking — from celebration or mourning, Castiel didn’t know which.
Judith nodded. “I believe you truly are one of us.” She sounded reassured.

Jeremiah spoke up. “I owe you a sincere apology,” they said. “I thought you were a double agent, a spy. I misjudged you.”

“I forgive your doubts, Jeremiah, I’ve had many of them myself,” Cas said, drawing a startled laugh from Zipporah.

“We’ll have to arrange a mourning ritual for Ezra, and the rest of our fallen kin,” Hadranriel said.

Hannah frowned. “Are you including Azrael’s supporters in that, or only ours?” she asked. Castiel was reminded that Hannah once had close friendships with some of Azrael’s followers.

Judith set her shoulders. “Why should we honor them, when they attacked us and tried to murder in cold blood?” she demanded.

“Because you would want the same of them, had they won this fight, and Azrael is not stupid enough to disrespect her own rituals,” Castiel pointed out, soberly reminding them that Azrael was still Angel of Death, wings or not.

Castiel knew an angel had been given the title, sent to perform the wrathful acts that God commanded, or was said to have commanded, anyway. If Azrael wasn’t lying, and Jeremiah had confirmed that she was not, then she was the angel who smote Egyptian babies on the night of Passover, who razed Sodom and Gomorrah, among so many other smaller disasters Castiel could not begin to count.

Hannah watched him eagerly, as if she was waiting for him to continue. It was nice of her to act like she cared about him now, but all that really interested her was the angel she wanted him to be.

Castiel continued up the stairs with his kin, fighting down the swirling sickness in his stomach. He knew that he’d drawn on too much of the potion’s power during the fight, that he’d risked his own health against Benjamin.

But Father, for a short time he’d felt like a real angel again. And now that feeling was gone as if it never was, and all he felt like was a fraud.

He reached for the flask, uncapping it and hoping he wouldn’t have a coughing fit as he had every other time he took a dose last week. Cas couldn’t be exposed like that, but he also couldn’t let the potion’s effects fade, as only a daily dose would. Jeremiah already eyed him with suspicion, and that had only just gone away after this battle.

He tipped the flask back, but nothing oozed into his mouth and down his throat this time. He frowned. Was it empty? He could have sworn there was more of this disgusting goo left to drink.

“Castiel,” Hadranriel began, as they entered the boardroom.

Something in their voice put Cas on his guard immediately. “Yes?” he asked, trying to seem the picture of the unaware.

“Not doing so well, are you?” they asked him.

Castiel swallowed. “I have no idea what you mean.”

“I knew this might happen,” Hadranriel said. “The potion is killing you.”

Cas shivered.

Zipporah spoke up. “The one Hadraniel cooked up to give Castiel the seeming of grace.” She swigged from a bottle and smiled sourly. “This stuff tastes worse if you drink it after absinthe.”

Jeremiah straightened. “What?”

Cas cleared his throat. He had no other choice but the truth. “I’m not — I’m not an angel,” he confessed.

Hadraniel tilted their head. “Ignore them,” they commanded, and Cas flinched at the harsh order.

“What —”

“Look at me, Castiel,” Hadraniel said. “I know the truth. The potion, used regularly, is as poisonous to you as a snake’s venom. It will kill you, unless you take drastic action.”

“And I suppose you have just the solution,” Cas said sarcastically. “What happens if I stop drinking it?”

“The effects will fade, if you stop,” Hadraniel admitted reluctantly. “But you will be weak, and I’m sure many of our ground-floor angels would be interested to hear that you have mislead them for weeks, and that a human was giving out their commands.”

Castiel closed his eyes. “What is your other option?” he asked. He would try to avoid dying, if possible.

Hadraniel nodded at Hannah. Slowly, she produced a slim glass vial, stoppered and filled with a bluish-white, swirling substance that Castiel recognized immediately. “This is the grace of Simiel, one of Azrael’s fighters.”

Cas stared. He should have known it would come to this, from the moment he saw the ill effects of the potion on his body. “You want me to take another’s grace,” he said slowly, like a child who didn’t understand.

Castiel coughed suddenly, the remnants of potion within him rising up. When he glanced at his hand, it was streaked with blood.

He could be a real angel again, not just a shadow-puppet imitation. He knew his wings would be as broken as the rest, but he could be himself again.

Wasn’t that supposed to be a good thing?

He thought of returning home, to Heaven, to be his shining, glorious, holy self. He could put Heaven to rights in person, instead of hoping for the best.

Castiel could be a warrior of God again.

And he would lose Dean.

How could he choose between Heaven, beautiful, shining Heaven, and Earth and a life with Dean — no. A life as a human. Ultimately, Dean could still fall out of love with him, if that was even how far his feelings went. Life as a human was wonderful in itself, alongside the Winchesters he could be
a warrior of humanity even if he wasn’t with Dean.

“Cas?”

His heart stopped. Dean stood in the doorway, one hand putting pressure on his bandaged side, the other propping him up on the doorframe.

“Are they telling the truth?”

Sickness rose in Cas’s chest, and he stopped breathing. Dean knows Dean knows Dean knows. He was frozen in place, the same two words repeating in his head over and over. Dean knows.

“I... I’m sorry, Dean. It’s true.” His head buzzed, he couldn’t think. *Dean knows, he thinks you’re pathetic and weak, he hates you, he has to, you’ve been lying to him for weeks.*

“And what do you want?” Dean asked softly. Crowley’s head appeared over his shoulder.

“I don’t...” His breath was coming in short gasps. He could feel tears in his eyes. This was the end of it. Dean would cut him loose now, knowing that Castiel would willingly lie about something like this, hide it from him intentionally. And *God,* Dean would feel *violated,* knowing that the man he kissed had been carrying this secret all this time.

Castiel didn’t know what to do. Fuck him, he always had an option, but he couldn’t even breathe.

“You listen to me, you son of a bitch,” Dean said, and Cas flinched. Dean stared at him, shocked for a moment. His eyes were red, as if he were holding back tears, and Dean realized suddenly that Cas was afraid to hear what he had to say.

“You son of a bitch,” he repeated. “I don’t give a flying fuck what you choose. If you want to take this angel’s grace and turn into a winged dick again, be my guest. I’m not gonna ditch you because you want to be with your family, too.” Dean took in the look of utter shock on Cas’s face before barreling forward.

“And if you want to stop pretending, if you want to give up being an angel forever, then I will be right here by your side. I don’t care which one. I can’t let you think I’ll leave you or hate you for taking back your halo. As long as you don’t leave me for angels who only keep you around ‘cause they think you’re useful. You are so much better than them.” Dean swallowed, watching Cas’s reactions carefully.

“You’re smart, smarter than Sam sometimes, and I swear to God that kid’s a frigging genius, and you’re so fucking snarky and you know how to make me laugh even though I don’t remember how, and you had the balls to tell God himself to fuck himself and your hair does this stupid thing where it looks like sex hair even when all you did was sleep, and your body fits perfect against mine except when your arm gets stuck under me,” he took a deep breath, still running his mouth in a panic, “and when you smile you have dimples and it’s not really fair and you learned how to kiss *incredibly* fast but goddammit, I’m in love with you so if you think I’m gonna tell you to fuck off you’ve got another think coming.”

He cut himself off suddenly. *Fuck.*

Cas stared at him with eyes that had gone very round, stunned.

Hadraniel quivered with a strange sort of shock and rage.

Judith’s mouth had dropped open.
Hannah’s lower lip shook as if in disappointment.

Jeremiah had a hand on their angel blade.

Zipporah just straightened up out of her slump, a look of vague interest on her muddled, half-drunk face.

Dean swallowed hard. “So, uh. Do what you want. Just. Um. I’m not planning on letting you leave me behind any time soon.”

“Say —” Cas squeaked, his voice a good two octaves above his normal gravelly pitch. He cleared his throat. “S-say that again?”

Dean shifted, knowing that every fucking angel had their eyes on him now and he could feel Crowley poking him in the back, trying to prod him into speaking. He wanted to tell him to fucking stop because it hurt his side, but his eyes fixed on Cas’s and he managed to stammer through a very dry mouth, “I’m. Uh, I’m sort of, well, very, I’m very in love. With. With you.” He released a shaky breath.

This was nowhere near how he thought he would tell Cas.

Then Cas crashed into him, hands grabbing him tight and pulling him into a kiss.

For a moment, Dean didn’t know what to do, taken completely aback by that response. Cas had been so distant these last weeks, their kisses so few and far between and never as intense as this.

Maybe it was the blood loss from the wound in his side, but Dean was getting dizzy just kissing.

Crowley was frozen in place. He’d seen the two lovebirds kissing before, of course, but to hear...that, and then see this — it was almost too much. He was human, with human feelings, of course, but obviously he wasn’t going to Heaven after breaking another fucking commandment. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s wife, or some shit like it. Not that Dean was Cas’s wife, but clearly the sentiment was there, where Crowley had no such thing to keep him warm at night.

Crowley looked into the air past the happy couple, trying to ignore the ache in his chest that had nothing to do with any physical harm. His sight settled on the only angel who remained seated.

Zipporah gazed at Cas and Dean with a look that Crowley would call sorrow, if it wasn’t completely uncharacteristic of angels to feel sorrow. And something Crowley knew instantly for regret, whether angels were supposed to understand regret or not.

Dean let himself get lost in kissing Cas, letting the moment stretch out and knowing he would be able to hold his breath just to make it last longer.

He didn’t know the last time he’d felt this way. Happiness was pretty fucking hard to come by for a hunter.

Only one thing tainted the kiss, and it tasted like iron. The blood that came up when Cas coughed still lingered in his mouth, and Dean wanted to scream at the angels, knowing they manipulated Cas into doing this, that Cas had been in pain, hurting and lying about it, because he hadn’t been able to tell.

Maybe he’d just wanted to believe that everything, for once, was at least semi-okay.

Cas pulled out of the kiss just long enough to breathe and meet his eyes in a silent question. Did you
mean it?

And Dean nodded.

God, Cas could kiss like nobody Dean knew. He gave and took just the right way, every suck on
Dean’s lower lip giving way to an invitation past his lips to take that kiss further, finding some kind
of rhythm in his own need and building it up to a peak.

At the back of his mind, Dean thought they must look disgusting to the angels around them, not to
mention Crowley.

He could hear the angels muttering angrily amongst themselves, and it occurred to Dean that maybe
kissing Cas in front of the bastards who’d rather have an angel, not a lovesick human, was a not-so-
great idea.

Nervously, Dean started to back off, pulling away from Cas gently. He didn’t want to freak him out,
but he couldn’t just ignore the dissatisfied, ominous whispers further inside the room.

He tugged on Cas’s jacket, then broke the kiss completely.

As he moved back, he realized those voices had gone completely, utterly quiet. Then Crowley
shouted.

Dean heard the sound of a knife sinking into flesh, and Cas’s eyes went wide, that endless blue only
a thin ring around the black of his pupils.

Cas gasped breathlessly, stumbling forward, and Dean saw Hadraniel standing there, hands empty
and eyes steely and cold, their angel blade buried in Castiel’s back.

Hadraniel stood perfectly, rigidly straight. Their army fatigues had been ripped during the battle, but
somehow they’d repaired in the time since — Dean didn’t know why he would notice that, of all the
things to notice.

They took a step closer to Cas, who labored for breath on the floor, and spat on him.

Dean punched them in the face. The angel didn’t even react.

“Would any of you side with this — this disgusting perversion?” Hadraniel demanded, turning to
face the other angels. They denied it with varying intensity; Judith and Jeremiah seemed completely
assured that Cas was an abomination, while Hannah hesitated a moment. Zipporah lazily shook her
head, as if she hadn’t been watching them like a hawk.

Hadraniel seemed to know that Dean was about to stab them, because they struck him suddenly in
the side and forced him to drop his weapon. Then they crouched down next to Castiel, calm as if
they hadn’t just stabbed him in the back. “You’re no better than the Nephilim abominations,” they
said, and Crowley caught a flinch from Zipporah. “You’re filthy, Castiel, so covered in the muck and
stink of humans you would rather have them over your own kin.”

They stood and held their hand out to Hannah. “Give me the grace,” they said.

Hannah hesitated.

“Give it to me,” Hadraniel repeated coldly.

She dropped the vial in their hand.
Hadraniel ran their fingers over it gently, then threw it to the floor and stepped on it, crushing the glass under their thick army boot. The blue-white grace swirled out and faded in the air, spreading out across the floor and turning the white tiles into something translucent, sparkling and clear; the dull stone turned to diamond before their eyes at the touch of the grace.

“Castiel is a disgrace,” Hadraniel murmured. “This is his payment.”

Anger and panic jolted through Dean’s veins. He was so stupid. His traitor mouth decided that now was the time to say the fucking L-word, and his sentimentality had gotten the better of him. This was why he never said it. It never ended well.

Hell, even just loving someone put them on the death list. Mom, Dad, Sam, Bobby, anybody he let get too close to him had to die.

Hadraniel turned to Judith, still rigid and stiff. “I want them taken to our secure interrogation room. If any of them die there, so be it, but I would prefer to let our supporters put their executions to a vote.”

Hannah winced.

The word executions unfroze Dean. “You bastard,” he growled. “What the fuck did you do to him, how dare you fucking touch him?”

Hadraniel’s jaw tightened. “You are the only one here with an interest in touching your worthless slut,” they hissed. “If Castiel wants to play the whore for a human, a Winchester no less, then his death is not only just. It is necessary.”

Hannah looked unsettled by her sibling’s callous words, but said nothing. Zipporah just watched with the same look of mild, unassuming interest.

Cas could hear every word Hadraniel said. He should have known. He had known, but of course he let himself forget and lost his tight control at the worst moment. Cas could feel Hadraniel’s knife in his back, holding the worst of the blood back. It might be the only thing keeping him alive.

Judith stepped forward, bending to pick up Cas where he lay, struggling to breathe. “Don’t you fucking dare!” Dean shoved her away. Carefully, he picked Cas up, whispering in his ear, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I’m so fucking sorry.”

Cas shook his head weakly as Dean somehow managed to carry him, thankful — and not for the last time — that hunting was no sedentary lifestyle, that he could carry Cas.

“Get away from us,” he hissed at Judith, who watched him with wary eyes. Crowley stood paralyzed with shock behind him, but Dean’s movement nudged him into alertness.

Dean couldn’t take it anymore. “How dare you say you’re God’s lieutenants? You call yourselves good and righteous, but your grace doesn’t even deserve the name.” Dean snapped. “You’re soulsucking leeches, fucking parasites that cling to whatever’s strong enough to keep you standing. You call yourselves God’s warriors? Good to know warriors have less honor, less loyalty, than, than. . .”

“Demons,” Crowley supplied harshly, staring directly at Zipporah. He’d liked her. She seemed different. But she made no move to help them.

“Does calling Cas a whore make you feel better about being a useless piece of shit who gets off on being the only coward left standing?”
Judith led them down the hall, to the very last room. Dean’s arms hurt from carrying Cas, but he refused to let the fucking angel know that. She unlocked the door and pushed Crowley in roughly, but one look from Dean was enough to warn her away from doing the same to him and Cas.

She gave Dean an empty, vicious smile. “We’ll see you in a few days’ time,” she said. “If you live that long. The room is airtight. You should... pray that you run out of air before you are sentenced to death.” The door slammed shut behind her.
Resurrection

*Resurrection: the act of rising from the dead*

Dean couldn’t breathe. His throat had gone so tight that it was all he could do to stay fucking conscious.

They’d laid Cas down on the table in the interrogation room, a cramped space that was comfortable for two; with three, the place became worryingly warm in worrying short order. If Judith was telling the truth, the room was completely airtight. Dean guessed that angels just didn’t have a problem without fresh air.

He paced back and forth, trying to come up with a way out, a way to get the door open for a breath of cool, clean air.

On the floor, Crowley sat with his feet tucked under him, almost motionless. Dean was sweating — from worry or heat, he didn’t know.

Hours passed the same way — Dean tried to call Jody, then Charlie, then Kevin, but he couldn’t get through. Knowing the angels, his signal was probably blocked. But he could sure as hell watch the last hours of his life tick by on his goddamn cell phone.

He flicked through his photo albums, wincing at every picture of Sam. There weren’t many there, of course, but what hit Dean hardest was that there was only one of Cas, the one he used to make his fake IDs.

Whatever Dean did on his phone, he did walking, pacing around the perimeter of the room like he was getting something done.

Finally Crowley spoke up. “You know you’re using up more oxygen that way,” he pointed out quietly.

Dean glared at him, then slid down to the floor.

Cas had long since gone unconscious. Maybe that was better — he might last longer that way, with shallow breath and only the tiniest movements. The angel blade was still buried in his back, but without anything to keep Cas put together, Dean knew it would be stupid to remove it.

How he wasn’t dead yet, Dean could only guess. Most likely, Hadraniel had missed everything vital in their attack, so right now the pain had Cas out of it and the blood loss would kill him, not a fucked-up heart or intestines spilling their juices.


Crowley was next to him in a moment. “You alright?”

“Fuck off, I’ll be fine.”

“Whatever you say.” Crowley managed to get to his feet in spite of the ache in his bones. If Dean didn’t want his help, fuck him. Castiel needed real medical attention. Crowley half wished he were still a demon in that moment, just so Dean could make a deal for Cas. He would ask for only a kiss in
exchange, though he wouldn’t say as much to Dean.

For Christ’s sake — and Crowley thought that very wryly — the man was a stubborn jackass, but even he had to see that Cas would hemorrhage very quickly unless they did something. Leaving the wound exposed would foster infection, if nothing else.

Dean didn’t seem to notice what he was doing, staring blankly off into space. Crowley assumed he was doing the traditional, patented Winchester Self-Blame routine. Not that he could fault him for that, this time — he and Cas were fucking idiots with the shittiest timing ever.

Crowley rubbed his temples between tearing strips of cloth from his already shredded jacket. “The sacrifices I make for you,” he said under his breath.

He used what remained of his jacket to soak up the blood that pooled stickily on the curve of Castiel’s back, then muttered an apology. “Sorry, Cas, this is going to hurt.”

With that warning, Crowley pulled the angel blade from Cas’s back. Cas released a weak gasp, his eyelids fluttering. “Cas, can you hear me?” Crowley asked. Dean perked up.

Cas took a shuddering breath. “. . . hurts.”

“Damn fucking right it does,” Crowley said grimly. He tugged Cas’s coat off, but he couldn’t unbutton Cas’s shirt without rolling him over and possibly jeopardizing the wound — he gave up and ripped the white fabric apart. He thrust it at Dean. “Tear that up into strips,” he said.

Dean spurred into action, ripping the shirt into pieces and letting the bloodstained parts flutter to the floor. When he had a small stack of clean white strips, he wrapped them as tightly as possible around Cas’s chest, binding the wound tightly. Blood had already started to soak it, but at least they were doing something productive. The remains of Crowley’s jacket followed Cas’s shirt.

“Dean. . .” Cas said weakly.

Sure, Crowley thought irritably. I’m the one who got the knife out of your back, I’m the one who bothered to try to fix you, but no need to thank me.

Dean knelt so Cas could see his face from where he lay on his stomach on top of the table. “Right here, Cas.” He grabbed the hand that had slipped from the table and twined their fingers together. “Right here.”

Cas smiled. “Sorry about. . . you know.”

“Don’t fucking apologize. You’re a goddamn awesome kisser.” Dean pressed his lips to the back of Cas’s hand.

“But Sam. . .”

Dean shushed him and squeezed his hand hard. “So let’s assume we get out of here alive somehow.”

“Please,” Crowley said, caustic as always.

He ignored the sharp remark. “What would you wanna do?”

Cas thought on that, then found his answer. “There are things I don’t know yet, about being human.”

“Like?” Dean asked, and it was obvious on his face where his mind was.
Cas winced as Crowley put more pressure on the hole in his back than was strictly necessary. He knew about Crowley’s interest, but that was a low blow. “Pickup lines,” he said mischievously.

Surprise pulled a laugh from Dean, and he cracked a weary smile. Cas almost sighed. Thank God he could still smile in the face of death.

“Hey, uh, did it hurt when you fell from Heaven?” Dean asked abruptly, holding back another laugh.

Cas frowned. “Yes, of course it. . .” he began, confused. Then he saw the look on Dean’s face. He added, “But then again, I think it was worth it all the same.”

Dean raised an eyebrow. “Yeah?”

“Because I Fell for you.”

That was. . . wow. Shit. “Huh,” Dean said intelligently.

Crowley snapped, “Can you put aside the gooey love shit for a moment? You see, we’re pretty likely to be about to die soon.”

Cas frowned, stirring. “What?”

“There’s no air flow. We’ve got X amount of oxygen, and we’re kind of running low,” Dean said tightly. “We really should stop talking.”

Cas groaned as he shifted, sliding halfway off the table and almost falling the rest of the way. Dean and Crowley caught and steadied him, helping him over to the wall, where he slumped down and leaned against Dean. Crowley handed him his coat, which was somehow cooler than the hot air around them. He slipped it on, head pounding after even that minor exertion.

Had he ever felt so weak before? Maybe he’d been this helpless when he first became a human, but even then, he’d been able to fight to stay alive. He didn’t think it had ever been this bad.

On the other hand, Dean’s skin was cool on the warmth of his own, and he smelled like Dean, though admittedly more like sweaty Dean. He couldn’t make himself care about that. He was probably dying, after all.

Maybe that would fix the problem. If he could get into Heaven, he could find Sam and maybe convince an angel to, to bring them back to Earth. . .

Stupid. He was, in Hadrianiel’s words, “playing the whore for a human.” What angel wouldn’t have heard it by now, what angel wouldn’t already think he was the last dregs of Heaven?

He made a small noise of worry. More likely, Azrael would hunt him down in Heaven and devour his new-made soul, and those of Dean and Crowley, and maybe Sam, if he wasn’t gone already, and they would be completely powerless to stop her.

Castiel decided that he was the most foolish angel God ever created.

Apparently holiness was very subjective, he mused vaguely, knowing that the carbon dioxide buildup in the room was affected his ability to think straight. After all, if God created foolish angels, were humans also meant to strive for that ideal of foolishness?

He twitched involuntarily. God, why did humans have to be able to die from so many stupid little things? Half the plants on Earth looked exactly like edible ones, but would kill in a heartbeat. Take
fruit, for instance.

Cas tried to remember an example, but the dizzy feeling in his head was only getting worse, and he couldn’t tell if it was from the blood loss or from possible hypercapnia. He was having a very hard time breathing.

He had the mildly concerning though that this was a very bad sign.

Pressing deeper against Dean’s chest, his hand found the wetness of a bandage that had soaked through. Had that been there before? Cas couldn’t recall if he’d seen it earlier.

He turned to ask Dean how long his side had been wounded, but his tongue felt heavy in his mouth and Dean’s eyes had fallen closed and his breathing was very, very shallow.

“Crowley?” Cas somehow managed to mumble, but there was no response, and black smoke was creeping in at the corners of his vision.

He heard, or maybe hallucinated that he heard, a creaking from beyond the heavy door.

Wasn’t there something wrong, outside the door? Something about angels. . . yes. They were being killed by angels.

What a fucking shitty family he had.

Cas had the faintest idea that there was the sound of a door being unlocked close by, but he could no longer tell if it was real, or what he wanted to be true.

Then the door swung inward, hitting Dean’s leg. Cas expected him to jump up and swear at whoever opened doors so carelessly, but he didn’t even stir. Cas’s stomach dropped, but a moment later he felt slightly better. Cooler.

A chilly breath of air had swept in along with the door. The heat wasn’t stifling anymore.

Cas’s head hurt and his back throbbed with pain he’d only been mildly aware of until this moment.

Someone came around the door and saw them, slumped against the wall — Cas barely conscious, Dean and Crowley already out. Castiel’s eyes flickered up and back down, barely able to stay open for a second.

Then he felt a soft hand cup the side of his face, and he tried to twist away, but the grip tightened, holding him in place. His mind cleared the longer their skin stayed in contact, as if the carbon dioxide had never entered his bloodstream.

He blinked, focusing at last on the figure that knelt to press a hand to Dean’s cheek.

Zipporah had a wet stop on the front of her shirt, as if something he was drinking had dribbled down. Her eyes were clear and sharp, more alert than Cas ever remembered seeing them.

Dean groaned and shifted under Cas, blinking hard against the bright lights. “What the fuck are you doing?” he growled once he realized who was healing them. The angels must have decided on a punishment for them.

“What pulling your ass out of the fire.” She went to Crowley. “I’ll try to heal your wounds when I have the chance, but right now I don’t have the power or the time. We need to get out of here, and fast.”

Crowley finally woke, and Zipporah pulled him to his feet, then extended a hand to Cas. He gazed
“Are you insane?” he asked her. “Drunk? High?”

“I’m more clearheaded than I’ve been in months,” was her dry answer. “And I’d love it if my stint in sobriety was over as soon as possible. Hurry up.”

“Then why the hell do you think we would trust you?”

Zipporah sighed. “Well, first, you don’t have much choice, do you?”

Dean glared at her, but he couldn’t argue with logic like that. He got the feeling she just saved their lives from carbon dioxide poisoning, and it wouldn’t make sense to do that if she were just going to drag them down to be killed properly, with more fuss and feathers.

He shoved himself up until he stood, then helped haul Cas to his feet. His angel’s face was pale, probably from loss of blood. Dean was confident that he didn’t look much better, painfully aware of the gash in his side.

They followed Zipporah’s lead, past the meeting room. Cas’s blood was still staining the tiles — well, the diamond-encrusted tiles, now. Some of it had dried brown, but most of it was still sticky and viscous and all-around disgusting. Dean tried not to think about the hole in Cas’s back.

Zipporah hesitated at the elevator and the stairwell, facing them uncertainly.

“Stairs,” Dean said, too tense to be polite. “Angels use the elevator all the time, there’s no knowing who could stop it and catch us, even by mistake. No one in their right mind takes the stairs.”

He held the door open for them and then followed, listening nervously to their footsteps echoing throughout the stairwell. The noise was loud enough to make Zipporah shoot him suspicious looks.

Dean waved her forward, hoping she wouldn’t try to stop and question his decision. Just ‘cause she was saving their bacon didn’t give her the position as boss around here.

A resounding thump stopped him in his tracks. Cas’s legs had collapsed from under him, and his movements were slow and dazed.

“Oh, no. No.” Dean grabbed Cas by the waist, trying to hold him steady. They could limp the rest of the way if they had to. “No, you are not leaving me now. Not gonna happen.”

Crowley blocked Zipporah’s path down the stairs. “Fix him.”

She looked regretful. “I can’t, I don’t have the power, I told you. I can only do so much healing at once, and I used my strength to keep you three from dying.”

Crowley moved out of the way and went to help Dean support Cas. The three of them somehow managed to get down the last several flights of stairs without a catastrophe other than Dean twisting an ankle when he lost his footing for a second.

Zipporah hesitated at the first floor. The lobby waited for them, but there was no telling how many angels might wait out there. “We’ll have to run it,” she said. “Your car —”

“Where is she?” Dean asked.

“I drove it to the front.”

“You what?”
“Hang on, did you say we’ll have to run it?” Crowley demanded. “And what’ll we be, in the six-legged race?” He hoisted Cas up a bit, trying to get a better balance.

“I can try to run on my own,” Cas suggested.

“No way. You can’t risk it,” Dean snapped.

“I can do it,” he insisted. “It’s only a few yards, Dean, I’ll be fine.”

“I’m not gonna leave you behind.”

“You won’t have to.” Cas was unflinching, his face stony and resolved. “Don’t worry about me, Dean. Everything isn’t your responsibility.”

Dean caught his eye and, at last, he nodded. Zipporah pushed open the door.

The moments after that were a blur. Crowley bolted for the glass doors to freedom, completely losing track of Cas and Dean in the process. All he saw was the black hood of the Impala gleaming in the midday sun.

Dean stayed behind Cas, ready to grab him and drag him along if he stumbled. But Cas ran hard and fast, making Dean work to keep up. They swished through the doors, and Dean threw himself into the driver’s seat of his baby. Crowley was already waiting stiff and anxious in the front seat, and Zipporah held a bloody angel blade in her tight-clenched fist.

“Did you kill the fucking guards?” Dean asked in disbelief as he revved the engine and pulled the hell out of there.

Cas was breathing heavily, and Dean knew he had to be bleeding harder now, after his heart rate went up. “Can you heal him now?” he demanded.

“I can try,” Zipporah said uncertainly.

She got Cas to turn with his back to her, then pulled his coat away. Her hand glowed faintly, and she grinned. “Got it.”

“You can fix him?” Dean asked, forcing himself to keep his eyes on the road. How pointless would their escape be if they were immediately smashed by oncoming traffic?

“Yes.” Zipporah held her hand against the spot where Hadraniel’s blade had entered Cas’s body, and her mojo almost seemed to brighten. “It’ll take longer, but I can do it.”

Crowley fell asleep as Zipporah worked on Cas. Dean envied him. How long had they been up by now? Thirty hours? More?

At last, the healing was through. Dean pulled the car over to fill her up with gas a few minutes later, and shook Crowley awake.

Cas murmured something about being starving — Dean could only assume whatever that potion was, it stopped him needing to eat, but now it was catching up to him. “We’ll stop at a drive-through, pick up some burgers or something.”

True to his word, that was their next stop. After Dean relayed their orders to the poor guy stuck working at Biggerson’s, he twisted back to look at Zipporah. “You wanna explain why you broke us out of there?”
Zipporah sighed. “You’re out. Do you need any more explanation?”

“Yes.” To Dean’s surprise, it was Crowley who answered. “You didn’t act like the rest of them. Cas was practically fucking Dean’s throat with his tongue, and you didn’t even blink.”

Dean felt the heat of a blush rise on his neck and cheeks. In the mirror, he could see Cas’s cheeks pinken.

Zipporah closed her eyes. “‘Let he who has not sinned cast the first stone,’ ” she mumbled. “I need a drink.”

“I’d prefer a legitimate explanation,” Cas said dryly. Dean pulled forward to take their food from a skinny kid with several paper bags. He passed the food around; Cas had an entire bag to himself, stuffed with three burgers and two orders of fries.

“You’re disgusting,” Crowley muttered.

“I’m hungry,” Cas said defensively.

Zipporah didn’t bother unwrapping her food. “How could I hate him, when he followed in my path?” she asked listlessly.

Dean jerked around. “What?”

She thumped her head down on the back of the seat. “Long ago, shortly after the first true humans were made, I . . .” she shivered. “I went to Earth. In those days, it wasn’t forbidden, but after.”

Zipporah looked like she was staring at some horror none of them could see. “I met a human there. I, we — well. We created the first Nephilim together.” She turned away.

“Heaven cast down the angels who —” Castiel began, but Zipporah was already shaking her head.

“Michael banished and killed those who acted in lust,” she whispered flatly. “I was graciously given the chance to repent. I could return to Heaven and suffer. . . other consequences, because my actions were of love and not of desire. Provided I killed our child.”

Dean’s stomach dropped. Cas felt ice cold trickle down his spine.

“I did it,” she said, barely audible. “I killed him, this tiny little child — he never deserved what I did.” Zipporah cleared her throat. “So I understand it, how you feel. And I never forgot your humanity — Hadraniel would have pretended you were a full angel for eternity, given half a chance.”

“So you —”

“My child became a demon,” she whispered. “And it took so much, thousands of years, to regain Heaven’s trust. I will never be forgiven for this new betrayal.”

The car was completely silent. None of them seemed to know what to say to that.

“Thank you,” Cas said at last. “For saving us. I — I wish that Heaven never forced you to kill your child. But thank you, for all your help.”

Zipporah flinched at his words and said nothing.

Dean coughed. “Well. I’m gonna find us a place to stop,” he said. He needed sleep, and soon. Not to
mention, his side was really starting to get to him and he wanted to take some time with Cas.

Jack’s Bar and Inn could almost be called classy, if it wasn’t for the ‘home-brewed’ liquor that Dean suspected was moonshine. For what it was worth, the place had nice, log-cabin walls, and only eight or nine rooms. Their room was well-maintained for once, smelling only faintly of cleaning products and the air conditioner’s unused, musty scent.

Dean liked it. The beds were big enough that he and Cas wouldn’t struggle to stay on at the same time.

He immediately collapsed on one of the beds and found his way under the blankets with a sound of enthusiasm. Cas followed him with a long yawn, sinking into the mattress.

“Hey, Zipporah, can you, uh, patch me up?” Dean asked, his voice more of a murmur than anything. “I’ve got a slash through my side and a twisted ankle.”

She rolled her eyes. “As long as I can raid the bar on your tab while you sleep.”

“Deal.”

When he woke up, the first thing Dean noticed was the total absence of pain. The second thing was that someone was kissing his neck. “Jesus, Cas!” he mumbled. He tried to turn on his side to face him, but he realized too late that their legs were intertwined. The ensuing tangle took a few seconds to figure out, but once he and Cas were pulled apart, Dean looked at him. “What time is it?”

“Noon” Cas murmured, his face already pressed into the curve of Dean’s neck and shoulder.

“Fuck.”

“Please.”

Dean sat up, staring. Cas fought to smother his smile, but it shone through nonetheless.

“Did you mean it?” he asked, and Dean frowned. “Did I mean what?”

Cas sounded nervous. “When you said you love me. Was that serious, or did you just. . .”

Dean let himself fall backward, bouncing slightly on the mattress. “Trust me on this one, Cas. If I didn’t mean it, I don’t think I’d have said it.”

Cas’s lips were parted slightly, a little red from kissing Dean’s neck.

Dean raised an eyebrow. “You gonna sit there, or are we gonna make out now” He flashed a teasing smile before Cas leaned down to press his lips to Dean’s Before they met, though, Cas pulled back, gazing down at him, then climbed off the bed, smirking as if in a taunt.

“Jackass,” Dean said mutinously.

“You love it.”

A stupidly happy grin spread across Dean’s face. “You can fucking bet I do.” He went for a kiss, but Cas pressed a hand against his chest and stopped him. “What now?” he said — he would never admit he whined.

“If we’re going to do this, we need some things,” he said. “You have condoms, yes?”
Dean’s mouth opened, but it took a moment for him to form words. When he did, he found himself stammering. “You — really — w-what made you change your mind? Are you sure you’re ready?”

“I want you more than I want the approval of angels,” Cas said simply. “And I want to know how it feels when you fuck me into the mattress.”

“Oh.” Dazed, Dean sat down on the end of the bed.

Cas frowned, suddenly worried he pushed too hard. “You do want this, right?”

“Of course I do!” Dean said, almost offended.

“Then get out of my way and let me on the bed,” Cas said. He unbuckled his belt and began to undress.

Dean fumbled for lube and condoms in his bag, then climbed up to join Cas. “Fuck,” he breathed. With the heavy curtains drawn, it could easily be nighttime, and Dean felt like a goddamn teenager after the last few weeks of barely any talking, let alone kissing, let alone this. But oh, God, did those weeks make this moment feel like nothing ever had before.

He ran his hand down Cas’s body, almost exploring the skin he’d bared by removing his shirt. They would have to make time to find out everywhere Cas was sensitive and every way he liked to be touched, someday, but right now they had more pressing things to worry about. And knowing that he wanted a someday with Cas scared him far more than fucking him could.

He helped Cas hook his legs around Dean’s waist in a way that was comfortable for both of them, then he uncapped the bottle of lube. “Uh, this is my first time ever actually doing this,” he said. He’d researched the process, though, after he and Cas first shared a bed in the nonsexual way, in case it ever came up. Dean wanted to be safe, gentle.

He slicked his hands with lube and took a deep, wary breath. “This’ll probably feel really fucking weird.” Dean slipped a finger into Cas gingerly, wondering too late if he should’ve worn gloves or something.

Cas gasped. “Dean, that’s cold.”

“Sorry I didn’t spring for frigging warm-up lube, Cas,” Dean said, sarcastic. “In case you weren’t paying attention, I have a finger in your ass.”

“Is that what pillow talk is supposed to sound like?” his angel asked, voice so devoid of sarcasm that Dean almost took the question seriously.

“Oh, fuck you.”

“I thought you were going to. At least get started.”

Dean mused that he didn’t know where Cas learned to be so damn snarky. Then he nearly slapped himself. Of course, hanging around hunters all the goddamn time would do that to him.

He quickly learned how to shut Cas up. Just as his angel started to make a crack about how slow Dean was going, Dean curled his forefinger inside him, and the pressure turned his words into a moan.

“Do that again,” Cas said, voice low and heated and even rougher than usual.
Dean took as much time as he could preparing him, but he could tell that Cas was getting impatient.

Finally he pulled his fingers loose, and Cas let out an involuntary whimper at the sensation of emptiness. Dean snorted. “I’m never letting you live that down,” he said as he wiped his hand of lube, deftly put on a condom, and slicked himself up. Cas stuck his tongue out, but a moment later Dean was sliding into him, and Cas forgot what was annoying him.

This was territory that Dean knew pretty well. He kissed Cas before he started to move, shifting his hips slowly and deliberately. Cas’s hands wound in the bedsheets to anchor him as he tried to stifle the sounds that his mouth was so interested in making.

Dean picked up the pace just as Cas got control over his faculties again, and suddenly Cas swore.

“Fuck, Dean, yes. Mmm, shit, how are you doing that?” he demanded.

“Skill,” Dean panted. He was making every effort to contain his own obscene moans if only for the benefit of the neighboring rooms.

Cas barely even heard him, distracted by the rhythm of Dean’s dick inside him. “Jesus fucking Christ,” he gasped out. He wanted more, he wanted everything Dean could give him. Any worry he once had that Dean didn’t feel the same was washed away in the heat of intercourse.

Each thrust pushed Cas closer to the edge, and God, was he beautiful when he was close. Dean had never seen him quite like this, with his lips parted desperately and him making the most sinful sounds. His legs were wrapped tight around Dean, so tightly Dean wouldn’t be surprised if he found bruises there later.

Cas kept running his mouth, unable to stop himself, as he felt his climax building. Dean had lost all semblance of self-control and was moaning above him, mumbling encouragements that Cas would barely make out through his own gasps; “Yeah, Cas, doing so good, holy shit, you’re so beautiful like this, Cas, come on, you’re almost there, I can feel it.”

Dean snapped into him twice, one thrust right after another, and Cas let out an incredibly unholy moan, his desperate sounds turning into a stream of one alone: “Dean, Dean, Dean.”

Cas’s body went rigid under him, and he felt Cas’s ass squeeze around his cock. He knew immediately that Cas was coming. A few moments later, he went over the edge himself with nothing but a stifled gasp. Cas was already slumping, limp and languid.

They lay in silence for a few minutes. “Dean?” Cas said, breaking the contented quiet between them.

“Yeah?”

“I’ll have to kill more of my family, if we get into Heaven.” It wasn’t a question.

Dean wished he didn’t have to respond. “Probably.”

Cas’s voice was very soft when he spoke again. “And Sam may not even be there.”

That hurt more. “Yeah,” Dean said, the word barely a breath.

Cas closed his eyes and curled up against Dean. “I won’t kill if I can help it,” he said. “But I’ll do what I have to, to stay alive.”

Dean kissed the top of his head. “God, I hope we can do this.”
Cas opened his eyes and gazed up at the ceiling. “You’re not the only one.” He pressed his nose into the curve of Dean’s neck, nuzzling him for comfort.

Crowley had gotten up and left the room once the making out started, uninterested in watching the two of them lock lips for who knew how long. He found Zipporah at the bar, glaring at a glass of murky liquid that claimed to be whiskey.

Zipporah offered the glass to him, her face blank and distant.

He refused it silently. The bar was almost vacant, except for the shifty bartender who watched them with beady eyes as he washed the same glass over and over.

Crowley tried several times to get Zipporah to open up, but she never so much as said hello.

At last, he told her to come back to the motel room, that Dean and Cas were awake and that they should probably have a talk, about what the fuck they were going to do. Zipporah spun on him out of the blue. “I am not going to play in your frigging power games,” she said, cold and sharp.

“I have no interest whatever in luring you into a power game,” Crowley said honestly. “But we want Heaven to not be a murder house. And also we want Sam Winchester alive and well.” He stood up. “I would assume it would be pretty useful to you if we got you back into Heaven. Hell, if you help us kill Azrael and that fucker Hadraniel, I’m sure we’ll be able to convince most angels that you deserve another chance.”

“With more murder?” she asked caustically.

“Fine,” Crowley sighed. “Then consider it an opportunity to blow Heaven up. Turn the whole hierarchy on its head and leave nothing but ashes. Considering your history, that ought to appeal to your sense of justice.”

“There’s no way,” she said, but she let Crowley drag her back to their room.

Dean and Cas were talking quietly when they came in. “Oh, we were just about to go find you,” Cas said.

“I’ll bet,” Crowley said, glancing at their shirtlessness and damp hair, noting two towels puddled on the floor.

“We were talking,” Dean cut in. “And we’ve gotta figure out what the hell to do. I mean, God, I’m glad we’re alive and everything, but Sam — Sam isn’t and I don’t want to lose him any more than any of us want to watch Heaven fall apart.”

“To cut a long thought process very short, we have no chance of putting Heaven together at this point.” Cas sat up and rolled his shoulders, stretching with catlike grace.

Zipporah cast Crowley an I told you so look.

Dean’s mouth twitched, flickering between a carefully neutral expression and the one Crowley knew was genuine, a look that showed Dean was only a hair’s breadth from breaking down.

“I don’t even know if he’s there anymore,” Dean said, and his voice broke. Tears sprang to his eyes without permission. “He could be gone, totally gone, and I’d never know. It’s been radio silence from upstairs for months now. Bobby, Ash, Dad — I don’t know if any of them are okay. My fucking mom is there, fighting a battle that I swear to God we can’t afford to lose.”
Confessing had been the fucking stupidest move he’d ever made. They were *this close* to finding the
door to Heaven and mounting an attack on Azrael’s forces, and thanks to him, they had jack squat.

Sunlight shone through the windows, the completely wrong kind of weather for how Dean felt. He
*wanted* the goddamn thunder and lightning and whistling winds. That would have felt right. Even
the fucking sky should be mourning the last shot they had for bringing Sammy home.

“Are you just naturally pessimistic or did you get that way after years of wading through shit?”
Crowley asked sarcastically.

“I *swear* to God, I am not in the mood to deal with you, Crowley.”

Cas leaned back against Dean’s chest. “We aren’t alone, at least,” he offered unconvincingly.
“Hadraniel, and the others, I’m sure they’re preparing an attack on Azrael at this moment. Her
followers are weak after the last battle, especially with Benjamin…” He stopped. He’d forgotten
killing him. How could he have forgotten taking yet another life?

Another wave of guilt hit him. Dean forgave him for the lies — his exact words had been, “I guess
you learned from the best” with the stupidest grin on his face before he kissed Cas again — but the
mounting death toll among the angels was a weight that settled squarely on Cas’s shoulders, one he
couldn’t shake so easily.

“God you two sad sacks need to find a hobby. Take up knitting. Or gardening. Or making those
shitty scented candles.” Crowley settled into the room’s lone armchair, the faded upholstery forming
a black and white diamond pattern. “In the meantime, how thick are you?”

“Crowley —” Dean began tiredly.

“Shut it, no talking while the king is talking,” Crowley said. “Please explain why you think you can’t
pull this shit off.”

Dean sighed and started listing. “Because we have no angel mojo. We don’t know where the door is.
We can’t get through the door even if we can find it, we’ll be up against two factions of psycho
douchebags and half the souls in Heaven, we don’t know where Sam is, if he’s even still there —”

“You’re missing something very important,” Crowley said. “Crucial even.”

Cas rolled his eyes. “Maybe tell us before we get old?”

“What you’ve missed is this: you Winchester bastards never fucking lose.”

“God-Cas,” Dean countered.

“You beat Raphael,” Crowley pointed out. “And Lucifer, and Azazel, and Dick frigging Roman and
his band of body-snatchers, and you got out of Purgatory even though every other jailbreak took
serious mojo. You hitched a ride out of *Hell*. And,” he added, a little self-consciously, “You out-
gamed the King of Hell, at my own fucking tricks. I’d say that’s a damn good track record, wouldn’t
you?”

“Point being?” Dean asked.

“Point being don’t count yourself out yet. Listen,” he continued desperately, when Dean shook his
head. “I lost to you and your brother *even when I stacked the odds*! If I thought God had any interest
in playing the game, I’d think he was hiding aces up your sleeve. As it is, who’s to say the dealer
doesn’t have an investment in the winners?”
“Enough with the metaphor, thank you,” Cas said dryly.

“You’re Dean Fucking Winchester, you ass,” Crowley finished. “I’m pretty sure you’ve got a better chance than you think And don’t think I don’t see you, angel,” he added to Cas. “I think I remember you blowing up a certain angel yourself once upon a time.”

Cas’s jaw twitched. “So you think we’ll win, because we always do?”

“I figure you’re always the damn underdog, and if the underdog keeps kicking ass maybe there’s better odds than anyone is expecting.”

Zipporah watched them argue. “Obviously I should have been paying more attention during the Apocalypse,” she said. These Winchesters had never been her concern, of course, but maybe they should have been.

Dean frowned, surprised at how much sense Crowley made. That was new.

Really, looking at it from that perspective, he and Sam had some ridiculously lucky days. And hell, if they could hang on to that kind of luck, maybe they really could do this.

“I can’t say I believe you about God,” Cas was saying, “but there’s no way to give up here. If we do, we’re not just giving up; we’re putting Heaven and Earth in jeopardy just by doing nothing, Dean. As for our odds of succeeding, never tell me the odds. Crowley may be right.”

Dean narrowed his eyes at him. “Was that a fucking Star Wars reference?”

Cas smirked. “And I think you agree with me.”

He stared at Cas. When had his angel gotten to know him so well? "Well, I mean, you tried to make a reference, anyway."

Cas had kept talking. “If we let this go, at best Heaven ends up with a dictator who has no problem using souls —”

“— like Happy Meals —” Dean put in.

“At worst, Heaven collapses, the angels are still stuck on Earth, and we have billions of spirits dumped back on the Earthly plane with nowhere to go.”

Something in Cas’s words flipped a switch in Dean’s head. “That’s it,” he said. “Holy shit, that’s it.”

“What’s it?” Crowley asked, yawning.

Dean slid off the bed. “That’s how we do this. How we get into Heaven.”

Cas frowned. “How, exactly?”

“The souls. They’re breaking through the boundary, right? Like, that’s the whole problem. The spirits are breaking down the boundary. They can get through it. And Cas, Zipporah. You could take your vessels into Heaven, right? It didn’t mess with bodies, or anything?” Dean grabbed his duffel.

Zipporah stared. “You’re proposing we just breath through the boundary.”

“We wouldn’t even have to do too much work — the spirits would do all the breaking. We’d just . . . slip through the cracks.”
Dean hadn’t felt so hopeful in weeks.

“Our vessels go with us in Heaven, yes,” Cas confirmed. “But Dean, what you’re saying, it’s never been done.”

“Neither was getting out of Purgatory,” Dean pointed out. “Or stopping the Apocalypse.”

Crowley looked impressed. “And once we’re in?”

“Then we do whatever we can. We blend in with the rest of the souls, we’ll hunt down Azrael and Hadraniel and gank them and any bastard followers that get in our way, and try to find Sam.”

He felt a pang in his chest. The odds of actually finding him safe were tiny, and he knew that. Among all the billions of people up in the penthouse, what was the likelihood of actually being able to hunt Sam down?

On the other hand, if it would be almost impossible for Dean, it would have to be at least tricky for the angels.

Dean had to hang on to any tiny scrap of hope there was.

“So there’s a chance, right? It could work?”

Cas and Zipporah exchanged a glance. “It could, but Dean — it’s risky. Even if by some miracle we made it through, we’d have to fight like hell just to get to Azrael and Hadraniel, and we could still be killed up there,” Cas pointed out.

Dean shrugged, trying to hide that the idea worried him too. “Well, what’s life without a little risk?” he asked.

Zipporah shrugged. “If that’s everything, I’m going back to the bar to get plastered.”

“Sounds good to me,” Dean said. “Heaven’s waited this long. I guess it can wait a little longer.”
Redemption

Redemption: the act of atoning for one's sins

The early April day was unusually warm, the sun beating down on Dean as he finished tossing the last of their weapons into the trunk of his car. The Impala could really use a wash, her sleek paint job covered in a fine layer of dust kicked up from driving back roads.

Every few minutes he caught sight of faded, blurry figures wandering around him, but they never quite manifested into full-blown spirits. Heaven was going to hell fast, though, if he could see flashes of spirits for miles in any direction.

He heard someone clear his throat. Crowley leaned against the hood of his car, looking oddly uncomfortable.

“Dean?” he asked quietly.

“Yeah?”

“Zipporah says there’s a fifty-mile span about an hour’s drive out where the veil is barely holding. She tells me that’s our best shot at getting into Heaven.”

“Thanks.”

“Listen, I wanted to talk to you.” Crowley scratched the back of his neck, shifting his feet. “Do you remember what I was like, right after I was cured?”

“A jackass?”

Crowley made a face at him. “Yeah, thanks. But I was talking about. . . something else.”

Dean thought back to that night — God, it felt like years ago. “You were more polite than you’d ever been.”

“I was still a self-centered jackass, yeah, but I was already changing. Sam, he put me right, but I was still the man I was as a human. You and Cas are the ones who turned me into a team player.” He sounded as though he wasn’t sure whether or not to be resentful.

“What’s your point?” Dean asked. They needed to leave, and soon. An hour’s drive was another hour of everything on the line.

“My point is, you and Sam and Cas, you made me better than I was. And it’s. . . it’s fucking stupid, but thanks. I guess.” Crowley swung open the backseat door and climbed inside.

Dean didn’t know what to say. He’d been expecting something like ‘why the fuck am I doing this, why should I put my precious, lily-white ass on the line?’ But that was Crowley’s whole point. He wasn’t the same man Dean almost left chained to a chair in a church, all those months ago. “You’re welcome,” he muttered.

Cas and Zipporah left Jack’s Bar and Inn a moment later, and they slid into the car wordlessly. Cas could feel the tension in all four of them. After all this time, he was going home — no. Not home. Heaven. He finally had the chance to make amends. And if he did. . . it might be over.
And something was different in him now. His humanity didn’t feel so foreign and new. Fuck. Cas wasn’t afraid to be human, not anymore. He glanced at Dean. Cas loved being human. And maybe it wasn’t so strange after all.

They breezed into a small town at the edge of the danger zone. The spirits here milled around absently, seeming almost properly visible — only their faces were still blurred and messed up. They were in full color, shining bright.

Zipporah ignored them. “Come on, I can feel it — where the veil is thinnest,” she said, and led them to a large house painted light blue-gray.

The family inside hurried to put on coats and carry valuables out of the house, unaware that the six or seven ghosts indoors were nothing compared to the hundreds of thousands of spirits under the sky. They didn’t seem to notice the four people walking boldly into their home.

Cas grabbed Dean’s hand and squeezed before letting go. Zipporah paced through the house, stopping in the dining room. Even the air itself seemed to shiver and blur, like the illusion of water on the highway on a hot day.

“Hold on to me,” Zipporah said, her nervousness almost audible. “This will probably hurt.”

Dean took hold of Zipporah’s hand, closing his eyes in anticipation. Behind his lids, he could see her body glow with some impressive silver-blue mojo.

A moment later his eyes flew open, and he fell forward onto his knees and emptied his stomach. His insides felt like they’d been run through a blender. Dean wiped his mouth. “Thanks for the warning,” he said hoarsely.

Crowley, next to him, had just done the same, and it looked like Cas was barely holding back from tossing his cookies too. Apparently the veil was not meant to let people through. That tenuous line between Heaven and Earth had stretched just enough to let them through with only an urge to throw up.

Dean got to his feet and helped Crowley stand; Cas was already up, though he still looked a little green. He turned to see Zipporah leaning against the wall of the sterile white room they found themselves in. “Go on,” she panted. “I’m all . . . tapped out.”

“You want us to just leave you here?” Dean demanded.

“Better than getting you killed ‘cause I can’t even . . . walk.” Zipporah sighed, producing a small tinted bottle from her pocket and sipping. A vague smile lit her face, and she waved them forward. “I’ll be fine. Don’t die.”

Dean looked around as Cas took the lead. “This doesn’t look like Heaven,” he said in confusion. They were in what looked like endless white halls, crowded with people.

Cas shrugged. Heaven is more fluid than you imagine, Dean. Normally, a soul stays in their own heaven — when Ash let you into his, you moved directly from yours to his, but these halls are supposed to be for administrator use only.” Dean could barely hear him over the shouts and screams of the people around them. “They’re the boundaries between heavens, metaphysically speaking. The halls are here so maintenance can ensure each heaven stays contained.” They waded through the crowds of souls, most of whom didn’t seem to realize they were still breathing.

All around them, the people moved like waves, rising and falling with energy and rage. Dean shivered, knowing that Sam had been trying to calm these people. A mission like that had to be liek
trying to stop a fucking tidal wave.

He turned to Cas. “Any idea how to get to Bobby’s personal wonderland from here?” he asked, but then the wall next to him collapsed inward, and two people emerged from the rubble — after a moment of confusion, they joined the screaming ragefest.

“Bollocks,” Crowley breathed. “They’re gonna burn it all down.”

Cas’s jaw tightened. Then he grabbed Dean’s arm. “They’re here. The angels. Azrael — maybe Hadraniel too, I don’t know.”

Dean swallowed hard. “Then we’d better get to work.” He drew his angel blade and checked his belt for holy oil. Crowley has six or seven bottled hooked onto his own belt, and Cas had both a blade and a loaded gun with two extra cartridges. If they had nothing else to be thankful for, it was that the trunk of the car was always stocked with everything they needed.

The souls moved away from the angel blades, muttering and hissing in confusion. A thought occurred to Dean as the people cleared a path for them. Maybe they’d seen angel blades before, and knew how ruthless Heaven’s best could be, but they could tell the three of them were human. They didn’t attack; they simply watched.

Dean saw something that made his stomach drop quite suddenly. A shout ripped from his throat and he shoved past the hundreds of people around him. “Sam!”

He could see him, tucked up against a wall — he was a full head taller than most of the people around him. When Dean was closer, he saw Bobby, and Ellen and Jo, and a woman with long blonde hair.

“Sammy, I’m here!” he shouted, and came crashing through the crowd, Cas and Crowley totally forgotten behind him. His brother turned slowly, then his eyes widened.

Sam looked like he’d just had his feet knocked out from under him. “D-Dean?”

“Yeah, Sam, I made it just in time for the party,” Dean said. He clapped Sam into a bear hug, but it took a few moments for Sam to respond.

“Dean, are you dead?” Bobby asked. “If you are, I’m gonna kill you.”

“No, no, it’s complicated. I’ll explain later. Ellen, Jo, how are you?” He hugged each of them. As Cas and Crowley caught up, he took a step back and saw the blonde woman again. He stared. “Mom?”

Mary Winchester smiled at him sadly. “You dumb kid,” she said affectionately, and wrapped her arms around him.

Cas and Sam were hugging, and Crowley stood very awkwardly behind them, unprepared for a family reunion he wasn’t a part of.

Dean looked around. “Where’s Ash? And. . . Dad?”

Sam flinched, and Cas frowned, then pulled back and scrutinized his face. “What happened?”

“Ash is. . .” Sam’s mouth twisted, and Bobby took over.

“The angels found my digs, and they got Ash. We lost what he was using to get in touch, Dean, we
wanted to talk to you, but. . .” he shrugged. “Sorry about that, boy.”

“And Dad?” Dean asked, trying not to let any emotion color his words.

Mary pressed her lips together. “Ellen and I kicked his ass. I love him to death, but Sam told me how he. . . how he raised you, and I can’t let that stand. I haven’t seen him in weeks.”

Sam let out a hoarse laugh, and it was then that Dean realized how beat-up they all looked, like they’d been really shoved through the meat grinder. “Yeah, Dean, you should’ve seen it. Jo and I couldn’t stop laughing, after.”

“Your dad’s an ass, Dean,” Jo said, grinning weakly. She had dark circles under her eyes and bruises on her cheek and arms. Her mom had bandages over her neck, and Bobby and Mary had too many scars to count.

“So none of you know if he’s okay.”

“Sounds about right,” Bobby said. Then he did a double take. “Who invited that limey jackass along?”

Crowley didn’t flinch. “That’s Mr. Limey Jackass, Singer. And I’m just here for, what’s it called nowadays? Moral support.” He sighed. “Look. I’m here to help. And that’s all you should be worrying your pretty little heads about.”

“He’s safe,” Cas added.

Mary raised her eyebrows. “Is this the Castiel everyone’s been telling me about?” she asked.

Dean shifted. “Uh. Yeah.” Thoughts of last night suddenly filled his head. Fucking shit sonuvabitch.

“Yeah, Mom. This is Cas. He’s kind of, um.”

Cas kissed his cheek. “I’m glad to meet you, Mary. Sorry your son isn’t very articulate.”

Mary laughed. “Maybe you can whip him into shape, huh?”

Cas smiled, but the screaming of the spirits around them distracted him. “We need to get to Azrael,” he said, the urgency of the situation falling back into his voice. “If we can kill her, he can put all of this to rights. There are other angels, Zipporah, Hannah, some of their subordinates. Maybe even among Azrael’s people.”

They moved out, Cas taking the lead. He knew exactly where he was going. The battle was so forceful and deafening that he could hear it even through the faint remains of angel radio that he had, telling him precisely where Azrael and Hadraniel were.

As they approached, all of them could feel the force of angelic power around them. Then Cas saw her. Azrael. Her forced moved around her while she stood motionless, directing them in near silence.

He felt Dean nudge him. “She doesn’t look so good, does she?” he said. Castiel could see what he meant. Her hair was wild and unkempt, as if the state of her vessel reflected her own ability. Even from this distance, she looked sick, like something drained her grace.

Hadraniel, standing opposite and directing their own soldiers, looked no better, wan, word, and a far cry from the self-assured angel of a few days ago.

Dean tightened his hold on his angel blade as he reached the edge of the crowd of souls. They fought
wildly now, tearing at Azrael’s and Hadraniel’s followers without discrimination. The angels warded them off with their blades and swords, but the spirits were undeterred and just kept going. Dean admired people with that kind of courage.

He stabbed the first angel he met straight through the neck and pulled his blade free without hesitation. Cheerfully he wrenched the weapon out of the vessel’s limp hand and tossed it to the nearest fighting spirit, who promptly fought back with a better chance.

Cas smothered the feeling of guilt that sank into his chest, knowing that even if he didn’t kill, he would still have to watch Dean and Crowley, and now Sam, Bobby, Ellen, Jo, and Mary slaughter his kin. He hit one on the side of the head with the hilt of his blade, but even when she dropped there was another to take her place. Cas had to kill just to stay alive, though he felt sick each time he did.

Mary was maybe the most ruthless of them all. Crowley fought only a few feet from her, and he could hear her cursing them for what they had done to her children, a wildcat in a fucking leather jacket. She didn’t care who got in her way. Crowley was surprised to realize he was almost envious of Dean and Sam. Their mother gave a damn about what happened to them.

It felt like only moments had passed when the eight of them, hunters in a close-knit cluster, got within twenty yards of where Azrael and Hadraniel circled one another. All around them was the maelstrom of angels and spirits.

Dean saw an angel standing alone, not fighting — Hannah. He thought quickly. Hannah would be a better leader for the angels than Azrael and Hadraniel. “Cas!”

Cas appeared at his side and grabbed Hannah, pulling her aside; she looked like she was trying to argue with him, but Dean caught Cas saying something about “needless bloodshed” and “make Heaven anew” and Hannah reluctantly nodded.

Dean heard Sam make a choked-off noise, a sound he’d never heard him make, and then Sam was charging toward Azrael at full speed, with no regard to safety. Dean shouted and ran after him, hearing nothing but a dull roar in his head. Sam wasn’t thinking, he wasn’t worrying about getting turned into white vapor and absorbed into an angel’s grace. Dean pushed his brother out of the way, making him stumble and slide across the floor.

Azrael turned on her heel and caught Dean’s eyes. “You just won’t die, will you?” she asked, her face a cold mask.

“Sorry to disappoint,” he said, and stabbed.

Azrael his his blade with a clang, trying to force it out of his hand. Dean shuddered as the force sent aftershocks down the metal and into his hand, but he refused to drop the blade.

Behind her, Dean saw Crowley approaching quietly, sneaking up on Azrael while she was distracted. He lit a bottle of holy oil, and the liquid let out a whoosh as it went up.

Azrael spun in an instant and stabbed him deep in the side.

Crowley gasped and staggered back, vanishing in the swarm of angels and humans.

Dean scrambled to his feet, refusing to think of anything but killing the bitch. Cas grabbed his arm and dragged him backward, and though he fought, he felt another hand tight on his shoulder and swore as Cas and Bobby pulled him into the crowd. “She did this to us!” he screamed at them, trying to make them see. “She burned the bunker, she tortured Sam!”
“And getting your ass killed’ll definitely fix that,” Bobby snapped. Ellen and Jo stood back to back about ten feet away, fending off attacks from all sides. Mayr was surrounded by angels that had fallen to her own blade.

“Sam,” Dean croaked at last. Sam appeared next to him. “What?”

“Cas, get Hannah,” Dean said. “I’m sending you home. Hannah can get out of here, at least she’ll stay alive, and she’ll get you home, bring you back. You’ll be safe.”

“Don’t be stupid, Dean, I’m staying here.”

Cas nodded. “He’s right, Dean. We need him.” As much as he hated it, the needed fighters, they couldn’t afford to lose Sam.

“I’m staying right here,” Sam informed him flatly. “You don’t tell me what to do.”

And that was it. Dean swore and told Sam he was a fucking moron for refusing to be safe, but he didn’t have a choice. He couldn’t make his brother go.

They lost themselves in the heat of battle, and Dean was forced to think less about if Sam was okay and more about not getting speared by a fucking sword. The war around him demanded that he just kill, and not worry about anyone, or anything, else.

Dean shouted at Cas to warn him as an angel went for his throat. Cas swung around and caught the angel in the chest, blood spattering his face. He kept fighting working his way toward where Azrael still fought Hadraniel.

Then he heard Cas calling for him. It took Dean a minute to spot him. He was pulling Crowley aside, into a corridor where no one fought; souls wandered around, but didn’t attack. Dean hurried to follow.

“Are you okay?” Cas was asking. “Any bad pain?”

“Never took you for a . . . complete sodding idiot,” Crowley said, but his voice was quiet and weak, with no venom left in it. “My fucking . . . guts are spilling out, Cas, what . . . did you think?”

Dean dropped to the floor. Crowley was lying propped up against the wall, trying to hold his middle closed with one hand. Even as he did it, it was obvious that blood was gushing quickly, staining his clothes.

“Just hang on, Crowley,” Dean said hurriedly. “I’ll go find Hannah, she’ll be able to put you back together—”

“Oh, no,” Crowley said, trying to sit up straighter. “Not how it works. That’s the . . .” He winced, pressing his other hand to the wound. “That’s the Winchester family tradition, not mine. I don’t want to suffer the fucking indignity.”

Dean shook his head, trying to deny it. “Damn it, Crowley, don’t be stubborn, not now.” No, no, no, no. They were so close, they needed him and his bastard backhanded compliments and his save-our-skins mentality to fight. It wasn’t fair. “Just let me find her,” he repeated.

Crowley snorted, but he was already losing breath. “Don’t . . . don’t play any of that God-awful music at . . . my funeral, or I swear I’ll come back to haunt you.” He smirked, but the expression was quickly replaced with a grimace of pain.
Sam ran up. “Dean, we have to hurry, we’re going to lose our opportunity unless we —” He stopped dead. “Crowley?”

“Heya, Moose,” he said vaguely. “Tell your brother he should’ve kissed my ass while he had the chance.”

Dean laughed, but the sound was strangled.

Cas pressed his lips together, knowing there were tears in his eyes, but not caring. “Heaven for you this time, I think,” he said quietly.

“Put a... good word in for me, huh?” Crowley suggested, and he managed another weak smirk.

Cas nodded. “Of course.”

Crowley’s smile wavered, but it stayed on his face as his breath stopped.

Cas let out a shaky breath, letting tears fall silent on his cheeks, and he closed Crowley’s blank eyes gently.

Dean felt like he’d been hit with a ton of bricks, the breath knocked out of him completely.

“Crowley,” he whispered, blinking away the wet in his eyes. “Damn it, Crowley, what the fuck is wrong with you?”

“Sorry, I’m not gonna die for you twice,” came a voice from behind them. Dean turned to see someone he didn’t recognize, a taller guy with a scruffy, short beard and red-brown hair. He spread his arms. “Hello, boys.”

“Crowley, you son of a bitch.”

“Son of a witch,” Crowley said, winking. It was weird, seeing that condescending look on someone else’s face. Crowley flickered, and for a moment he looked like the Crowley that Dean knew. “I’ve got to go. Promise you won’t come to visit me for a very long time, Dean. I need a break from your nagging.”

Dean snorted, but a tear slipped down his cheek nonetheless, and Crowley’s spirit wavered and vanished.

Sam stood. “What a jackass,” he said, raising his blade and heading back into the battle.

“His spirit should be in his own heaven now, Dean,” Cas said, through a choked-off voice. “No more hell for him. It’s a promise.” He got to his feet, and a moment later Dean did the same.

The fight hadn’t begun to taper off in their absence; if anything, it seemed more consuming, every angel fighting wildly.

Dean killed his way through five angels, heading straight for Azrael now. He didn’t let any of them get in his way, shoving and pushing when he could and killing when necessary. He knew Cas did the same, a few feet to his left. Azrael and Hadraniel had a ring of space around them, twenty feet wide all the way around.

The angels were surrounded by a strong, hot breeze that pushed Dean back when he tried to break through and attack.

He felt Cas beside him, and he thrust all his weight forward, pushing past the hot wind that still tried
to blow him aside. Cas got through a second later, stumbling forward into what felt like the center of a whirlwind. Azrael’s long hair whipped in the breeze, and Cas’s coat flapped.

When they fell through into the center of the battle, Hadraniel pushed Azrael’s blade back, sending sparks to scatter across the floor. Straightening up, they caught sight of Cas getting to his feet with a gun ready in hand. Their face twisted in rage, and they took two steps toward them, raising their angel blade high.

With silence and absolute grace, Azrael rose up and brought her fiery sword down, burying it in Hadraniel’s back and running them through.

Cas looked like he was going to be sick. The two of them closed their eyes as Hadraniel’s body glowed and a flash of light filled the air, along with the horrible smell of burning flesh.

“Azrael!” Cas shouted over the whistling of the fierce, hot wind. “Azrael, stop!”

She leveled her blade at his chest. “I hear you’ve been busy,” she said, eyes flickering to Dean with cold amusement.

“That’s not important,” Cas said quickly. He didn’t need any other angels to hear and turn against him.

Azrael paced closer, eyes fixed on them. “I told you to stay out of this, Castiel.” She looked burned out. Even the wind whirling around them seemed to have lost its biting heat.

“Or else you would kill me,” Cas said. “Well. Here I am. But you’ve tried before.”

“My people were incompetent,” she said, defensive.

“Or you were,” Cas said. “Or maybe you didn’t really want me dead.”

Azrael hesitated. “No,” she said sharply. “You must die.”

Dean got ready for a fight, but Cas reached out and stilled him. “Please, Azrael, you must stop this bloodshed, before it’s too late.”

He gestured at the angels battling all around them. Judith had taken command of Hadraniel’s forces and was shouting orders from her place near the center of the chaos. “How many more of our brothers and sisters must die?” he asked.

“As many as continue to fight me,” Azrael hissed.

Dean watched her warily. She seemed to rise tall before his eyes, and for half a second he would have sworn he saw wings fluttering behind her, great, gold-black wings covered in thousands of staring golden eyes.

In that moment, Dean saw the kind of immense power he’d been fighting for years, the screaming, terrible creatures that surrounded him pressed down and confined in seemingly ordinary bodies that could not even convey a fraction of the literal fucking glory inside. Then he blinked and the impression was gone.

Cas didn’t even seem to notice Dean’s brief existential crisis. Dean wasn’t even totally sure if what he saw was real.

“Azrael, listen to me,” Cas demanded. What a fucking idiot, Dean thought dazedly. Then he
remembered that Cas was one of those things, once. Jesus fucking Christ, and he’d just fucked him last night. Shit.

“Heaven is going to fall apart if you don’t call them off now,” Cas continued. “You need to put the veil to rights, or billions of souls will cross over into the Earthly plane. There will be no Heaven left to lead.”

Dean saw Sam fighting his way through Azrael’s guarding winds across from them, and he hoped he wouldn’t be caught or seen.

“I do only what you have done!” Azrael shrieked, her gaunt, haggard face somehow mustering an expression of hate.

“You weren’t alone on those battlefields,” she spat at him. “You showed all of us what must be done, you taught us free will, Castiel, and now you would have me take it back, you would have me give way to another Michael, another Raphael, another Naomi?”

Cas flinched. “I would have you stop, before you become one of them yourself,” he managed to say. “Just as I did.”

“No,” said Azrael, the sheen of sweat streaking her face. “No, don’t you see? You set us free, you gave us the light of freedom. You ate the apple, Castiel, and now there is no going back. I must do what is right, and eradicate our enemies before they can poison our new life. And if that includes you, then so be it.”

Dean caught sight of Cas’s face in the flickering light from her sword — he was pale and determined.

“Heaven must be cleansed in fire,” Azrael shouted, her voice carrying through the halls of Heaven wildly. “Beginning with you, Castiel. You have brought us into the light, and now your mission is done.”

She was insane, Cas realized. Maybe it was the fighting and the killing, or the struggle to rule her people and keep Heaven in one piece, but she was unbalanced in the most dangerous way, a fanatical light in her eyes.

He could sense Dean’s presence at his side, and with a short glance he knew Dean saw it, too. Azrael had to be killed.

Cas had made her into this. He had shown free will to angels. He’d said it was like teaching poetry to fish — now he saw it was more like handing a psychopath a gun and sending him into a crowded shopping mall.

He gave her all the tools to become a killer, then became one himself, as if to show how it was done. Then he left Heaven in chaos, left them to discover where they fell on the scale between holy grace and heavenly wrath.

Dean knew something was wrong, he could feel Cas tensing beside him. Sam was still behind Azrael, waiting for the moment to strike. Any second she might turn and run him through without warning. He needed to time his attack perfectly.

His fault. His fault. Cas couldn’t think anything else. Maybe Azrael was the one to do the killing, but Cas had given her the chance, the perfect opportunity to become the hateful thing that she was.

Cas lunged. Azrael countered his strike easily, but she roared when Sam’s blade sank into her
shoulder, lodging in bone. He tried to yank it free, but she turned on him and swung her sword at him — he stumbled back to avoid it, but almost tripped over his own legs.

Dean wouldn’t give her the chance to devour his brother. He threw himself at Azrael’s legs, hacking at the tendons standing taut at the backs of her knees. He sliced through one, but almost immediately it began to heal.

Azrael spun on him, her eyes sharp and still filled with the spark of the obsessed. “How dare you touch me,” she hissed, beginning to draw herself up to her full height once more.

Fire spilled from her, flaring until it rose to form powerful wings that fluttered — where Cas’s wings had manifested as shadows in the light, hers formed from pure light and heat. Dean gasped as a burning sensation rolled over him. He was too close, those wings were going to sear the meat from his bones. Then the feeling vanished as if it never was. The wings went weak and faded into nothing.

Azrael’s shoulders heaved; she was panting with the effort of an intimidation display that failed miserably. A flash of panic crossed her face.

“How dare you —” Azrael began, but her voice cut off. Sam ripped his blade from her shoulder sharply. She turned again, but just as quickly she spun to face Cas, then Dean again.

Now fear showed on her face. Azrael looked like she was straining for some last vestige of power. Then she caught sight of Sam again.

The next thing Dean knew, Azrael had gripped Sam by the collar, opening her mouth wide to take him in. Glowing whiteness began to trickle from him into her, and he was frozen, helpless, unable to move.

Dean’s blood ran cold. Without thinking, he charged straight at Azrael, and slashed across her back hard, making her scream and drop Sam. His brother gasped in pain, and struggled to his feet.

Azrael swung her great flaming sword after him. Dean blocked the slice, but when their blades met, the clash scraped sparks from the fire, scattering them into the air and the floor. Azrael pushed back, bearing all her weight down on Dean’s blade.

_Crack._

Dean stared at the stump of what had been an angel blade, white-hot and half-melted. The blade skittered across the floor while its hilt remained in Dean’s grip.

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“Fuck.”

Azrael smiled, showing teeth in a wolfish, triumphant grin. Dean unhooked a small clay bottle from his belt and prayed that his lighter would go up on the first try.

She swung her sword above her head, the flames a blur with speed.

Then the sword slipped from unfeeling fingers, her eyes going wide with shock. There was a small bullet hole straight through her forehead. Cas dropped his gun.

Azrael’s body swayed, glowing.
“Fuck, yes!” Dean muttered as he got his Zippo to light and put the torch to the holy oil. As light burst forth from the angel’s body, he threw the clay at her feet, hearing it shatter as he squeezed his eyes shut.

When the light faded and the smoke cleared, the only sign of Azrael was a pair of wings scorched into the floor of the halls of Heaven and a scattering of ashes in the air.

Dean panted, gasping for air and trying not to inhale the flakes of ash. As he stood, he thought he saw, for a moment, a woman identical to Azrael, but with hair pulled back severely and a professional-looking suit. She gazed at him mournfully before she vanished.

The battle went on for a while after that, though Dean, Cas, and Sam were left alone. At last Hannah raised her voice above the remaining angels, ordering them to cease fighting. She told them Azrael and Hadrianiel were dead, that there was no point in warring for control of Heaven. “Enough of our siblings have died today,” she said, and caught Cas’s eye.

He smiled and nodded encouragement.

At last the fighting waned, and Sam Dean, and Cas found Bobby with Jo and Mary. Ellen was having some strong words with Hannah about the organization of Heaven — namely, that no one was allowed to see those they loved.

“Restructuring of Heaven,” Cas murmured. “She will have to satisfy the demands of the people here, and if Zipporah ever wakes from whatever drug-induced stupor she’s worked herself into this time, I’ll bet they can balance each other out. And they’ll find other angels to help them, and to repair the boundary between Heaven and Earth.”

Already, Hannah had sent gatekeepers to work on internal maintenance. There were more of them among Hadrianiel’s followers, and Hannah assured them that if everyone cooperated and stopped killing for power, Heaven and Earth would stay exactly as they were meant to be.

Dean spent some hours talking with his mother, time that Cas couldn’t begrudge him. Sam informed him that Mary was thrilled that Dean ‘finally found someone that helped Dean learn to relax.’

Cas liked Mary’s sense of humor. He couldn’t imagine the person who could get Dean to relax.

At last, though, Zipporah appeared. “Apparently I’m supposed to take you back to Earth, then report here for fucking meetings. I hoped those would be over once we were home.” She glanced around. “Where’s Crowley?”

Dean and Cas looked at each other. “He, um, Azrael killed him. He should be in his own heaven now,” Dean said.

Zipporah raised an eyebrow. “How did the King of Hell get a room in Heaven?”

Dean looked away, knowing that she could see the red ringing his eyes. “Ex-King of Hell,” he mumbled.

She looked thoughtful. “I could visit, if I stay.” She smirked. “I’m sure he’d appreciate it.”

“And that is more information than I needed to know,” Dean said.

Sam had a weird look on his face as Zipporah took them to the backdoor in and out of Heaven. When she touched him, he flinched away, and he began to panic when she tried to take him up so she could carry him to where his body lay. Dean had to talk him down to get him to go with her.
They had to steal a car to get to the old church where Sam was buried. It nearly killed Dean to dig up his brother, and he hadn’t been able to look until Zipporah finished putting him back together and Sam climbed back out of the grave, shiny and good as new. Almost.

Zipporah gazed wistfully at the celebratory beer Dean was pouring. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I have to go back. Hannah’s been pretty damn insistent about that.”

After she left, they took their stolen car and headed down to where Dean left the Impala. Fortunately, though, his baby was intact. It looked like the spirits had a fun time fucking up her paint job, and she was a little dented, but those were things he could fix in time.

Sam settled into the passenger’s seat, from habit. A little put out, Cas sat directly behind Dean and put his hands on his shoulders periodically.

The drive to Rufus’s old cabin was a long one, and mostly quiet. Dean called Jody, then Kevin, then Charlie to tell them the angels were back in the attic and Sam... Sam was home. But his brother was staring blankly out the window and didn’t respond when Dean asked if he wanted to talk to them.

He could tell then that something was wrong, but he didn’t say anything.

The night they arrived, Dean and Cas built up a pyre in back of Rufus’s cabin. Sam didn’t help.

There wasn’t a body to burn, since Crowley’s meatsuit wasn’t really the right guy to mourn and they’d let the angels work their mojo on dealing with the body. It was nearly morning when they’d gathered enough wood and stacked it properly.

“A hunter’s funeral,” Dean said, barely able to get the words out.

Cas poured oil over the wood, but Dean hesitated before he lit the match. He ran inside and hunted around for something in the cupboards. Sam asked absently what he was doing, but didn’t sound interested.

Dean poured scotch over the wood, knowing Crowley would hate him for wasting it. Once the bottle was empty, he left it on the platform and lit the pyre. The two of them watched the flames build higher and higher, flakes of ash and black smoke billowing into the lightening sky as the sun climbed over the horizon.

They didn’t stay to watch the last embers die out.

Several hours passed before any of them spoke again. Dean was pouring himself coffee, even though he was already running on expired adrenaline and only a memory of sleep. Cas appeared at the top of the stairs. He’d slept in the basement. Sam had used the bedroom. Dean took the couch.

Cas’s coat was wrapped around him tightly, like armor. He sat down at the table. “You mind pouring a cup for me?”

Dean didn’t respond, just took a second mug from the cupboard and filled it. He sat down across the table from Cas, passing him the cup as he did so.

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” The words slipped out of Dean’s mouth without permission. He quickly raised his own coffee to his lips as if to disguise that he’d spoken.

“Do you think Sam’s okay?” Cas asked.
Dean shrugged.

“That’s very fascinating, Dean, thank you.” Cas set his mug down. “I mean it.”

Dean still didn’t say anything.

“You slept on the couch,” Cas said, changing the subject. “Any — any reason?”

That pushed him. “Sam’s going to have to adjust,” he said. “I don’t want to make this any harder on him.”

“By avoiding me?” Cas demanded, keeping his voice low.

“They tortured him up there,” Dean snapped. “I know from experience — you don’t just bounce back from that, Cas!”

Cas put his hand on Dean’s. “I think he’s stronger than you give him credit for. And I’m sure he can handle two consenting adults sharing a bed.”

Dean glared at him, then laughed. “God, you’re a jackass.”

“At least I’m your jackass,” Cas said.

He wasn’t quite sure how it happened, but he found himself on his feet with Dean’s tongue sliding along his lower lip and then pushing into his mouth. He felt Dean’s hands in his hair and at his back, and he decided that this was what miracles felt like.

Sam cleared his throat, and they jumped apart awkwardly; Dean went red. How long had Sam been standing there? Despite the pale, sleepless way Sam looked, he was grinning slightly. “Get a room,” he muttered, reaching up into a cupboard for a coffee mug. And that was it.

After that, everything more or less fell into place. Dean started talking about getting the three of them a house near Lebanon, turning it into something kind of like the Roadhouse used to be.

Sam was withdrawn for a long time, rarely feeling up to chatting. Sometimes he woke up screaming with nightmares, and Dean and Cas learned how to tell if Sam needed support or if he needed to be alone with his thoughts.

Still, they could see him starting to recover, and more and more often he would join them in front of the TV to watch a movie or help grill something. He even started to look through obituaries and see if there was a hunt anywhere nearby.

Crowley was an odd subject between the three of them; Dean and Cas flinched when Sam made some disparaging comment one night early on, but the sting eventually faded.

One day, at the end of April, Cas and Dean had curled up to watch Star Trek together. Cas leaned against Dean’s shoulder, making himself comfortable and kissing his neck occasionally just because he could. Sam was probably reading a book or something, in his room.

“Have you heard of anything terrible happening recently?” Cas asked abruptly.

Dean frowned. “What?”

Cas shrugged. “Just surprised we haven’t had a major catastrophe yet. I was worried you were hiding something from me.”

Dean laughed. “Yeah, Cas, it’s not like we haven’t had enough trouble in our lives.”

“I’m just a little suspicious.” Cas smiled contentedly as Dean queued up the next episode. “Whenever we think it’s over, it gets worse.”

Dean kissed him lightly. “Don’t worry. I’ll let you know when it happens.” They settled down to keep watching. Dean dozed off with Cas curled up against him.

It was past seven when Dean woke up. At some point, Cas had fallen asleep too. Dean nudged him awake, then got up.

Sam was sitting at the table, wide awake and frowning at his laptop. “Hey, Dean? Come have a look at this,” he said, turning the laptop to face him.

“Rock Springs, Ohio?” Dean said, pulling up a chair.

Cas yawned. “What’s in Rock Springs?” he asked.

“Well, that’s just it. I don’t know what to think. Electrical storms, mostly; the crops in the area are dying out, too. But look, everything I’ve run into — guys, it’s consistent with signs of demonic activity.”

Dean frowned. “That’s impossible. Every demon’s on lockdown in Hell.” His stomach twisted at the thought of Hell somehow getting open. No. There was no way for Hell to be unlocked.

“I know,” Sam said, running a hand through his hair. “It doesn’t make any sense.”

Cas leaned over and looked at the screen. “Is it possible it’s a haunting?” he asked. He glanced at Dean, and he could tell by his expression he was just hoping it wasn’t what Sam thought.

Sam shrugged. “Yeah, it’s possible, but then we’d be hearing about something bigger — deaths, freaky supernatural occurrences, and there’s nothing like that. Just a couple more missing persons. Just like you’d see with demon possession.”

Dean shook his head forcefully. “No. No way it could be a demon.”

“I’m telling you, Dean, I can’t think of anything else!”

“Then we’ll have to go see for ourselves,” Cas said reasonably.

Dean stood up. “Pack your bags, Sammy.” He smiled to himself, slightly. “We have work to do.”

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