Hiatus fic set after the S11 finale. Dean's alive, Sam's alive, they're going to get Cas from wherever he got zapped to, and everything's finally gonna be all right. Dean's on top of the world.

A little voice in the back of his head is whispering "It's never that easy," but Dean ignores it.
Okay but I gotta find Cas now

Here's an S11 hiatus fic for you all. This one's not a plotty epic like my usual hiatus fics — it's more an intimate character study (more in the style of my winter fics, like Winter's Tale, Most Important Thing, Twenty Dollars). I usually write a plotty epic in summers and an emotionally intimate character study in winters, but I was just in northern Alaska in the middle of snowy blizzards for the last several weeks and so I am in a wintry frame of mind. :)

"She only stayed for like, two minutes, tops," Dean says over his cell phone to Sam. "She barely even had time to say anything."

Sam's totally silent on the other end of the line. Cas doesn't say anything either (Dean's assuming Cas is standing there next to Sam listening to everything — because, Dean asked Cas to look after Sam, and that means of course Cas will look after Sam). But Cas hasn't said a word yet. And now Sam's gone silent too.

Dean's been walking along a deserted footpath in whatever park Chuck and Amara have stranded him in. He really has no idea what direction he should be going; once he found the path he picked a direction at random. (At least he finally managed to get a cell signal — which was a huge relief, because it meant he's still on Earth.) It's a nice enough place — the footpath's now taking him past carefully tended beds of roses, and lilacs and hedges and neat gravel paths that branch off here and there. Some kind of arboretum, maybe. But where the hell is he?

And what the hell just happened?

Chuck and Amara had vanished only a half hour ago, the long-estranged siblings twining together like some kind of hybrid alien smoke-monster (and, Dean thinks, there was definitely something kinda weird about that sibling relationship, but... whatever). The sun — the friggin' sun! — had healed right up in no time flat. And then, as if that whole scene hadn't been batshit-crazy enough, all of a sudden there'd been the brain-bending, soul-searing discovery that Mom had been somehow resurrected. Or had ghosted down or something. And was wandering around the very same park. Dean had been thrashing his way through some trees trying to get a cell signal when he'd heard her calling for help.

She'd looked confused at first, even frightened. But as soon as Dean had said "Mom?" she came to her senses.

She stared at him for a long moment, and then it seemed everything flooded back to her. Her face lit up, and at once she seemed to know who she was. And who he was. She called out, "DEAN!" and actually ran to him, wrapping him in such a tight hug he could barely breathe.

Dean had seen her a few times before, in his adult life. Sorta. Kinda.

There'd been her ghost, eerily wreathed in flame, in their old house in Kansas. There'd been Dean's made-up version of Mom in the weird hallucinatory djinn dream-world. There'd even been the time travel, and a few other strange sightings.

But all of those had involved a very altered version of Mom, not the one Dean remembered from his
childhood. This time didn't feel like any of those. This time, as Mom grabbed him and wrapped her arms around him, Dean knew immediately it was the Mom he remembered. Mom for real, Mom here and now, Mom with all her memories and her soul intact.

She'd even frickin' smelled the same. Dean had never even known he'd had any memory of her scent, but once he had his nose down on her shoulder, with her long hair brushing against his cheek, he breathed in some mix of... what was it? Some 1980's shampoo of hers? Her perfume, her hand lotion or something? It was a soft, slightly citrusy scent, and at the first whiff of it Dean was absolutely flooded with memories. Memories of being cradled by Mom; of scrambling into her lap on Sunday evenings for a snuggle when they watched TV; of being swung up into her arms when he'd been just a little kid.

It was really her. She was real, and her hug was real. And Dean's hug back was real too, and the way his breath stopped, the way his eyes stung with tears... All real. All real as hell.

But then...

"She only said a few things and then she just kinda wafted away," says Dean to Sam. Dean has to close his eyes as he says this, and he even presses his free hand to his eyes to try to block out the empty path before him, he's focusing that hard on the sharp image of Mom, actual Mom, right here in this very same park just minutes ago. As if he could call her back to him somehow, summon her back into being, if he just concentrated hard enough.

Sam repeats slowly, "She... wafted away?"

Sam sounds pretty confused. Sixty seconds ago he'd been overjoyed to hear Dean's voice. (Actually he'd been almost overwhelmed, swinging between weepy and triumphant, saying over and over, "I knew it, I just knew it, I knew you'd pull through somehow!") But now he just sounds kind of shell-shocked.

Dean knows the feeling.

"So... what did she say?" asks Sam.

Dean has some trouble answering. What Mom said is actually crystal-clear in Dean's mind, though. In fact every word's still echoing in his ears, like it's been permanently engraved on his brain. But his breath has seized up again, as he remembers it all, and it's surprisingly hard to talk.

I've only got a few minutes, Mom had said. Just enough time to tell you this: I love you so very much, Dean.

She released him from the hug, and stepped back half a pace, as if to get a good look at him, both her hands still on his shoulders. She went on:

I love you so much. You and your brother both. I love you both SO much. I've known what's been happening, you know. I'm not sure where I was exactly — I was in the house for a while, and then I went... somewhere else, I don't know. But, somehow I knew what's been going on. I wept, Dean, I cried for you; I knew when you were in Hell, and I wept. I wept for Sam, too, so many times.... I wept when you took the Mark. I wept to see it change you. I thought my heart would break all over again when you died. I've wept for you for so long. But NOW.... (A huge sigh here.) I'm so grateful
that you both have your lives back at last. You can just live now.

She shifted both her hands up from Dean's shoulders to cradle the sides of his face. Dean stood breathless, transfixed.

* I want you to know that I'm proud of you, Dean. I'm SO PROUD. *(She gave each word its own deliberate weight.) You took such good care of your brother, all along. You always have. Since you were little. You grew up long before you should have had to. It broke my heart to see it. But you grew into such a fine man. So did your brother. And the two of you saved the world.*

She paused, gazing up into his eyes, still cradling his face in both hands.

**Will you do one thing for me?** she said.

"Anything," Dean murmured, almost too stunned to speak.

Mom smiled, and she said, still cradling his face:

*Let yourself be happy now.*

Dean blinked, and she continued:

*Let yourself be happy. Sam too, of course, but you're the one who fights it most. Don't fight it anymore. Let yourself be happy. Believe you deserve it, because you DO. Let yourself be happy at last. Do that for me.*

She stood up on her toes to kiss his cheek, smiled at him one more time, and then she simply disintegrated into a cloud of blueish-white sparkles. They floated up into the sky, fainter and fainter, and then there was nothing up there but the evening sky.

Dean stared up after her for a while. The sun had set; the stars were out, crisp and clear against the velvet sky.

She was gone.

Dean tries to summarize all this now to Sam as, "She said that she loves us. That she's proud of us, and she wants us to be happy." It isn't quite a full description, but it's the best he can manage, and his voice goes rough as he says it. And Sam's gone dead silent again.

Dean starts walking along the footpath again, half-heartedly still trying to figure out where he is. Mostly for lack of anything else to do.

"It was really just two minutes?" says Sam.

"Yeah. She warned me right at the beginning that she didn't have much time. I never really got to say anything back," says Dean. It's dawning on him now that if Mom had only hung around a few minutes more, Sam could've got to talk to her too! Sam didn't get to see her at all, *and Dean did*; it seems awfully unfair, and Dean knows that's got to sting for Sam.

Why *was* the visit so short, anyway? Why hadn't they had even a little more time? Dean glances up at the sky again. The moon's starting to rise. The stars are clear and bright.
No Mom.

"Did she say why she'd come?" asks Sam.

Dean says, "I think it was some kind of last gift from Amara. Right at the end, Amara said something about, she wanted to give me what I need the most."

"What you need most is two minutes with Mom's ghost?" asks Sam.

Dean has to laugh at the way Sam summarizes it. And sure enough there's something off about the idea. First off, two minutes is indeed ridiculously short — hardly satisfying at all. But also... truth is, Mom died when Dean was four. Obviously Dean's missed Mom terrifically over the years, but Dean's a grown man now. He's been without his mother nearly his entire life. He's long since accepted it; he's adjusted. He's been standing on his own two feet for a very, very long time.

He's built his own little family, in fact. Him and Sam and, increasingly, Cas. They take care of each other, the three of them, they've been doing that for years, and... it's okay.

It's good, even.

Getting to see Mom again is something Dean knows he'll always cherish to the end of this days, but it actually doesn't feel like the thing he "needs most."

"Yeah, I don't get it either," Dean says to Sam. "I mean, I miss Mom a ton, of course, I always have. I wish we'd gotten to grow up with her, but...." Dean trails off. Finally he says, "It just seems kinda off."

Sam says, "Well, Amara's gifts always were a little twisted. A little dark."

"Dark, right," says Dean.

Suddenly they're both laughing.

It's incredibly wonderful to hear Sam laughing again. It seems like something Dean hasn't heard in a very long time.

Dean realizes at this point that he still hasn't heard Cas's gravelly voice, and that it would be really nice to hear that voice too, so he says, "Hey, can you put Cas on?"

"Oh! Cas got zapped away!" Sam says. "I totally forgot to tell you! What with you being alive and all. This English girl broke into the bunker and zapped Cas away and shot at me."

Dean's just turned down a different winding footpath, still hoping to find a way out of the damn park, but at this news he freezes in mid-stride, staring blankly at the curving gravel path ahead of him.

Dean finally says, "Don't we get even an hour off?"

"Apparently not," says Sam, with a rueful chuckle.

"What happened?" says Dean. He starts walking again, more briskly now. It suddenly feels a lot more urgent to figure out where he is and get back in action. "Where's Cas? He okay?"

"I've been trying to call him but he hasn't picked up since he got zapped. It's been a couple hours and no word. I'm thinking he went somewhere out of cell range, like you did for a bit? Hopefully he'll call soon."
I gotta find Cas right away is Dean's first thought, and Cas must still think I'm dead is the second, and third comes the memory of Cas's hug.

It had definitely been a night for chick-flick moments. There'd been a baker's dozen of them at least, and at the top of the list had been not one but three hugs, each heartbreaking in its own painful way. There'd been Mom's hug, there'd been Sam's too of course, but first of all there'd been that unexpected hug from Castiel in the cemetery. Dean had somehow been taken by surprise, for Cas had never before really given him that kind of one-on-one heartfelt hug.

For Dean, the hug had unfolded in several successive waves of understanding that had hit him almost like tiny little punches. At first Dean thought it'd be one of those super quick pro-forma guy hugs, not a real hug really. But then he realized it was lasting a hair long, and then it seemed maybe it was one of those Cas-awkwardly-mimicking-human-interactions moments, that Cas maybe didn't quite understand the nuances. But then Dean felt Cas's arms really tighten on and then Dean realized Cas actually had a perfect grasp of this particular human interaction and its nuances, and that he really meant the hug. Every moment of it. And a split-second later Dean realized that Cas was actually, truly, grieving....

Dean had already known that by dying, he'd be abandoning Sam. But it hadn't fully hit him, not till right that moment, that he'd be abandoning Castiel as well. That Cas might actually need him too.

So many things Dean wanted to say to Castiel then.

He wished he could tell Cas about all the sleepless nights. All those desperate hours, trying to find some way to evict Lucifer. He wanted to describe how much he'd longed to hear Cas's voice again, instead of Lucifer's eerily different (and indescribably disturbing) voice... how terrible it had been to see that beloved face distorted and changed by Lucifer's horrible mannerisms. (How was it even possible for the very same vessel to look and sound so different?)

Dean wished he could somehow convey how very much he'd missed Castiel.

Earlier, during the car ride to the liquor store, Dean had tried to tell Cas some of this. He'd managed to get some of it out, the "you're our brother" part at least, before Sam had called and they'd had to rush back. The "you're our brother" part was, of course, true, and it was important. It was very important. But it was not at all the whole story.

Now, feeling Cas holding on so tight, and then feeling him reluctantly let go, Dean found himself wishing he could pause time somehow, just in order to sit Cas down and tell him the whole story. Tell him all the things Dean had never told him.

But all Dean was able to say, in the end, was a totally incoherent "Okay... okay... all right."

"I could go with you," Cas had said next.

That, of course, had actually been an offer to die at Dean's side, and Cas had said it so friggin' casually. Like it was no big deal.
"— and I took her down pretty easy after that," Sam's saying, and Dean has to struggle to refocus. Sam's talking about the English girl. "I don't know if she's just a crappy shot," Sam goes on, "or didn't expect me to dive like I did, or what, but, c'mon, it's not like it's the first time I've been shot at, right? I dove at her knees, she missed, we wrestled, I won. Then we had a discussion." (Dean knows this means Sam had her tied up in a chair for a while. Maybe with her own gun trained on her too. A discussion, Winchester style, as per usual.) Sam continues, "I think I convinced her that we're on the same side. I pointed out how the sun's healed and the Darkness is gone and Lucifer is gone — she hadn't really realized everything was fixed. And then I let her go, which seemed to totally surprise her. Anyway, long story short, now she thinks we're just 'wayward rather than irredeemable,' is how she put it." Sam chuckles. "Then I showed her the library and we talked some more and now she thinks I need 'proper training'!" (Sam puts on a posh British accent here, pronouncing it "pro-pah.") "Says I missed my calling! Heh. I told her I'd think about it. She's headed back to London to argue with some other Men Of Letters, or Women of Letters I guess, about taking us off the hit list. Anyway, crisis averted."

"Okay," says Dean vaguely, who hasn't bothered trying to follow all this except the part about crisis-averted. "But I gotta find Cas now."

"Uh-huh, agreed," Sam says, "I'm gonna call Verizon and see if I can get a location ping off his phone. And I gotta come pick you up. Where the hell are you, anyway? Where did the big Chuck-Amara reunion go down?"

"Some garden," says Dean. "Kind of a park. I'm not sure where. I've been wandering around all these paths —" and at last the path he's been following opens out at the top of a hill, and Dean finally gets a view. He's on a wooded hillside looking down at a medium-sized, nice-looking city by a river. There are lots of bridges, and a neon sign of a leaping deer. And... the moon seems to be rising over a volcano, of all things, a volcano that's squatting on the eastern horizon all by itself, its snowy slopes bathed in the silvery moonlight. There's not a single other mountain in sight.

Well, that narrows it down.

"Portland," Dean tells Sam. "I'm at that rose garden in Portland, Oregon."

Sam's already hit the road while Dean's still hitchhiking down to the Portland suburbs and looking for a beat-up car to steal. By noon the next day Dean's coaxing an incredibly underpowered old Dodge Colt through the Idaho Rockies, while Sam's already reached Salt Lake in the Impala. By nightfall they finally connect at an all-day-breakfast trucker joint in Tremonton, Utah, where Dean ditches the tiny Colt.

They've been touching base on the phone throughout their respective drives, so it's not like they haven't talked, but just the same it hits them both hard to see each other in person. There's another hug, and it's a doozy, and about ten thousand times happier than the one the previous night. Dean finds he can't even make himself do the back-thumping thing (the "okay, we're sort of hugging, but really I'm just pummeling you" standard guy hug). Instead he's grabbing on tight to the back of Sam's head with one hand, and just hanging on with the other. Sam's doing something similar.

"It's a damn good thing I like chick flicks," mutters Dean as they finally separate. Sam gives a
choked laugh; he's wiping his eyes, totally unable to hide that he's gotten all teary-eyed again. And of course so has Dean.

"We're bawling like little girls," Dean points out, as they both try to regroup.

"Yep," says Sam, who's even having to wipe his nose on his sleeve. "Even though I already knew you were alive."

"Cas doesn't know, does he?" says Dean. "That I'm alive? He got zapped before I called, right?"

Sam's eyes widen. "Shit," he says. "Damn. You're right." He gives a sigh, and adds, "You know, he was tagging after me like a puppy back to the bunker. Like, all of two feet behind me and showering me with words of support nonstop. I guess he was trying to be helpful but I couldn't even talk then. But later, after you'd called and I got a little more settled down, I realized he was probably tagging so close because he was upset."

"Also I asked him to look after you," Dean confesses. "Asked him to make sure you didn't do anything stupid."

"Oh," says Sam, and as the "anything stupid" phrase registers, he repeats, "Oh. Right. Damn." He pauses. Dean is watching him, and he knows immediately, from the evasive look in Sam's eyes, that Sam might indeed have done "something stupid" if he'd had more time alone.

"Well, he was certainly trying to keep an eye on me," says Sam. "Till he got zapped, anyway."

They're both quiet a moment.

"Let's go find him," says Dean. Sam nods and grabs his laptop, and they head into the trucker breakfast joint.

"So Verizon still can't get a ping," says Sam once they're at a table, hunched over his laptop while Dean scarfs down a late-night order of pancakes and bacon. "I've been trying to call him, too, off and on, every time I stopped for gas. Straight to voicemail every time. I'm hoping his phone battery's just dead."

"Or he's in the middle of nowhere," says Dean. "Stranded in the wilds of Montana or something. Somewhere with no service."

"Or Antarctica," says Sam. "Or some foreign country where his phone doesn't work."

"Or Mars," says Dean. "Or Purgatory or something."

Now they're both getting depressed. Dean tries to think optimistically, and he says, "Look, it may just take him a few days. Remember that time when he got zapped when he carved that sigil on his chest?"

Sam grimaces. "Like I could ever forget that scene."

"Well, it took him weeks to get back in touch after that, remember? We thought he was dead but he turned up fine."
Sam nods. "He'd ended up on a fishing boat, right? Offshore somewhere? And then in a hospital?"

"And he was in a coma!" says Dean, brightening as he remembers the details. It really had taken Cas quite a while to get in touch. "Remember, he said the doctors thought he was brain-dead? And it took him a while to revive, or reboot or whatever it is he does, and wake back up. But he did wake back up in the end."

"I always wondered if God, I mean Chuck, had something to do with that," says Sam. He looks pensive, and after a moment Dean realizes why.

It's kind of disturbing to realize that a lot of Cas's unlikely-survival moments have probably been due to Chuck resurrecting him.

The reason it's kind of disturbing is because Chuck's gone now.

"I don't think we can count on any more magic resurrections," says Sam slowly.

Dean's just reached the same conclusion, but he can't accept that Cas might actually be dead. That's... that's simply unacceptable. He puts the thought right out of his head, sets his fork down to focus, and counters with, "But, remember, that was a sigil carved on his chest, like, it might have blown Cas right out of the vessel. That was a special case. What happened yesterday was just a regular sigil-zapping, right? The sigil was on a wall?" Sam nods, and Dean says, "A sigil on a wall usually takes him a couple days to return from, right?" He's trying to remember other times the angel-banishing sigil has been used on Cas. "Let's see, Cas got zapped once by Anna in that barn; I used it on him once in Bobby's panic room...." (Dean still feels a little bad about that one.) "A couple more times, too. Like when Hester was threatening us, remember? Cas ended up at that dog track in Australia, right? I guess he popped back from that one pretty fast but he could fly then; he had pretty good power. It's usually been a few days before we hear from him again."

"Yeah, it's been longer when he's low on power," says Sam, nodding. "The time when he ended up in a coma he was pretty low-powered. And ended up with zero power after. Does he have any power right now?"

"I don't know," says Dean, realizing he'd forgotten to check with Cas about this. During all the end-of-the-world doom and gloom yesterday, it had seemed much more important just to get to that liquor store. Cas had seemed more or less okay (if a little quiet) after Lucifer was blasted out, but, come to think of it, that Lucifer-getting-blasted moment, during the fight with Amara, had actually looked pretty rough. Cas had already been fairly low-powered before the whole Lucifer possession; could he possibly be at no power now? Even before getting zapped?

"He said Heaven's been sealed again," Sam points out. "Whenever that's happened before it's always meant Cas loses power, remember? Something about power flow, about him not having access or something."

"Okay," says Dean slowly. "So he might be low power. Or even no power. But he's not gonna be dead." (This is just not possible.) "But he might be out cold like happened with the sigil-on-the-chest. And he might have ended up in a hospital again. Let's... Here's an idea. Let's check for John Does. John Does who are in comas at hospitals. There's a national network for unidentified patients, isn't there?"

Sam's nodding, and he's already started tapping away on his laptop.
Sam gets into the John Doe registry (which also covers Jane Does, it turns out), but soon discovers it's going to take a while to go through it all, so they get a motel room for the night in Tremonton. It's a dive, with threadbare bedsheets and lukewarm water, but it'll do. They spend the evening completing a first pass through the entire John & Jane Doe registry (which is surprisingly large). But there's nobody who sounds like Cas.

"Maybe he's not in North America?" Dean suggests.

"Or he might not have been found yet," points out Sam. "Or at least might not have been entered in the registry yet. Looks like sometimes hospitals take a day or two to conclude that a patient is really an unknown John Doe. We should check again tomorrow."

Sam starts trying to ping Cas's phone again. Dean, meanwhile, starts a long round of phone calls to all their hunter contacts. But nobody's heard anything.

A half hour later Dean's gotten desperate enough to call Crowley, who hasn't heard a thing through his demon contacts either.

"At least that means he's not in Hell," Sam says, when Dean relays this news to him. "And I guess not in Heaven either, if it's really been sealed."

"There's still Purgatory," says Dean glumly as he tosses his phone onto his motel bed. Crowley had been his last idea. He eyes the motel room's minifridge; he's already emptied out the one miniature Jack Daniels bottle that was in there, and a liquor store run is starting to sound like a great idea. *Never did get to the one last night*, he thinks, remembering the conversation with Cas.

Sam is watching him, and he says "Way ahead of you," reaching into a brown paper sack that he's got tucked under the motel room's little table. He pulls out a sixpack of beer, adding, "Got this when you were checking us in. Figured you might need something, and you work better on beer than on liquor." Sam pulls a can off the plastic rings and tosses it to Dean, who grabs it gratefully and cracks it open.

Sam adds, "You said it yourself, he's usually gone a few days after a zap. We gotta be patient. Here, I brought your laptop — why don't you start in on North America news item searches, I'll start on the international ones, and we'll check the John Does again tomorrow."

Dean nods, takes a swig of beer and gets to work.

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They still haven't found anything by the next morning and reluctantly they start the drive back to the bunker. Sam continues searching for new news items on his phone, looking for anything about mysteriously appearing people, or strange visitors in comas. And he checks the day's newest John Doe entries. Dean drives, making a few calls on his cell whenever he can; he's broadening his phone-call effort to include some witch and psychic contacts.

There's still nothing.

They're both a little quiet when they finally get back to the bunker.
"It would finally all be over," Dean points out, as they spread out their stuff in the library, "if we could just find Cas." Sam glances up at him from his laptop with a questioning look.

"I mean, think about it," Dean says. "God, the Darkness, Amara. The Mark of Cain. Metatron. Lucifer. All of it. It's over. It's been years, Sam. One damn thing leading directly to another damn thing, for years, and never a frickin' break, but now it's... all... I can't even really believe it...."

Words actually fail Dean, but Sam gets it; Sam's nodding, and he says, "Everything's actually fine for once."

"Yeah," says Dean. "Except no Cas."

"We'll find him," says Sam. He's got a thoughtful look on his face, and he adds, "Hey... so... now that Amara's gone, can I ask, um, do you still feel that... pull toward her? That, uh... attraction thing or whatever?"

Sam's tripping over his words, but Dean knows exactly what he's referring to, and he says "No. NO. It's gone." And best of all, he discovers, as he says it, that it's true! That weird pull he'd felt toward Amara, the half-attracted, half-fascinated (and more-than-half-brainwashed) sensation that's been driving him nearly insane for months, is simply gone. Erased as if it had never been.

Dean almost gets a little dizzy as he realizes this. He sits slowly down in one of the bunker chairs (Sam's watching him). Very deliberately, Dean makes himself think of Amara. He's trying to see if he can elicit any of that strange forced-attraction feeling that he used to always feel whenever he thought of her.

He makes himself picture her face; he pictures her wearing that ever-present slinky dress, with the bombshell cleavage. He pictures that way she used to look at him (that freaky stalker-ish stare she had, and the way he could never seem to look the fuck away). He pictures her lovely eyes, and her cascade of soft dark hair. And he feels... nothing.

Absolutely nothing.

He's elated, and he says to Sam, with a big sigh, "It's gone. I picture her and I don't feel a goddam thing! I swear to God — to Chuck, whatever — I swear it's gone. It's been eating at me for a solid year! Ever since the Mark got off me." He's never even wanted to talk about this before, but now that it's gone, it's suddenly much easier to talk about. Dean looks over at Sam and adds, "It was so friggin' weird, Sam. She just had this freaky hold on my mind somehow. It was like a Mark-hangover that I just couldn't wake up out of."

"Like a... spell?" suggests Sam, a little slowly.

Dean thinks about that. Sam might be on to something. "Something like that," he agrees. "Not normal magic, I think, but it definitely wasn't voluntary, not for me. It never really felt natural. It didn't feel like it was coming from me, not really. It was like she'd tweaked me, re-made me the way she wanted or something, forced me to feel how she wanted me to feel. But now I finally feel back to normal. Like now I can feel like I want to feel. First time in two frickin' years, actually."

Sam's smiling, and he says, "Glad to hear it."

For some reason, all this makes Dean think of Cas again. Maybe because of all those Amara staring-contests. Cas was always the original king of the long stares, of course, long before Amara showed up. But with Cas, those staring contests actually had felt real, like they meant something. Like there was an actual friendship there, some kind of mutual respect.
Amara had wanted to absorb Dean. To devour him alive. Cas, in contrast, had offered to die at Dean's side.

*Hell of a difference*, thinks Dean.

He pulls out his phone to make another call, saying, "Let's get back to work."

The next morning, Dean's doing his first daily check of the John Doe registry (he checks three times a day now) and as usual there's a few new entries. "Four new John Does today," says Dean to Sam, who's sitting across the table doing his own morning check of the news websites.

"What's the descriptions?" says Sam. He doesn't even bother looking up; there's new John Does all the time, and there's been nothing even close to a match.

Dean takes a sip of his coffee and starts clicking through the descriptions of the various new John Does that have turned up at hospitals across the country. "Guy in his twenties in Mobile, Alabama... nope, he's black. One in Chicago, nope, female.... One in Seattle... nope, teenager. Guy in Flagstaff... whoa. *Whoa.*" Sam finally looks up, and Dean reads the description. "Caucasian male, six feet, slender build, dark hair, blue eyes, late 30s or early 40s." This could be a lot of people, of course, but so far it's a match, and Dean's heart's starting to pound. He reads further: "Tattoo! Tattoo on the abdomen! Cas has one there, right? That one that wards him from angels finding him?" He looks up at Sam, who's now looking back at him wide-eyed.

For the first time in days, Dean feels hopeful.

"It sounds right," says Dean. "Doesn't it?"

"Alive?" says Sam quietly.

Dean nods; he's only been checking the "alive" listings in the mornings. (He only looks at the "dead" listings once a day, at night. Really just for completeness — it's not really necessary to check those more often, since, of course, Cas can't be dead.) But Dean doublechecks the listing just to be sure and reports, "Alive and in stable condition! But unresponsive, it says. I bet he got knocked unconscious, just like we thought. He's probably just still rebooting."

"Any photos?" Sam asks. "Of the tattoo, or of the patient?" He's already tapping something into his own laptop.

Dean shakes his head. "They haven't uploaded any photos yet. Looks like they found him a few days ago but only logged him into the system now."

Sam's focused on his own laptop now. "Got it. Check this out. I just searched Google News for Flagstaff news items from the last three days, and here's a news item on a man found — oh shit, Dean, found in the Grand Canyon! It's a press release from the National Park Service. Man found unconscious down at the base of the canyon. Damn, I really hope he didn't fall all the way down there...."

"Maybe he can still fly a little?" says Dean hopefully. (Cas has never really explained much about the state of his wings; all Dean really knows is that Cas "can't fly" and "misses his wings.") "He always wanted to see the Grand Canyon."
"Well, he may not have got much of a view yet, since apparently he was unconscious the whole time and they had to airlift him out. Helicopter rescue, the works. The park service is calling him an 'unprepared hiker.'" Sam starts to chuckle. "There's a whole thing about how he didn't even have a water bottle. Oh man, LISTEN TO THIS, Dean, they describe the guy as wearing a trenchcoat! The park service is all pissed off about it. Here's the quote: 'We want to remind the public that a trenchcoat, business attire and dress shoes are entirely inappropriate clothing and footwear for hiking the Grand Canyon'." Sam looks up with a wide beaming smile.

"That's our angel!" says Dean, slamming both hands down on the table in triumph. He flips his laptop closed and jumps up; Sam's already jamming his own laptop into his shoulder bag. The rest of their stuff is already in the Impala. (They've been ready for days to head back out at a moments' notice.) Dean checks for the Impala keys in his pocket; they're right there, and the feel of the keys in his hand gives him a tremendous boost of energy.

As they get into the Impala and Dean revs the engine, he feels like he's practically got his very own wings. He feels that elated, that free, like an anchor's dropped away from him and he's soaring up into the sky. He pulls the car out onto the road, Sam is in the seat beside him, and they're going to get Cas, and the future is stretching out bright and expansive before them.

It's all clear as day in Dean's mind how it'll be. They'll collect Cas, who will probably have woken up already by the time they even get there. Cas'll be fine. They'll bring him back here to Kansas. He'll ride in the back; maybe he'll ride shotgun sometimes. Maybe Dean will even let him drive a bit! Cas'll be low-powered, so he'll need to eat, so they'll stop at lots of diners and buy him burgers and feed him up, and he'll be fine. And they'll get back to the bunker and all live together and...

They'll just... live.

They'll eat pizza, and watch movies. They'll do a hunt now and then.

And there'll be no Darkness, no Amara, no Mark, no Cain, no Lucifer, no Yelloweyes, no Leviathans, no Raphael, no angel wars, and no Apocalypse. Nobody will be possessed. Nobody will be soulless or crazy or brainwashed or under a spell or anything like that. It'll all be over.

They can just live.

Just like Mom said: "You can just live now." Then Dean remembers Mom's strange, sweet request about "Let yourself be happy," And he remembers Amara's last words too, and he thinks, You got it a little wrong, Amara. THIS is what I needed most. I needed THIS family back together. Not one from the past, but the one I have now: Me and Sam and Cas.

The whole world seems to be shining as the Impala speeds down the highway. Dean shoots a grin at Sam, and Sam grins back, flipping on the radio, and music starts playing. It's a classic old Doobie Brothers tune, "Listen To The Music", and they're going to get Cas, and everything's gonna be all right. Dean's on top of the world.

A little voice in the back of his head is whispering, It's never that easy, but Dean ignores it.

A/N - So I was working on this in Alaska. First fiction writing I've been able to do in months and it
felt so good! Have been itching to start posting it! And then when the S11 finale aired I thought "This would actually fit PERFECTLY after the S11 finale! ....if I just completely disable both S11 cliffhangers in about 5 minutes of conversation in chapter 1", lol, so that is what I am doing.

Update schedule: I'll be aiming for my usual Friday updates. However, chapter 2's not written yet and I have to drive some sea turtles around the country this coming week - I'm currently wrapping up an insanely busy science job that ends the last week of July, and then going to Brazil and then moving cross-country, so it's kind of nuts, but I'm nonetheless optimistically aiming for weekly Friday updates. (If I won't be able to get an update posted on Friday, I'll at least post an edit in the previous chapter's A/N about when it'll be up.) After chapter 2, chapters 3-6 are already done, and that'll get me through end of July when the job ends, and then I can just write for a few months.

I hope you enjoy this fic! Please drop a comment if you have a minute! And if there was something specific in this chapter that you liked, please do let me know.
I'm okay, I'm okay. I'm all right.

A/N - The sea turtles were successfully released, yay! They looked just great as they crawled into the sea! Crawling well, healthy and all healed up. Planning & doing the turtle release took up 3 days completely though, including the Tues-Wed-Thurs midweek evenings when I usually get a lot of fic editing done, so I'm only posting half of the chapter now. Second half is written but still needs a polish; it will follow next week as its own chapter. So, just a couple of scenes right now, but I hope you like it. :)

Dean's good mood lasts all the way through Colorado and about halfway through New Mexico, at which point, in mid-afternoon, he realizes he's getting nervous. Sam's tried Cas's phone a few more times and there's still no answer. Dean tries sending out a few quiet prayers, too (something he's been trying off and on, for days), in case Cas can pick up prayers even if his phone's dead, but there's no hint of a response. Which isn't all that surprising, but it reminds Dean that their friend is in a coma.

Shouldn't Cas have woken up and called by now? It's the fourth day since the zap.

What if he's in a permanent coma? What if he really got injured in the Grand Canyon? Could he possibly have actually fallen for part of the way, maybe broken some bones or something? Or did Lucifer damage him somehow? Is he having trouble rebooting?

What if something's wrong?

By the time the Impala starts climbing up into the high desert of the northern Arizona mountains, the little voice in the back of Dean's head has started to convince him that everything can't possibly be okay. Everything's going to get all fucked up again, somehow; he can feel it.

"Beautiful country," Sam remarks, as they pass Petrified Forest National Park. "They call all of this Red Rock Country, you know. All this part of the country. High mountain desert, for hundreds of miles." It's a striking, wide-open landscape, surprisingly cold for a desert, and with all kinds of strange rock formations — eroded walls and buttes and peaks, with bands of colorful striping on the rocks. Sam adds, "I came here once, to the Petrified Forest I mean, with some friends, back when I was in Flagstaff. Definitely worth a stop on the way back, actually. Bet Cas would like it."

"Yeah," says Dean. "Sure."

"The Grand Canyon's really close to Flag too, you know," says Sam, slipping into what sounds like a local's nickname for Flagstaff. "You remember I stayed in Flag for a bit, right?"

"Yeah," says Dean. "Uh-huh."

Dean's actually thinking, How could I forget. It's not actually a great memory. Sam had run away to Flagstaff for a few weeks as a teen, leaving Dean totally in the dark. Actually Dean had been terrified that Sam might've actually died, but no, Sam had just run away, straight-up disappeared, to go find himself or some teenaged angsty shit. And apparently Sam had loved being on his own; his memory of being in "Flag" had actually turned up in Sam's version of Heaven. (Which still kind of
bothers Dean.)

For Sam, "Flag" means freedom. For Dean, Flagstaff means... losing family.

Which is not really what Dean wanted to be reminded of right now. In fact he'd been trying not to think about it.

"Bryce National Park isn't too far either," says Sam.

"Yeah," says Dean again.

"And Zion, and Arches, all the Utah parks. Canyonland's fantastic; people always overlook that one. And Painted Desert's really close. You can't swing a cat around here without hitting a national park. You think Cas'd like to see any of those?"

"Yeah," says Dean. "Sure."

Sam falls silent. Dean glances over a moment later to find Sam peering at him with his forehead all wrinkled up like a Shar-Pei. That's the Concerned-Sam look, of course, and it means Sam's about to try to get Dean to "open up" and "share his feelings."

"Can it," says Dean automatically, before Sam even gets started. "Some day your face is gonna freeze that way, you know."

Too late; Sam's already in gear. "Cas'll be okay, Dean," Sam begins. "Of course he'll be okay," says Dean, shifting his gaze to the landscape ahead of them and scowling at the lovely rock outcroppings. "He's probably already okay. He probably already woke up. In fact he's probably left the hospital already. He's fine."

"If that's what you think," says Sam, "then why do you look so worried?"

"I don't. I'm not worried," insists Dean, even though his fingers are tightening on the steering wheel. "Everything's fine. You said it yourself, everything's finally okay. It's all over."

Sam takes a little breath, and Dean can tell he's about to launch on Phase 2 of the brotherly-bonding speech, the "Dean, you've got to talk about this stuff," part. Dean prepares to double-down on his stonewalling.

But something changes. Something about what's happened this week, maybe; something about the way Sam's voice had sounded on the phone when he'd first heard Dean was alive.

"C'mon, Dean —" Sam begins, but Dean's already bursting out with, "It's just, something always goes wrong. Always. Always, Sam! Something always goes wrong!" The little voice in the back of his head has taken over completely now, and he adds, "Nothing's ever this easy. Especially not with Cas!"

Sam thinks a moment. "I don't know," he says, thoughtfully. "I mean, I definitely know what you mean — something has always gone wrong. But you know something? I kind of feel more like... like with Chuck and Amara gone, maybe the whole universe has turned over a new leaf. Like maybe we can just start fresh, you know? Maybe even Cas can take it easy for once." He chuckles, and says, "I was even thinking, an hour ago when we crossed into Arizona, imagine what it would be like just to have normal-people problems."

"Normal-people problems?" says Dean, glancing over at him.
"Problems like, running out of gas. Paying the rent. Health insurance. Dental bills. Root canals, divorces, termites, I don't know. Stuff other than monsters. Point is, there might be problems, sure, but just as long as it's not the end of the world, you know? For once."

Dean looks over at him again. "You're saying, you'd rather have termites than the end of the world?"

"Of course," Sam says, with a shrug. "Nothing's ever perfect, you know? But whatever's coming, we can handle it. I'll take the termites."

"You'll be sorry you said that when the termites come," Dean says, and Sam laughs.

The rest of the drive is all national forest, national parks and Native American land, all pretty sparsely populated, and Sam's totally unable to get a cell signal for the last hour of the drive. Dean can't help reading that as a bad sign: what if they're never going to be able to get in touch with Cas?

They're driving on actual Route 66 itself by the time they pull into Flagstaff. It's night now — the sun set hours ago (it's been a very long drive) but Dean does get some glimpses of the town. It's pretty small, and what with good ol' Route 66 spearing straight through town, a genuine Native American reservation just over the hill and a giant railway track cutting right through the center of the tiny downtown, it feels like a classic Western town. Complete with a vintage old railway station (and also complete with a ten-minute wait at the tracks while a seemingly endless freight train goes by). It looks like a nice little place, actually; there's some kind of college, there's lots of signs to the Grand Canyon, there's a zillion bike trails everywhere, and a ton of coffee shops and tiny local breweries. Every third store seems to be a mountain bike shop. It's cute and all, but by now Dean's feeling so pessimistic that he just gets annoyed at the breweries and bike shops. He's muttering "college hipster kids..." to himself as they pass yet another brewery.

It doesn't help that Sam's in a fit of nostalgia now over his Flagstaff days. Dean's biting his lip to keep from pointing out that Sam was only here for a couple weeks; to hear Sam talk about it, it seems like he lived here for years. Sam's pointing out the Route 66 souvenir shops, some bike path he remembers using, he's talking about the dog he found, the mountain cabin he stayed in. Even when Dean's trying to focus on finding the hospital, Sam's still chattering on about whether Cas might want to go to "the Canyon" tomorrow or might want to visit some astronomical observatory up on a nearby hill.

Dean's starting to get irritated, but then it occurs to him that maybe Sam's actually just trying to keep his own spirits up. Maybe he's trying to convince both Dean and himself that Cas will be fine, and that they'll all get to tour Flagstaff together tomorrow morning — all three of them.

Sure enough Sam falls into a worried silence after just a few more minutes. A passing rainshower's blowing through town now and the windshield goes blotchy with big fat raindrops. Dean flicks the wipers on; Sam watches them in silence.

Then Sam says, "I should've been paying more attention."

"What?" Dean says.

"To the girl. That English lady," says Sam. "We walked right into a trap, Cas and me. I should've been more alert."
"You had stuff on your mind," points out Dean. "And Cas got taken by surprise too."

"I was in front," says Sam. "I was leading. I led Cas right into it —"

"Don't start that," orders Dean. "It wasn't your fault."

The rain stops just as they finally locate the hospital. By the time they park and get out of the Impala, the whole parking lot's wreathed in an eerie low fog, streamers of steam trailing up into the air as the rain evaporates away into the cool mountain air. It gives the whole night-time scene a spooky feel, like the hospital's floating on a foggy lake. It seems ominous, and Dean's really bracing himself now for... something, he's not sure what. Cas still in a coma, maybe? Cas insane; Cas amnesiac again... or maybe Lucifer somehow survived and re-possessed him? Or some other angel could have found him (are the angels still hunting Cas?), maybe another crazy reaper, or some stray Leviathan, or....

"Settle down," Sam says, and Dean realizes he's drumming his fingers on the Impala roof, staring at the hospital entrance as Sam pulls his bag out of the back. "He'll be fine," says Sam, clapping Dean on the shoulder. "Come on." They head in.

As they walk up to the receptionist in the main lobby, Dean mutters, "I hate hospitals." Sam just nods. Too many bad memories, too many times. Bobby dying... Dad dying... Sam injured, Dean injured....

Everybody always getting hurt.

Everybody always dying.

The receptionist steers them to the ICU, warning them that it's a little busy there tonight. Apparently the Flagstaff hospital is a "major regional trauma center" and sure enough it's huge, and full of activity. There's a big central desk and four corridors branching off in different directions, and the ER's right next door. There's all sorts of people dashing around, whole crowds of residents and nurses and EMTs rushing around with newly arrived patients on gurneys who are being rolled here and there, some coming from the ER, some going to operating rooms. It's a little confusing. Dean actually gets shoved aside by some intern darting down the hall, and this gives him a sudden, visceral memory of Bobby's death (he'd gotten shoved just the same way, that night, right when Bobby had been dying). It rattles him much more than it should, and he's still trying to calm himself down by the time they get to the central desk of the ICU.

There's nobody there; all the staff are temporarily elsewhere (running around shoving people, apparently). But Sam manages to find a whiteboard half-hidden behind the desk, and it says that "John Doe" is in Room 8. It's the only John Doe listed. They go to Room 8.

They find it. The bed is empty.

It's empty.

The bed's empty. Cas is gone. Cas should be in Room 8, he's the only "John Doe" the hospital has right now, John Doe's in Room 8 and this is Room 8 and Cas isn't here. Dean checks with an intern about whether they've got the right room, but the intern just points to the gigantic "ROOM 8" sign on the door, making an obvious effort to not roll his eyes. They're in the right room; it's empty.
And it's not like Cas has been rolled away in his bed for a CT scan or something, because the bed is still here. Sam goes back to doublecheck the whiteboard while Dean stands in the room and looks around.

The bed's been stripped, and there's a mop in the corner. Somebody's been cleaning the room, and Dean knows what that means. It means the hospital's getting it ready for the next patient. It means Cas isn't coming back to the room at all.

"Maybe he finally woke up and walked out?" Sam says, walking up next to Dean. "Checked himself out?"

Dean pulls out his phone and taps Cas's number. Sam watches while he holds the phone to his ear.

But Cas still doesn't pick up.

If he were awake he'd pick up, Dean thinks. If he were awake, he'd have charged the phone by now, 'cause hospitals always have chargers. Especially, "major regional trauma centers" are going to have a way to charge a patient's phone. And he'd have picked up. If he were awake he'd have picked up.

"If he were awake," Dean begins, but he can't finish the sentence. He stuffs the phone back into his pocket.

Sam says, "Maybe he got transferred somewhere else. Some other department." There's a sort of a forced-optimistic tone in his voice.

"Maybe," Dean says.

Or maybe Cas didn't get transferred. Maybe Cas's ICU room at the hospital is empty because....

Dean turns on his heel and starts walking back to the ICU desk, weaving through the flood of residents and interns and hospital staff. At last there's somebody at the desk, some harried-looking nurse who's grabbing charts and answering about three phone calls at once, and Dean starts gearing himself up to corner her and make her hang up all the phones and tell him where his friend Castiel is. (Or John Doe, or whatever they're calling him here). Dean's already scowling as he stalks toward her, steeling himself for an argument, getting ready to force her to tell him that Cas is okay. He's even getting angry in advance (why, he doesn't know), and starts walking faster, feeling his fists starting to clench as he zeroes in on the hapless nurse. Sam's hurrying to catch up and he even reaches out to put one hand on Dean's arm, murmuring quietly, "Whoa, Dean, slow down, slow down," but Dean can't stop.

And then, just as Sam puts his hand on Dean's arm, they both hear a familiar voice. A wonderfully — almost painfully — familiar voice, low and rough. It's saying, "The tests don't matter. I have to leave right now. I can't stay for more tests."

Dean screeches to a halt so suddenly that Sam barrels into his back. Dean grabs for Sam's arm even as Sam is grabbing his, both trying to alert each other about the voice. There's a moment when they're holding onto each other and looking around in all directions, trying to locate where Cas's voice is coming from — there's still so many other people around, and so much noise, that it's not even clear at first where he is. Then like magic the crowd parts, and there he is. There's Cas.

He's alive.

He's upright and on his feet. He's wide awake. He's talking.
He's in the middle of an argument with a doctor, actually. Cas has his back to Sam and Dean, and he's facing the doctor, who's planted right in front of Cas with his arms folded looking pretty skeptical. Maybe because Cas is looking a little disheveled. More than a little; seems Cas is in the middle of getting dressed, right there in the hallway, and he's trying to get his trenchcoat on and seems to be having some trouble. (It's the Lesser Trenchcoat, as Dean thinks of it; the Greater Trenchcoat, the original one, is long gone.)

At least Cas has got his pants and the white shirt on — barely. The pants at least seem to be fully on, but the shirt is unbuttoned, with the shirt tails dangling loose, the cuffs undone and the sleeves shoved messily up his arms. The shirt's also muddy and wrinkled. (Actually, everything looks muddy and wrinkled.) Cas has his blue-striped tie in one hand and both his shoes in the other. He hasn't even bothered with the suit jacket or his belt (both are in a heap on the floor by his stockinged feet) but as they watch he successfully gets one arm into one trenchcoat sleeve. But he's still groping around his back with his other hand, trying to find the other sleeve. That's the hand that's holding the shoes and of course there's no way he can get his arm into his sleeve while he's also holding the shoes, and the trenchcoat's also gotten all twisted behind his back, but he keeps trying, flailing around with one arm behind his back trying to stick the tips of the shoes into the sleeve. He's focused intently on the doctor through all this, saying, "You don't understand, you have to let me go, I have to get back to Kansas, I can't reach my friend — my, my brother, I can't reach him —"

Dean's already cruising over to him, closing the distance between them with long strides. Sam's right at his side. Cas still has his back to them and hasn't seen them yet.

"We really need to do more tests—" says the doctor, but Cas says "If my brother's not there then honestly there's no point anyway, no point in even doing the tests—" Dean and Sam come up behind Cas at that point, and, as smoothly as if they'd rehearsed it, Sam plucks the shoes out of Cas's hand, while Dean gently takes hold of the collar of the trenchcoat and gives it a little shake so that the coat straightens out and Cas finally gets his arm in the sleeve. Cas shrugs on the coat at last, calling a relieved "Thank you," over his shoulder before he's even fully turned to see who it is.

"No problem," says Dean.

"Our pleasure," says Sam.

Cas spins around so fast he almost loses his balance. He drops his tie, and he stares.

He stares at Dean for such a long moment that Dean briefly wonders if he's really okay. (Cas looks a bit of a mess — four-day-old stubble on his chin, his hair sticking up every which way, and still just half-dressed.) Cas then glances at Sam, twice, doing a classic textbook doubletake, before his eyes return to Dean.

"I'm alive," Dean announces, unnecessarily.

"Dean," Cas says.

There's a whole world in how Cas says that one word.

And now apparently it's time for another Heartfelt Castiel Hug, as Cas closes the gap between them in one quick move and wraps both arms around Dean. It's a really tight hug this time, as if Cas is trying to weld Dean right onto his own chest. Cas has also gone for the both-arms-on-top hug option, a little tricky since he's not as tall, but he pulls it off, one hand on the back of Dean's neck and the other wrapped tight over Dean's shoulders.

It's such an intense relief to find Cas alive and alert and upright that Dean, once again, totally forgets
to do the standard back-thumping. He just wraps both hands around Cas's back, and lets Cas take
hold of him. Lets him put his chin over Dean's shoulder. Lets him squeeze Dean tight.

Okay, maybe Dean's squeezing him a little tight too. Maybe Dean's got his chin tucked over Cas's
shoulder too. Maybe Dean even lets himself close his eyes for a moment, just to soak it in

Cas takes a couple of jerky gasps of air, like he's so stunned he's forgotten how to breathe.

"I'm okay, I'm okay," Dean says to Cas. "I'm all right." Cas already has one hand on the back of
Dean's head and now he moves his other hand there too. One hand's now a little bit up in Dean's hair
and the other a little lower down on the nape of Dean's neck. Cas is even scratching Dean's hair a
little. It's definitely a little odd, but there's something sweet about it too, for Castiel is so clearly
overwhelmed.

Cas takes one more huge breath of air, almost a gasp, and at last he releases Dean. Sort of. He takes
one step back but now he's slid one hand down onto Dean's shoulder, and he leaves his hand there.
It's that old hand-on-the-shoulder position that he used to use when he was about to fly Dean
somewhere; or, sometimes, about to tell him something.

Dean waits, but Cas says nothing. He just looks at Dean for another long moment.

It's such a long pause that for a strange and fleeting moment, Dean almost wonders if Cas is about to
kiss him.

"You can stop holding on, you know," says Dean, laughing a little. "You can let go anytime."

Cas glances down at his own hand. "Sorry... of course," Cas mutters, and he finally manages to let
go and step back.

A moment later he's muttered "Sam," and has turned and lunged at Sam too.

This turns out to be another pretty intense hug. Sam and Dean are both half-laughing now — Sam's
exchanging a look with Dean over Cas's shoulder, while also trying not to bash Cas in the back with
his own shoes (which are still in Sam's hands).

"Great to see you too," said Sam, patting Cas's back gently with one shoe heel. "But I'm not the one
who had the soul-bomb in his chest, remember."

"Yes, but I didn't know what happened with that woman," says Cas. He manages to let go of Sam
(more quickly than he'd let go of Dean) and adds, as Sam hands him the shoes back, "Also I was
worried you might have done something stupid." Sam looks puzzled, and Cas explains, "You
weren't answering your phone. I thought you might have done something... stupid. Something quite
stupid." And he stops there, taking another slightly ragged breath and looking down at the floor, his
shoulders slumping as if he's suddenly exhausted. He's clutching both shoes to his chest now, like
they're all he's got left in the world.

Dean and Sam exchange a grim look. Something stupid. It's a code phrase, of course, one that Dean,
when he'd said it, wasn't even sure that Cas would understand. But clearly Cas has figured it out.

"Didn't you get any of my calls?" said Sam. "I've been calling you for days. So has Dean. Is your
phone dead?"

Cas grimaces, looking up from his shoes. "It's not working. Apparently I was found lying at the edge
of the Colorado River. Lying half in, half out of the water." His eyes go a little unfocused as he adds,
thinking back, "I think I remember sort of rowing myself out of the water? With what's left of my
wings... I'm not sure. It turns out the banishing sigil can put one in a bad position, relative to the Earth's surface I mean, if the wings aren't... Well, anyway, some river-rafters found me, and I'm told I was soaking wet, and the cell phone's ruined." (The muddy, stained look of his clothes is starting to make sense.) He adds earnestly, to Sam, "But, Sam, they let me use the hospital phone. I woke up a few hours ago and I've been using the hospital phone and I tried calling you six times in the last hour."

"Oh, damn, I'm sorry," Sam says. "No cell service." He digs out his phone and looks at it. "Great. Now it says an unknown number called six times."

Dean explains, "We were on our way here, Cas. Lot of empty country in Arizona — which means, not many cell towers."

"Ah," says Cas, nodding. "Of course. I should have realized. I just —" He heaves a big sigh and runs one hand through his hair. It's an oddly human move, and Dean's struck by how mortal Cas looks right now: his disheveled hair, the four-day stubble, all his clothes with those dried mudstains and his shirtfront totally unbuttoned (whatever undershirt he used to have seems to be long gone). It all looks very... human.

The way he's blinking and rubbing his eyes also seems very human.

"I'm very glad to see you both," Cas finally says. "Dean, I have to confess, I promised you that I would look after Sam, but—" he takes a breath— "I was so careless, I wasn't thinking clearly, and, and, I'm so sorry, I wasn't alert enough and I let us walk directly into a trap and let myself get banished immediately and left Sam there all alone, with an aggressive woman—"

Dean almost laughs. It's exactly what Sam had been worried about earlier.

"Pretty sure we walked into that together, dude," says Sam, clapping him on the shoulder.

"But I promised Dean— " Cas begins, and he pauses. He shoots a look at Dean that's greatly relieved... and yet also still haunted. Dean realizes, then, that Cas must have woken up thinking not only that both Sam and Dean had died, but also that he'd failed to carry out Dean's very last request:

Look out for Sam, okay?

Of course.

"Sam's alive," says Dean gently. Sam nods, and Dean adds, "And I'm alive. We're both alive."

"I'm alive too," Castiel tells them, as if they hadn't noticed that yet. "So... we're all... alive?" At last his shoulders relax a little as he glances back and forth between Sam and Dean, taking it in.

"Hard to believe, isn't it?" says Sam, grinning.

At that point somebody says "Mr. Winchester?"

Sam and Dean both whip around to find that the doctor (who had faded away diplomatically during the whole reunion scene) has sidled back up next to Sam and is now saying, a little apologetically, "I really hate to interrupt, Mr. Winchester, but we do need to discuss a few things."

Dean's immediately on guard about how the doctor could have known Sam and Dean's last name. It takes a moment to register that the doctor was actually talking to Castiel. Cas clarifies, "That's, um, that's the name I gave," and he then says to the doctor, gesturing toward Sam and Dean, "May I introduce Sam and Dean. They're..." He hesitates.
He flicks a glance at Dean, and then at Sam, and that rare half-smile starts to creep onto Cas's face, one corner of his mouth crooking up. At once Dean knows what he's going to say.

Cas turns back to the doctor and says, straightening up a little: "They're my family."

A/N - And that's all we have time for this week. Just a sweet fluffy reunion. :)

More to come next week! Thank you for your patience, and as always, if there was anything in particular you liked, please do let me know! I love to hear from you.
The perfect amount of tousle goes a long way

A/N - First off, an apology for not replying to all your lovely comments! Last week was really hectic after the turtle transport and I had to work all weekend, and I just ran out of time. (Also - to anybody who's tried to tweet me - Twitter's been nonfunctional on my phone since I left jibcon in April. I can receive tweets but can't send them! Really weird. Reinstalling hasn't solved it, sigh.) Anyway, apologies for the lack of responses last week, but please do know I really do read & cherish every comment!!

And - I'm so glad you all liked the happy reunion. It seemed like our boys needed at least one moment of peace together. :) Whatever comes next...

Now back to our heroes, who have just been reunited in the Flagstaff hospital. (PS - spoilers about "Some Like It Hot," if you've never seen it.)

The doctor seems greatly reassured that Cas actually has some family to pick him up, and promises to sign the release paperwork as soon as Cas "gets himself together." Only then does Cas seem to notice that he's still only half-dressed, and that the few clothes he's managed to get on are a mess. "I look filthy," complains Cas, frowning down at his mud-stained shirt and coat, and feeling at the stubble on his chin. "I'm not presentable."

It brings to mind a moment several years ago, when a very messy-looking Castiel (fresh out of Purgatory) had walked into a motel bathroom looking like a muddy wreck, and had come strolling back out all of five seconds later perfectly spotless, clothes clean and pressed. And freshly shaven on top of it.

Cas now just plucks at the mud stains on his trenchcoat with a sigh.

"So how are those magical clothes-laundering skills these days?" Dean asks. "On the fritz again?"

Cas just gives him a frustrated look.

"Low power?" Sam guesses.

"No power," says Cas, with another sigh, looking down at the stained shirt and patting at himself vaguely. "Everything hurts, actually. And I've ruined another set of clothing."

"Never mind," says Dean. "Get your shoes on. We'll fix you up."

They hustle him into a nearby men's room for a quick once-over — the idea is to give him enough of a sprucing-up to satisfy the doctor that Cas is actually sane and releasable. Sam whips the trenchcoat off and starts beating the dust and dried mud off of it over at the side of the restroom, while Dean
takes a critical look at Cas's other clothes. The pants are dark enough that they hide the mud okay. The white shirt is more problematic, but Dean decides that the dark suit jacket, once buttoned up, will hide the worst of the shirt's stains. Soon Dean's buzzing around Castiel like a personal valet, helping him get the suit jacket on, handing him the belt and settling the blue-striped tie around his neck in a loose loop. Cas tucks his shirt-tails in while Dean's working his way around Cas in a little circle helping thread the belt through the belt loops, and then while Cas is adjusting the belt Dean tries to help him tie the blue-striped tie. They hit a minor moment of confusion when it turns out Dean is trying to put the tie on with the seam side up — the way Cas used to wear the original blue tie, years ago — while Cas actually wants it the normal way, seam side down, which Claire seems to have shown him at some point. At first neither of them realizes what the other's trying to do; Cas flips the tie one way, Dean flips it back, Cas flips it over again, Dean flips it back again. (Sam's finished dealing with the trenchcoat by now and is watching them from the corner of the room, coat slung over one arm. For some reason he seems to be stifling a laugh.)

"Oh, right, you want it normal," says Dean, finally remembering that Cas now wears his tie the usual way.

"I want it presentable," says Cas, twisting the tie back around.

"You want it boring," says Dean, flipping one end over again.

"I just want it orderly," says Cas, flipping it back.

"Okay, okay. Orderly," says Dean, giving in. Dean then tightens the tie a little, snuggling it up Cas's neck in an "orderly" way. Cas loosens the tie before Dean even has his hands off it. Dean tightens it again. Cas loosens it.

"Oh, you want it disorderly," says Dean.

"I want it comfortable," says Cas with a frown.

"You two are a great comedy act," comments Sam. "Like Laurel and Hardy."

"More like the Odd Couple," says Dean, grinning.

"Or the couple in Some Like It Hot?" suggests Cas, trying to join in.

Dean and Sam both look at him. "Some Like It Hot", of course, is the classic old film where a man in drag accidentally ends up married to another man... who turns out to not mind at all when his spouse turns out to be male.

"It's a 1959 romantic comedy movie," Cas explains, "featuring a pair of male friends who have to impersonate women to escape from a gangster. It also stars an actress by the name of Marilyn Monroe. I don't know if you've ever heard of her?"

"You know what, Cas?" says Dean.

"What?"

"It's good to have you back," says Dean, grinning.

Sam's grinning too, and thankfully he doesn't say anything about "Some Like It Hot"; he just hands Cas the trenchcoat, and Dean and Sam both watch as Cas pulls it on. Cas is frowning at himself in the mirror as he adjusts it, and when he realizes both brothers are watching him, he turns toward them a little and even straightens up slightly, waiting for their verdict.
"He'll have to shave later," Sam comments to Dean. "Just fix his hair a bit and we're done."

At that comment, Cas unexpectedly produces a comb from the inner pocket of his suitjacket and starts combing his hair down, looking in the mirror earnestly as he does so.

Dean finds he needs a moment to adjust to the idea that Castiel the angel, soldier of God, warrior of Heaven and smiter of demons, apparently carries a ninety-nine-cent little plastic Walgreens comb around with him at all times. Some habit he picked up back when he was human, probably.

And then Dean realizes he has an opportunity here to finally fix something that's been mildly bothering him for a couple years now.

"Don't comb it down quite that much," Dean suggests, reaching over with one hand to block Cas's combing and ruffle his hair back up a little. "I think you should kinda fluff it back up. Like... this...." Dean fiddles with Cas's hair a bit more, till it's starting to achieve a nice amount of disarrayed fluffiness.

"What? But it's disorderly that way," Cas says, frowning into the mirror. He's peering around Dean's arm with his comb still raised. "What's the point of combing it if you then de-comb it? It's more presentable combed."

"It's more boring," corrects Dean. "It's fine to comb it — the comb kinda organizes everything and gives you a starting point — but then, I think, you should fluff it a bit." Cas's hair is still insufficiently fluffed. It's not staying up, so Dean wets down his hands at the sink and really goes to work, squaring up right in front of Cas and starting to work on Cas's hair with both hands, saying, "You did the tie you way you like, so let me do the hair. Fair's fair, right?" Cas is looking doubtful, but he's lowered the comb and he submits uncertainly, still craning his head a little to peer over Dean's shoulder at the mirror.

Dean wets Cas's hair just a tad and then scrunches it up, till it's clumping together just that perfect little bit, standing up slightly in front.

"But this is how it used to be before I learned about combs," complains Cas.

"Exactly," says Dean, remembering Castiel walking into a barn, wind-blown and dramatic, hair tousled, sparks flying, one evening long ago. "Trust me, girls'll dig this."

"Girls will dig this?" Cas repeats slowly, looking in the mirror and turning his head from side to side. He still looks doubtful.

"Girls... will...," says Dean, fiddling with some stray tufts at Cas's forehead, "almost definitely... dig... this." He steps back and eyes his handiwork. "Not that you want to look like you care too much about your hair, mind you. There's a fine line."

"What Dean's saying is, he's always stifled a secret desire to be a hairdresser," says Sam. "He's about to tell you all about the joys of product."

"Bite me," says Dean — though in fact he does use a tiny bit of some mousse stuff on his own hair from time to time, which, unfortunately, Sam knows about. (But Sam uses a totally girly "volumizer" shampoo, and sometimes even borrows the mousse stuff, so they're even.) "So I want to look halfway decent, is that a crime?" says Dean. He turns back to Cas to say, "All I'm saying is, the perfect amount of tousle goes a long way." Belatedly he adds, "With the chicks."

"The perfect amount of... tousle...." Cas repeats, glancing at Dean's hair briefly, and then at Sam's.
"Don't look at Sam," Dean advises. "He's a freak."

"Hey," says Sam, aggrieved. "We both know who's spent half an hour staring in the mirror trying to get his hair to stick up at—" (Sam adds air quotes with his hands) "—the 'classic bad-boy angle'."

"Oh, come on, I was sixteen."

"You were doing it just last week, Dean," says Sam with a snort.

Sam is, unfortunately, correct, so Dean rolls his eyes, drops the topic and is about to suggest they head outside and find the doctor. But when he turns back to Cas, it turns out Cas is feeling at his hair with both hands now (still staring in the mirror), and then he's wetting his own hands down at the sink, apparently trying to copy Dean's method. Once both hands are dripping wet, he starts pushing around clumps of hair randomly, but he's got way too much water in the mix and soon there's water trickling down his hair and even down his face. Sam is stifling a laugh again, and Dean's biting his lip, but Cas keeps at it. Soon his hair is almost drenched, big clumps sticking every which way, and he catches Dean's eye in the mirror. (Somehow though he still manages to look pretty good. At least it's better than the High-School-Math-Teacher look he'd been going for before.)

"Like that?" Cas says, watching Dean.

"Close enough," says Dean.

Sam says, "That's a, um, slightly imperfect amount of tousle, Cas, just by the way. That's more the half-drowned look, actually. Little less water next time."

"But he carries it pretty well," points out Dean. "So we'll call it good."

"Girls will dig this?" asks Cas. He's watching Dean in the mirror again.

"Girls will definitely dig this," says Dean. And once again Sam's stifling a smile.

Thirty minutes later they're wedged in a booth together at a late-night burger joint. It's one of those semicircular booths with a curved padded wall; Cas is in the middle and Dean and Sam are on either side, and Dean's ordered burgers and fries for everyone. Even Sam's on board (none of his healthy crap tonight). They're all hungry, and Cas in particular seems to be downright starving. Soon Sam's even having to keep Castiel from trying to eat a spoonful of ketchup straight from the bottle before the food arrives. ("It's not a vegetable, Cas, I don't care what Claire says, you don't just eat it straight. You have to put it on stuff!")

Dean allows himself a moment to sit back and enjoy the sight of Sam instructing Cas in the appropriate culinary uses of ketchup.

Next Dean even allows himself a moment, quite tentatively, to think Everything's really all right.

For once the worried voice in the back of his head actually goes quiet.

It's a strange feeling.

It only lasts a few seconds. When the waitress arrives with the food and sets the burgers down in front of them, and then the fries, and beers for all three of them, and milkshakes too (Cas wanted
both), and as Cas begins devouring his burger, and as Sam doles out a instructional dollop of ketchup next to Cas's fries, Dean starts to develop a new worry. He's now worrying about when he's going to wake up out of the dream.

Because it has to be a dream, right?

They found Cas, Cas is fine, everything's fine, all the horrible things are over, and it's all playing out exactly like Dean had imagined. Right down to the burgers.

There's even the bonus fun of getting to snicker quietly about Cas's crazily messed-up hair. It's dried all funny by now, tufts sticking out in all directions. (Of course somehow Cas still looks great anyway.)

Just don't wake up, thinks Dean to himself, as he starts eating.

Sam has shifted to updating Cas on the English-girl story (they'd given him quick summaries in the car, but he hasn't really heard the details yet). Cas once again starts bemoaning his carelessness in "letting" himself get banished, and then Sam and Cas slide into a half minute or so of arguing about which of them is more at fault. Dean's watching all this from the side, bemused, and he finally has to wade in with "IT'S THE ENGLISH CHICK'S FAULT. It's neither of your faults. Now eat."

Cas, though, still has more questions, for he turns to Dean to ask, "But Dean, what about you? How did you survive?"

"Like I said in the car," says Dean. "Chuck disabled the soul-bomb."

"Yes, but what happened exactly?" asks Cas. "What did they say?"

Dean fills him in on Chuck and Amara's smoky double-helix finale. (He doesn't get around to describing about Mom. That's still too confusing to talk about.) Cas nods, slowly, as Dean describes the Chuck-Amara showdown.

"That all rather makes sense, actually," Cas says. "I have to say, seeing their way of interacting, their sibling relationship — such as it was — did at least give me some insight into why Heaven has always been the way it is. Why the angels have always acted the way they have." He heaves a tired sigh and adds, thoughtfully, "We're supposed to be siblings, we angels, yet it seems we're always in such conflict. Fighting each other, locking each other up.... correcting each other...." (Cas pauses here, long enough for Dean to wonder, Does correcting mean torturing?) "... I wonder now if Chuck had Amara on his mind when he was creating the angels. Maybe an echo of those tensions just sort of... seeped into us."

"Did you ever get a chance to talk much with Chuck?" asks Sam.

Cas goes quiet again, staring down at his French fries. He picks one up slowly, and looks up to say, "Very little. He was so ill, of course, and, to be perfectly honest, I wasn't feeling too well myself, after Lucifer's departure." He pokes at the dollop of ketchup with the French fry, looks at the result doubtfully, and adds, "When Lucifer left I found myself more drained than I may have let on."

"What, from the way he was torn out?" asks Dean.

"Or just from what he was doing to you all along?" says Sam. He and Cas share a brief look.

"Both, I think," says Cas, looking down at the fry again. He doesn't add more details, but just swallows the ketchup-tipped French fry.
The fry seems a revelatory experience. Cas closes his eyes as he chews, concentrating hard, and once he opens his eyes he immediately grabs several more fries, dips them in the ketchup and eats them too, one at a time, with obvious gusto. He closes his eyes for each one. Dean's smiling as he watches; there's something awfully endearing about watching an angel enjoy a French fry that much.

Sam finally says, with a grin, "I'm guessing it tastes like more than molecules?"

Cas pauses in mid-chew, opening his eyes. He nods at Sam, finishes chewing, swallows and says, "It's been quite a while since food tasted this good. I'm enjoying it." But then he adds, with a frown, "Though I'm afraid it also means that I'm really down to no power at all."

"Fully human?" Dean asks.

Cas nods again. He then returns to his half-eaten burger, picking it up and taking a huge bite. Again he's obviously relishing it, but after he swallows down his next bite he looks at the burger in his hands with a slightly worried expression. He says, slowly, "I'll guess I'll have to figure out what to do next."

"You know what?" says Sam. "I think you get to do whatever you want."

"What?" says Cas, looking at him. "What do you mean?"

Dean sets down his own half-eaten burger, angles himself a little toward Cas and even props one elbow up on the back of the booth to face Cas more directly. Cas turns slightly to look at him as Dean says, "Okay, listen. So, you don't have to follow Chuck's old orders anymore, right? You're not feeling like you've got to follow God's plan? I know you haven't been really doing that for a while, but it's totally off the table now, right?"

Cas nods his head emphatically and says, "For one thing, he's gone. I don't think there even is a plan anymore. And also... I've got to say, meeting Chuck was very freeing in at least one way. He was so..." Cas gropes for a word, gesturing in the air with his burger. "Fallible," he finally finishes. "Petty, almost, at times. I no longer believe what we angels were once taught, that God is infallible, that every act of his was inherently good, that he had a perfect plan." After a pause he adds, "Actually I no longer think he really had any plan at all." He takes another bite of burger.

Dean nods. "So you're free of that. And you're definitely not possessed anymore, right? Not even a little bit?"

"What? No, no," says Cas. He swallows down the bite of burger and looks at Dean quite seriously. "No, Lucifer's really gone."

"You're not under a spell?" asks Dean. Cas shakes his head again.

"Not brainwashed?" asks Dean.

Cas frowns a little, eyeing Dean now. "No."

Sam puts in, "There's no angel civil war going on?"

"Not that I'm aware of," says Cas. "I certainly hope not." He's looking back and forth between them now, more alert, and he sets down his burger. "What are you both getting at?"

"Got all your memories?" asks Dean. "You know who you are?"

Cas says "I do indeed," and now his chin lifts a little, and there's a hint of that smile again on his
"Well, then," says Dean. "What do you think, Sam?"

"I think that sounds like a completely free angel," says Sam, and Cas looks at him.

Dean nods, and adds, "Us too, Cas. No wars, no Apocalypse, no Leviathans... nothing like that anymore. *It's all over.* Nobody dying, nobody possessed. We're free."

Cas is staring at Dean now, like he doesn't quite understand, so Dean gives him a wide grin and leans forward a little to drive it in. "Cas, there's *nothing* to worry about now, don't you get it? *Nothing's wrong.* We're all really *free.* At last."

Cas goes very thoughtful. He gazes down at his plate once more, staring at his French fries and the dollop of ketchup too, studying them as if they're deeply meaningful religious artifacts.

Sam explains, "We were thinking, Cas, on the way here, we can finally just do *whatever we want.* Have just normal-people problems for a change. Mortgages."

"*Termites,*" says Dean.

Sam nods, and adds, "And I think the same's gonna be true for you."

"*Meaning, I'm going to have termites?*" says Cas slowly, glancing up at Sam.

"*Meaning, you can do whatever you want,*" says Dean, laughing. "You've always been such a fan of free will, right? But you know, I don't think you've ever really been free." Cas flicks a glance at him, and Dean says, "Think about it. You've never really had a chance to do what you want without a looming disaster forcing your hand. But now..." Dean spreads both hands, looking around at the peaceful diner. "Now everything's fine."

Sam asks him, "So what do you actually want to do?"

Cas looks back and forth between them, an almost solemn look in his eyes. Then Cas gazes off into mid-air, a contemplative expression on his face.

"I need to think about that," says Castiel slowly.

"It may take a few days of getting used to," says Sam, "Just from personal experience."

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*A/N - More tomorrow. (Sorry for the string of shorter chapters, it's just the reality of my workload these days...) Hope you are enjoying my little story! And, as always, feel free to drop a comment if you want to make me happy. :)*
The dinner doesn't last too much longer. After all, it's late, Dean and Sam have just driven a thousand miles and Cas has just woken up out of a coma, and they're all exhausted. So they head for a motel, where Dean takes a certain amount of pleasure in booking two rooms for a change: one for Sam and Dean, and one for Castiel.

As Dean and Sam are unpacking in their room, Dean starts bundling together a few things to take over to Cas, who's right down the hall in the other room. Dean digs up a spare pair of new boxers for him, and an extra razor, and a clean t-shirt to sleep in.

"Here, give him a toothbrush," Sam says, holding out a brand-new toothbrush from his own bathroom bag. "I was going to toss my old one soon but he can have the new one — I'll just keep using the old one another day. And give him this toothpaste, here, I already brushed my teeth." Dean takes Sam's contributions and starts bundling the little pile of night-time supplies together. He's got them all wrapped up in the t-shirt when he has a brainwave.

Plunking the whole bundle in his own duffel, Dean zips the duffel closed and picks up the entire thing, hefting it over one shoulder. Sam raises an eyebrow and Dean says, "I think I'm gonna room with Cas tonight. There's two beds in there — plenty of room. Nothing personal, it's just, you snore, dude."

"And how do you know Cas doesn't?" says Sam, eyebrow still raised.

"Well, only one way to find out, huh?" Dean says.

Sam laughs, returns to his unpacking, and says, "Go for it. Seriously... the guy just got out of the ICU, and he's all of five days post-Lucifer. I was actually thinking of offering to stay with him myself. Keep an eye on him for me, would you?"

Dean nods, and a minute later he's heading down the hall to Cas's room.

Cas seems very pleased to see him. He makes a big show of inviting Dean in and saying, "Of course you can stay, of course, I'd be delighted to host you, it's my pleasure!" (Dean gallantly refrains from pointing out that it's actually Dean who paid for the room.)

Cas is grateful, too, about the t-shirt and the other supplies (though it's also clearly a moment when he's realizing that he's going to need to think about supplies like this again). It's an uneventful evening, though. Dean concludes, after watching Cas lay out his sleeping clothes and unwrap the toothbrush, that Cas is definitely seems tired. Sure, he's in pretty good shape for a coma patient fresh out of the ICU, but he's so tired he's stumbling a little, and he's almost a bit spacey, as if he's
distracted about something.

There's barely even any time to talk, though, for Cas almost immediately disappears into the bathroom, where he takes a ridiculously long shower. (It's so long that Dean starts to wonder what exactly he's doing in there, and he even thinks, with a grin, *Just how human is he now?*)

When Cas comes out, though, now clad in Dean's t-shirt and the new boxers, he's just looking even more tired — so much so that Dean chivvies him right to bed. Where Cas conks out so completely that it's almost like he's gone right back into a coma.

Dean's soon ready for bed himself, but finds himself sitting on his own bed instead, watching Cas sleep.

Partly Dean's watching him to make sure he's not actually going back into a coma.

But partly...

Partly Dean just wants to watch him for a little while.

Even in sleep, Cas somehow still looks like Cas (and not at all like Lucifer, that is). Though it's a little odd to see him curled up in a bed like this — now that he's wearing Dean's t-shirt he looks even more human. His hair's still damp from his shower, he's curled up tightly on his side with his knees drawn up and with the motel blanket wrapped snugly around him. Curled up like this, he somehow looks much more vulnerable than he had in the hospital, so vulnerable that Dean even feels a pang of worry. Cas doesn't quite look relaxed; that habitual worried look is still on his face even in sleep, and he's also hanging on to an extra pillow with both hands, the pillow pressed to his chest and both his arms wrapped around it.

As Dean watches, Cas shifts in his sleep, muttering something. His fingers tighten on the pillow.

Dean wonders, *What are you dreaming about?*

There was a time, years ago, when Castiel had asked him the same question.

There was a time when Cas had even been able to visit Dean's dreams.

How tough Castiel had seemed then, back in those early days... how mysterious and unearthly; how alien. How powerful.

Especially compared to how weakened he'd become later. First when he'd rebelled and fallen, and later when he'd lost his grace and become truly human.

It comes back to Dean, then, how Cas had been hoping that Sam and Dean could be his "teachers" in the art of being human. But, of course... Dean had been forced to kick him out. Dean winces to think of it. He usually tries never to think about that moment, simply because the memory of the expression on Cas's face always makes Dean cringe, even now.

*I could've done so much better*, Dean thinks now, watching Cas stir uneasily in his sleep. *I could've done better by you.*

Cas had needed a friend. And Dean had let him down. Sure, there had been extenuating circumstances, sure, but that's what it really boils down to.

*I this time I'll do better*, he promises Cas, silently. *This time you'll have a place to stay. And food, and clothes. You won't have to work at a goddam Gas-n-Sip. You'll stay in the bunker, right down the
Dean mutters out loud, "I swear, Cas."

At last Dean slips under the covers of his own bed, and for once he falls asleep immediately. There are no nightmares.

Dean wakes in the morning to find the tables have turned: Castiel's the one who's wide awake now, and he's sitting on his own bed, and he's watching Dean. Just as Dean was watching him last night. Just as Cas used to watch Dean years ago.

From the faint dawn light that's slanting through the windows, it looks like it's pretty early in the morning, maybe six or so. But Cas has already showered and shaved. He's also apparently tried again at the "perfect amount of tousle," and has again arrived at an imperfect amount of tousle, but he's getting closer — it looks pretty good now. All in all he looks astonishingly like he did back when Dean first met him, so much so that for a moment Dean wonders if this might actually be seven-years-ago Castiel visiting him on some time-travel mission. There's something of the old Castiel in the way he's sitting there watching Dean sleep, and also in that steady, almost steely, look in his eyes, like he's on a mission or getting ready for battle.

Though Cas still looks very tired, in a way he never really did as an angel. In fact he looks like maybe he hasn't slept well.

**Definitely human again,** thinks Dean, and it seems very important to make sure Cas knows he'll have a much better experience this time. Dean's still pretty sleepy himself, though, and what somehow comes out of his mouth is: "You know, if you're really human again now, there's much more fun things we could do together than you just sitting and watching me sleep."

Cas blinks, and looks away. He says, drily, "I'm aware."

Dean is instantly blushing — that hadn't *at all* come out like he'd meant it to. He's already scrambling mentally for some follow-up joke, but all he can seem to come up with is, "I mean, like, we could go to the Grand Canyon or something."

To which Cas replies, with calm equanimity, looking back at Dean, "You know, I met the angel who made the Grand Canyon, a few years ago. Back when I first lost my grace."

"What? Really?" says Dean.

"It was my first day as a human. I was trying to call you..." Cas seems to be thinking back, reliving that first day. After a brief pause, he goes on, "She recognized me, but I'm sorry to say I didn't know who she was. She was so confused.... So lost." Cas adds slowly, "She'd just fallen."

He's silent a moment and adds, perfectly matter-of-factly, "About five minutes later she tried to kill me."

Dean blinks, and Cas continues, "I had to crash her car into a tree to disable her. I was quite fortunate to survive, actually. Then I still had to kill her anyway... " Dean's sitting up slowly in his bed, staring at him; he's never heard any of this. Cas seems to be in sort of a reverie now, like he's lost in the memory, and he continues, slowly, "It was the first time I realized I was going to have to kill my brethren just to survive. That's also when my coat got covered in blood. I don't suppose you remember that first coat I had? Jimmy's coat? I didn't have enough money to clean it. I only had a
dollar and twenty-five cents and I had to buy some water instead. I was so thirsty...."

Cas is silent a long moment, and he looks down at the trenchcoat that he's wearing — the Lesser Trenchcoat, of course. Dean's listening intently; he's never known what happened to the Greater Trenchcoat.

"It's funny," Cas says at last. "I still miss Jimmy's coat. It seems... odd to get attached to an article of clothing." A faint smile appears on his face, and he cocks his head a little and says, "Isn't it odd?" As if human emotions still take him by surprise.

Dean nods uncertainly, and Cas goes on, "It was actually hard to walk away from it. But my vessel was desperate for water. I hadn't even really recognized the sensation as that of thirst." He's gone contemplative now, and he says, "Thirst, and hunger. Fatigue; pain. They were all so... unfamiliar."

Dean swings his feet out of bed, sits fully up on the edge of the bed so that he can face Cas directly, and says, "It's not gonna be like that this time."

Cas meets his eyes. There's something in his expression that Dean can't quite read; something of that steely look. Something guarded.

"I know," says Cas.

Dean says, "I swear, Cas." But Cas just looks away.

Before Dean can say anything else, a knock comes on the door; it's Sam, checking to see if they're up. 

"So, I was thinking, Cas, you'll need a bed now," Dean calls through the bathroom door a few minutes later. He's getting dressed hurriedly in the bathroom while Sam and Cas wait outside. Dean goes on, "You know that room at the bunker, the one at the end of the hallway, down from Sam's room — that'd work well for you, wouldn't it?" Dean walks out of the bathroom to find Cas standing in the middle of the room looking at him steadily, while Sam packs up the few things they'd loaned Cas yesterday. Dean goes on, as he pulls on his shoes, "We could shift one of the extra beds there, from the dorms in back. Get you a tv and your own laptop so you could feast on all the Netflix you want. So, basically you can just have your own room. And for the hunts we can do just like we did here — two motel rooms. As long as we stick to Motel 6 or below, and don't get fancy, we can afford it ok. Me and Sam have been doing pretty well at the pool-hustling these days; a second room'll work fine."

Cas has still said nothing, which seems a little odd, so Dean says, "How about it? Sound good? And of course if you just want to rest up at the bunker for a while, without coming on hunts yet, just say the word."

Cas is still oddly quiet. He turns away from Dean and takes a few steps over to the window, where he gazes quietly out at the parking lot, hands hanging loosely at his sides, and he studies the parking lot outside for a long moment. Sam, who's just finished packing up, shoots an inquisitive look at Dean, but Dean can only shrug.

"Actually," Cas says at last, still looking out the window, "I've been thinking." He glances down at himself as if assessing the bedraggled state of his clothes and says, "There's something I want to do."
"Shoot," says Dean. "What is it? Grand Canyon after all? Maybe another park instead? Whatever it is, we can go do it."

"That's a nice idea... but..." says Cas. He's speaking a little slowly again, and Dean realizes he's choosing his words carefully. Cas turns around to face them and finally says, "The thing I want to do, I was thinking I would do it alone."

Dean and Sam both look at him, and Cas says, "I've got some loose ends to tie up. Why don't you two go on back to Kansas. Get back to your hunting. I'll come visit you later."

Visit. He'd said "visit."

Like he wasn't really planning on staying with them.

"Wait, what exactly are you doing?" says Sam. "What kind of loose ends exactly?"

Now Cas gets his tell-tale evasive look. He looks completely to the side, away from Sam and Dean, as if he's suddenly become fascinated by the lamp in the farthest corner of the room. "Loose ends that are... loose," he says vaguely. "And that need tying up."

All sorts of alarming scenarios are immediately running through Dean's head. "Okay, fess up," says Dean, folding his arms. "What's this really about? Chuck? Amara? Some spell? Angel wars? Leviathans?"

"None of those," says Castiel, almost gently.

"Crowley?" Dean guesses. It actually makes his stomach cramp to think of Cas falling into Crowley's clutches again. "It better not be a demon deal."

"Not Crowley," says Cas, looking him right in the eye now. "No demon deals. Nothing like that, I promise."

"Is this about Lucifer?" Sam asks quietly. "You need some time?"

Cas pauses a moment, and nods. "I guess it is about Lucifer, indirectly. And about Chuck having left." He takes a breath and says, "You were both talking last night about how we can do whatever we want now. I was thinking about that, early this morning, and it occurred to me that maybe you're right. Maybe this is the first chance I've had to... really do what I want. And I realized there is actually something I do want to do. I'm going to... travel around a little bit on my own. See some people."

"Like who?" says Dean. "About what?"

Cas still has that slightly evasive look (which is setting off certain alarm bells for Dean, of course). "I'm perfectly capable of traveling on my own," is all he says. "I'll be fine."

"Okayyy," says Dean slowly, very much unconvinced. "But... don't you need to rest a bit first? Get on your feet? You haven't exactly had it easy lately. The bunker's a good place to rest, you know."

Cas nods. "I know. I'll come see you later."

"Don't you need your car?" says Sam. "The Continental? It's still at the bunker. You want to come back and grab it?"

Cas shakes his head. "I'll find some other means of transportation. I'll come get the car later."
The two brothers spend a little while more trying to get him to explain what he's doing, but Cas has gone into full-on cryptic mode now and simply won't talk about it — there's just more vague comments about "stuff to do" and "loose ends". The most he'll confess to is that it involves "traveling around" to "see some people."

And then all of a sudden Cas is just leaving. Dean, who's very grudgingly starting to accept that Cas might go off on his own for a few days, had assumed they'd at least drop him off at the bus station or something, but no. Cas just says a quiet "Till we see each other again, then." He hesitates, an uncertain look on his face for a moment, and then he's opening the door and walking right out. Without even any hugs. He's almost scurrying out, almost like he feels like he's got to get going before he changes his mind.

"Whoa, whoa, dude, wait, wait a sec," says Dean, running after him into the hall. "Look, you can ditch us if you want, but—"

Cas turns around, genuinely startled. "I'm not ditching you," he says. "Not at all. Quite the opposite. There's just some things I want to do."

"That you're being totally mysterious about," Dean points out.

Cas is looking frustrated now, and he says, "Dean, there's just some loose ends —"

"That need 'tying up', I heard you the first dozen times. Look, I can see you won't talk about it, but just promise me you're not doing some boneheaded self-sacrificing move."

Cas blinks. "This is not self-sacrificing. And it's not dangerous." He thinks a moment and adds, "Quite the opposite. It's something I want. If I'm going to be human again, then there are... some... things... that I... want to do."

"Okay, okay," says Dean. He's still feeling suspicious (and also strangely crestfallen about the whole thing), but he's determined not to let Cas head out there with just a mud-stained trenchcoat and no supplies at all. Especially not after last time. Dean finally says, "Hang on just two minutes. Will you at least let us help you out a little?"

Dean does, at last, convince Cas to at least come to an ATM with them, where Dean and Sam each withdraw $300 (the maximum the bank will give them). They force him to take the $600 in cash, and Dean also marches him to a nearby store and buys him a couple of shirts and a five-pack each of clean underwear and socks, and some toiletry supplies. And a shoulder bag to put it all in. And a new phone, as well, which Dean even sets up with some starter numbers, punching his and Sam's numbers carefully into the "Favorites" list.

"Here's a credit card too," says Sam, "And a driver's license." (Apparently Lucifer ditched Jimmy's wallet at some point, but Dean's had a stash of fake id's for Cas in the trunk for a while now, along with the usual id's for both Sam and himself.)

"Thank you, Sam," says Cas gravely, slipping the license and credit card into his inner jacket pocket. They're standing on the sidewalk now in Flagstaff, by the Impala, outside the store where Dean bought the phone. And as Cas looks at them, slinging his new shoulder bag up on one shoulder, Dean realizes he's really going to leave this time.

Cas is heading off on his own, and this is the goodbye.

It's not unusual, of course. He's done this before. Many times. It's just...

It's just that Dean's throat is suddenly tight. "You know to get in out of the rain, right?" is all he
seems able to say.

Cas actually smiles. "I learned that some time ago. Don't worry, I know my way around now."

And, Dean realizes with a pang, he does. Dean kicked him out, all those years ago, and so Cas learned to get by on his own.

*You reap what you sow,* thinks Dean to himself.

Dean says, trying to make a joke out of it, "Guess you do, huh. Guess you can always go back to the Gas-n-Sip life." He rubs his nose and adds, "And if that's what you want, awesome, Cas, I mean it, but, you ever need anything... don't be a stranger."

"That means, come see us," clarifies Sam. "Come see us *and stay a while."

"Long as you want," says Dean. "Whenever you want."

Cas looks back and forth between Sam and Dean for a moment, adjusting the shoulder bag on his shoulder. "Thank you," he says, quite seriously. It's the same kind of solemn, quiet "thank you" that he'd said after the you're-our-brother speech a few days back. The same strange pause after it, too; like there's more he wants to say, but he doesn't know how to say it.

At last Cas steps forward and gives them both a hug. He's slightly hampered by the shoulder bag, so it ends up being just a quick one-armed hug, one to Sam first, and then one to Dean. It may be quick, it may be one-armed, but it's strong. With Dean, Cas again does the hand-on-the-back-of-the-neck thing, and again he gives Dean a quick little scratch there, almost ruffling the hair of the back of his neck. When Cas steps back there is something sad in his eyes, and yet he's smiling too.

"I'm so very glad you're both okay," he says. "I'm extremely glad. And thank you for coming here to check on me. Thank you. It meant... a great deal. A great deal. I'll see you both soon." He turns and walks away down the sidewalk. Again there's that strange hurriedness to his motions, a stiffness in how he's walking, his head down. Again Dean has the impression that Cas is almost having to force himself to rush away.

But Cas doesn't look back.

There seems nothing more to do other than to go back to the Impala and drive back to Kansas. So off they go.

Sam and Dean are both a little quiet. There's no more talk about seeing the Grand Canyon or any of the other parks. Dean flicks on the radio and drives in silence for a while. He goes right past the turnoff to the Petrified Forest without a second glance, and Sam doesn't say a word.

Dean's resolutely telling himself that he doesn't feel at all let down or disappointed. At all. But there's no denying it feels strange to be driving home without Cas, after doing the entire drive to Flagstaff so worried about him. Yet... nothing's *wrong,* exactly. Cas is okay. Cas is perfectly fine. Everything's still fine, really. It's just that once they'd found Cas alive, Dean had somehow been certain that they'd be carrying Cas home in the Impala in a ceremonial homeward-bound parade.

Now that everything's *finally really over,* they were supposed to all end up together. Eating pizza
together and watching movies. Living together in the bunker. It feels all wrong to be driving off without him.

But it's what Cas wants.

"I feel like I've been dumped," Dean mutters at last, as they're crossing into New Mexico.

Sam gives a little laugh. "Yeah, I know what you mean. Somehow I thought he'd be coming back with us. But, you know..." Sam goes pensive. "He may need some time to get over... you know... um... " Sam waves a hand helplessly; he's suddenly gone tongue-tied.

"Lucifer," Dean says for him.

"Lucifer," agrees Sam, with a grim sigh. "Cas was possessed for months. And, speaking from experience, it takes some time to feel like yourself again after that."

Dean knows there's some depths there that he should probably coax Sam into discussing sometime. For now though he lets it slide, and just points out, "He could be getting over it with us. We could help him get over it. Like, you especially, right?" Sam gives an extremely emphatic nod (he's clearly thought about this) and Dean adds, "And what's he got to do, anyway? Who does he even know to go visit?"

Sam shrugs. "Maybe he's got actual stuff to do. Maybe... I don't know, maybe Lucifer did some things that Cas wants to put right? He sure seemed reluctant to talk about it."

Dean's again fearing the worst, imagining angels ganging up on Cas, or some secret angel war starting up again that Cas is going to inevitably end up in the middle of.

"I don't like it," says Dean.

Sam nods. "Yeah, but, remember, Cas has always gone off on his own like this. Even when he couldn't fly, remember? He's always driven around or done weird trips or had things he had to go do."

"Not when he was human," Dean argues. "He's human now, Sam —"

"And he learned to get around on his own as a human," Sam says calmly. Because you kicked him out, Sam could have added, but diplomatically he doesn't. "In fact... maybe he just wants to enjoy being human? Be out in the world. Find himself."

(The phrase makes Dean wince, and he thinks, Goddam Flagstaff. It's always Flagstaff.) Sam adds, thoughtfully, "Maybe it's not Lucifer, even, or not entirely. Maybe he wants to just be human? Experiment with... I don't know, doing human things?"

"Doing human things?" says Dean skeptically. "Like what?" Though actually some alarming possibilities leap to mind immediately. Possibilities that Dean should probably be laughing about, things that could easily be turned into a joke really... but instead it all just feels depressing.

"Oh, I don't know," says Sam, all too vaguely.

Dean turns up the radio.

They drive on. From New Mexico to Colorado; from Colorado to Kansas. And throughout the drive Dean keeps thinking of the moment when Dean had first heard Cas's voice in the hospital. And, a moment later, the look on Cas's face when he'd spun around. How he'd called them "family".
But then we told him to do whatever he wanted, Dean remembers. And what he wanted was to leave.

*Let yourself be happy,* Dean thinks, then, remembering Mom's advice. And as the Impala motors onward, as Kansas cornfields roll past, it slowly comes to Dean that last night ... he was happy. He was genuinely happy. Being back together with Sam was critical, of course, but then finding Cas alive too! That hug... both Cas's hands wrapped around the back of Dean's neck... Dean can almost feel Cas's ragged gasps of relief, even now. Dean and Sam *and Cas,* three of them, all together for once.

Even just being able to help Cas get his clothes back together had felt, somehow, so... *rewarding.* So right. Even that little moment of running his hands through Cas's hair and trying to fluff it up a little... that one tiny moment, fiddling with Cas's hair, with Cas so puzzled and doubtful but letting Dean do it anyway (and Sam in the corner, stifling his laughter)...

Dean's astonished to find it almost makes his eyes sting to remember it.

*Happiest I've been in ages,* Dean realizes.

*Now what, Mom?*

They arrive back at the bunker the next day. Dean texts Cas that evening, just to check in, but Cas doesn't text back till late the next afternoon, and then it's just with a dry "I'm fine. How are you and Sam?" He doesn't add details, and Dean finds he's too shy to ask for any.

Life slides into a routine with almost depressing ease. The next morning Sam's already looking for cases, while Dean washes the Impala; then they head over the border to Nebraska, where Dean does a booze run while Sam gets groceries; and at night Sam fires up some Netflix movie or other, while Dean queues up an absurd amount of porn on his laptop and tries to act interested in it (and also tries to keep himself from texting Cas again). The next day there's some more searching for cases, some more fiddling with the Impala, another Netflix movie. The day after that is the same, and the day after that.

Sam gets a lead on a probable ghost case in Ohio one day and off they go, and they deal with it. Then there's some vamps in Tennessee and they deal with that. Days slide by; one week, then another.

And yet life's fine, really; it's good. In fact it's great. Really. All the end-of-the-world stuff actually *does* seem to be over. There's no Apocalypse, no Lucifer, no God, no Amara, no Darkness; there's no Leviathans, no Yelloweyes, no Metatron, no Mark and no Cain. No Lilith, no hellhounds. There's no looming end of the world. Nobody's crazy. Nobody's possessed, nobody's cursed or brainwashed or soulless or under a spell.

Everything's fine.

Everything's great.

Except that Cas is gone.
A/N - Ahhh, I'm sorry.... But you all knew something was coming, didn't you? As plot twists go for me this is extremely mild, but a little unsettling nonetheless.

I'm aiming for the usual Friday for the next chapter, but next week will be an extremely heavy work week again so it might be Saturday or even Sunday before I get it up. Wish me luck. Hope you're still liking the story, even if it's taking a turn toward the angsty! As always please drop a comment - I hope to catch up on the comment-replying on Sunday. :)

edit: It's past 11pm on Friday night and I JUST got off work. Saturday for the next chapter! Sorry for the delay!
A/N - Been working late every night this week - I'm in my last 3 weeks of my job! During which I have to get 3 last science papers written, which is kind of like writing one master's thesis per week, so I've been going 100mph on the science writing. Up every day at 6am, in at 7:30am, work nonstop till 9 or 10, go home, repeat. I actually managed to finish the first manuscript late last night (AND IT'S COOL, it's the one about whales having this other hormone) and got it shipped off to my co-authors at about 10pm Fri night, wooo, and now I get two whole days off, WOOOOOO, but am running behind on the fic. Sorry!

But I still got a little chapter for you today though! Hope you enjoy it. (And huge thanks also to my beta reader for super fast turnaround on my last-minute drafts!)

About ten days later, Dean and Sam are preparing to hole up all night in a possibly-haunted old silver mine in the mountains around Alta, Utah. It's late afternoon and they're both sitting at the mine entrance prepping for the night ahead, loading a big heap of rock salt cartridges and checking all their gear. They're not quite in the mine yet so there's still a bit of cell reception, but just the same Dean jumps when his phone vibrates in his pocket. He has to scramble to his feet to extract the phone from out of his jeans.

It's a text from Cas.

Dean hasn't heard from him in days. Cas has sent a text. All on his own.

It reads:

Hello Dean

"Don't overdo it with the details there, Cas," Dean mutters.

Sam, sitting cross-legged on the ground, glances up from his half-finished row of salt cartridges. Dean explains, "He texted two whole words: Hello, and Dean." Sam chuckles and returns to his work, as Dean starts drafting a text to send back:

Hey long-lost angel, how you been?

Dean pauses before sending it. He squints at the words for a moment — is "long-lost angel" too familiar? Too casual? Too... something?

He deletes the "long-lost angel" part, stares at the screen for a moment, adds one short word, and sends:

Hey bro, how you been?
Three blinking gray dots soon appear at the bottom of the screen: Cas is writing something. Dean waits.

But it's a long wait, the three gray dots blinking endlessly. Nearly an entire minute goes by.

"What's he saying?" says Sam, packing rock salt carefully into another cartridge.

"He's working on his novel," Dean says.

The three gray dots disappear. Cas has deleted whatever he was going to send.

A moment later the dots blink briefly, and a new text comes through:

*Fine*, reads Cas's text.

Dean sighs, swipes over to the phone app and stabs Cas's number.

The phone rings quite a few times. Cas isn't picking up.

It goes to voicemail. "I know you're there, Cas, pick up the damn phone," Dean says. He hits End Call.

A moment later a new text shows up:

*Sorry, can't talk now. Just checking in. Are you and Sam well?*

*Fine*, Dean writes. He's punching each letter hard, a little annoyed, which is making it come out with a lot of typos: *Campung out toniggt in Alta UT. Possibke hainted mine*, he writes. He sends that one off, thinks a moment and adds, taking more care with the typos this time, *The mine's pretty big. Lot of tunnels. Could use some backup if you're free. We could wait for you & do it tmrw night?*

There's another very long minute of the three blinking gray dots. They appear... they stay there for a long time... they disappear.

They appear again for a while.

They disappear.

Cas at last sends:

*Afraid I can't. Will you be ok?*

Dean stifles a sigh and sends, *Yeah, we're fine. Just an invite. No worries.*

*Call if you have any trouble*, texts Cas.

It's not worth mentioning that Dean's not going to be able to "call if he has any trouble" since there's no cell reception inside underground mines. (Obviously.) So Dean just sends, *We'll be fine*, and at last he adds, *Take care, buddy. PS Sam says hi.*

"You said hi," Dean informs Sam, stuffing the phone back in his pocket.

"Hi Cas," Sam says dutifully. He's loading both shotguns now with the new shells, and jamming some extra salt shells into his jacket pocket. He hands the rest of the extras to Dean, hauls himself to his feet and asks, "He coming to join us or anything?"
"Naw, he's busy."

Sam looks a little disappointed. "Could've used him. What's he doing?"

Dean shrugs. "Screwing around somewhere," he says, which he knows is probably unfair. (And hopefully is not literally true.) And he didn't mean to say it in such a snappy tone of voice. It makes Sam frown a little, so Dean shows Sam the exchange of texts, adding, "Just seems a little off that he didn't want to come, don't you think?"

Sam reads through the text exchange, but at the end he just looks thoughtful. "He may just still need more time," is all he says.

Dean nods; Sam's probably right; that's probably all it is. Cas just needs some more time. For...

something.

The mine job ends up being fairly tricky. It turns out it's not just one vengeful-spirit but a whole set of them, linked to the bodies of an unfortunate dozen miners who'd apparently been left to die after a long-ago cave-in. It's hard to get to the bodies, which are buried under a pile of rocks down a deep side tunnel, and there's a particularly dicey moment when the ghosts try to get Sam and Dean hopelessly lost in the maze of old tunnels, which turn out to stretch for miles under the mountains. But at last, after they've pented the entire night stumbling around in the dark (and being flung against the jagged rock walls now and then), Sam finally manages to shoot a jet of lighter fluid through the tumbled rocks of the cave-in, Dean lights it and they manage to incinerate the bodies without having to uncover them. Then both brothers have to bolt for the surface as fast as they can to escape the resulting smoke.

It's well past dawn by the time Sam and Dean stagger back to the mine entrance, exhausted and coughing. They're both covered in soot, Sam's limping, and Dean's nursing some nasty bruises and a very sore shoulder from a particularly rough throw against some boulders. But they're alive.

" Didn't need no stinking backup," Dean says as they straggle out of the mine entrance, blinking in the bright outdoor light.

He's answered by a flood of simultaneous dings and buzzes from both their phones. They've just gotten back into the range of the nearest cell tower, and apparently somebody's been trying to reach them.

"Shit, I've got like 12 messages from Cas," Sam says, squinting down at his phone.

"Same," says Dean, studying his own phone. It's a whole series of voicemails and texts that seem to have started at around midnight. The texts begin with:

Hello Dean. How's it going with the haunted mine?

Dean? Did you get my last text? I was wondering how it's going with the haunted mine.

Dean, are you all right? Please contact me.
Dean I'm getting worried. Please write back if you get this. I'm hoping it's a cell service issue again, but please contact me. I'll try contacting Sam.

Dean, neither of you are responding. I'm going to call around and see if I can find anybody nearby who can check on you.

Dean it's nearly morning now and neither you nor Sam are responding and I'm very concerned. I have been trying to find someone else who can check on you. I did manage to locate two angels who are still down on Earth, but neither of them is close enough to Utah to arrive within a day, and they're both depowered anyway. I'm going to try to come myself after all. Alta UT, correct?

Dean I have stolen a car and I'm on my way.

Dean doesn't bother reading all the rest of the messages, but just hits Cas's phone number, and this time Cas picks up on the first ring.

"Dean!" Cas says, relief clear in his voice. "Are you all right? I've been trying to reach you all night!"

"Yeah, we're fine," Dean says. "We—" He's interrupted by a brief fit of coughing — Dean's still hacking the smoke out of his lungs. "Well, a bit beat up but fine. Could've used you actually, but we got it done."

There's a frustrated sigh from Cas. "I'm sorry I couldn't come till now. I was trying to reach you for hours," he says. "I know I only told you to call if you ran into trouble, but I got worried anyway and then I couldn't reach you. I waited up all night. Sam wouldn't answer either!" He sounds so much like a fretful parent that Dean can't help smiling a little. Sam, who's leaning against a tree a few feet away, seems to be overhearing most of the conversation, for he smiles too.

"Sorry, dude, no cell service down in the mine," Dean explains. "Appreciate the thought, though. Hey, where are you by now, anyway?"

"Partway through Utah," Cas says. Dean can hear, now, the tiredness in his voice. "Nearly there actually," adds Cas.

"Meet us in Sandy, then?" Dean suggests. "Sandy, Utah. It's on the outskirts of Salt Lake, just down the mountains from here. Lemme buy you a breakfast to make up for panicking you. Hey, you could stay with us tonight — we've got a motel room in Sandy."

"Oh, um," says Cas. "Actually, now that I know you're both okay, I think I'll...." He hesitates. Dean waits through what seems to be an extremely long, very silent, pause, and he knows what's coming.

Cas finally finishes with, "I'll... just.... head back to what I was doing. I was sort of in the middle of something."

"Dude, you've been driving hours," points out Dean. "Why not at least grab a meal?"

Another long pause.

"No, I've got to get back," Cas says. "I'm glad you're okay, though. Please say hello to Sam as well." He pauses again and adds an unconvincing, "I'll see you both soon."

And all of a sudden he's hung up, and Dean's left staring at his phone.
Dean tries calling back, but now Cas won't pick up.

"Dammit," Dean mutters, stuffing the phone back in his pocket.

Sam's leaning over, gingerly prodding his sore leg. "He's not coming?" he says.

"NO, and now he won't pick up again," says Dean, annoyed all over again for reasons he can't even seem to figure out. "What's he got going on that's so damn important?"

Sam just straightens up and gives a noncommittal shrug. "Hey, at least he tried to get here. Maybe he's actually got some kind of life without us."

This seems like way too casual a statement. Sam doesn't seem nearly concerned enough about Cas's weird behavior, so Dean tries to point out, "But why wouldn't he—"

"Dean, he's not a pet," says Sam. "So he's busy. It's allowed. C'mon, let's grab breakfast."

They can't tackle any new cases till Sam's leg and Dean's shoulder both heal up, so for the next week they're holed up at the bunker again. Once Cas knows they're safely back home and healing, he goes totally radio-silent again. There's no explanation for why he suddenly started texting that night, and no explanation for why he never does again.

And still no clue where he is.

It keeps eating at Dean. He knows, though, that it's a little silly that it's bugging him this much, because actually Cas has always gone off on his own like this. It's nothing new. It should feel routine. Sam and Dean have always done almost all their hunts without him.

But ... why is Cas off on his own now? Why now, when everything's supposed to be over? He's not leading an army, there's no civil war in Heaven, he's not running around trying to hide a tablet... why now?

Why doesn't he want to be at the bunker? Why doesn't he want to be hunting with the Winchesters?

He called us family, Dean keeps thinking.

But, of course, "family" doesn't necessarily mean staying in touch. Come to think of it, family might actually not mean that much to an angel. One day Dean wonders if telling Cas "You're our brother" might even have given him the wrong idea. From the point of view of an angel who's been repeatedly abused, tortured and betrayed by his own siblings, for millennia, maybe being part of a family — and having new "brothers" — isn't really all that attractive an idea?

And yet Cas had seemed so pleased about it, in Flagstaff... So touchingly shy about using the Winchester last name, and so happy to be able to introduce Sam and Dean to the doctor as "family."

It doesn't make sense. It's like a nagging itch that Dean can't seem to scratch.
And then all of a sudden Cas is back.

He shows up on a routine evening. Sam's diligently researching a possible new case in Oregon, and Dean's helping Sam research. Well, in theory Dean's helping; in reality he's shamelessly watching Japanese porn, streaming video after video like it's his part-time job. The porn's only mildly interesting tonight, though. The truth is that Dean's attention keeps drifting (he's watching the porn mostly because it seems like what he's supposed to do, what he's always done). At least the regular shots of whiskey help pass the time.

Then the bunker door creaks open and there's Cas, walking right down the stairs like he's never been gone, calling out a "Hello?" as he enters.

"Whoa, Cas!" Dean says. He's been leaning back in his chair, feet up on the table with the laptop perched on his lap, and he scrambles to his feet so fast he nearly tips his chair over backwards. "We're in the library, wait a sec —" Dean calls, fumbling the laptop onto the table and hurrying over to the map-room just a step ahead of Sam. Dean pauses at the threshold into the room, watching as Cas comes down the wrought-iron staircase.

"Hello, Dean," Cas says, adding, "Sam," with a nod to Sam.

He's nailed the hair, Dean thinks. He looks good.

Cas catches Dean's eye on the way down the stairs, and smile spreads over Cas's face. It's one of those slightly-awkward, lopsided Castiel smiles, and it's wonderful to see; and then Dean realizes that there's a goofy grin on his own face too, for he's pleased beyond reason that Cas has returned.

Cas reaches the bottom of the stairs, and now Dean's expecting that Cas is probably about to launch into another round of those reunion hugs. And even though Dean's really not a hugger he's anticipating it enough that he takes a couple steps forward, arms already slightly raised. But Cas is gliding away around the far side of the map table.

Actually Cas seems to be deliberately maneuvering so that the table is between him and Dean.

It's subtly done; Cas trails one hand along the edge of the table as he strolls along its far side, gazing thoughtfully down at the map as if he's studying the Russian Arctic coastline with great interest. But it's not accidental. There's something slightly tense in Cas's posture.

Holy shit, Dean thinks, pausing in mid-stride. He's avoiding a hug.

Well.

Well, then.

Which is totally fine, of course. Dean's never been a hugger. Neither has Cas. Neither of them are huggers. So it doesn't matter. It's just... sort of interesting, is all.

"So how'd it go?" says Sam, who's still standing behind Dean — doubtless watching Dean now standing awkwardly in the middle of the room, and Cas sidling around the table away from him. Sam sounds totally unconcerned, though, as he asks, "Where you been? Did you find yourself?"

Cas frowns, glancing up from the map. "I hadn't lost myself," he says. "I knew exactly where I was."

"Tie up those loose ends, then?" asks Dean, sticking both hands in his pockets and leaning casually against the table, half-sitting on it, like he'd really just wanted to sit down and had never had the slightest thought in his head of any sort of hug.
"I think so," says Cas, glancing down at his trenchcoat, which seems to have been leaned (though some traces of the worst mudstains are still detectable). Cas traces one hand over the coat and adds, "For now."

"So... what are you going to do?" says Sam. "Just swinging by to say hi, or do you want to stay a while?"

At which Dean has a bright idea. "Hey, you know what, Cas," Dean says, still leaning casually against the table, "Sam just found a possible case. A bunch of people died of frostbite overnight at this campsite in Oregon, despite the fact that the weather's breaking heat records. You wanna come along? We were going to head out tomorrow, and —"

"Actually," says Cas. He stares down at the Russian Arctic coastline again, tapping his fingers lightly on the map. "I was thinking I might get a job. Actually... I might have found one. In fact I've already applied."

Dean blinks. "A job?"

"What kind of a job?" asks Sam.

Cas tears his eyes away from the Russian Arctic coastline to flick a very brief glance at Dean. There's a bit of a wary look in his eyes as he says, eyes dropping back down to the map, "I noticed there's a new store on Interstate 70, not too far away really, it's only a little bit of a drive, and they had a help-wanted sign, and it occurred to me that I have the requisite qualifications, and, um— " Cas is talking rather fast, like he's hoping Dean and Sam won't notice the details. He adds in a rush, "It's a Gas-n-Sip and they only need someone for a few weeks, I guess someone's sick, but I've got the experience and I only want a few weeks anyway so they thought that might work, it's just short term but—"

"A Gas-n-Sip?" Dean breaks in. "Are you serious?"

Cas pauses in mid-sentence and glances at Dean again, a dark look in his eyes now. Dean's about to launch into a whole set of disbelieving jokes about the Gas-n-Sip (starting with, "You'd actually rather go be a blue-vested peasant at a friggin' Gas-n-Sip then come help us save people's lives?") Dean's actually got his mouth half-open, ready to launch in on his speech, but then he notices the patient steady stare Cas is giving him now. Cas's posture's gone tense again, and though his face looks calm he's clenching one hand.

He looks resigned. Kind of like he's been expecting this.

There's a little pause.

"Yes, a Gas-n-Sip," says Cas finally.

Dean closes his mouth, and nods.

Sam breaks in with a gentle, "Probably a pretty good way to get some pocket change, huh?"

Cas relaxes a little. "Exactly," he says. "Pocket change."

"We could get you pocket change," says Dean. "Did that credit card get maxed? We can switch you to another one. We've got a couple extras kicking around that are probably still good."

"I don't want to be a burden," says Cas. "I'd rather earn it on my own. And it's just for a little while."
"Of course," Dean says, realizing now that he really ought be acting supportive. Though he's struggling a little with trying to remember how to act supportive. "Right. Yeah. Obviously," he rambles. "That's great. I mean, if a... um... Gas-n-Sip job is... what you want, um, then, I hope you get the job... I guess?"

"I'd love to come on hunts, of course," Cas says, "Ah... just not right now."

Dean can't help saying "So, when, then?" Sam's drifting closer.

Cas hesitates. "Sometime... later?"

"Sometime later," repeats Dean. "Later than now, huh? Well, that's super precise." Cas is studying Greenland intently, and now Sam's inched close enough to step on Dean's foot, and Dean mentally reins himself back in. "No, I get it, Cas, I do. You do your thing, sure." Cas risks another glance up, and Dean tries to give him an encouraging smile. "Go find yourself at the Gas-n-Sip, and we'll... we'll be here if you wanna hang out! Right, Sam?"

"Absolutely," says Sam.

"I was actually hoping maybe I could stay here for a few days?" Cas says. "While I'm working the job. I could use... uh... somewhere to sleep, and the bunker's not far away from my worksite. An hour's drive or so. Maybe an hour and a half. Really not far at all. Maybe I could sleep here at night?"

And now there's something so uncertain in Cas's voice that it almost makes Dean's throat hurt.

"Pretty sure that empty room down the hall's still available," Dean says, and he hoists himself back up from his awkward half-sitting position to take a few steps around the table toward Cas, and raises an arm to clap him on the shoulder in welcome. But Cas flinches away.

It's a tiny move, almost imperceptible: Cas just shifts his weight to his farther foot, his body twisting slightly to angle away from Dean, leaning just an inch or two away. But it's unmistakable. After a slightly awkward millisecond of hesitation Dean claps him on the shoulder anyway (that's truly all that Dean had been planning), and steps back a little confused.

"Welcome home, cowboy," Dean manages at last. "I'll... I'll check on the sheets."

Sam also looks a little flummoxed, but he just says, "Hey, I was just about to heat some pizza. We were planning on watching some old westerns tonight, Cas, you interested?"

"I'd be delighted," says Cas, and all of a sudden he seems relaxed again.

Sam takes him to the kitchen to pick out a frozen pizza, Dean checks on the sheets... and twenty minutes later they're all watching movies ("Stagecoach" and "Treasure of the Sierra Madre") and eating pizza together. Cas sits in a wooden chair by himself, and Sam and Dean share the sofa.

It's almost like Dean had imagined it.

—but Cas lands the job, and almost right away he's heading out bright and early, taking off at six a.m. or so in his gold Continental (he seems touchingly pleased when he realizes Dean's kept it
ready for him). He starts putting in long hours immediately, and never returns before eight at night.

Dean and Sam both try, several times, to coax him to come along on a few hunts on his days off. Not just because they want him along (which they do), but also because they really could use more backup.

It'd be good to have a third. Dean's been thinking about it ever since they ran into that other pair of hunters, Cesar and Jesse. It'd be really smart, actually, to have some additional backup. Cesar and Jesse, of course had turned out to have other plans (which Dean usually avoids thinking about. Because it always causes a strange little pang, to think of Cesar and Jesse off on their horse ranch, probably surrounded by dozens of fuzzy little baby foals by now).

Cesar and Jesse aren't available. But Cas would be perfect.

"I know you're all into the Gas-n-Sip life now," Dean says one evening, when Cas has tottered home looking completely wrung out again after another fourteen-hour double shift. Dean's over at the tv trying to find the right cable to hook up Sam's laptop, and he glances over his shoulder to see that Cas is slouched in his wooden chair looking totally uncomfortable as they wait for Sam to return from the kitchen with tonight's popcorn. Dean says, "Jesus H. Christ, Cas, move over to the sofa, you look you're going to fall right out of that chair."

And Cas actually does move, shifting over to the sofa and collapsing down into it with a sigh of obvious relief. As Dean tries (unsuccessfully) to get the HDMI cable connected, he says to Cas, "You could take a day off now and then, you know. Come along on a nice relaxing hunt for a while. We'd only work you twelve hours a day instead of fourteen. Eleven for good behavior." He glances back at Cas to find that Cas has already slouched so far down onto the sofa that his body has gone almost complete horizontal. His head's wedged against the sofa back, his chin on his chest and his fingers laced over his chest; he looks as if he's about to fall asleep. He dresses these days in a strange hybrid of his Gas-n-Sip outfit and his Lesser Trenchcoat outfit, and tonight the trenchcoat's splayed out on top of his blue vest. Cas peers over the rumpled trenchcoat at Dean and says:

"I don't have any power now, Dean."

Sam pipes up at that point with "You're a hell of a fighter anyway." He's just arrived back in the room with three bowls of popcorn precariously balanced in his arms. Dean nods, taking one bowl and handing it to Cas. Dean adds, as Cas takes the bowl, "You know a ton of stuff, Cas, power or no power." He can already see a doubtful look crossing Cas's face, so Dean says, "You could take it easy at first, you know. You could just hang out in the motel. Ride around in the back of the Impala if you want. You could even take shotgun." (Sam nods at that.) "Then just camp at the motel. You don't even have to do the hunting part; you could just help us with the research. Or, hell, just come along for the diner breakfasts."

"That's... a nice idea," says Cas. "But, ah, I think I'll focus on... just living. For now."

That seems to strike him, for he sits up so suddenly he almost spills his popcorn, and he adds hastily, "Of course, you must call me if you need any help. If you need any help at all, of course I'll come...." Cas pauses a moment, his feet fidgeting a little and his hands gripping tightly onto the edge of the popcorn bowl, and he adds, a little awkwardly, "... if I can."

"If you can?" says Dean. "You'll come if you can? If the Gas-n-Sip hot dogs don't need turning? If the light bulbs don't need changing?" Sam is shooting Dean another annoyed look, but Dean can't help it.

Cas looks down at his popcorn. He's quiet a moment, and then says, "Well, you know, I have a schedule." He glances back up at Dean with an almost pleading look, and adds, "But, of course you
should call if you need help."

"Right," says Dean. "I'll do that."

"I mean it," says Cas, now looking worried. "Call if you need me. Please."

Sam's come over now and has grabbed the HDMI cable out of Dean's hands and is jamming the end into the laptop, apparently in a hurry to get the movie going, but it still takes Sam a few seconds. Which gives Dean a moment to study Cas.

Cas is hunched over his popcorn now looking distinctly uncomfortable. He's turning one piece of popcorn around in one hand, but he's not eating it, and he still has that worried look. He almost looks frustrated... and almost, maybe, a little ashamed. There's something a little familiar about his whole demeanour.

After a moment Dean places it: This is how Cas looked back in Idaho, the other time he was human. Which makes Dean wonder if maybe, possibly, Castiel is just plain scared. Like he'd been with that Rit Zien case.

It's understandable, really. For someone who's used to always having magical healing powers and super-hero strength, it must be incredibly disorienting to suddenly end up with no power at all. And... in fact, Castiel had nearly been killed by the Rit Zien, hadn't he? He'd ended up on his knees, bloodied and with a broken wrist, mere moments from death, when Dean had burst in the door and saved him.

Not to mention that the Rit Zien had homed in on Cas from miles away because Cas had apparently been radiating some kind of borderline-suicidal psychic distress signals.

Dean's irritation has suddenly dissipated. He'd actually like to say something, but now the movie's starting (it's "High Noon" tonight), and all Dean can think to say is:

"Hey Cas, here's the salt."

Which is probably a less than ideal way to encourage a newly-mortal angel friend to take his time finding his way in the human world, but it's all Dean can come up with. Dean even makes a special trip across the room, way over to the sideboard where the salt shaker is, just to pick it up, and he walks all the way across the room again to hand-deliver it to Cas over on the sofa.

Cas takes it with a quiet, "Thank you, Dean." But then he gives Dean a small smile (even though all Dean has done is give him a salt shaker), and Cas salts his popcorn a little and finally starts eating some. And somehow everything seems to be all right again.

Though then Dean can't figure out where to sit. Cas is on the sofa in Dean's usual spot, and Sam has now sat down next to Cas, and it seems like it might be too crowded if Dean squeezes onto the sofa too. So tonight it ends up being Sam and Cas side-by-side on the sofa, feet up on the coffee table, while Dean sits in the wooden chair.

Which is fine. Sam and Cas both look comfortable now, and that's what really matters, after all.
A/N - There's another short chapter just about ready to go, but that one will have to wait till next week since the rest of Sat & Sun have to be spent packing up my house!

The next 3 weeks, while I finish my job & pack up my house, will have shortish chapters and sometimes they'll be delayed till Sat instead of on the usual Friday. But I'm really trying to post something every week even if it's short. Thanks for your patience!

As always, please let me know if there's anything you especially liked or that seemed to work well. I love to hear from you. :)

edit: wellll it's now 9pm on Saturday night and I **JUST NOW** finally finished my humpback paper working at it nonstop since 7am this morning - and that was after a week of 14hr workdays. But the paper's actually done! I emailed it off to the 2nd author just now! woooo! I will shift gears to the fic tomorrow (Sun) - hope to have at least something little up by Sun eve. Sorry for the delay....
I've got a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore

Sorry for the huge delay! Usual lame excuse, been working till 10pm every night and then packing to move out of my room. After a string of really late nights I finished my last paper (science paper I meant, to send to a journal) at 9pm Saturday night! wooo!! In the last eight days of my job now - my last day is July 28, not that I'm counting or anything — and I just have 1 more paper I have to write, before my end date. The end's in sight.

Anyway, that's why this chapter is late. Next 2 wks are crazy since I'm moving so there might be a delay after this, but please keep checking in, and thanks for your patience.

Over the next few weeks, Dean and Sam figure out the weird frostbite case in Oregon (there's a little coven of witches in Corvallis that's getting a bit out of control, it turns out)... and Cas works at the Gas-n-Sip. The week after that, Dean and Sam take out a lair of shapeshifters down near Dallas... and Cas works at the Gas-n-Sip. The week after that, a case pops up in South Dakota involving a "ghost stallion". Reports are describing an actual horse ghost, complete with an eerie silver-colored mane floating in the breeze and sparks coming off its ghostly hooves, that's haunting a broken-down fairground racetrack. Dean's sure that one'll finally pique Cas's interest, and it actually does seem to catch his attention (he even calls Dean up the next day with an idea about luring the horse closer with "ghost carrots"). But still Cas goes to work at the Gas-n-Sip.

Every single day Cas heads out to the Gas-n-Sip. He's putting in long hours, too, with barely with a single day off. So once again Dean and Sam head off on the case on their own.

"He wasn't even all that clear about how to make a 'ghost carrot'," says Dean to Sam, as they're driving north through the Nebraska plains, heading up to South Dakota. "I mean, what do we do exactly, piss a carrot off and murder its fellow carrots? Treat it unjustly before we eat it?"

"I don't think Cas meant a ghost of a carrot, exactly," says Sam. "I mean, not a vengeful spirit of a carrot. I think he just meant, some kind of non-physical form of a carrot. He was talking about some way to send small objects to the Veil. We could call him back."

"He's at work," says Dean, who's already tried calling Cas earlier that morning. Cas had had customers at the time, and couldn't take any time to talk. "He doesn't get a break for a few more hours. He's pulling another double shift. I'll try later."

"Jeez," says Sam, frowning a little. "Has he been at work every day? Every time either of us called?" Dean nods, and Sam says, "Right back to the Corvallis case? That's, let me think—" (Sam starts counting on his fingers) "— that's sixteen days in a row at least. You know what, Dean, I don't think he gets any days off.

Dean considers that. He's known Cas has been working a lot, but hadn't really noticed the complete lack of days off. "Is that even legal?" Dean asks.

Sam snorts. "I'm thinking Gas-n-Sip Corporate probably isn't a paragon of fair labor relations. But it could be it's legit overtime. Maybe Cas just really wants to save up that pocket change."
"That's a friggin' mountain of pocket change," says Dean. "I still can't figure out what he even needs it for."


Dean shakes his head.

"Something's off," Dean says.

Sam glances over at him. "I know what you mean, but it seems like it's Cas, though. I mean, he's not...." He hesitates, glancing out at the rolling fields outside. "It's not Lucifer," he says at last. "I'm sure. I'm certain, Dean. It's Cas."

"Yeah, he's not 'off' that way," Dean agrees. "I think you're right, he's still himself. It's just everything he's doing that seems off."

The "ghost carrots" turn out to work great, though it does take another long conversation with Cas that night before they figure out how to send carrots to the Veil. But once they get back from South Dakota, Dean keeps watching Cas out of the corner of his eye. After all the things that have gone wrong with Cas over the years, maybe a certain amount of paranoia is inevitable. Every evening when Cas straggles in from another long day of work, Dean finds himself watching Cas: studying Cas's behavior, his posture, his voice, even his little mannerisms and how he moves. Dean's trying to pick up on any signs of possible brainwashing or possession or curses or... something. But there's nothing obvious.

Yet there's still something "off," and it's still nagging at Dean. So one day he decides to drop by the Gas-n-Sip. Just to check things out.

He thinks of this at mid-day, long after Cas has already left, and as soon as the idea pops up in Dean's head he realizes he's never actually asked Cas which Gas-n-Sip he's working at. Dean could just call, of course, but he kind of wants to take Cas a little bit by surprise — maybe check out the Gas-n-Sip quietly, make sure nothing's "off" at Cas's workplace. Cas had at least mentioned something about "west on Interstate 70", so Dean takes the Impala down to I-70 and starts heading west.

Dean drives through flat prairie towns, wide agricultural fields and rolling Kansas hills. There's a whole string of Gas-n-Sips the entire way, of course, at just about every highway exit. Dean starts checking Gas-n-Sips after he's driven about forty minutes (hadn't Cas said that his Gas-n-Sip was about an hour away from the bunker?) but one after another has no Castiel. Dean keeps going. Around the one-hour mark he's convinced that he's bound to find Cas at the next Gas-n-Sip. But Gas-n-Sip after Gas-n-Sip has no Castiel, and no gold Continental parked outside, and nobody inside who recognizes the names "Steve" or "Jimmy" either.

Two hours in, Dean's gotten almost all the way across Kansas, and he's getting certain he's missed Cas at some previous Gas-n-Sip. Maybe Cas was on break or something? Took the Continental out for a lunch break? But Dean's not sure what else to do other than to keep checking Gas-n-Sips, so he keeps going.
He's practically to the Colorado border, still checking one store after another, when as he pulls into one last Gas-n-Sip in a tiny I-70 off-ramp, he catches a glimpse a dark-haired man moving around inside the store, sweeping the floors. Dean can only see part of the man's back, actually, but something about the slant of the shoulders is unmistakable, and the angle of the head. There's a prickle of delight at the sudden recognition. It's got to be Cas. Cas turns slightly and Dean catches the edge of his profile; yes. It's him. Dean's found him.

There's a moment of pure contentment at having found Cas, and discovering that he's actually at a Gas-n-Sip and appears to be okay. Dean sits there a moment longer in the Impala, quietly watching him, and checking out the surroundings. But everything seems perfectly normal. The edge of the Continental is just visible around the corner; the parking lot is tidy and clean; it's a perfectly ordinary little Gas-n-Sip, in an ordinary Kansas town, on a pretty day. Cas seems fine. It's not jolting anymore to see him in the blue Gas-n-Sip employee vest; Dean's seen it before, and somehow it look almost sweet. He's fine. He's just sweeping the floor. There's maybe something tired in his movements, and maybe he's moving a little slowly, but he looks okay.

But why has he chosen to work this Gas-n-Sip, practically at the state border? Dean's been driving at least two hours. They're almost out of the state.

Dean gets out of the Impala, walks inside and announces his presence with, "I've got a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore."

Cas jumps and spins to face him.

At once there's that crooked smile on Cas's face, and Dean feels the answering grin on his own face as well. It's good to see him — and it's remarkably reassuring to discover that Cas seems pleased to see Dean as well.

Dean stops several paces away, though. The last few weeks, Cas has been pretty consistent about the no-hugs thing; in fact there's basically no physical contact at all anymore, not even the hand-on-the-shoulder move that Cas used to do. The increased sense of distance is something Dean tries to accept without thinking about it too hard, so now he just reminds himself No hugs. And no shoulder-claps. He keeps his hands in his pockets, just in case that might help Cas relax a little.

"We are in Kansas," Cas informs him.

"It's a joke, Cas," Dean explains. At Cas's blank look he adds, "Number one joke about Kansas. You must have heard it? From the Wizard of Oz?"

Cas frowns, thinking. Dean can almost see him rummaging through some crowded mental file of the million movie plots that Metatron somehow stuffed into his head a few years back.

"Oh," says Cas, understanding at last dawning on his face. "Right. Um... we must be over the rainbow."

"What?"

"It's the next line," says Cas. "And actually, I believe the exact quote is 'I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore', not 'I've got a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore' and you're supposed to say it to a small dog—"

Dean snorts. "My point was, we're practically in Colorado. Jeez, Cas, bit of a long drive for you, huh?"

"It's not too bad," Cas says. But now he looks puzzled, and he adds, "Did you come all the way out
"No, I was checking up on some leads in Denver," Dean lies, out of the blue. "Had to come out this way anyway. Just stopped for a snack." (He's totally unclear on why he suddenly wants to hide the fact that he just drove two hours for a five-minute conversation with Cas.) "But seriously, are you really driving this whole way both ways every day? That's got to be hours in the car every day." Dean's even about to add "There are a million other places you could stay in the evenings that would be a hell of a lot more convenient than the bunker," — but he bites off the sentence before it gets started, thinking maybe he shouldn't be giving Cas any ideas about leaving again.

Cas sets his broom aside, propping it carefully against a snack-food display rack, and turns, slowly, to face Dean. He puts his hands on his hips, and he's got a thoughtful look on his face, like he's preparing for a difficult conversation.

"Dean, I know you don't understand why I'm doing this," Cas begins, in a very serious tone of voice. "but I just want to—"

"No, I get it," says Dean.

Cas looks a little surprised. "You... do?"

"You gotta find your way," Dean says. "It's cool. Listen, Sam and I were kinda talking about it, and we both know this must be a weird transition for you. Not that you haven't been human before, but... it's gotta be weird, just the same. You do what you gotta do. It's okay. Just... maybe take a day off now and then?" Dean pauses, watching Cas, but Cas is just gazing back at him, still standing by the broom, looking very attentive. "I mean, don't drive yourself into the ground, you know?" adds Dean. "You gotta take care of yourself."

Cas is silent a moment.

"That's what I'm trying to do," he says at last. But Dean's noticing now that the dark circles under Cas's eyes seem worse than ever, and the familiar worried look is back too. In fact the worried look seems almost permanently engraved on Cas's face these days; he always seems to be carrying an air of burden and strain that never seems to fully leave him. He looks good anyway, though, thinks Dean, looking him up and down. He always looks good. (To Dean, at least.) His clothes are clean, he's got himself together. And he's got that hair-tousle thing just about perfect by now.

But he looks so tired.

"You don't have to do this alone, you know," says Dean, thinking of Cas trying to save up as much money as he can, on his own, for some unknown life goal. "You could let us help. I mean, I know you probably want to do it on your own. But you don't have to."

Cas is still gazing at him very steadily, and there's such a long pause now that Dean gets a little puzzled by the intensity in Cas's expression.

Cas finally breaks eye contact and turns, with a small sigh, to look at the Gas-n-Sip's hot dog display, and then he spends a moment watching the hot dogs rotate around and around in their little heater. It's probably just something to look at while he thinks, but Dean tries to crack a joke to lighten the mood, saying, "Just don't tell me you're falling in love with those hot dogs."

A million much worse jokes leap to mind then, about hot dogs and sausages and falling in love, and Dean has to grit his teeth to keep from saying them. (Or thinking about them, actually.)

Cas gives a tiny huff of a laugh. "Actually they've started making me sick," he says. "I can't eat them
"Not surprising," Dean says. "Just a tip: the pies are good, cause honestly it's hard to screw up a pie, but you don't even wanna know what goes into those hot dogs. It's a Gas-n-Sip; no offense but it's not exactly gourmet food, you know."

Cas gives him a sidelong glance and says, "You know, though, it's soothing."

"Soothing?"

"Knowing there's at least one thing I can control," says Cas. He turns and gestures around at the brightly lit Gas-n-Sip. Dean drifts a little closer, so he can stand next to Cas and follow his gaze. It's just a Gas-n-Sip, but as Dean tries to see it from Cas's point of view, it starts to look almost impressive, this little store full of provisions for human travelers. It's so full of odd-looking snack foods and brightly packaged treats, all brought here from a thousand different places, all arranged nicely to be purchased by a thousand different travellers on their way to a thousand different places.

It's spotlessly clean, and perfectly organized. The floor's just been swept, and the coffee pots are perking with a fresh batch that Cas must have made just minutes ago. The shelves are well stocked, and there's not a crumb on the counters. Everything's bright and colorful and clean. It's sparkling.

"I can't fix everything," says Cas, slowly. It takes Dean a moment to realize he's not talking about the Gas-n-Sip. "I can't fix anything," Cas continues. "Not anymore. I have to accept that." A flicker of something grim crosses his face, but then he brightens as he adds, looking around again, "But at least I can keep this one place clean. This one very tiny small piece of the world. Eight hundred square feet; I can keep it swept. And that's about all I can manage, I think."

"You can do a lot more than that," Dean says, but, oddly, Cas's shoulders drop at that, and he suddenly looks more tired than ever.

"I can't," says Cas. "I really can't." Now he's sounding sad, almost like he's grieving the loss of something that he can't seem to explain. And that Dean can't quite grasp.

What's bothering him? thinks Dean. It could be a lot of things. Losing his powers? Being kicked out of Heaven? Losing his angel family, and Chuck as well? Maybe Cas misses his old garrison?

Dean's struck by a sudden thought, and he says, "Do you miss your wings?"

And then Dean's wishing he'd kept his mouth shut, for Cas suddenly looks almost like he's been kicked in the stomach. His lips press tight together and he even crumples a little, his shoulders hunching and his chin dropping, and he crosses his arms over his blue Gas-n-Sip vest, rubbing one of his upper arms with his other hand, as if he's suddenly feeling cold.

"Oh, hey," says Dean. "Never mind. Sorry, I didn't—"

"I thought I'd be used to it by now," says Cas, who's staring at the floor now with both arms wrapped around his chest. "I always thought I'd adjust. But I can't even look at the birds anymore."

Several carloads of customers arrive all at once, and Cas shakes himself out of his wing-depression pretty fast. In fact, it's a little disturbing to see how well he can hide it, how in just a moment he's
lifted his chin and squared his shoulders and got his calm stoic-soldier look on again. "I've got to get back to work," Cas says quietly to Dean, and then he's pressing an entire peach pie into Dean's hands and telling him "I'll see you tonight."

So off Dean goes, to do another two-hour drive home.

*It was worth the time, though,* he thinks, as he drives, the peach pie sitting in the passenger seat of the Impala beside him. *And not just for the pie. It was good to see that Cas seems like Cas, even at work.* Cas's voice seems like it should, that rough gravelly growl; the way Cas looks at Dean seems like Cas; the lopsided smile, the things he says, the way he reacted about the wings (and *dammit,* why did Dean even have to mention that?) It all seems like Cas.

It really is Cas; Dean's sure.

And so what if he doesn't want to hunt? Dean thinks a few days later. *If he really doesn't want to, that's cool.* The new routine is actually working out okay. They all still get to spend time together. Cas still comes back to the bunker in the evenings, after his ridiculously long commute, and it's actually kind of touching that he would drive so far just to spend an hour or two with Sam and Dean. They often grab breakfast together in the mornings, they watch a movie in the evenings, and Cas sometimes helps with the research as well. The "ghost carrot" tip turns out not to be an anomaly; Cas turns out to be full of helpful ideas, and when there's a case brewing he starts assisting in the evenings with research. Later, when the case wraps up, he always wants to hear every detail whenever Sam and Dean get back home from a road trip.

He just doesn't want to come along, is all. Dean and Sam both keep offering, on every hunt, that Cas could come along. But each invitation is greeted with the same array of excuses. Cas is "too busy;" he "just needs a bit more pocket change;" he "has a schedule" he has to adhere to; he'd "like to come on hunts.... later."

Always "later." Never now.

But he seems to be settling in. A sprinkling of his (few) possessions start appearing in the bedroom that Dean’s set up for him; Cas starts hanging his trenchcoat and jacket neatly in the room's little closet, and he's got a little stash of three neatly folded Gas-n-sip vests as well, and a small assortment of boxers, socks and a few shirts. This is all a good sign because he had seemed remarkably uncertain about taking possession of the room at all, which was a little odd given he's been hanging out at the bunker off and on perfectly comfortably for years. But he's hesitant about actually sleeping in a bed, and having a specific room that's his very own.

Thinking it over later, Dean realizes Cas has never had his own bedroom here. In fact, the only other time he's slept in a real bed at the bunker, Dean kicked him out within a few hours.

They watch a lot of movies. Cas already seems to know every movie plot inside and out, yet it turns out he loves actually seeing them for the first time anyway. Together, Dean, Sam and Castiel finish a tour through the classic westerns ("I'm surprised they're not discussing the plight of the cows" says
Cas). They work their way through Indiana Jones the next week ("The Ark of the Covenant doesn't melt people like that!" says Cas. "Well, only rarely."). Next is Star Wars ("At least Luke's father spoke to him at the very end. And spoke kindly," says Cas — after which he goes quiet for a while).

The seating arrangements start to evolve. The wooden chair turns out to be hellishly uncomfortable and Dean soon drags it back to the library, searches out an upholstered easy chair in one of the meeting rooms, and drags that over to the tv room instead. For a while then it's Dean in the easy chair. Cas smack in the middle of the couch (Dean's old spot), and Sam still in his usual spot at the end of the couch.

The easy chair's okay; it's fine, really. But the viewing angle's a little wrong and there's nowhere to prop a beer, and it's too far from the popcorn (which is usually right by Cas). One evening Dean realizes he'd rather be closer to the popcorn. He doesn't want to crowd Cas, though, so he tries perching on the couch arm, but that's a little awkward, and then he tries sitting on the floor just in front of the couch. Sam tosses him a pillow and then Dean's sitting on the pillow with his back leaned up against the couch, and Cas puts his feet up on the coffee table, and then Cas is rearranging till he's slightly closer, till the side of one of his thighs is in contact with Dean's shoulder.

Dean waits for Cas to flinch back. But he doesn't. Whatever Cas's problem is with hugs, apparently it doesn't extend to legs-by-the-shoulder positions. Cas stays right where he is, leg in firm contact with Dean's shoulder, and he even props the popcorn bowl on his knees so Dean can reach it.

The floor's actually not all that comfortable, not even with the pillow, but Dean watches the movies there every night for the next week.

One night Dean actually nods off. There's been a long hunt recently, and a very long drive back; Sam got some catnaps during the drive, but Dean's still a little short on sleep. They start watching "Men In Black" and Dean dozes off pretty early on, when Will Smith is just starting to take the Men in Black entrance exam, and wakes hours later to find his head is leaning heavily on Cas's knee. The movie's long over, the room is dark, and Sam is tiptoeing around picking up the beer bottles and the popcorn bowl.

"Shit," Dean mutters, lifting his head and wiping his mouth. He's mortified to find that he's been drooling on Cas's jeans. "Jeez, I'm sorry, Cas," he says, but when he glances back at Cas, it turns out Cas is fast asleep too, his head tipped back onto the couch cushions and his eyes shut fast.

"He didn't want to move," Sam whispers. "When he realized you'd fallen asleep he didn't want to wake you."

But then Cas leaves again.

"Oh, I won't be home in the evenings for a while," Cas announces one day.

"What?" says Dean. "Why?"
Cas shrugs. The shrug seems a little too staged and deliberate, like he's trying to convince himself (and Dean, maybe) that it's a very trivial matter. "I've been offered another place to live that's a little closer. It's a bit of a long drive from here, you know."

"What kind of a place?"

"Oh, just... " Cas hesitates. "There's a motel just over the state border where I can stay. It's quite cheap and it's a much shorter drive. I thought I'd stay there during the week. I can come home on the weekends."

Dean and Sam glance at each other.

And all at once that's the new routine: Cas is gone completely during his work week (Sunday through Thursday).

At least he's still back on weekends.

Till the day when Cas says "So, I might stay a little longer at my other place. A couple weeks. I've got some, ah, stuff to do on the weekends. But I've got a full week off after that and I'll come see you guys then."

He's gone for two full weeks this time. And then shows up out of the blue again.

Then he's gone for another two weeks and he's back. Then longer still - three weeks away. Then he's back.

Those aren't the only changes.

Cas's clothes start changing. The trenchcoat and suit have suddenly gotten dry-cleaned at one point; they're both spotless all of a sudden, the mudstains totally gone. Cas also has a new (spotless) white shirt, and the blue-striped tie is completely gone too, replaced with a solid blue tie a little more like the original one. He's not wearing the blue vest back and forth, either — he's apparently only using that at work now, and he's acquired a couple other shirts and a rather nice-looking short jacket that somewhat startles Dean with its snappiness.

The idea of Cas shopping for these clothes at some Colorado mall somewhere is a little disconcerting. But it's even more disconcerting when Cas can't seem to remember where he got them.

"A friend helped pick them out," is all he says. "I forget where."

"A friend?" Dean mouths, silently, to Sam when Cas has his back turned. Sam can only shrug. Dean's about to start quizzing Cas about who this "friend" is and whether the "friend" is trustworthy, but he realizes it'll seem a little too much like a doubtful parent grilling a teenager.
"Well, since you're a million years old," Dean says grudgingly, "I guess you're allowed to make a friend or two." Sam gives a snort of laughter, and Cas even gives a faint smile.

And then there's the hair. Cas has clearly been practicing the hair-scrunching all along, because he's long since nailed the "perfect amount of tousle". That's been really nice to see, but he's spending an increasingly long amount of time in the bathroom on his ever-shorter bunker visits. Dean swings open the bathroom door one day to find Cas already in there, staring in the mirror intently. Cas has apparently forgotten to lock the door, and he's got a palmful of Dean's mousse stuff in one hand, with Sam's "volumizer" shampoo sitting right out by the sink too, and Cas is fiddling with the tufts of hair on his forehead, tugging bits of hair this way and that. He's even craning his head around as if he's trying to get a look at the sides.

"Oh, sorry, were you trying to doll yourself up?" says Dean. Cas jumps about a foot in the air, spinning around to stare at Dean. He's already fumbling the mousse stuff out of sight behind his back.

"There's a lock on the door, you know," says Dean. "If you want to have a moment in private with your hair, I know you two need some time to catch up."

"Right, right," mutters Cas. "I forgot about the lock." He grabs the doorknob and whips the door shut. Dean's stifling a laugh by now. Because, Cas was most definitely flustered. It's a little cute, it was definitely funny, but it's also a little odd. Since when has Cas gotten flustered about bodily functions?

_Come to think of it, Dean thinks, still chuckling, since when has Cas even paid the least bit of attention to his appearance?_

_Since a couple months ago, when he started going off on his own, Dean remembers. When Dean first told him that "chicks would dig" the tousled hair._

That day, that exact moment, is when Cas started caring about his appearance.

Dean's laughter starts to fade away.

After that Cas is very diligent about keeping the bathroom door locked. And then he starts taking incredibly long showers too. (That, at least, makes Dean laugh again.)

That's the first in a long string of what seem to be self-improvement efforts of various types. Sam finds Cas wandering around the bunker gym one day, and Dean even catches Cas weighing himself on the Men of Letters' old-style scale, clad in nothing but a t-shirt and boxers, sliding the little weights carefully along the balance arm. Again Cas jumps about a foot in the air when Dean surprises him, and there's something almost comical about how fast he lunges to grab a towel to wrap around himself (even though he already had the t-shirt and boxers on). "Relax, dude, I only saw your back," Dean says, "Not that it ain't a nice back." Cas just gives him a very embarrassed look and disappears at near-lightspeed around the corner, towel wrapped firmly around himself like a cape, leaving Dean still chuckling — but still a little confused.

The clothes continue to change. The Lesser Trenchcoat disappears entirely one day, apparently banished to the back of his closet for good, and now Cas is wearing either the jacket or a new sweater, a knit sweater in dark blue that's appeared out of nowhere. Then he's suddenly acquired a
hand-knitted gray wool cap too. The hat's a little misshapen, obviously handmade, but somehow it suits him, and soon he's wearing it almost every day, when he heads out in the mornings in the chilly late-October air to his job, and when he comes back at night. Soon he's barely taking it off, and wears it even indoors. (Granted, the bunker gets pretty chilly in winter.) A cream-colored scarf shows up after that, and a pair of black gloves, and a nice looking shoulder bag.

He's a little cagey about all of them. The most he'll say about any of the new clothes is, "Oh, a friend gave it to me," or "I must have picked it up somewhere," or even, least convincing of all, "I don't remember where this came from."

And then there's the food.

"I might skip the fries," says Cas one day, just as Dean's ladling out a batch of truly awesome homemade steak fries onto Cas's plate. "Sam, do you have more of that salad?"

After that he totally stops eating most of Dean's meals and is almost slavishly copying Sam's health-fanatic diet, protein smoothies and all. Sam's thrilled, of course, and soon he and Cas are getting into long conversations over dinner about quinoa and yogurt. While Dean rolls his eyes. More fries for me, at least, he thinks.

Next Cas is coming home with recipes he wants to try. Things he's been eating somewhere else and apparently liked enough to try to copy at home. It's all annoyingly organic and Whole Foods-ish — free range chicken, and organic pasta, and suspiciously healthy looking salads.

The trips away continue. Around late October Dean finally succumbs to curiosity and manages to hack Cas's Verizon account enough to get a ping on his location. Both times Cas is in a town near Denver, at what looks like a Holiday Inn near the Kansas border. It's a reasonable place for him to be based, but when Dean asks him about it, Cas looks a little shiftly but finally confesses, "Yes, I've been...." He hesitates. "Shopping. In Denver."

"Shopping," repeats Dean. "In Denver."

"Yes. Shopping," says Cas.

"Working in a Gas-n-Sip.... and shopping," repeats Sam. "And wearing clothes that just showed up somehow? That you don't remember where you got?"

Cas gives a completely deadpan nod. "Would you like to watch a movie?" he suggests.

The clues are everywhere, but somehow Dean's still just thinking of it as Cas being on a "self-improvement" campaign of some sort. It's willful blindness, of course, and Dean's dimly aware that he's missing something obvious, but it's not till weeks later, in early November, that he's forced to really think about it. Cas is disappearing out the door one day, heading off to his "temporary place of residence," as he keeps calling the Holiday Inn in Colorado. He's wearing his gray wool hat, and carrying his new bag, and wearing his spotless new sweater. Sam and Dean are in the middle of cleaning up the breakfast dishes as Cas heads out the door with a smile and a wave, promising, as always, to "be in touch soon." The smile's almost startling; he looks amazingly chipper, like he's really looking forward to getting back to Colorado.

They hear the grumble of the Continental starting up and pulling out of the bunker garage. As soon
as Cas is definitely gone, Sam turns to Dean with a grin and says,

"Hope we get to meet her someday."

"What? Who?" Dean genuinely has no idea what Sam's talking about.

Sam flicks him an odd look. He's silent a moment but finally says, almost reluctantly, "Cas's girlfriend."

"Cas can't have a girlfriend," is Dean's instant response.

Sam gives a kind of a half-laugh, and starts making a new batch of coffee.

Dean sets down his stack of dishes and stares at Sam. "What are you talking about?" he demands.

Sam gives a little sigh. Once he sets the water boiling he turns to Dean, almost reluctantly, and says, "Week-long trips, Dean. Weeks long. Two and three weeks long. You know what that means. You know what that would mean if I did it. You know what that would mean if you did it."

"He just needs to be closer to his job," protests Dean. "It's like a two hour drive."

"He's closer to his job, sure," says Sam. "But... I'm pretty sure he's closer to something else, too. Why did he even pick that Gas-n-Sip in the first place, anyway? There's a zillion others that are closer. He shifted locations on purpose."

"He'd tell us if he had a girlfriend," says Dean. "He just took the job cause he needed money."

"Well then, why did he need money?"

Dean hesitates. This has actually still been puzzling him.

Sam has a reluctant look on his face, like he hates to even be forcing Dean through this discussion, but he says, "Think about it, Dean. Why did he even want a job?"

"To... contribute to society?" Dean says. "Just... take a break for a while? From the wars and all? He had this thing in his head about, trying to do at least something even if it was just keeping eight hundred square feet swept. And besides, he probably needed the money."

"If he wanted to sweep eight hundred square feet, he could do that here," points out Sam. "And why would he need the money? That credit card we gave him isn't even close to maxed. I checked."

Dean can't think of anything.

"We check the accounts of that card," says Sam. "And he knows that. I check our cards all the time to see if someone's watching us, see if anybody's stolen our numbers or run a credit check or something. You know that — I check them all the time. Well, Cas knows that too. He's seen me doing it."

"What's your point?"

"He knows we monitor that account, Dean! If he used the credit card, we'd know when and where
he was buying anything. And he knows that. Don't you see? He doesn't want us to see what he's actually dropping all his cash on."

"Like... what exactly?" Dean is starting to understand where Sam is going with this, but, stubbornly, he doesn't want to be convinced.

"Hell, I don't know. Restaurants, maybe?" says Sam. "Flowers. Pairs of movie tickets. Stuff like that. Jewelry, little gifts." Dean's rolling his eyes now, but Sam persists. "C'mon, Dean, think about it. He doesn't spend money on himself, like ever. He doesn't have a car loan or a mortgage. Till recently he didn't even have housing to pay for, and we were buying the food. What's he spending money on? He's got to be spending it on somebody else."

"Okay, maybe," Dean allows, "but, seriously, a girlfriend? Maybe he's... I don't know, gambling it away, or saving up for a new pair of wings or something—" (Dean's startled to hear this idea come out of his mouth, and Sam just laughs) "— or a new trenchcoat, I don't know, there's other things it could be for!"

Sam takes a big breath. "Sure, Dean, but, for chrissake, why wouldn't he have a girlfriend? I mean, why would he not? He's been out and about for months. You seriously think he's going to spend all that time out there and is never going to meet anybody? It's been months."

Dean can only stare at Sam blankly. It has actually never occurred to Dean that it might be perfectly natural for Cas to pick up a girlfriend. Sam's silent a moment, measuring out the coffee, and he finally continues with, "Look, I know you kinda like having him around. We both like having him around, obviously. But... c'mon, you gotta admit, he gets to have a life too. And most of all — he's human now. I think we might've both forgotten what that really means. We've seen how human he gets. We've seen it before, right?" Sam's suddenly looking very awkward — he's even blushing a little as he fumbles the coffee scoop back into the coffee can, but he plows on with, "He's gotta be having human... uh... thoughts, right? Human... desires. Human..."

"If you say 'urges', so help me," Dean says. "Or 'needs'. I don't want to hear about Cas having 'urges.' Ever."

"But what if he does?" Sam insists. "Dean, the guy has a right to live a life. He can do what he wants. We told him exactly that. You told him exactly that."

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What do you really want to do, Cas?

I need to think about that.

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Dean remembers how Cas took that long, long shower, that evening in Flagstaff... thinking about "what he really wanted to do."

He'd thought about it, that night, hadn't he? He'd even woken in the middle of the night, apparently, and had sat there for hours in the early morning watching Dean sleep, and thinking about his "options."

And then Cas had decided to leave.
Maybe I was overthinking it all along, Dean thinks. Maybe it wasn't that something sneaky was going on. Maybe it wasn't even that he was scared, or not entirely.

Maybe he just wants a life.

A regular life, for once. A life that includes a girl. Dean's had a year like that. So has Sam. Cas has never really had much of a chance (not while he was sane and had all his memories, that is). Maybe he just wants a regular life... a regular job....

A regular girl.

The concept of Cas possibly having a girlfriend shouldn't seem so unexpected and alien, yet somehow it is. It shouldn't be the least bit surprising, either, but somehow it is.

It also shouldn't be depressing, but somehow it is. So much so that Dean has to try to cover his confusion by grabbing a couple beers out of the fridge (totally forgetting that it's only just after breakfast and that Sam is literally making coffee right this very second) and then he has to focus intently on twisting off the caps. *Cas can't have a girlfriend, Dean wants to say. Cas lives here in the bunker. With us. He's part of my —our — family and he lives here with me — us. Most of the time. Some of the time. He can do trips, sure. He can sleep around, even, sure. But he can't possibly have a girlfriend.* He opens one beer, he opens a second for Sam (which Sam takes hesitantly, with a pointed glance toward the coffeemaker), and he's already midway through opening a third for Cas before he remembers that it's only eight in the morning, Sam didn't even want a beer, and Cas isn't even here.

Meanwhile Sam's going through a whole pile of evidence now, like he's building a case. "He's even been paying attention to his looks!" Sam points out, with a laugh. "Have you noticed? He was so interested when you told him chicks would dig a different hairstyle, remember? He's been fussing with his hair ever since. Then, get this, my shampoo kept moving around on its own and finally I realized Cas was borrowing it! He used to use yours, remember?" (It's oddly disappointing to realize that Cas has stopped using Dean's shampoo.) Sam adds, "Since when does he care about 'volumizers?' When has Cas ever cared about that stuff before? He's changed up all his clothes, he's even watching his weight, Dean, he's trying to eat healthy all of a sudden, he was checking out the gym downstairs, he's trying to get fit! I mean, these are the signs, aren't they?"

"Hair gel," says Dean, taking a long swig of beer.

"What?"

"I caught him using that gel stuff I use," Dean said, forcing himself to add an amused little chuckle. "That mousse. Trying to, like... get his hair better fluffed or something. Looking in the mirror, and, um.... Heh. He was embarrassed about it." The odd scene, and especially Cas's shyness about it, seems highly significant now in retrospect. Dean adds another forced chuckle, which definitely comes out a little fake-sounding, and tries to cover it up by taking another huge swig of beer that drains nearly half the bottle in one go.

Sam, thankfully, doesn't seem to notice Dean's confusion, and just says, "Dead giveaway. I can't believe we didn't put it together before. I should've realized the second he turned up with that hat."

"Hat?" Dean's noticed the hat, of course, but hadn't thought much of it.

"That wool hat. It's hand-knitted, Dean, didn't you notice? The scarf too. I bet a friend gave them to him. Same friend who's been giving him all those recipes, I'll bet."
"A female type of friend, you mean?" says Dean.

Sam shrugs. "You know any guys who knit hats for their friends?"

"There are plenty of guys who knit," Dean objects.

"Name one," says Sam.

"Tons of guys knit," says Dean, who can't think of a single one. "Lots of guys knit. It's a whole thing these days. Hey, maybe Cas has taken up knitting." (Sam looks extremely doubtful, and actually chugs down a swallow of beer at that point, despite the early hour.) "Or maybe he made it himself, maybe he found it in a thrift store, I don't know. A hat doesn't prove a damn thing." At this point Dean realizes his beer bottle seems to be empty, so he starts in on Cas's beer.

"We shouldn't be surprised," says Sam, gently. "It isn't the first time."

"What do you mean?" says Dean, a little thickly, as he swallows down another huge swig of beer.

"Well..." Sam hesitates, now looking at Dean almost as if he's trying to break bad news gently, and finally he says, "Cas has had girls before, you know. I mean, hell, he was married once, right? That time when I was in the hospital after the trials?"

"Yeah, but he had amnesia," says Dean. "That didn't really count. And the wife was super religious and kind of... in awe of him, I think. That wasn't, like, a normal marriage." He manages to stop himself from adding I'm pretty sure it was never consummated.

"Still though. And he sorta had that thing with Meg, remember?" Sam says.

"Meg flirted with everybody," said Dean. "Cas was just, like... attached to her because she took care of him. He wasn't really into her, not that way."

Sam looks a little doubtful. "Pretty sure she liked him that way. And what about that reaper, too? What was her name? April?"

"Yeah but, that was just like a one-time fling deal," says Dean. "You know those don't mean anything. Besides, she was trying to kill him. And succeeded."

"But he liked her, didn't he? He said she was hot, didn't he?"

"Well, yeah... but...." Dean stops, realizing that he seems to be having trouble making a clear case to Sam about why none of those girls count. None of those had been real relationships. Cas had just been trying on a role, really; he'd been stuck in a male body and so he'd been testing out the part he thought he was expected to play in human society. He hadn't really known, or cared much, about any of those women. And none of them had really known Cas. Not really.

Not like... well, not like Dean knows Cas, just for example.

Sam's again giving Dean a bit of a strange look, and Dean scrambles to try to act like this is no big deal. So Cas might have a girlfriend. Sure. Fine. That's cool. "Well, anyway, if that's what it is, good for him," Dean manages, taking another big swig of his beer, mostly in the hope it'll wash away the weirdly disconsolate feeling that seems to clamping down around his stomach. "If that's what's going on, that's awesome. Really."

"We couldn't expect him to stick around the bunker forever," Sam says. Now he sounds a little wistful, as he adds, "And you know... it'd be nice if at least one of the three of us got to have some
kind of an actual life, wouldn't it?"

"Of course!" Dean said, a little too emphatically. "Absolutely. Yes. It's great. Good for him for meeting someone. Hope it's someone great. Good for him. A Colorado girl, huh. Wish him all the best. To Cas!" Now he's actually toasting Cas, with his second beer, at eight in the morning, which is way too over-the-top and Sam's giving him that funny look again. But Sam joins in on the toast just the same.

A/N - and now I have to run around in my house like a maniac packing stuff up. I've got that 1 more science paper to write in the next 8 days, start to finish, so I am not sure if I can get a chapter up this coming weekend, but I will definitely try, so do check in. I'll put an edit in this A/N once I know for sure when I'll be able to post the next chapter. Thanks, as always, for your patience with the erratic posting schedule and my lameness about not replying to comments recently - there's just been zero time. But I PROMISE you I always read each & every comment, and it's like the highlight of my day!

And as always, please let me know if you liked the chapter! :)
Here ya go, a fifty-cent special

A/N - Sorry I had to skip a week! Absolute crazy chaos in my life right now what with packing and moving out of my room and finishing my job. But the room is cleared out, I mailed 10 boxes to my new place today, and THE JOB IS DONE, WOOOO - Wednesday was my last day. Such a sense of bliss and freedom I can't believe it.

And then I spent all of Thursday working this up for you all. It feels so good to have time for writing again! Hope you like it.

The girlfriend begins to take shape in Dean's mind. She's a bit bossy, Dean thinks. Like, Dean's got an impression that she must have been criticizing Cas's taste in junk food. (No more French fries at all — seriously? Dean's pretty sure she's probably also the reason that Cas doesn't like hot dogs anymore.) But apparently she's been making Cas some real home-cooked meals. And Cas seems to like her cooking, given all the recipes (hers, no doubt) that he's been bringing home.

The girlfriend's some kind of health nut, too, thinks Dean. Because, Cas is soon outpacing even Sam in the healthy-foods discussions, going on and on about healthy fats and nuts and B vitamins and probiotics, and of course Sam's totally thrilled wiht it all. Cas's breakfasts begin to shift, too, from Dean's pancakes-and-bacon favorite to stuff like steel-cut oatmeal mixed with "antioxidant loaded" (says Cas) blueberries, and "high protein" (says Cas) Greek yogurt and a dollop of "immune boosting" (says Cas) organic honey.

Cas insists he loves this mix of tasteless breakfast goo, and tries to force some on Dean every morning. It's only edible if buried in about half a pound of the organic honey, but Dean piles on the honey and smiles and nods and chokes the stuff down.

Yet Dean has to concede, watching Cas assemble the oatmeal-and-blueberry-and-yogurt breakfasts in the mornings, that Cas is actually learning to eat right. He's finally ditching his awful junk-food habits.

Awful habits he just might have picked up from hanging out with a certain hunter....

It seems like the girlfriend, whoever she is, might be good for Cas.

Dean hates that.

The girlfriend must also have opinions about clothes. For one thing the Lesser Trenchcoat never reappears. Dean's grudgingly grateful to the girlfriend about this, actually, for he's in silent agreement with her that the Lesser Trenchcoat never was quite right for Cas. The Greater Trenchcoat always had more pizzazz. More... something. More drape, more billow when Cas walked, more like a cape
or like... wings, actually. More like wings. And also more cuffs and belts and things. So Dean's hopeful that the girlfriend might be in the process of shopping for a better trenchcoat. Dean even starts to wonder if he should get in touch with her just to give her a little friendly trenchcoat advice, about what sort of coat to steer Cas towards. *Maybe she doesn't know that the original trenchcoat looked better?* he thinks. *I could give her some tips on what would look good on him.*

But no, nothing like the Greater Trenchcoat appears, and Dean's too uncertain about the whole girlfriend idea to press Cas for a name or for actual contact information. (And also... maybe it's *not* a girlfriend? Maybe it's just... Claire or somebody? A group of Gas-n-Sip work friends? Dean can hope, anyway.) Cas's wardrobe keeps changing nonetheless, though, mostly in ways that seem to involve the acquisition of comfier and comfier clothes. Nothing as formal-looking as any kind of trenchcoat.

One day Cas has suddenly got a pair of soft drawstring sweatpants, and on his next trip he's also acquired a kind of dorky-looking, but also soft-and-fuzzy-looking, polarfleece vest. When Cas gets home he changes out of the snappy-looking new jacket and into the shapeless blue sweater and the fuzzy fleece vest as soon as he walks in the door. There's a day a few weeks later when Cas even shows up with a new pair of soft slippers (slippers that he says he got "somewhere"), and then he's changing into the slippers every time he comes back to the bunker, shuffling around in them on movie nights almost like an old grandpa.

"I think he's turning into Mr. Rogers," whispers Dean to Sam one day, as they're both idly watching Cas kick off his outside shoes and slip the fuzzy slippers on. Sam nods, and whispers back, as Cas shrugs off the Gas-n-Sip work vest, and pulls on his fuzzy blue sweater, "That's not a bad thing."

Dean nods back. Because it's kind of cute, actually, how much Cas seems to be nesting; how relaxed he seems in the bunker now, and how cozy he usually looks. It's undeniably a little drab and dowdy, but he sure does look comfortable.

*The girlfriend's got a crappy sense of fashion,* Dean concludes. There's that one nice-looking jacket, sure, but Cas only wears that outside and everything else seems to be some shapeless mass of polarfleece or hand-knit wool. Every time Dean looks over at Cas on the movie nights, Cas is all cozied up in his (somewhat shapeless) blue knit sweater, the gray knit hat (also somewhat shapeless), the cream-colored scarf, and the fuzzy slippers. Usually with the fuzzy vest on too, a blanket or two wrapped around him on top of all that. It's not exactly Male Fashion 101.

But the new stuff does, at least, all look soft and comfy.

The girlfriend seems to want Cas to be comfortable when he's at home.

Actually she's actually done a better job at that, it seems, than Dean's ever done.

Dean hates that.

A few weeks later Dean's strolling into the tv room to see which Netflix show Cas and Sam have gotten addicted to now. It's one of Cas's increasingly-rare weeks back at the bunker, and these days, Sam and Cas typically get a jump on starting the tv-watching. That's because they're usually eating the same healthy salad-type stuff, so the two of them often start eating a simple, fast-to-prepare, salad-type meal while Dean's still making something else for himself (something much more tasty.
Tonight Sam and Cas have already finished some bland looking chicken-Caesar-salad type thing while Dean's been making himself some completely awesome burgers from scratch, complete with sauteed onions, hand-made patties, pre-toasted buns, the works.

Dean walks over to them munching on one of the burgers (a magnificent burger, it must be said, though it did indeed take some time to prepare). He's carrying two other burgers on a plate, just in case he can entice Cas (or Sam for that matter) to try one.

"Burger?" Dean offers, holding out the platter. "I swear it's tastier than whatever crap you two have been choking down.

Cas brightens at the offer, and even says, "Oh, Dean, thank you." But he's also shaking his head, and he adds, "But I'm full. Thank you for the offer, though."

Cas can't be full, though; he's actually only eaten a little bit of his own dinner. Dean sighs; Cas must still be watching his weight. He really wants to tell Cas, *Don't let a girl try to change you. Be sure you still feel you can be yourself. If you like burgers, eat burgers, dammit.*

But he bites his tongue. Cas has still been reluctant to tell any details about the mysterious "friend" who he's been spending time with, and Dean and Sam have both decided to give him a little space.

Sam, at least, grabs one of the burgers.

Dean sets the burger plate down on the coffee table and looks at them both for a moment. It's the middle of November by now, and of course the Men of Letters never seem to have thought all that much about insulation, so Cas is curled up on the couch all bundled up as per usual —slouched down on the sofa with his legs propped up on the coffee table, not only wearing all the hand-knitted crap but also with the inevitable blanket wrapped around his legs. Cas's half-eaten Caesar salad is in a bowl on the coffee table, a popcorn bowl is next to him on the sofa, Sam's now busily chomping on the extra burger, and they both seem to be fascinated by some new Netflix show.

Turns out to be some weird new show called "Sense8", which seems to involve ESP and mind-reading and lots of gay people having orgies, as far as Dean can figure out. Two lesbians are kissing on screen, and so Dean watches for a few moments (because lesbian make-out scenes are acknowledged, by everybody, to be universally hot). But the next shot is of two guys making out, and Dean finds himself feeling a little awkward about that — because, you know, it's gay guys, which, that's totally fine and all, but it's not Dean's thing. Not at all. There's nothing wrong with it but it's not Dean's thing at all. In fact it seems safest not to watch, so Dean turns his back to the screen.

Cas, though, seems to be riveted by the gay-guys-kissing scene; he's frowning at the tv in intense concentration, almost like he's studying for an important exam. Though his eyes are almost all that's visible of him; the blue sweater almost seems to swallow him. He's even got his hands tucked into the ends of the opposite sleeves of his blue sweater, so that the sleeves form sort of a seamless loop, and his cream-colored scarf is piled high around his face. He's so well wrapped that he just seems a just a pair of blue eyes in a big bundle of blue- and cream-colored wool, with the gray knit hat perched on top.

"Do you ever take that sweater off?" Dean asks, walking over to sit on the arm of the sofa. "It fits you like a burlap sack, you know." Sam pauses in mid-burger bite to slant a frown at Dean.

Cas straightens up a touch, emerging slightly from his wool igloo till he looks almost human-shaped again, and he looks up at Dean. "I like how the sweater fits," says Cas, glancing down at the sleeves.
One hand emerges and he pats at the baggy sweater sleeve of his other arm. "It's comfortable. I can roll up the sleeves easily," he says, and he looks back at the screen, but it's moved on from the gay guys and it seems the new scene isn't grabbing Cas's attention as much, for now his gaze keeps flickering over to Dean.

"You can roll up the sleeves easily?" repeats Dean, a little skeptical. The sweater, and the hat too, are both just so... shapeless. "That's why you like it? That's, like, a selling point in sweaters? Where'd you get that thing, anyway, the thrift store?"

There's a stir of motion in Cas's blanket; he's shifting his feet. "Erin gave it to me," he finally says. "Apparently I wasn't dressing warmly enough."

Erin.

It's the first time Cas has mentioned a name.

Dean has to take it in for a moment. It seems a significant name, weighted with importance, and Dean finds he needs a long moment to assess the sound of it.

Erin.

Erin. Erin. Erin. It's amazing how significant it sounds. It's ringing in Dean's mind almost like a bell tolling, and Dean now realizes that he's still been harboring a little secret theory that there isn't actually a girlfriend. There have always been some other possibilities, of course; Cas could have been just saving money for something else. There was the Claire theory, too; there'd been the work-buddy theory.

But no, it's not Claire, it's somebody else. Somebody named Erin.

Sam has perked up with interest too; he's setting his burger down on the plate on the coffee table, and is looking over at Cas.

"Erin?" Sam says. "Is that your friend?"

Cas hesitates. A slightly alarmed look crosses his face, like he's just realized he's let a secret slip. "Yes," he says cautiously. He shuffles a little, puts his feet down on the floor and sits up a bit, no longer looking as relaxed. He takes a very small handful of the popcorn from the bowl next to him, just a couple of kernels, but then just fiddles with the kernels without eating them.

"Is Erin the same friend who gave you that hat, by any chance?" says Sam, in a totally innocuous tone.

"Yes...." says Cas. He's definitely looking guarded now, studying his popcorn kernels closely, but Sam keeps pressing. Sam's got a carefully innocent look on his face, but Dean's pretty sure Sam's hiding a grin.

"Is that the same 'friend'..." says Sam brightly, making apostrophe-gestures in the air with his fingers for the word friend, "who's been cooking for you?"

Cas is definitely fidgeting now. "Sort of," he mutters, and then he drops the uneaten popcorn back into the bowl, sets the bowl aside, pulls his phone out from some deeply hidden pocket, and makes a show of checking the time. And then he kicks off his blanket and stands up. "Actually I've got to go," he announces, winding the cream-colored scarf more tightly around his neck, as if he's armoring up to head out into a blizzard. "It's later than I thought and I've got a drive ahead of me. I have to get back tonight."
Dean blinks, and Sam shoots a glance at Dean, raising an eyebrow. This is the first Cas has mentioned that he's heading back tonight.

Sam's unfazed, though, and he continues with, "Going back where? To Denver by any chance?" He's still sounding like Mr. Innocuous. "Gonna do some shopping for a few weeks?"

"Going to see Erin, by any chance?" adds Dean, forcing himself to join in on the game.

Cas finishes tucking his scarf-ends over his shoulder and turns to Dean with a sigh. "Yes, Dean. Yes, I'm going to see my friend Erin. What of it?"

"How long you staying this time?" says Sam.

"This is like the eighth or ninth visit, huh?" says Dean. "Getting serious?"

At that, Cas gets an odd look on his face, and he eyes Dean a bit remotely for a second, like he's thinking about something. It makes Dean wonder if Cas even knows what "getting serious" actually refers to.

It makes Dean wonder (and not for the first time) has Cas ever had a real relationship? Ever?

Dean's waiting for Cas to say something along the lines of "No, not really, we only just met," and he's already got a little reply prepared about how Cas should enjoy himself and feel free to go have some fun. But then Cas says, with a slow and thoughtful nod, "I hadn't really thought of it that way. But yes, I suppose it's getting serious."

All of a sudden Dean has a stomachache.

"We ever gonna get to meet this Erin?" says Sam. "Because we gotta give her the stamp of approval, you know."

Or Sam says something like that, at least. Dean didn't really hear the details because he's still hearing Cas saying, "I suppose it's getting serious."

I'm going to see my friend Erin.

I suppose it's getting serious.

Dean forces himself to pretend he's interested by whatever it is that Sam just said. Actually what he really wants is to go somewhere very quiet, where he can sit down and think about the name "Erin" for a while, maybe just go lie down on his bed for an hour or two just to take in the fact that Castiel has an "Erin." But Dean knows he needs to join in with Sam on the brotherly-teasing, so Dean says, "Yeah, we definitely gotta check out the girlfriend!" He adds, doggedly, trying to make a joke out of it, "We gotta screen her. Silver and holy water, at least!"

"Yep, gotta make sure she's not a demon before you go and move in with her completely," says Sam.

Cas seems thrown by these comments. He's suddenly looking confused. He doesn't say anything for a moment, but just glances back and forth between Sam and Dean. Then he mutters, "I've got to go," fumbles his phone back in his pocket and turns to the side of the couch to get his bag. He almost trips over the blanket, which is still lying next to the couch by his feet, grabs the bag and walks, in something of a hurry, over to the door where his shoes are. Beyond that door is the library; beyond
the library is the staircase to the outside world; and now Cas is saying "I'll see you both later," and he's changing out of the slippers into the shoes, and all of a sudden it's clear that Cas is truly about to leave. It's also clear that he's been driven away by the (fairly mild) teasing.

Sam's apparently just realized this too, for he drops the teasing entirely and calls out "Hey, Cas, seriously, have a good time," twisting around in his seat to try to catch Cas's eye before he gets out the door.

"Go get 'er, tiger," adds Dean, though the "tiger" phrase comes out maybe a little mechanically. "And play safe."

Cas has got the shoes on now, and he straightens up and pauses in the doorway, looking over at Dean with a distinctly uncertain look on his face.


At that point Dean remembers Cas's classic comment, a few years back, about how he'd used "protection" with that homicidal reaper chick — protection in the form of an angel-blade, that is. It'd been one of the Castiel All-Time Classics, one that Sam and Dean still laugh about from time to time, but it occurs to Dean now that Cas might still not understand how important all that stuff is. So, not to be outdone by Sam's advice, Dean says, "Wait, wait," digs out his wallet and actually manages to locate a spare condom. (He almost always has one stuffed in an inner flap of the wallet for emergencies.) It's a bit battered but the expiration date is still good, and it looks more or less intact, safe in its slightly-crumpled little wrapper. "Here ya go," says Dean, "A fifty-cent special. Don't say I never helped you out." He frisbees it at Cas through the air.

Cas is startled, but manages to catch it and then stares down at the condom in his hand looking totally bewildered, like he's never even seen one before. And maybe he never has? Cas now looks so confused that Dean feels a stab of worry. It's looking like Cas has, in fact, not been using condoms.

Could Cas be low enough on power that he might be susceptible to STDs now? Wait, does he even know about STDs? And... damn, what about good old-fashioned pregnancy? Cas must know the basics, but... has he at least had The Talk with the girlfriend? Or maybe she's on the pill or something?

Or... is she just being totally reckless?

What kind of girl is this Erin, anyway?

Scenarios start running through Dean's mind, each one worse than the one before. Is the girlfriend playing some I'm-gonna-get-pregnant-and-you're-gonna-have-to-support-me game? Is Dean going to have to give Cas the friggin' talk?

Or has Dean totally misread the situation? Maybe Cas looks so confused simply because he hasn't slept with this "Erin" yet? And if not... why the hell not? Cas has been making multi-week trips to Denver for a couple months now! Is Erin stringing him along or something?

Is she leading him on? Is she messed up? Or maybe she's super religious or just is one of those girls who needs some time, or...

Or... is she playing some kind of game?

Dean is standing there getting progressively more angry at the imaginary Erin in his mind when Cas finally glances back over at Dean. And now Cas just looks sad. And... fond, almost. Fond and worried. But somehow it's almost like it's Dean he's worried about, not himself at all.
Something about Cas's expression makes Dean drop all the teasing entirely, and before he knows it he's in dead-serious mode. "Take care of yourself," says Dean to Cas, as heartfelt and honest as if they're having another end-of-the-world, if-I-never-come-back moment.

There's a tiny pause. Sam and Cas are both looking at Dean now.

"Thank you," Cas says quietly to Dean, tucking the condom into the pocket of his frumpy Mr. Rogers slacks.

It's exactly like the thank-you that Cas said back when Dean gave him the whole you're-our-brother speech, just before the big Amara showdown. It's exactly like the thank-you that Cas said in Flagstaff, too. Like Cas doesn't really know what he wants to say. Or like there's so much to say that he can't say any of it, and he can only come up with just those two words.

Cas doesn't say anything else. He just turns and leaves.

"Maybe he isn't sleeping with her yet," Sam says, once Cas is gone. "Though god knows he's spent enough time with her." As Sam settles back in his chair, he looks up at Dean with a thoughtful look. There's an odd pause where Sam takes a couple short breaths, his eyes darting to Dean a couple times. It's as if he's considering, and discarding, several different things he could say to Dean.

What Sam finally says is, "We should be happy for him, you know."

"Of course," says Dean automatically. "Yeah. Of course I'm happy for him." He re-plays the phrase through his head a few times, trying to make it be true: I'm happy for Cas. Really I am. I'm happy for him.

I'm really truly happy for him.

Yet all Dean really feels is... well, that weird stomachache.

This sucks, because what the stomachache means is that Dean is actually an asshole, because Dean should be feeling happy for Cas. He should be genuinely happy for Cas. Especially after all the shit Cas has been through! After all those years of torment, all the hell, all the Rowena-spells and angel-battles and Lucifer-possession and all of it. God knows ("Chuck" knows, Dean corrects himself) that Cas deserves something good. He deserves a girlfriend who cooks for him, and helps him pick out clothes, and makes sure he wears a hat and a scarf and a sweater when it's cold. Cas deserves someone who notices that he isn't dressing warmly enough. And, thing is, Cas WASN'T dressing warmly enough, not at all, it's late fall now and it's literally freezing out and Cas has no power at all and the trenchcoat is nowhere near warm enough, and why the hell hadn't Dean noticed that earlier? Of course Cas needed something other than the trenchcoat, of course he needed a sweater and a vest and a scarf and hat, it's nearly friggin WINTER! How the hell did this goddam "Erin" notice that Cas was probably really cold when Dean hadn't?

Cas deserves someone who notices when he's cold.

Someone who keeps him warm.

Cas deserves someone who invites him to come over for long weekends, and whole weeks. Someone who maybe can give him a stable life. Maybe even a good life. Maybe even some sense of
peace.

And maybe, just maybe, some love. Picket fence and everything.

Cas deserves this. He really does. Dean's happy for him.

Or at least, Dean tries to be.

Sam's muted the tv now and he's gazing up at the ceiling like he's still thinking about something. "Erin seems like she's probably nice, huh?" says Sam at last. "Takes care of him. Gave him that hat and all."

"The hat's terrible," Dean can't help saying, and Sam bursts out laughing.

"She has to have knitted that hat for him, Dean," says Sam. "Don't you think? The thing's obviously hand-made." Sam's even got a soft little smile now. "He has to wear it. If you really think about it...

"He hesitates again, studying Dean a moment, and finally says, "It's sweet that he wears it all the time."

"It's terrible," Dean says, grumpily. "The scarf too. And that damn sweater. He wears them all the friggin' time and they're all horrible. The trenchcoat was better. Especially the original one."

Sam downs one last handful of popcorn and says around it, with a chuckle. "Did you get emotionally imprinted on that first trenchcoat or something? God knows you carried it around long enough."

It's supposed to be a joke, but Dean's suddenly acutely uncomfortable, and the stomachache feeling has gone much worse. He stands and grabs some of the leftover dinner plates that have gotten scattered around, and the extra burger that Cas didn't eat, and the half-full popcorn bowl too, and takes the whole precarious stack to the kitchen. He's hoping Sam will drop the whole topic and go away, and he's even thinking, Drop it, Sam, just drop it.

But Sam trails Dean into the kitchen and leans against the tiled wall with his arms crossed, watching as Dean dumps Cas's uneaten burger in the trash.

"Cas is allowed to leave us, you know," Sam says, a little quietly. "I know you were looking for him all that time. I know that you've been wanting him to move in for... well, for years, really. But we gotta let him go."

"Well, obviously," says Dean, who's now feeling incredibly crabby. "What are you even talking about?" The burger pan has some stuck-on crap on the bottom and is going to need a ton of scrubbing, so Dean concentrates on that. He reaches under the counter to grab one of the bunker's infinite stockpile of old steel-wool pads, the old Brillo kind that foams up with bright blue soap when they get wet. Dean starts scrubbing away so hard he almost sends a shower of blue suds over the edge of the sink.

"Didn't you say, back when we met Cesar and Jesse," Sam says. "... that if a hunter finally finds the finish line and gets out alive, we gotta respect that?"

Dean thinks of Cesar and Jesse, happy together on their horse ranch surrounded by hundreds of cute little fuzzy baby horses (every time Dean pictures Cesar and Jesse, there are more and more baby horses in the mental image) and something twists inside him. Something painful. He spins on Sam to
say, "But what about this Erin?" Dean's waving the damp sudsy steel-wool pad for emphasis, and bits of blue soap start flying around. One almost hits Sam in the face; Dean barely notices as he demands, "Who is she? How'd they meet? Where? Did she ask him out? Did he ask her? How did this happen exactly? Is she really good for him, Sam?" Sam's watching him quietly as Dean goes on with, "I mean, does she deserve him? Cause she better deserve him! You know how he is, he can get taken advantage of. We don't know a thing about her! What if she IS actually a demon or something?"

"Cas is a grownup," Sam points out. "More than a grownup. You know that. And he's not an idiot. He'd know if she were a demon. And why would she be a demon, anyway?"

"Well, even if she isn't a demon," says Dean, frustrated at how logical Sam sounds, "what if she just isn't good for him? What if she, I don't know, doesn't respect him or something? Does she even know who he is, what he's done? She can't, right? I mean, does she know the sacrifices he's made, how important he is?"

Sam shrugs. "We gotta let him make his choices —"

"He let FRIGGIN LUCIFER WALK RIGHT IN!!" yells Dean. "LUCIFER! He said yes to LUCIFER! HE LET LUCIFER TAKE HIM THE FUCK OVER!"

Sam blinks, and Dean goes on, still in a near-yell and waving both hands around, "And Cas was, I don't know, fucking STONED or something, the entire past year! Don't you remember that one time we got through to him, when Lucifer had him? Don't you even remember? He'd just CHECKED OUT, Sam, he'd GIVEN UP! He's been messed up for months, you know he has!" More blue suds seem to be flying around the room now, but Dean doesn't notice at all as he draws a big breath to add, "Not to mention, THE FIRST GIRL HE EVER SLEPT WITH STABBED HIM TO DEATH! The next time after that, that date he tried to do in Idaho, he almost got killed then too! He ended up with a BROKEN ARM!"

"Broken wrist," corrects Sam, mildly.

"The POINT is, he doesn't exactly have a good track record here, Sam!"

Sam frowns. "You really think any girl who's into Cas must be secretly trying to kill him? Couldn't she just be, y'know... a normal girl? Maybe she just likes him?"

Sam's got a point, but Dean blasts past it with "But even if she's just a normal girl, what if this Erin chick is just plain totally taking advantage of him? How would he even RECOGNIZE that kind of thing? How would he even KNOW? How would WE even know? Even if she's just a normal girl, she could be.... she could be trying to get pregnant! Or... she could be just manipulating him! Like, like, not even letting him get any!" Sam frowns at that, and Dean adds hastily, "Which, like, not that she has to, but, you know what I mean, is she good to him? Does she care about him? We don't know! Or, she could be... taking all his money or something, and walking all over him, or what if she's just... mean to him? Would he just let her do what-the-hell-ever to him, like he did with Lucifer? Would he even know there's an alternative? Does he even know what a relationship is supposed to be?!!"

"You say that like either of us know any better," says Sam quietly.

Dean looks at him.

Sam says "We don't exactly have the best track records either, you know. Neither of us."
Dean looks at him for a long moment, and Dean thinks, *Amara.*

And, Ruby, of course, on Sam's side.

There've been other mistakes too... other bad calls.

In fact it's been probably ninety-nine percent bad calls, hasn't it?

Just like that, all the wind is gone from Dean's sails. He turns back to the pan with a sigh, chucking the Brillo pad back into the sudsy water. It lands with a cheery *plop* and Dean watches it sink.

"Dean, you don't have any reason to think this Erin is bad," points out Sam. "You're getting all paranoid about nothing. All we know is, she knitted him a hat and she makes him meals. Those are not bad things."

"I'm just worried about him," Dean says to the burger pan, unable to look at Sam. *I'm just worried about him.* It isn't quite true, it's not *quite* what's going on and Dean knows it, but it's close. "It's just... we don't know a thing about this Erin."

Dean glances up at Sam only to find that Sam's looking at him a little funny now, like a thought has struck him.

"Dean... you're not... you're not... jealous, are you?" Sam says, very slowly.

"What? No, of *course* not," Dean snaps. He turns back to the pot, plunges a hand into the water to grab the steel-wool pad and starts scrubbing again. "Don't be ridiculous. I'm just a little worried, that's all." But now that Sam's said it, the word *jealous, jealous, jealous* starts ringing in Dean's head. Sam's nailed it; that's *exactly* what this feeling is, this sick feeling in the pit of Dean's stomach. An unsettled, bereft feeling that's been there, off and on, for entire weeks now, actually. Ever since Cas started leaving.

Dean closes his eyes, hands clenching on the rim of the sink. *Jealous,* he thinks. *I'm jealous.*

"It's not too late for you, you know," says Sam, and Dean is struck dumb by this statement. Dean stares down at the sudsy pan with his mouth dry. *What is Sam saying?* Dean can't even pretend he's cleaning the pan any more; he can't even seem to move his hands; because — *what is Sam saying?*

Then Sam adds, "Maybe it's not too late for me either?" Dean slowly turns his head to look at him, completely confused now, but Sam's just staring at the floor, and he looks kind of introspective. Sam gives a sad little shrug and says, "Maybe *one* of us will find a girl too? Some kind of partner... someday? Somehow." Sam glances back up at Dean. "I know you always write off that idea, but it's not impossible, you know."

"Right," says Dean. It takes a huge effort to keep his face neutral. He turns back to the pot. "It's not impossible."
A girl. Right. How he's been feeling about Cas is just jealousy about having a girlfriend. Right. Cas has a girl, and Dean just wants a girl too. Right. Of course that's what Sam meant; of course that's all that could be going on.

A few seconds tick by. Dean starts scrubbing the pan like a maniac again, and Sam's gone very quiet. When Dean checks Sam out of the corner of his eye he discovers Sam is watching him closely now. Drop it, Sam, just drop it, he thinks.

"He's still family," Sam says.

"I know," says Dean. Drop it, Sam, please.

"Doesn't matter where he lives or who he's with. He'll always be family. He'll always come if you need him."

"I know."

"You're going to scrub a hole in that poor pan. What did it ever do to you? C'mon, rinse the damn thing already and I'll get you a beer."

And just like that Sam drops the topic entirely.

A/N - Aw, poor Dean....

I hope to be able to keep writing regularly after this. Though btw, on Wednesday I fly to Brazil for an actual vacation (wooo!) before I move cross-country. (A vacation... hard to believe.) I will keep the fic going while I'm there, but I'm not sure of my email access, so if a chapter isn't posted on the usual Friday just keep checking on days following.

And thanks so much for all your positive feedback on this fic - I never got a spare second to respond in the last couple weeks but I read every comment. This fic is such a small-scale, intimate emotional character study that when it started off I didn't know if it would make sense, or be interesting, to anybody else but me. It's such a quiet, subtle little situation, yet still so painful for Dean nonetheless; a true tragedy for him, even. I didn't know if that would come across - so I'm really happy to hear it seems to be working.

Hope it's still working with this chapter too. Let me know what you think.

Thanks for reading my story!
Erin soon takes form in Dean's imagination as a somewhat hypothetical, slender, vaguely attractive brunette, maybe in her thirties or so. Dean pictures her with a nice smile... though she's probably a little serious. She'd have to be serious, wouldn't she? To go out with a guy like Cas? Because Cas is kind of serious. And Cas a bit of an odd duck, really. In a good way of course, but definitely a little different. After all, he's a different species and he's a million years old, just for starters, so it seems like Erin might have to be a bit of an odd duck herself. Maybe she's kind of a nerd, or a little shy? Probably she's a little conservative, too. Erin must not have been looking for a bad-boy edgy type or anything, in fact, since she'd apparently first hooked up with Cas a few months ago, which was back when he'd been wearing either his Gas-n-Sip blue vest or his unexciting Lesser Trenchcoat outfit. Apparently Erin is someone who doesn't really care all that much what a guy wears. In fact, Erin's someone who is happy to go out with a guy who works at a Gas-n-Sip.

This is not necessarily a bad thing. So maybe she's a bit serious, a bit conventional, maybe she doesn't care if her partners have ambitious careers or not, but that also means that Erin might be someone who cares more about who a person is, and not what they're wearing or what job they have.

That's a good sign.

Erin's probably nice. She's got to be nice.

She'd better be nice. (Or else.)

The Erin thoughts won't stop, and Dean doesn't sleep well that week. On a few evenings he tries killing time by watching a little porn, but can't seem to really get into it the way he used to. Next he tries watching late-night movies on his laptop, but nothing really holds his interest. The night after that he ends up staying in the TV room after Sam's gone to bed, trying to lull himself into a stupor with an endless marathon of the original Star Trek. It's a great lineup of classic old episodes, but Dean's mind keeps wandering.

Specifically, his mind keeps wandering over to how it's going for Cas and Erin. How it's going emotionally. How it's going physically.

How it's going right now.

Then Dean finds himself thinking, *Maybe they're going at it right now. Right this very second.*

It's unsettling to feel his thoughts floating in this direction, for it feels like something Dean's really not supposed to be thinking about. Yet he can't seem to control it; thoughts about Cas and Erin's love life, or lack thereof, have started to surface constantly, unbidden. And always accompanied by an almost queasy feeling of worry. It's actually bugging him a little — okay, maybe more than a little — that he's not totally sure if Cas and Erin are sleeping together yet.

Dean eventually gives up on the Star Trek and heads to bed. (Sam crashed a while ago. It's been a slow week, with no cases on the radar.) But Dean still can't sleep, and he lies in bed gazing at the ceiling in the dark.
He could just ask Cas, of course — ask about if Cas and Erin are sleeping together — but given how skittish Cas seems to be about the whole thing, that doesn't seem like the best approach. Cas is probably not going to appreciate Dean calling him up and saying, "So, I was just checking up to see if you and Erin are planning on sleeping together tonight? Just curious, that's all! Just checking in to see if you need The Talk!"

*They must be sleeping together, Dean thinks. It's normal for him to have a girlfriend, and normal for him to make out with her and sleep with her. It's normal. It's good.* He's pushing these thoughts at himself very deliberately, forcing himself to look at the idea head-on, trying to get used to it.

Even if they're not sleeping together yet, they must *at least* be making out a lot, right? They pretty much have to be by now.

At this point a vivid image springs into Dean's mind, as he lies there in bed staring at the ceiling, of Castiel making out with Erin-the-vaguely-attractive-brunette. In Dean's mental image, Cas's hands are stroking through Erin's hair, and Cas is kissing her; first tentatively, then more and more passionately. Till Castiel's almost curling around her, both hands on the sides of her face, kissing hungrily, like he's trying to make up for a million years of celibacy all at once. Maybe Cas would start sliding a hand up her shirt... feel her up a little... losing himself completely in the "hedonism," as Cas had put it once....

Dean sits up and flicks on the bedside light just to make the image go away.

He checks the time. It's midnight. A shot of whiskey or two would be just the ticket right now, wouldn't it? Whiskey's really the best approach for dealing with a bout of midnight insomnia, isn't it? Dean swings his feet out of bed and pads down the hall to grab the whiskey bottle from the library, and a glass. It takes several shots of whiskey in the end, and a couple sleeping pills too, but at last Dean manages to get to sleep.

The next evening, as Sam and Dean settle down on the sofa to watch some old comedies, Dean suddenly becomes convinced that Cas and Erin are *also* sitting on a sofa somewhere, *right now*, watching some show of their own. Sam starts the movie and Dean gazes at the screen sightlessly as the Cas-and-Erin scene shapes up in his mind: Cas and Erin have probably just finished dinner. They're probably on Erin's couch, in Erin's apartment, which, it seems clear now, is somewhere in Denver. ("Shopping in Denver." Right.) Dean can't help adding details to his mental movie stage-set: Probably Erin's got a small apartment, not expensively furnished, probably just Ikea stuff or something, but it'll be comfortable; Ikea couches aren't bad, after all, and maybe there's some of the winter sunset light still slanting in through the windows. There's probably a line of houseplants on the windowsills (girls always have plants) and some art on the walls (girls always have art) and one of those red mixer things in the kitchen (girls always have that red mixer thing). And Cas and Erin are probably sitting on Erin's sofa watching Sense8 on Netflix, watching those orgy scenes together maybe, and... Cas maybe has an arm comfortably over her shoulders. ...

Or maybe he's running his hand through Erin's hair. Maybe they're not paying much attention to Sense8 anymore. Maybe Cas is leaning in to kiss her.

Dean sits there staring blankly at the TV, trying to make himself get used to this image. After all, he's gonna have to get used to it. Someday he's going to meet this Erin, and Cas is going to kiss her right in front of Dean, and Dean has to be okay with it. Dean even *wants* to be okay with it, for Cas's
sake.

Or maybe Erin would be the one initiating the kiss? Is she the bolder one? Cause Cas has probably been a little awkward and hesitant at first, right? Or... who knows, maybe he's bold, maybe he's diving right in, maybe he's taking to it like a fish to water. But he'll be a little clumsy. He has to be, he's still pretty new at all this, and even though they've been going out for a couple months now it's got to still be kind of new for him. Erin's probably nice about it, though. She'll be sweet, she'll guide his hands... she'll help him through it. So... probably it's working out... in fact, Cas and Erin must have gotten beyond kissing by now. They're probably moving on to... other things...

"You okay?" says Sam.

Dean jumps, realizing he's hanging on to one of the sofa pillows so hard that his knuckles have gone white. He's practically gouged holes into the pillow.

"Yeah," says Dean, forcing himself to loosen his fingers. He'd like to set the pillow aside, but then realizes, to his surprise, that he's actually got a bit of a hard-on. Not full-blown, nothing that Sam would notice. But still. What the hell. "It's just..." says Dean, clearing his throat, "... the scene kind of got to me."

Sam frowns at him. "You do realize we're watching Monty Python and the Holy Grail?"

Dean blinks at the screen. Indeed it seems to be Monty Python. "Yeah, but, you know," he says. "That whole thing with the coconuts and the swallows... it's kind of sad when you think about it. Isn't it?"

Sam just gives him a very confused look, and Dean says, "I'll go make the popcorn." As soon as Sam turns his attention back to the screen Dean scampers out of the room. The half-hard-on has pretty much vanished by now anyway, wilting away in the flood of confusion that's running through Dean now, but Dean takes some pains to keep his back to Sam nonetheless.

Dean finds a popcorn bag, sets the microwave timer for three minutes and then stands there staring at the rotating popcorn bag for the entire time. The timer counts down silently, the popcorn starts popping, the bag starts inflating, and all the while Dean thinks.

Sam was right, he thinks to himself. I'm jealous. And also turned on, apparently.

What's really going on here?

This obsession with picturing Cas and Erin has gotten out of control. And, though Dean knows he can ignore a lot of things about himself when he needs to, a genuine hard-on (even if not full-blown) is kind of difficult to ignore. Granted, it had happened when Dean was picturing Erin-the-brunette rolling around naked on the bed.

Okay... Erin-the-brunette and Castiel rolling around naked on the bed. And if Dean's totally honest with himself, it's not the first time this has happened, either. There've been a few other moments, in the past. A few other times when a strange thrill of interest had gone twining through him, when he'd glanced over at Cas, in any one of the thousand strange settings they'd found themselves in. Cas in Purgatory, scruffy and dirty; Cas handing him the blade, in Heaven's green room; Cas's tousled hair, back in the barn when it had all started; Cas staring him down in a hundred different places, his blue
eyes boring into Dean like lasers. Cas gazing at him just a few months ago, lunging at Dean with that sudden hug. Saying "I could go with you."

It had been faint at times, that twist of interest in his gut, like a small bell ringing in the distance, but...

But it had been there.

And, thing is, Dean's not dumb, and he's not completely oblivious. (Just mostly oblivious, he thinks.) Despite his considerable skill at suppressing various uncomfortable feelings — a talent he's honed over many years — he's never really been one to hide from sexual thoughts, and he's aware now of the obvious possibility: has he gotten stuck on Cas somehow?  

*Have I fallen for Cas?* he wonders.  

*Am I gay or something?*

There's something close to the truth, maybe, in the first question. But the second question, the one about maybe being gay, really doesn't seem to fit. Dean's been around the block on this before in his life, after all. Sure, there's been a bit of experimenting now and then. There's possibly been a few moments in Dean's past that arguably could be categorized, by someone who didn't know Dean very well, as having the faintest tiniest hint of possible gay leanings, like for example the Dr. Sexy sort-of-a-crush thing and, oh yeah, there'd been that orgy with the male twins and Crowley that one time. And maybe a few other experiments as well. So, maybe there was just the tiniest hint of possibly being not one-thousand-percent straight.

But nevertheless Dean actually feels sure he's not gay. It's a conviction that has a solidity to it, a clarity, a weight of truth in his mind, that makes him certain he's right. He's actually truly *not* gay -- and not just hiding from it, that is.

Because, thing is, the draw he feels toward girls is genuine, and really is strong. Much stronger than those faint flickers that occur now and then with certain guys. The thing with Lisa was definitely real; and the thing before that with Cassie (*Cassie...* now, how is it that the first girl Dean ever got really serious about had a name so freakishly similar to Cas's?) That was real too. Those relationships were real, and the flings he has with bar chicks now and then are real too, and... well, just the way his eyes are always drawn to the female form. Male-twin-orgy aside, Dr. Sexy crush aside, the pattern is actually pretty clear: Dean's sexual desires have *really truly* been ninety-nine percent focused on women. Dean's simply not into guys.

Well, not into *most* guys.

There's still that one percent, isn't there?

And Cas has always been in a different category, hasn't he? Cas has always been in an entirely unique category. In all kinds of ways.

And one part at least is coming very clear:

*I wanted him to just be MY angel,* Dean thinks. *I didn't want to share him.*

*It's all a moot point anyway. Since apparently he's straight.*

The microwave bell rings. Dean sighs, and gets the popcorn bowl.
Later, after Sam has gone to bed, Dean gets into a little battle with himself about whether or not he should contact Cas simply to try to figure out if Cas is with Erin right now. A text, maybe? Or a phone call? Something like, "Hey, you with Erin right now?"

This is clearly a bad idea, and Dean decides against it. But it takes several shots of whiskey to fortify the decision.

Dean's very relieved a half hour later when a wave of sleepiness at last hits, for he knows then that he's finally going to be able to get to sleep without making some totally dumb-ass move like calling Cas about Erin and completely spooking him in the process. Pleased with this outcome, Dean is fumbling his way under the covers when he discovers he's grabbed his phone, just in order to give Cas a quick call to explain about how Dean's not going to call him. In the whiskey-fueled haze of sleepiness this plan actually seems to make sense, so he fumbles his way to the Favorites list and stabs Cas's number.

Despite the late hour (it's past midnight), Cas actually answers, with a sleepy-sounding, "Dean! Hello... Hello. How are you? How are you, Dean?"

Cas sounds like he's really only half awake, but Dean starts right in and announces: "'I'm just calling you to let you know that I'm not gonna call you.' (He has to concentrate on enunciating each word, and feels rather pleased with how well the words came out. Hardly any slurring at all.)

"Uh-huh," says Cas.

"I'm not drunk, either." Dean pauses, and adds, in a spirit of honesty and openness, "Not very drunk."

"So you're drunk," says Cas.

"Yes," says Dean. "I'm drunk-dialing you."

"Okay," says Cas, apparently unfazed.

"I mean, about Erin," Dean says, who's now struggling to understand the logic of what he's saying. The whole idea of this phone call had all made total sense in his mind just moments ago, but already it's starting to seem more confusing than he was prepared for, so Dean starts over with, "See... I was gonna call and ask more details, about Erin, and see if you need The Talk, but I, I, I won't. Cause I respect your privacy. See?"

"The Talk?" says Cas. "What talk? Which talk? I don't need... The Talk?" He sounds fascinated by the concept. There's something a little odd about his speech; he's talking more slowly than usual, almost drawling as he drags out the phrases. "What if... Dean, what if I DO need The Talk? What if it explains everything?"

"You want The Talk?"

"I do. I want... The Talk," says Cas, as if Dean's about to tell him all the secrets of the universe. "I always want The Talk."

"Okay," says Dean, now vaguely aware that Castiel is not really sounding normal, but Cas wants The Talk so Dean takes a breath and dives in. Dean starts off with, "So the condom is like your angel-blade, you always carry one, but it should have, you know, room at the tip, and, you unroll it, just like... just like on a banana, if your dick were a banana, when your dick's hard I mean, you gotta
Dean: get it hard first, cause, you don't want babies, right? Or... "What was the other reason for condoms again? "Chlamydia," says Dean.

He can't think of anything else to add.

"That about covers it," says Dean.

"Cool," says Cas.

"Awesome," says Dean, nodding in agreement. (Wait, did Castiel just say "cool?") "So you hanging out with Erin? You guys making out or anything? Like, right now?"

"Erin's working," says Cas.

"What, now?"

"Erin works late sometimes," says Cas.

Dean's very pleased to realize that he's got Cas all to himself. Though then he can't think what to say, and finally asks "So... if you're not making out with Erin, what are you doing then?"

Cas says, "I'm just holding time together."

"You... what?"

"Holding the seconds together. They keep coming apart. I have to keep them lined up in a row. Dean... is The Talk still happening? Is this still The Talk? Or is this a memory of The Talk?" Castiel sounds like he's had a sudden revelation as he adds, "Or wait. This is all a memory of a dream of The Talk, isn't it? It's not really happening, is it? Or.. is it? Did this already happen?"

"Uh," says Dean. "I'm not sure." A thought is dawning. "Cas, are you drunk?"

"No, you're drunk," says Cas.

"Right..." says Dean, thoroughly confused now. "I just wanted to be sure you understood about condoms."

"You told me," Cas informs him. "You told me my penis was a banana. In my dream. Just now. When I was dreaming."

"You were... dreaming?" Dean repeats, slowly. There's something familiar about how Cas is talking.

"I dream and I look at the stars," Cas says. "They're all lined up in a row, and I'm in the row too. We drink and look at the stars together. For hours, Dean. I wish you were here too."

It comes to Dean then, where he's heard Cas sound like this before. This same mix of oddly lazy-sounding speech with the occasional revelations and inspired tangents. Once before Cas had sounded like that. Once, in the future.

"Cas, are you... stoned?" asks Dean.

A slow, throaty chuckle then. "Yes," says Cas. "Erin showed me that too. Erin's showed me so many things, Dean... Erin's... so helpful. So kind...."

Dean's suddenly hating Erin again.
"Erin got a last name?" he asks, already planning a little secretive googling.

"Klein," says Cas, willingly enough, though he adds, "But don't bother checking up, Erin's no demon. I already investigated. You know, it's similar to time travel," he adds. "Being stoned, I mean. The minutes get all out of order. Remember when I got lost in time finding my way back to you? I never told you, I went back farther, accidentally. You're so cute when you're six! Of course, you're cute later too. But Dean, what really matters is, are you happy? It's much more important than anything else. I... understand that now. I understand so many things now, Dean."

"You're definitely stoned," Dean says.

"You're definitely drunk," Cas points out.

"Yeah, but that's legal!"

"This is legal too."

"Oh, shit, you're in Denver," Dean says, one last piece finally clicking into place. Denver, in Colorado... Colorado, the first US state to fully legalize marijuana.

"Mile-High City," says Cas with another slow rumbly chuckle, and as Dean's thinking It should be illegal to have that sultry a chuckle, Cas adds, "Dean, I should go, I'm supposed to call Erin. I'll see you in December. But... call me anytime, Dean. Anytime you want to talk about my penis again, you can call right back."

Dean's feeling far too mortified the next day to call Cas back. He's not even sure he's remembering the whole conversation, and he's hoping like hell that Cas won't remember a single second of it. All he mentions to Sam is that he and Cas "talked a bit," and Cas is "good"... and that Erin's last name is Klein. Dean's feeling too off balance now about the whole Erin thing to do the previously-planned googling, but Sam says he'll check her out.

Meanwhile Dean's image of Erin, and her apartment, starts shifting a little. Now her apartment is furnished (in Dean's mind) mostly with thrift-store chic, and it's cluttered with bongs, and her previously tight-laced conservatism has shifted to a stoner's slacker acceptance. Dean's feeling a lot more skeptical about Erin now, in fact. He really doesn't like the idea of Cas being stoned, of Cas falling in with some group of Denver hippies and sliding away, down into a free-fall into nihilistic hedonism, just as future-Cas had once done. (However, Dean's also aware that his own borderline-alcoholism is probably something very similar, so who's he to complain?) Though at least Erin still seems to be after Cas about "eating healthy". She's probably one of those Whole Foods hippies, Dean concludes. She probably does have the red mixer thing, but uses it to make pot brownies. I better warn Cas about edibles.

Cas-and-Erin mental movies keep springing to mind every day, now set in a picturesque Whole-Foods-hippie apartment complete with batik wall hangings and dozens of beaded throw pillows. Dean even starts mapping out their probable weekly routine. He wakes on a Monday morning and Cas still isn't back and he thinks, Cas must be waking next to Erin around now. Cas probably wakes up next to her every morning. They probably usually have breakfast together and then she goes to work (as... somebody who works late "sometimes". A waitress? a bartender? Maybe a grad student?) Meanwhile, Cas puts his blue vest on and drives back across the Kansas border to the Gas-n-Sip.
On Sunday Dean and Sam go grab pancakes in a diner together, and Dean thinks, *Cas and Erin are probably getting brunch now*. Brunch is the classic couple's thing, right? She's probably making Sunday brunch for him. Maybe healthy whole-wheat pancakes or something? Covered with that Greek yogurt stuff and Whole Foods organic honey? (Cas had always liked Dean's pancakes, before he went all healthy.) Dean wonders if Erin can make a good burger, too. Cas used to love Dean's burgers.

Used to.

By Sunday afternoon Dean is itching with restlessness. He can't shake the images of Cas happily eating Erin's whole-wheat hippie pancakes, probably in between by bouts of Sunday-morning sex, so Dean starts pacing around the bunker looking for things to do to get his mind onto something else. Soon the Impala's been washed and detailed, all the guns have been cleaned and oiled, and the bunker's spotless. Dean's run out of things to do, and he keeps walking around looking for more chores.

"Feels strange, doesn't it," says Sam, as Dean comes stalking back through the library on about his sixth circuit around the bunker.

"What?" says Dean.

"World's not ending," says Sam, leaning back from his laptop. "No cases. Cas is fine. Everything's fine. Nothing to do but sit here and twiddle our thumbs."

Dean lets out a heavy sigh. "It's driving me crazy."

"You could always go to Denver," says Sam.

Dean glares at him.

"I'm serious," says Sam. "You wanted to check out the girlfriend. You're climbing the walls about it, you know. So go check out the girlfriend. I still think you're being paranoid, but, thing is... I was thinking the other night about what you said, and, you may be right that Cas doesn't tend to have good luck. Might be worth at least a subtle holy-water check."

Dean snorts. "Just, bump into her and accidentally spill a vial of holy water on her? And drop some salt in her hair and stab her a little bit with a silver blade?"

Sam laughs and says, "Just tell her you're clumsy." But then he goes serious and adds, "Seriously though, go and check." He sounds a little worried, and Dean looks at him. Sam hesitates and finally adds, "Well, look, here's the thing. I can't find her online at all."

"What do you mean?" says Dean, frowning.

"I googled her. Erin Klein, in Denver. I've been working on it a couple days, actually." Sam turns his laptop toward Dean, and Dean leans closer to take a look. "See?" says Sam. "There's only two Erin Kleins in Denver that I can find any track of, and one's four years old and the other's seventy-eight. Somehow I'm doubting Cas is going out with either of them."

"Not everybody's online," says Dean.
Sam says, "Most people at least have something online. I tried different spellings of Klein, too, and I tried all the Denver suburbs — that's what's been taking me a few days. I was thinking we should just ask him about her, but...." Sam hesitates, worry clear on his face. Then he says, a little uncertain, "Maybe you could take a pass through his room? Just see if you can find an address for this Erin, or a place of employment or something? Just a little more info. Probably she's legit, but I'd feel better if I knew for sure."

Dean gives him a businesslike nod, trying to hide the stir of emotions that are suddenly roiling inside him: worry and concern for Cas; sharp suspicion for Erin; and an almost shameful sense of hope. It's a little disconcerting how much he's cheered up by the thought that Cas's girlfriend might, in fact, be up to no good.

Dean decides he might as well bring the whiskey bottle with him to Cas's room. And the glass.

A minute later Dean's walking down the hall past Sam's room, and gently nudging Cas's bedroom door open. He flicks the light on and stands in the doorway looking around. It's a simple room, not much decoration. Bed, dresser, desk, chair. The closet door's ajar, the Lesser Trenchcoat just visible in the back, where it's been hanging quietly for a while now.

Dean feels a little guilty being in here. This was supposed to be Cas's private sanctum, a room that Dean had promised would always be Cas's, and now Dean's snooping. It doesn't feel right.

But Erin Klein is not online. Sam can't find her online. Something's wrong.

Dean takes a step inside and starts looking around more closely. His eyes linger on the bed for a moment; Cas has left it neatly made up. Dean remembers, then, how Cas had looked back when he'd been curled up in the motel bed in Flagstaff, the bedclothes all in disarray around him, clutching a pillow to himself, fast asleep. Now that he's got Erin, does he wrap his arms around her instead?

Does Cas have his arms wrapped around her right now?

Dean sighs and turns away, mostly just to stop looking at the bed. There's a little calendar pinned to the wall above Cas's desk, and when Dean takes a quick glance at it, he finds that Cas has drawn lines through the weeks when he'll be away. The lines are even marked carefully with the word "DENVER." It's November now, and there are lines through the entire rest of the month. Oh, right; Cas had even said "I'll see you in December." He'll be gone the rest of November.

There's a line straight through this week, of course.

Which, Dean now realizes, as he peers more closely at the calendar, is actually Thanksgiving week. Today's Sunday; Thanksgiving turns out to be this Thursday.

Somehow Dean had totally forgotten that Thanksgiving is coming up. He and Sam have never been big on the family holidays, of course, but only now does Dean put together that Cas must be planning to spend Thanksgiving with Erin. Probably meeting her family or something.

Cas is going to spend Thanksgiving with another family.

Dean manages to force himself to think, Good for Cas. Good for Cas. I'm happy for him. Really I am. But the stomachache is back.
A glass of whiskey later, the stomachache has only gotten worse. Soon all Dean can seem to do is slouch on Cas's chair, bottle in one hand and glass in the other, as he gazes at Cas's empty bed.

*He's probably with her right now,* Dean thinks, as he refills his glass. Another of those vivid mental images suddenly flares to life uncontrollably in his mind, this one embarrassingly explicit: Cas naked, sprawled on top of Erin-the-vaguely-attractive-brunette, her legs wrapped around him, Cas moving slowly against her, inside her — slowly at first, then faster —

Dean lurches to his feet and turns to the dresser, draining the rest of the glass in one long swallow.

There's surprisingly few clothes in the dresser; presumably Cas has taken his favorites to Erin's. All Dean finds are a few t-shirts (several of which, it turns out, are actually Dean's — he's been missing them and had wondered where they'd gotten to), a stack of clean underwear, and a pile of warm wool socks (these look suspiciously new, and Dean's certain they're from Erin).

Dean chuckles when he finds some Rogaine tucked in the back behind the underwear, and then snorts with laughter to find some Preparation H next to that (*hemorrhoid* cream? *Seriously*?) along with some Gas-X pills for excess gas, and antacids for heartburn, and... Dean's not trying to snoop this deeply, really he's not, but (...*but Erin's not online...what if Cas is in trouble...*) — but he'd just pulled out a dresser drawer and there it all is in a heap. Even some stomach-ulcer medication, and headache pills, and an enormous amount of hand lotion, and eyedrops and sleeping pills, piles of Kleenex and a huge assortment of vitamins and — well, practically a whole pharmacy. As Dean glances over it all he realizes that Cas must have bought just about every single item that can be purchased over the counter at the local Walgreen's — looks like one of everything, just about, all jumbled together. This is all hilarious, of course. Apparently Castiel has had (or has simply worried about having) all sorts of embarrassingly human afflictions that he hasn't told Dean or Sam about. (The hand lotion and Kleenex have some pretty interesting connotations as well.) It's sweet, actually, to think of Castiel fumbling his way through all these strange details of having a human vessel — a vessel that must be some forty-plus years old by now, Dean realizes, with a start.

Is Cas *aging*? Dean thinks, with surprise. He thinks about that for a second, jolted by the thought that Castiel might age and die someday. And that Cas might be worrying about it. Or trying to prepare for it, apparently.

Then he thinks, *Well, I'm aging too. We'll go down together.*

It's actually a rather comforting thought.

Dean is still chuckling over Cas's miniature pharmacy as he moves on to the bottom drawer of the dresser. Where he's totally startled to find a box of artist's charcoals and about a million colored pencils in every shade of the rainbow, jammed in next to a huge jumbled stack of sketches.

Cas has been doing drawings.

There must be over a hundred of them. Dean's never seen him do any of this. The sketches are all jumbled in the drawer willy-nilly, a huge messy pile of them, not in a neat stack at all but more like Cas just flings them in there carelessly whenever he finishes one. Dean pulls the chair over to the dresser drawer and starts flipping through one side of the pile, puzzled and fascinated. In fact, he's so confused by the sketches at first that it takes him several moments to realize they're really Cas's, and
by then he's so engrossed in looking through them that he entirely forgets that this might not be for public viewing.

He picks up a handful. A lot of them are nature sketches — the landscape around the bunker, detailed studies of trees, sketches of the wildflowers that grow in the fields around here. There's one of a deer, its head up, looking at Cas in the fog. He's got its ears and its large eyes perfectly. There's one of a blue jay hopping around on the ground. There's a close-up of a bumblebee on a daisy.

They're good.

They're wonderful.

Dean's smiling without even realizing it, muttering, "Damn, Cas, you're good at this." And he wonders, does Erin even know he likes bees?

Dean comes to a sketch of himself and Sam.

They're seated at the library table. Sam's bending over a book, his hair falling over his eyes. Dean's tipped back in his chair looking up at the ceiling, with his legs stretched out and his feet up on the table, one foot crossed over the other.

It's done in fuzzy strokes, the light of the library lamps bathing the whole scene in shades of gold.

It's beautifully done.

There's another of Dean in the Impala, drawn from the vantage point of the passenger seat. With a start, Dean recognizes the shirt he's wearing; it's the day of the Amara showdown. It's the time he'd taken Cas out on that last drive, to give him the you're-our-brother speech.

Dean's certain Cas never took a photo during that drive, so Cas must have done this sketch from memory, and it's astonishing how well he's captured it. The Impala windows and roof are almost impressionistic, just contours and shading, and the trees outside are just a blur, but Dean's face is very carefully drawn, each line precise. In the drawing Dean looks worn and tired, with a grim expression that's highlighted by a beam of light that's slanting diagonally down through the windshield and falling across Dean's face. Half Dean's face is in shadow, half in light. It's eerie, and beautiful, and very sad.

Dean's a little unsettled now, and he tries to put the whole handful of sketches back in the drawer, exactly in their original positions. But the next one in the drawer catches his eye; it's of Dean sitting by a lake. Probably from that dream Cas had visited, years ago.

The one under that is of Dean in Purgatory, filthy and muddy and in mid-stride toward Cas, with a big relieved smile on his face. Dean's pretty sure he knows what moment that was.

There's several of Sam, just as carefully drawn. Sam sitting on the Impala hood. Sam sprinting around the corner of some warehouse, gun in hand. Sam sitting by a fire gazing into the flames.

But more of the drawings are of Dean.

There's an aerial view of the Impala. Somehow Dean's sure that it must be something Cas saw in flight. Back when Cas could fly, that is.

Then Dean comes to a study of a wing as seen from kind of a weird angle, as if looking over a bird's shoulder in mid-flight. The perspective must have been difficult to draw but it's perfect, the feathers slanting away from the viewer. Dean studies it for a long moment and finally realizes that it must be
Cas's wing. It's an angle that Castiel must have seen a million times — whenever he'd glanced over his shoulder at his own wing. Spookily, though, the wing's on fire. The outer half is aflame, and even a lot of the inner feathers are smoking at the tips. One of the feathers seems to be falling out; it's floating loose, falling away from the wing. Far in the distance is another feather that's been totally lost, tumbling away in the wind, and it's completely aflame.

Dean swallows. He goes to the next sketch beneath that, which turns out to be a close-up detailed sketch of a small black feather. And right there on top of it, sitting right on the sketch of the feather, is the actual feather itself, a little black thing just four inches long. He picks it up, puzzled, and looks at it for a moment, and then he realizes what he's holding. This is Cas's feather. Dean's absolutely certain. This is Cas's feather, one lone feather that Cas must have managed to save somehow from his ruined wings.

Dean's really rattled now. It suddenly comes to him that he's stumbled across something intensely private, and that what he's been doing here is unforgivable. Rummaging through Cas's private possessions like this, in the room that Dean himself had sworn to Cas was Cas's room and Cas's alone — it's unforgivable.

And also he's certain that if he keeps going through the sketches, he'll start finding ones of Erin, and Dean knows already that he's not going to be able to handle that.

He sets the feather down exactly where it had been; then he gently lets all the other sketches slide back down on top of it, and he shuts the drawer.

Then he sits on the edge of Cas's bed for a few minutes, unsure what to do.

I should just call him and ask about Erin, he thinks. I should just talk to him. Tell him Sam couldn't find her online. Tell him to be careful.

Tell him I really do hope he's happy.

Dean takes his phone out. There are only two numbers in Dean's favorites list, Sam's and Cas's. (Crowley, annoyingly, still turns up in the "Recent" list, but Dean refuses to put him in "Favorites").

He taps Cas's number.

It goes straight to voicemail. Cas's phone is off. Dean hangs up without leaving a message.

He's with Erin, Dean thinks, and he sighs, glancing up at the calendar on the wall.

And then Dean has a thought.

He stands, slowly, and goes over to the wall and pulls the calendar off its little nail. Sitting at the desk, Dean starts flipping to different months.

He flips forward first, to December. Where Dean discovers that Cas has another long trip to Denver planned next month. Three entire weeks.

Including Christmas. The three weeks runs right to December 28th.

"Getting serious," Dean mutters. It looks like Cas is practically moving in with Erin.

On December 31, there's a big question mark in a circle, and Dean knows this must be about whether or not Cas'll be spending New Year's with Erin. Which is kind of an important decision, isn't it? After all, the traditional kiss at midnight to ring in the New Year is really kind of about who
you actually want to spend the next year with. Sometimes it's just a random kiss, of course, but sometimes it matters.

Then Dean flips back in time. To the earlier months. To back when Cas must've first met Erin. He probably met her sometime in the summer, he thinks, just after the Amara thing, so he flips back all the way to May and starts paging forward.

There's some cryptic notes on the May and June pages that Dean can't make head or tail of — little abbreviations. Some of them seem related to Cas's travels after Flagstaff, and then the schedule at his Gas-n-Sip job — there are notations about how many hours per week he's working, and some Arizona phone numbers.

And then there it is. July 10th. The name "Klein" catches Dean's eye and he mutters "Yahtzee" to himself, before the first name even registers:

Aaron Klein, 4601 Madison, Denver, it says, in tiny, careful handwriting.

Aaron. Not "Erin" at all.

Aaron.

A/N -

Many of you saw that coming! It was so fun to read your comments last week - quite a few of you were all over the "Aaron" idea instantly!

And NOW what will Dean do? Make a move at last? Or maybe just some more drunk-dialing? (because there's nothing quite like drunk-Dean and stoned-Cas attempting to communicate with each other, ha ha) Tune in next week...

I'm in Rio right now at the Olympics (woo!) with an erratic schedule, but wi-fi seems to be pretty good at the house where I'm staying, so check in next Friday for the next chapter! I hope you're enjoying this story, and if you liked this chapter please let me know. :)
**Anything but this**

A/N - I'm in Rio now, running like crazy between the cheapest possible Olympic events. (Turns out you can see the preliminary heats and the obscure sports for not too much money!) It's fun and strange and confusing. I got to see the infamous green diving pool up close, saw Michael Phelps swim, met 2/3 of the Japanese women's archery team, saw the amazing horses galloping over the cross-country course and more. It's fun but exhausting; I've spent miles and miles walking, over ten miles a day sometimes, between wandering around trying to find the whitewater kayaking or ending up on the wrong side of the rowing lake. I did get a bit of time to write on the plane but it's so crazy here I don't know if I'll be able to get another chapter together for next week, but please keep checking in!

**PSA:** The fic's about to take a turn. You'll see what I mean.

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Dean doesn't tell Sam.

He sit there at Cas's desk staring at the calendar, and he knows he ought to march right back into the library and tell Sam that he should have checked one more spelling. "You should've checked A-A-R-O-N," is how Dean should announce it, with just the proper tone of amused nonchalance, just the right hint of a smile. He can already see how it'll go: Sam'll be confused for the first couple seconds, and Dean'll have to repeat what he said. Then Sam's eyes'll widen as the implication sinks in. He'll go something like, "Wait, really? Are you serious?" Then there'll be some "Are you serious" back-and-forth-ing — "yes I'm serious", "really?" — then some disbelief, some smiles, maybe some jokes about angels "winging it" or "flying both ways," and then... probably Sam'll be cool with it. Almost definitely he'll be cool with it.

Ninety-nine percent chance he'll be cool with it.

**But there's always that one percent,** thinks Dean.

Will Sam truly be cool with it? With Cas being into guys? There's a distinct difference between being cool with it in principle, or cool with it when it's an acquaintance, or cool with it when it's total strangers like Jesse and Cesar, and being truly cool with it when it's somebody who's....

Well, somebody who's family.

Dean's suddenly got a nagging twinge of worry.

After about two more seconds of considering what it'll be like to stand there and watch Sam's reaction, the twinge of worry has flowered into a near-dread. **What if Sam isn't cool with it?** Or what if Sam suddenly puts together what's been going on in Dean's head recently? What if Sam looks at Dean and realizes that....

Okay, maybe telling Sam about Cas can wait till later. But what Dean **really** should do now, at the very least, is just give Cas a call and straighten everything out. Tell him it's all okay. Make clear to him that he doesn't have to hide having a boyfriend (wait, wait, is **that** why Cas left, is **that** why he's
been hiding things?) Dean should really call him up and reassure him, just to let him know that Dean and Sam are totally okay with it (*but what if Sam isn't?*) and that they just want him to be happy.

Dean gets as far as pulling out his phone, and setting it on Cas's desk next to Cas's calendar, and pulling up the "Favorites" list. But it's suddenly far too terrifying to hit Cas's number.

Because, what exactly is Dean going to say?

Okay, maybe calling Cas can wait till later too.

A moment later Dean's fighting down a pretty strong impulse to stride over to the garage and just jump in the Impala and drive right out to wherever Cas is, drive directly to that address (Dean's eyes flick back to the calendar, to that momentous-looking address: 4601 Madison). And...

And what?

Knock on the door? Watch Aaron open it? Cas probably behind him on the sofa going "Who is it, Aaron?", and....

And what?

Dean doesn't do any of that. Instead he puts the calendar carefully back on its little nail, straightens out Cas's bedspread, puts the chair right back where it had been earlier, and slinks out of Cas's room, closing the door softly behind him. He retreats to his own room instead. Where he downs several more glasses of whiskey.

*I'm gonna regret this*, he thinks about twenty minutes later, already eyeing the bottle of hangover-headache pills that he keeps on his bedside table. He ends up swallowing down four of the pills with the last mouthful of whiskey, on the theory that if he takes the cure for tomorrow's hangover at the same time that he takes the cause, they'll somehow cancel each other out and the entire evening won't have happened at all.

The room's reeling a little as he flips off the light, kicks off his shoes, pulls off his jeans and starts struggling to get his socks off. He's drunk enough that the socks are not cooperating, and he realizes he also hasn't even bothered brushing his teeth. It's only about nine at night, in fact, but five (or was it six?) glasses of whiskey are doing wonders for making the bed seem appealing.

*Aaron*, he keeps thinking, as he manages, with effort, to yank one sock off. *Not Erin. Aaron.*

Could Aaron possibly be just some friend? Some work buddy, or a housemate? An acquaintance?

But Cas had been planning to call Aaron *past midnight*, the other night during that hopelessly confusing phone conversation. Dean can't think of very many other reasons that Cas would be calling somebody so late. Let alone with such a sense of routine... and with somebody Cas has been regularly getting stoned with... and eating with... and visiting... and who's been giving him gifts....

Dean finally gets the other sock off, balls up the two socks and throws them somewhere at random in the dark, and flops onto his back on top of the covers.

*Aaron.*

Of course, Dean's been pondering hypothetical what-ifs for days now. What-ifs like: *What if Cas weren't straight?* (Leaving aside the whole issue of what "straight" even means to an angel who can use vessels of either sex.)
What if Cas weren't straight?
What if he were into guys?

What if I really wanted something with him? (And Dean's not even sure about that part, actually. A certain door has definitely swung open, a door in his mind that seems like it might lead somewhere, but it's impossible to see where it's heading. It's like he's blundering into a pitch-black tunnel with no idea where it might go.)

What if I'd done something, what if I'd ever made a move?
What if I had a chance?

These questions, and many more, have until now been safely tucked away in the Impossibilities file. The Things-That-Can-Never-Happen file. Cas has always been far too critical — too important an ally, too necessary a friend — to take any such risks. Or to even think about taking any such risks. Only in the last few weeks, when it became clear that it was all impossible anyway (now that Cas has drifted away, now that Cas is with Erin), could Dean even look at it head-on.

But now the impossible questions are suddenly possible again.

What if I have a chance?

It's no longer hypothetical.

Which means it's terrifying, of course. Heart-crushingly terrifying. And there's one additional problem:

What if I HAD a chance, but I missed it? thinks Dean.

Because the situation here, really, is this: Cas has already left. He's found somebody else.

Cas had sat on that motel bed in Flagstaff for god knows how long, with that grim look on his face as he'd watched Dean sleep, thinking about "what he really wanted to do." Cas had thought about it, and then Cas had left.

What if I never had that ace up my sleeve after all? What if I never even had the chance?

Dean presses the heels of both hands to his closed eyes.

"World's worst chick-flick," Dean mutters to himself, hands still over his eyes. Because, he knows the script, he's seen the movie: This is dramatic-romantic-gesture time. Or it should've been. It should've been John-Cusack-with-the-boombox time. Dean should've been driving through the night straight to Cas's place (or Aaron's place, which is probably the same thing at this point), to burst in the door with a Hollywood speech. Maybe waving that little feather around too, just for effect, or clutching it to his heart dramatically. He should be leaving right now and be camped outside that address by dawn, playing "In Your Eyes" at top volume through the Impala's speakers.

It should have been John-Cusack-with-the-boombox time, but instead apparently it's get-drunk-and-pass-out-alone time.

Chick flick, Winchester style, Dean thinks, as he passes out.
He wakes long past dawn, to a splitting headache that's accompanied by a distinct hint of nausea. *Not too bad actually*, he thinks, as he maneuvers carefully out of bed and to the bathroom, trying to glide along the floor as smoothly as possible so that his head doesn't throb with each footfall. *Only a four on the one-to-ten hangover scale*. Last night's pills seem to have helped a little. Unfortunately that just means that Dean has to wake up and deal with the day.

A hot shower helps some, but nonetheless Sam laughs at him when Dean comes inching into the kitchen fifteen minutes later, fully dressed now but still using the soft-footed glide, looking for some coffee and orange juice to wash down another batch of the pills.

"Let me guess, five whiskeys?" says Sam, grinning at Dean from over the top of his laptop screen. "Or was it six? You don't look like you got to seven."

"I'm too old for this," Dean grumbles. "And definitely too old for your crap." Sam only chuckles, which is very annoying, though he does get up and hand Dean a welcome mug of steaming-hot coffee. Sam then even grabs a frying pan and, unasked, starts making Dean's tried-and-true hangover breakfast, a double-fried-egg sandwich on toast.

Dean sinks gingerly into a chair holding the coffee mug, and watches Sam puttering around the stove. Dean's trying not to move his head too much, and is also trying very hard not to think about anything.

The fried egg sandwich actually comes out looking pretty good. Though Sam insists on placing a vitamin pill and a glass of some suspicious-looking cloudy water by Dean's plate.

"What's *that*?" Dean asks, eyeing the glass doubtfully.

"Coconut water," says Sam. "I picked some up the other day. Cas said that Erin said it's rich in potassium, and I looked it up and she's right, it's good for—"

"Can you just not talk for a minute," says Dean, closing his eyes.

When he opens his eyes again Sam's still looking at him. Dean adds, "Sorry. Headache's worse than I realized." He gulps down the coconut water just to keep Sam quiet.

Dean's expecting it to be awful, but it's actually rather good.

There's blessed silence for a few minutes. Sam sits back down at his laptop and leaves Dean alone. Looks like Sam's doing the morning news check, looking for possible cases. Dean watches him quietly for a while, and sips the coffee and takes slow bites of the fried-egg sandwich. Gradually the coffee starts working and the new batch of pills starts kicking in. Maybe the coconut water's helping, who knows, but for whatever reason Dean's head starts clearing. The coffee's nice and hot, too. Dean wraps both hands around the warm mug and takes a few more swallows, and as the warmth spreads through his belly he starts feeling a little better.

*Aaron is the one who spotted that Cas was cold*, Dean thinks, partway through another sip of hot coffee.

*Aaron gave him the hat.*

*Aaron is the one who noticed he was cold, and Aaron is the one who warmed him up.*

*I didn't even notice he was cold.*
Dean sets his coffee mug down. It makes a little *thunk* on the table, and Sam glances at him briefly, but Dean barely notices, for he's just realized something.

What he's realized is that Dean is not the person who should be playing "In Your Eyes" through the boombox at dawn. In fact Dean shouldn't be in the scene at all.

For one thing, Dean and Cas don't even have a friggin' relationship *at all*, for chrissake. What was he even thinking, last night? They've never even so much as held hands! A few moments of extended eye contact now and then, spread out over eight years, is a pretty thin foundation to base a rom-com boombox scene on.

People like Cesar and Jesse get the happy ending. Not Dean. People like Cesar and Jesse, and, hopefully, people like Cas *and Aaron*. Not Dean. Cas and Aaron are the two people who are supposed to be in the big-romantic-gesture scene. Not Dean. Dean's never going to be the main player in those scenes; he never has been, after all, and he knows by now that he never will be. Dean's known for years that he's the peripheral character. He's the drifter, the cautionary tale, the bad choice, gliding in for a scene or two and then simply fading away. At best his role is as the supportive friend; at worst, he's the obstacle that has to be overcome.

Either way, his role here is to get out of the way and not mess everything up for Cas.

*If Cas has found something good I'm not going to ruin it,* thinks Dean, folding his hands around the coffee mug once again, and looking down into it thoughtfully.

And all at once he knows what he's going to do today. It's not a big romantic gesture; it's small. It's not noble or exciting. It's not going to be a turning point. He's just going take that open door, that door that has been slowly swinging open these last few weeks, and close it again. It's the right thing to do.

*He deserves better than me anyway,* thinks Dean.

"I'm going out," Dean says, pushing back his chair and standing up. "Be back tonight probably. Need anything?"

Sam's instantly on alert. (For the last few minutes he's been glancing at Dean off and on out of the corner of his eye.) "Where're you going?" he asks.

"Denver," says Dean, carefully not looking at Sam as he takes his jacket off the back of the chair and pulls it on.

He can hear Sam's grin, though, in Sam's next question, which is: "Gonna do the holy water check on the girlfriend?"

"Not exactly," says Dean, keeping his expression neutral, and still not looking at Sam at all as he checks his pockets for his keys and wallet. "I think Cas has that covered, actually. He says Aaron's clean, and I believe him." (It's easier than he expected to avoid any telltale pronouns about Aaron.)

"So... why are you going?"

Dean shrugs, and is in the middle of turning toward the door, about to leave without responding, when it occurs to him that Sam's actually been pretty nice about the fried-egg sandwich and all, and is only trying to help. And also, Sam's probably worried about Cas.

Dean sighs and turns slowly back toward Sam. He manages to meet Sam's eyes briefly as he says, "Don't laugh, but I'm actually just gonna bring some kind of, I don't know, I was thinking maybe
"he hesitates, glancing around at the kitchen, and finally adds "... a housewarming present for Cas, I guess? Since he's got his own place now." It's an idea that came to him just moments ago: swing by Denver, just make sure Cas is okay and that Aaron is truly legit, and maybe give Cas some kind of little gesture of support, something to help Cas set up their place together. "Something from Target maybe, I don't know," Dean says. He looks back at Sam with a preemptive scowl, adding, "I *said* don't laugh," even though Sam's just blinking at him with a perfectly neutral expression.

"Not laughing," says Sam. "It's a nice idea." But he's looking a little thoughtful now, and he swings his laptop partly closed, leaning back in his chair and tapping his fingers on the kitchen table for a moment before glancing back up at Dean. "Is this really a present for Cas, or for the both of them?" Sam asks, with unnerving perceptiveness. "You think Cas is gonna move in with her or something? White picket fence time? Is this like a, good-luck, we're-happy-for-you, we're-here-if-you-need-us kind of thing?"

Dean gives a noncommittal shrug. "Whichever. Dunno. Just thought I'd do something neighborly. And I said don't laugh."

"And I said, not laughing," says Sam, who's now got a slightly puzzled frown. "But what? Like, potholders or something?"

"Potholders or something," Dean agrees. "Yeah. That. See ya." He spins on his heel and leaves before Sam can say anything else.

The housewarming-gift idea feels a little weird and Dean is worrying about it, and second-guessing it, the entire time he's crossing Kansas. Sam's soon texting him with comments and ideas. Things like: *You better not be planning on this gift thing being a jumbo bag of Doritos from a Gas-n-Sip and a six-pack of beer. How about two jumbo bags, and a case of beer?* Dean texts back, from the rest stop he's sitting at. (He is, in fact, at a Gas-n-Sip, embarrassingly enough. Cas's Gas-n-Sip, in fact. Though it turns out Cas isn't here today.)

*NO*, Sam texts.

*Not even if it the Doritos are Cool Ranch flavor?* texts Dean. *Or Spicy Nacho?*

*NOTHING FROM A GAS-N-SIP*, texts Sam. *Nothing that you can ever find at a Gas-n-Sip. Then what?* replies Dean, who's really starting to think this has all been a bad idea. *Were you serious about potholders? Because I can't find any potholders.*

There's a pause in Sam's reply, and Dean's getting close to chickening out on the whole idea. He's outside the Gas-n-Sip now, standing by the Impala, leaning on its roof while he waits for Sam's reply, and he starts to look around to see if there's an easy way to turn around here and head back east. But then Sam sends: *Don't chicken out. It's a good idea - show him some support. What other stores are you near?*

Dean peers around Cas's Gas-n-Sip, feeling a little desperate now. This is one of those rest-stop wastelands that's surrounded by almost nothing but empty fields. Dean's turning all around, squinting into the chilly November wind, when he finally spots the distant hulking shape of a big-box store at a
shopping plaza a mile or so off. There's a little orange sign way up on a tall pole, designed to catch the eye of the drivers on the nearby highway.

*Just a Home Depot,* he texts back.

*That'll work,* texts Sam. *Try there.*

*What, you think he'll like a set of drill bits? Or a 50-pound bag of bark mulch?*

*They've got house stuff too. Go there and look around.*

Dean roams around the Home Depot for nearly forty-five minutes, picking up and putting down totally impractical gifts. Maybe Cas and Aaron might need some motor oil for Cas's Continental? A set of paintbrushes? An artificial Christmas tree? (Christmas decorations seem to be in full swing by now.) Dean rejects one thing after another and it's soon getting absurd (a chest freezer? A ceiling fan? A twenty-foot extension ladder?). He lingers a long time in the barbecue section, which actually does have some potholders except that they're the firefighter-grade, industrial-strength type. And there's actual barbecues, of course, and then Dean's lost in a daydream about showing Cas how to do a real barbecue.

Then he remembers Cas no longer likes Dean's burgers.

He leaves the barbecue section, tossing the industrial-strength potholders onto a stack of Christmas ornaments in the next aisle, and he's getting pretty frustrated and discouraged when he happens to wander past the houseplant section. And amid all the way-too-girly orchids, stacks of too-Christmassy poinsettias and a lot of weird poofy hanging things, there's a display of little potted plants that look not too bad.

Dean veers over to the plants.

In the middle is a small one that's got glossy dark-green leaves, and a couple of yellow blooms poking up in the middle. The blooms are colorful and bright; it's a cheerful little thing, yet without being too floofy or frilly. It reminds him a bit of his mental image of the mythical Erin's apartment — her (fictional) windowsills had always been lined with (fictional) houseplants — and weirdly that somehow makes it seem like an appropriate gift. But what really catches Dean's eye is that the plant's in a little pot that has a couple of small painted honeybees on the side.

Honeybees! Cas likes bees.

Maybe Cas'll remember that time he turned up naked covered in bees, and maybe they can both laugh about it.

Bees and flowers. It's perfect. A little housewarming gift for Cas. Dean can say something neutral like, "Just something to help you settle in, wherever you are now," and he'll hand it over and that'll be that.

It's only $5.99. Dean grabs it and gets in the checkout line.

But by the time he's paid and is carrying it out of the store he's already having second thoughts. The plant suddenly seems totally silly, its little green leaves too feminine, the bee design too childish, the whole thing all wrong. It's starting to seem like the wrong gift for one guy to give to another guy. Yeah, Cas is apparently maybe gay or bi or whatever (and maybe Dean is too, whatever), but a flowering plant in a cartoon-honeybee pot seems too gay. It's too much a "now that I know you're gay, I'm getting you super-gay stuff" type of gift. Dean might as well have bought a rainbow flag.
Then he remembers more about the whole bee episode and almost groans — Cas had been insane then! And he'd been insane because of Lucifer. Who has until recently been driving Cas nearly insane all over again, through those long months of possession over much of the last year.

I should've got the barbecue potholders, thinks Dean, but the potholders weren't right either, and in fact the entire idea of getting a housewarming gift at all is starting to seem like an incredibly bad idea. Dean should have laughed it off the moment he'd thought of it.

Dean decides, on the spot, to throw the plant in the trash. And then I'm turning the Impala around and heading back east, he thinks, as he veers across the parking lot toward a Home Depot trash can that's sitting a few parking spaces away.

What the hell was I even thinking?

He's lifting the plant up to heave it into the trash can like a little leafy football when its cheerful green leaves wobble a little in a burst of chilly November wind. Dean pauses and looks at it, at its little yellow blooms and the happy little bees on the pot.

The plant's innocent.

It doesn't deserve to die unwanted in a Home Depot parking-lot trash can, just because Dean couldn't figure out what kind of present to buy for his sort-of-gay angel friend who's left and gone away.

Dean's standing there with his arm still half-lifted, looking at the little plant, which now seems an embodiment of innocence itself, and the trash can a metaphor of everything that's wrong with the world. It strikes him, then, that the poor little plant is almost a botanical version of Castiel himself. All alone, helpless, stripped of the company of its fellow plants, it's been exiled from its comfortable home (the heaven of the Home Depot plant department, apparently), and is about to be discarded, through no fault of its own. No fault at all.

Cas wouldn't throw it away, Dean thinks, and he lowers his arm.

Cas would water it, and he'd put it in the sun.

Dean carries it back to the Impala safe in his hands.

By the time he reaches the car he's feeling like the plant has somehow taken control of his life. It's a bit annoying, and he plunks the little plant too roughly on the passenger seat. It falls over and spills a tiny bit of dirt on the Impala seats. Then Dean has to take a minute to prop the thing up again, and carefully sweep the dirt up and put it back in the cartoon-bee pot, and wedge his jacket around it so that it won't topple over again. He arranges it so its glossy leaves won't get bent, and even buckles the seatbelt around it too, to hold the plant safely in place during the rest of the drive. "You better still like bees, Cas," he mutters, starting up the engine at last. "And you better water the damn thing, 'cause I'm sure not."

During the rest of the drive to Denver, Dean tries to come to terms with the fact that he is apparently going to give Cas (and, by extension, Aaron as well) a flowering plant that has cheerful yellow blooms and painted cartoon honeybees on the pot. He's ceased responding to Sam's texts asking for updates on the gift, and is considering outright lying to Sam and telling him that Dean got potholders. He keeps glancing over at the plant as he drives, preparing himself for the moment that's coming up.
Here ya go, Cas, I got you a plant for your new place, he's going to have to say, and Cas is going to squint at him and say "Why on earth did you think I would want a plant?" and what's Dean going to say then? "It had bees on it?"

But by the time Dean reaches Denver and navigates to the correct quadrant of the city, he's relaxed a little and has managed to get into a more philosophical state of mind (or more fatalistic, at least) about the whole thing. There's not going to be any grand gestures. There's not even going to be much of a conversation. It'll just be a drop-by visit, a hit-and-run. If Aaron's there too Dean'll say hi, and if not then not, and all that's gonna happen either way is a quick hello and goodbye. Dean's already got a story lined up about how he had to come to Denver anyway for some case; it can even be the same mythical case as last time, when he went to Cas's Gas-n-Sip. "Just chasing down another lead on that case," he'll say. "Here, I picked up a plant for your new place. Okay, take it easy, see ya." And that'll be that.

He finds Madison St., which runs through nearly the whole city. Soon Dean's cruising down Madison keeping an eye on the street addresses and glancing at the map on his phone now and then. He's approaching the red pin on the map. He passes the 1000's, then the 2000's. 4601 Madison is getting closer. He sets the phone down, now just looking at the street numbers.

As block after block goes by, a quiet fatalism starts to sink into Dean, and, with one last regretful look at the little plant, at last he decides, I shouldn't give them the plant. It'll look weird. It'll BE weird.

He passes several blocks of house addresses in the 3000's.

In fact... I'll just check out Aaron's house from across the street first. Maybe not even say hello at first. Just look, from afar, make sure Cas is okay, make sure Cas looks happy, and then, once he's checked out the situation, he can assess whether to knock on the door.

Dean decides to leave the plant in the car. He'll give Cas the plant some other day.

He comes to the 4000's.

Dean knows by now that he's not even going to get out of the car. He's just going to park and watch 4601 Madison from a block away till Cas and Aaron show up, and he's going to make sure Cas looks okay, and then he's going to leave. Cas doesn't even have to know that Dean was ever here.

I'll keep the plant, Dean thinks. The honeybees might be a nice reminder of Cas, actually, once Cas has totally moved out. Once Cas is totally gone.

It'll be an interesting challenge, actually, for Dean to see if he can keep a plant alive. That's probably about the limit of my capabilities anyway, in terms of relationships with living things, he thinks.

Might be beyond my limits actually. But I'll try.

4601 Madison, however, is nowhere to be found. Dean's passing rows of houses in the 4500's and then there's a clump of big industrial buildings that take up whole blocks — a school and a hospital and a parking lot and a supermarket and some stores — and the next chunk of houses after that have numbers in the 4800's. Dean frowns, and pulls the Impala into an awkward three-point turn to go back down the street. Again he shoots through the area with the big buildings, and past the parking lot, and ends up back in the 4500's.

Now Dean's puzzled. Where's 4601? Where is Cas staying, exactly? Is this Aaron guy really legit?

Dean finally pulls into the parking lot, now planning to walk up and down the street on foot.
"All right," says Dean, to the plant. "All right. C'mon then." For no clear reason other than wanting the companionship, he takes the plant with him.

Now he's marching down the sidewalk with a plant in his hand. Its yellow blooms bounce with every stride and Dean's feeling more than a little ridiculous, but he keeps going. He's actually traversed one whole side of the street past the hospital and has somehow missed 4601 again and is crossing to the other side to circle back, thinking, *Dammit, Cas, Aaron better be worth all this*, when he finally notices the gigantic sign at the parking lot, a sign he drove right past just minutes ago.

It's an enormous sign: MERCY GENERAL HOSPITAL, it says, in huge letters, with large arrows below pointing to the emergency room entrance and to the visitor parking. In a smaller scrolly typeface below is: *4601 Madison St.*

Dean stands still and looks at the sign.

Mercy General Hospital.

4601 Madison.

This is the address he's been looking for. The address that was in Cas's calendar.

*Aaron must work at the hospital,* Dean thinks, slowly. *He's a doctor or something. Or a med student, a medical resident. This is his work address. This isn't where he lives at all. That first time, Cas must have met him for coffee at work or something.*

The tiniest bit of research could have told him this. If he'd even bothered to google the address.... If he hadn't hopped in the Impala so fast, if he hadn't been so hung over....

*Maybe I can find Aaron's home address from the hospital's employee records?* he thinks, as he walks slowly toward a set of big front doors. *Though there's probably a million residents and med students and doctors and everything...*

*I wonder how Cas might have met a med student....*

There's an uncomfortable thought tugging at Dean's mind now, about Aaron, and about how 4601 Madison is a hospital, and his feet are moving pretty slowly by the time he drifts through the main doors. He crosses a quiet, almost empty lobby, passes a cafe, and finds a big building directory on an inner wall, a huge panel of department names with long lists of doctors' names below each department. Dean scans the directory looking for an Aaron. *This is silly,* thinks Dean; *Aaron probably won't be listed. He probably works in the lab or he's an EMT or...*

DERMATOLOGY, GASTROENTEROLOGY, LABORATORY, he reads, his eyes flicking down the several dozen doctor's names under each department. And then there's:

**ONCOLOGY - 6th floor**

*Aaron Klein, M.D.*

Dean's stomachache is back now, but for an entirely new reason. He reads all the rest of the directory. He scans through dozens and dozens of doctor's names, and even goes and asks at the front desk, but there's no other "Aaron Klein" listed in any other department, and the receptionist verifies that the only Aaron Klein at the hospital is not only a doctor, but is an oncologist, and that Dr. Klein is a chemotherapy specialist who works on the sixth floor.

Now Dean feels like he needs to sit down, so he finds a table in the cafe, puts the plant down and sits
and stares at it a while. All Dean can seem to see, though, is Cas, in the bathroom at the bunker, staring into the mirror and fussing with his hair, and trying to fluff it up.

Castiel, studying his hair. Tugging on it, even.

Sam's "volumizer" shampoo. The Rogaine.

*The hat, Dean thinks. The wool hat. Cas never takes off the hat anymore.*

There are other things, too, but Dean's mind seems to be working very slowly, and all he can think about now is that Castiel never takes off his wool hat.

Dean manages to rouse himself after about five minutes. Clearly he's got to go to the sixth floor to check out Dr. Klein. He knows he ought to be going into investigative mode now; he ought to be pulling out his FBI badge or his CDC credentials and sliding smoothly into his professional role, sweet-talking some nurse into giving him access to the hospital records, but he can't seem to remember how to do any of that. Instead he slowly gets up, picks up the plant and drifts to a bank of elevators, moving on automatic pilot.

Dean spends the entire elevator ride holding the little plant close to his chest, cradling it in both his hands and looking down at its glossy little leaves and its yellow flowers. But still all he is seeing is Castiel staring in the mirror and tugging at his hair. And Cas's nervous jump when he'd realized Dean was watching him.

Cas, watching his weight.

Cas getting skinnier.

Cas trying to eat healthy. Cas trying out recipes, trying to get enough protein, enough vitamins.

Cas not finishing his salad. Fiddling with the popcorn and barely eating any. Cas has stopped eating burgers. And those hot dogs, at the Gas-n-Sip.... *They've started making me sick, Cas had said. I can't eat them anymore.*

A new diet of pretty bland food, a little tasteless. Like maybe he couldn't tolerate anything stronger.

The elevator doors open and it turns out Oncology's a big department. There's a huge open space and lots of chairs, and people sitting and waiting, and a lot of hallways branching off into different directions. Normally Dean always fakes like he knows where he's going, always ready to launch into a convincing story or flash a fake id at a moment's notice; normally he has a fast-moving, purposeful walk that he uses in situations like this. But today somehow he's just standing in the lobby gazing up at the "ONCOLOGY" sign like he's never seen a sign before in his life. A nurse asks, not unkindly, "Can I help you?" and Dean realizes he's been standing there with a totally deer-in-the-headlights look.

"I'm looking for a friend," Dean says. "He's here... seeing... Aaron Klein?" There's still a faint hope in his mind that Aaron might be a boyfriend. Or a friend, at least. An acquaintance.

.... who happens to be an oncologist who specializes in chemotherapy, and who Castiel has been visiting every four weeks like clockwork. Three weeks on, one week off. At a hospital. Doesn't chemotherapy involve some sort of repeating schedule?

*I have a schedule, Cas had said. I'd like to come on the hunts, I really would, but I have a schedule that I have to adhere to.*
Cas, smoking pot. Which is supposed to be so good at helping control nausea and pain, isn't it? Here in Colorado they've had medical marijuana for ages. They've been doing that for years and years here, since long before they legalized recreational use.

Aaron had suggested the pot. *Aaron's been so helpful*...

"Are you checking in?" the nurse is saying. She glances at the little houseplant. "Oh, are you here for pickup?"

"What?" Dean says, barely able to focus on what she's saying.

"Are you meeting a patient? Picking somebody up after treatment?"

"Uh," said Dean. "Yes."

"I'm sure they'll love the flowers. Name?"

"What?"

She gives him a slightly impatient look. "Patient's name?"

"Castiel... uh...."

"Last name?"

Dean blinks at her. His mind has gone totally blank.

Then he thinks, *You're our brother*. He remembers the sketches in Cas's dresser drawer, and the one of Dean in the car.

Dean swallows, and says to the nurse, quietly, "Winchester."

"And your name?"

"Dean Winchester," Dean replies. He's a little surprised to hear himself giving his real name.

"Ah, family then?" she says, as she checks her computer monitor for Cas's name.

Dean gives her a jerky nod, and watches as she scans down a list of names. A few seconds tick by and she's still looking, and in those few seconds Dean manages to convince himself he's got everything wrong. That she'll look up and say "There's nobody here by that name." That the hospital's street address and Dr. Aaron Klein of the Oncology Department, and Cas worrying about his hair and losing weight, are all just some freaky coincidence.

But now the nurse is nodding. The nurse's *nodding*. She *found Cas's name*. She's checked the list and she's found the Winchester last name, and the first name too, which is undeniably unique, and *she's fucking nodding*. "I see you're listed as the emergency contact," she says, which somehow makes the bottom drop even farther out of Dean's stomach. (Cas has thought far enough ahead to plan who to put as an emergency contact. Cas put Dean as the emergency contact. Cas never asked, Cas never said a thing, but Cas had to have *thought* about all this, he must have been worrying about it, he had to plan....)

"I said, do you have an id?" the nurse says, a little loudly, and Dean blinks; he's been lost in thought. Dean manages to dig out the one and only id that actually has his real name, and gives it to her numbly. She nods, makes a note, returns the id and says, "You're almost a half hour early."
"What?" says Dean. His voice comes out as a croak.

"He's still in treatment. You want to go grab a coffee or something? Hey, um... You okay?" says the nurse. She's frowning at him.

Dean's having to wipe his eyes. "Allergies," says Dean. She shoves a box of Kleenex toward him and he grabs one and blows his nose.

"Allergies in November?" she says.

Dean blows his nose again, clears his throat and manages to say, "I'm allergic to hospitals," and she gives him a sympathetic smile.

The nurse goes away to check on where Cas is, and comes back a few minutes later saying, "He's got another fifteen minutes to go on the saline flush. You know the drill, right? You can sit with him while you wait, unless you'd rather go get that coffee. Come on, I'll walk you down there." She beckons Dean around a corner and starts leading him down one of the many identical-looking hallways. "You know," she says, "we didn't realize he had a family pickup today. I'd already arranged the usual driver. An oversight. I should have checked. I just assumed it was the same as usual — I apologize."

"What?" says Dean yet again, who can't seem to understand anything she says.

"I'd already arranged the usual driver. The driver from the home-ride service that he usually uses to get home. I'll call and cancel. It's so nice you were able to come get him today, you know. He's explained how his brothers have to travel a lot and can't come, but we'd wondered, of course."

Dean looks over at her blankly, and she gives him a slightly sad smile as they walk along. "Some patients don't have anybody to pick them up," she explains. "I'll confess, I'd started to worry that your brother might be in that situation, which was a bit concerning because... well, you see, it's always worrying to see a patient who has to go through this sort of thing alone. As I'm sure he's told you, we've been trying to set him up with some extra support — some warmer clothes, and a meal delivery service a few times a week, tips on what to eat, a few things like that; we do what we can, but honestly the funding for home support services is pretty thin so we always worry, with cases like this. So it's especially nice that you're here. I'll let Dr. Klein now; he'll be so pleased. He's even been having Castiel call to check in, you know, during the overnight shift after treatment — we do that with patients who have to go home alone, but if you'll be with him then that's less of a concern. You'll be with him, right?"

Dean nods emphatically.

"Well, that's good then. Anyway, here we are." She pushes open a big door and stands aside, waving Dean in. "Here you go, he's in Bay 8, go on in."

She's holding open the door. Dean goes on in.
It's a long room, with a bank of huge plate-glass windows all down one wall that look out over the city. There's a whole line of separate little treatment stations for different patients, each "bay" with its own little curtains that can be pulled closed on an overhead track. Most of the curtains are half-open, so that when Dean looks down the row of patients he mostly sees a row of feet. The patients seem to be not in hospital beds exactly, but in comfy reclining chairs that tip all the way back, the kind that blood banks use. The patients are all in their street clothes, not hospital gowns. Comfy street clothes, Dean notices; he sees people wearing things like sweatpants, and pajamas.

Comfortable clothes....

He inches past the first few people, who seem unsurprised to see him go past. Every patient has somebody sitting with them. Some patients are chatting, some sleeping, some watching TV. Every patient has an IV running and they all seem to have had instructions to drink as well, for they've all got little bottles of water that they're sipping from.

_They're all in a row. I'm in the row too. We drink and we look at the stars...._

Dean glances out the plate-glass windows. There's a surprisingly lovely view of the city. It's early evening now and the sun's set already, and the stars are coming out.

_We drink and we look at the stars._

_Dean, I wish you were here too._

Dean feels like he's drifting through a very strange, surreal dream as he wanders down the row of patients. Bay 8's curtains are partly closed, shielding the sides of the bay from view, and when Dean peers around one of the curtains, there's Castiel.

He's alone.

He's the only patient who's alone.

He's lying with his feet up, the chair reclined all the way back. His head's tipped a little to one side; his eyes are closed. Dean inches a step closer, saying "Cas?" softly, but then he discovers Cas is asleep.

Cas has his soft blue sweater on, and a blanket's been wrapped around his legs. His jacket and scarf are hanging on a hook on the wall, along with his shoulder bag. But for once he isn't wearing the hat; it's sitting on a chair by the bed.

For a long moment Dean's distracted by studying Cas's hair. Definitely thinner. Kind of patchy. But Cas hasn't lost all of it; he still looks like himself.

_He's been wearing the hat, Dean decides, not because he looks all that bad, but just to hide the patchiness from us. Just to hide from me and Sam what's going on._

Cas, like all the patients, has an IV in one arm. The sleeve of his blue sweater is rolled up high on that side to make room for the IV.

_I like the sweater, Cas had said. I can roll the sleeves up._

Both his arms are covered with bruises, some fresh and some yellowing and aging. It looks awful; there must have been a lot of IV's. Dean realizes now that he hasn't seen Cas with his arms bare for months, and he thinks, then, of the time he ran across Cas weighing himself in the little bunker gym, and how Cas had practically run away, pulling a towel over his upper body. Dean is suddenly certain
that Cas had been trying to hide his arms. He'd been trying to hide the bruises. Likely it's also why he's been dodging the hugs; hugs simply would have hurt. Maybe there've been other painful spots too, who knows.

Dean takes a quiet step closer, puts the plant on a little table at the side of Cas's bed, and picks up the hat from the chair. He turns it over a few times, looking at it. There's a tag on the inside: "With Very Best Wishes, From The Ladies' Hospital Guild."

"Hand-knitted," murmurs Dean to himself.

A friend gave it to me, Cas had said. A hospital friend, apparently.

More memories are clicking into place. The doctor in Flagstaff, saying to Cas, "We really need to do more tests." Pulling Cas aside to talk to him in private.

When had Cas found out? That night in Flagstaff, or later? Dean thinks of the night when Cas had texted out of the blue, back when Sam and Dean had been waiting at the mine entrance. Dean had texted back "Hey bro, how ya been?" and Cas had spent ages writing an extremely long reply. Which he'd then deleted without ever sending it.

Fine, Cas had replied at last.

Dean gives a rough sigh, thinking now, I should've known something was up right then. Anytime Cas replies "Fine," he's NEVER fine.

All the meds in Cas's dresser. Every possible gut problem. Every possible skin problem. Every possible hair problem. Every possible vitamin he could ever need...

The Gas-n-Sip job. The way Cas has been scrambling to get enough hours. Probably hoping to qualify to be full-time? For the health insurance, maybe, or for the disability coverage? He'd worked a solid month before he'd started going to Denver... when does health insurance start, exactly, for new Gas-n-Sip employees? After thirty days' of full-time employment, or after a certain number of hours?

And of course he must've needed the cash as well. There must be co-pays, prescriptions, there's the gas money to Denver, the motel bills from wherever he's been staying....

I just need a little more pocket change.

Dean sits down in the chair, holding the wool hat in both hands.

There's a lot of questions, of course. How bad it is. What type, what stage. Whether it's spread. New questions keep surfacing, and each one brings a fresh wave of anxiety and dread, along with a kind of distant, unreal horror.

Dean thinks, Sam and I were insane to think we would ever get a break. That everything was "okay" for once, that all three of us were okay.

We were crazy.

We were dreaming.

Dean glances at the little plant that he's put on the side table, the absurd little housewarming gift for Aaron's Denver house. But Aaron is simply Cas's oncologist, not a lover at all; and Erin, of course, was never even remotely real. Erin, and her apartment and her imaginary little row of houseplants,
and her red mixer thing and her knitting... none of it was ever real.

All of it disappears.

And Dean's ridiculous jealousy seems to have disappeared too. Because suddenly he is wishing with all his heart, wishing desperately, that Castiel had a girlfriend named Erin after all. He'd give anything, he'd give everything, for Cas to have a girlfriend named Erin. Or a boyfriend named Aaron, for that matter. It doesn't matter any more which. It doesn't matter at all. Even if a female "Erin" meant that Dean would lose Cas forever, that Dean would never have a chance at all, Dean's aching to be able to just close his eyes and wish Cas away from here and wish him to the mythical Erin's apartment. He's wishing for Cas to wake up next to "Erin" every morning, and sit together with her in the evenings with his arm around her, and make out with her, and have sex with her, and have whole-wheat pancakes together for Sunday brunch, and be happy. Even if Dean never saw him again.

"Anything, Cas," Dean whispers, as he sits and watches Cas sleep, and waits for Cas to wake. "Anything but this."

A/N -

awww, dammit.

Poor Cas, and poor Dean.

Some of you figured this out early on, and many of you were homing in on it. The fic takes a sharp turn here, obviously, and Dean is going to have to really switch gears mentally. Hope you are all willing to switch gears too and come along for the rest of the ride.

For anybody for whom this hits too close to home: I'll understand if you have to stop reading. It hits close to home for me too, which is why I had to write it this way. It's one of the worst things in the world that can happen to someone you love, and, heads up, it's not going to be pretty. But love is about more than the fun stuff and the attraction and the sex; this is a love story and there's a lot more to love, after all, than just the good times.

Next chapter might take 2 wks but if I can post anything at all next week, I will.
Heard you needed a ride

A/N - I am overwhelmed and humbled by all your responses to the last chapter. I don't think I've ever gotten so many comments on a chapter, in any fic. I knew the last chapter would be rough, and honestly I was a little worried about whether it would feel worth it to all of you (worth it to keep reading, I mean). So I'm really grateful that so many of you want to keep reading, even many of those with very painful and very personal connections to what Cas is going through. I only hope I can do this justice!

If I miss the mark in any way, please forgive me; I do know what it means to tackle a story like this and I hope I can get it right.

I'm probably going to slow down the pace of writing a bit, both because I'm still traveling but also because I want to be sure each scene unfolds precisely as it should, shaped exactly as it needs to be. So this week there's just 1 little scene. (I have another scene written but it didn't feel ready yet.) Hope it's enough to hold you all for a week.

We return to a certain hospital in Denver...

Dean's still sitting there silently, holding the hat and keeping very quiet so as not to disturb Cas, when a nurse comes by to check on Cas's IV. She gives Dean a smile but Dean's so intent on watching Cas (as if he'll disappear if Dean takes his eyes off him for even a moment) that he can't even summon up a "hello" to the nurse.

She doesn't seem to mind; she quietly checks the IV bag, and touches Cas's arm lightly as she inspects the IV site. "Almost done," she whispers to Dean. "Just a couple more minutes." She slips away again, almost on tiptoe. But Cas must have felt the touch on his arm, for his hand moves a bit. His fingers close on the edge of the blanket that's wrapped around his legs, and he opens his eyes.

Cas happens to have his head turned away from Dean, and he lifts his head a little to look down at the IV in his arm. He touches one of the dark bruises experimentally with his other hand. The bruise must still be sore, for a grimace passes over Cas's face, and he gives a little hiss of pain, followed by a soft sigh.

Something about the sound of Cas's sigh — the clear fatigue in the sound, the air of resignation — makes Dean realize that Cas thinks he's alone. Dean thinks, Every time he's woken up here, this chair's always been empty. Nobody's ever been sitting here.

"Hey, Cas," says Dean.

Cas gives a start of surprise, a sort of body-wide jolt that's accompanied by a distinctive flinch of his right hand, as if he's groping for an angel-blade that isn't there. His eyes dart over to Dean. But he doesn't seem to relax at all when he sees who it is; instead he freezes very still.
Cas then looks all around his little treatment bay, at the curtains and at the view outside, as if verifying he's really still in the same place where he'd fallen asleep. He glances at Dean again for a microsecond, and then looks at his IV bag, and at the IV line in his arm, and at the bruises.

There's a slight pause as Cas stares at the bruises.

He looks slowly over toward Dean once more. There's a distinct expression of dismay on Cas's face now, and this time his gaze lands on the hat that's in Dean's hands.

One of Cas's hands goes to his head, then the other.

Now Cas is sitting there with both hands covering his head. He's a little hunched now, his shoulders tensed, and he shifts his gaze to stare at the blanket that's covering his knees, not looking at Dean any more.

"May I have my hat," he says, his voice very quiet. He's still not looking at Dean.

"Sure, yeah, of course, of course—" Dean says, and he almost knocks the little plant off the side table in his haste to reach over and put the hat in Cas's hands. Cas takes it with his right hand (he's still shielding his head with his left hand, on the side closer to Dean) and he pulls the hat on, still not looking at Dean. Cas adjusts the hat a moment, both hands now firmly on the edge of the hat tugging it into place, and he feels gently at the small tufts of hair that still remain, a few dark tufts that are poking out from the edges of the hat in the back.

Cas then folds his hands in his lap with what seems a carefully controlled calm. He raises his head slowly and gazes out the plate-glass window. Dean's trying his very hardest not to look at Cas now, so he follows Cas's lead and looks out the window with him.

Together they look at the stars.

Dean hears another little sigh from Cas and risks a quick glance back at him to find that Cas has put both hands to his head again. But this time he's taking a quick glance back at him to find that Cas has put both hands to his head again. But this time he's taking the hat back off. He pulls the hat off almost in slow motion and then, almost thoughtfully, runs one hand across his head. Dean can see now that there's a broad bald patch on the left side of his head. Cas traces his fingers over the area gently, and then feels at a few other regions where there's still some hair.

Several strands of dark hair come loose in his hand. Cas looks at them with almost idle interest, and shakes them onto the floor.

Dean's racking his brains desperately now for something helpful to say, and he even draws in a breath of air to speak. He's thinking of saying something like, *It really doesn't look that bad,* or, *I don't care at all if you lose your hair. I really don't care at all.*

Or, *Some chicks dig bald guys. Lots of chicks. In fact just forget about that "perfect amount of tousle" crap. Forget I ever said that.*

Or, *Sam and me'll both shave our heads in support.*

Or... *Why didn't you tell us? There's dozens of questions to ask, really: How bad is it? What's the prognosis? When did you find out? How can I help, what can I do? Could the angels fix it, could the demons, maybe even Crowley, maybe Rowena? What have you tried? Why didn't you call me? Why the hell didn't you tell me?*
But Dean can't seem to say anything at all. In fact he finds he's gone totally mute.

Both Dean and Cas are silent now, both gazing at the hat in Cas's hands. Cas turns it around a little, regarding it thoughtfully.

"What are you doing here?" says Cas at last. He's still not looking at Dean.

Dean swallows and shifts in his chair, bracing his hands against his knees. *I thought you were running away with someone else,* he thinks. *I thought you had a girlfriend, or a boyfriend. I thought you were moving in with them.*

*I thought I'd lost you, and I came to say goodbye.*

"Heard you needed a ride," says Dean.

Cas is silent a long moment. His gaze lifts; now he's looking at the stars again.

"I have a driver," he says at last. "There's already a driver arranged—"

Dean breaks in with, "The nurse called and cancelled." Cas looks disturbed at this news, glancing over at Dean with a frown. Dean adds, smiling a little to try to make it a joke, "Guess you're stuck with me, huh?"

Cas doesn't laugh.

"How did you find me?" he asks.

"Uh...." says Dean, and he stalls, suddenly realizing that this is where he's going to have to confess that he's been rummaging through Cas's things, "I, uh, I saw the address in your... calendar."

Cas's frown deepens. "My calendar... in my room?"

Dean shifts his feet, and his hands tighten on his knees. "Yeah," he says. "Um, sorry, I, um, Sam and I were getting a little worried and we just thought.... " He pauses.

Don't blame it on Sam, he thinks.

"I went in your room," Dean says. "I shouldn't have. I'm sorry."

But Cas just gives a measured nod. "And... you saw the address," he says, slowly, as if he's trying to reconstruct the sequence of events. "And you... drove out here? Why?"

"I was tracking down a lead on that Denver case," Dean says, automatically sliding into the story he'd lined up earlier.

Cas nods again, as if this makes sense to him. "You had a case," he murmurs, almost to himself.

Dean's thinking that maybe he should explain that there actually isn't any case, when the nurse comes back, whisking the curtains aside all the way now. It seems to be totally routine for her to interrupt awkward family conversations like this, for she just barges in and walks right over and says to Cas, with a bright smile, "You're all done. Your brother showed up while you were asleep, isn't that nice?" She starts fiddling with the IV bag. "Must be good to have a family pickup for once, huh? Isn't it nice that we switched you to Monday? I told you it'd be worth it." She looks over at Dean and explains, "He's been on that Wednesday cycle till now, you know; Wednesday through Friday on week one, and then again Wednesday on week two and Wednesday again on week three, and then the fourth week off. But we shifted to Monday or Tuesday for almost all the patients this week, so that everybody will be feeling reasonably well by Thursday."
Dean blinks at her. She adds, looking a little puzzled that he needs an explanation, "Because of Thanksgiving."

"Oh," says Dean. "Right." He'd already completely forgotten about Thanksgiving. He adds, with a weak smile, "So this is week... uh... three?"

"Week two," corrects the nurse, with a slight frown. She glances at Cas (who is not meeting her eyes) and adds to Dean, "Which means you need to bring him back on Monday. But you know about all that, right?"

"Right, right," says Dean. "Week three's next week. That's what I meant. I knew that. I just got... mixed up." Cas, meanwhile, has gone dead silent; now he's just watching the nurse's hands as she does something with a complicated-looking computerized box that's mounted on the IV pole. She presses a few buttons, and there's some beeps.

"All set," she says to Cas, and without a word Cas straightens his bruised right arm, turns his hand palm-upward and swings the arm closer to her so she can take the IV out. All these movements have a well-rehearsed look to them. It takes only a few moments for the nurse to remove the IV tube and tape a little bandage on his arm. She discards a few things, wheels the pole out of the way and begins a businesslike check of Cas's vital signs, saying "How are you feeling?"

Cas hesitates slightly before answering, "About usual." (Dean has the distinct impression that he would be saying more if he were alone.)

"So... your brother will bring you back in a week, right?"

There's a slightly awkward pause. Cas clears his throat and starts to say, a little quietly, "Actually, I don't think —" but Dean overrides him, speaking up with "Absolutely. We'll be back Monday."

Cas gives Dean a very brief, very doubtful look, and goes quiet again, staring down at his folded hands. The nurse says, "You'll be okay tonight?" and Cas nods. "Have any questions?" she says. "Need any tips?" He shakes his head, and she says, "Then we'll see you Monday, all right?"

"All right," says Cas, almost whispering. She does something to Cas's chair and it's soon making a whirring noise and folding back upright, depositing Cas into an upright sitting position. The nurse takes the blanket off his legs, hands him his jacket and scarf, and holds out a form for Cas to sign. "See you Monday, then," she says. She's starting to look a little puzzled that neither Dean nor Cas are saying anything, and as she looks back and forth between them she starts to get a worried look, but at last she adds a "Happy Thanksgiving." Cas manages a weak smile and says "Thank you," and she pats him on the shoulder and walks away.

Cas begins unrolling the sleeve of his sweater, working it back down his bruised arm in silence, and Dean watches as the bruises disappear under the familiar blue wool sleeve. Then Cas puts the hat back on his head, tugging it firmly into place with both hands. Again he feels lightly at the remaining tufts of hair, a move that Dean now realizes he's seen Cas do many times. Cas then wraps the scarf around his neck carefully, and he's soon all muffled up in the sweater, scarf and hat once more. It's a familiar look, but Dean's startled by how obvious it now seems that Cas is ill. He's thin — nearly gaunt, actually; he looks pale and worn, his skin dry and lined, his lips much more chapped than usual, and there are dark circles under his eyes. When Cas stands to put his jacket on, it now seems incredibly obvious that he's moving his arms quite gingerly, maneuvering both arms carefully into the jacket sleeves to try to avoid brushing the bruises. It seems so clear now that he's hurting. It looks like he can't even raise his arms very high, and there's an air of fatigue in all his movements.

*He's been moving like that for a while now,* Dean realizes. *I thought he was just tired....*
Cas pauses once he's got his jacket on. Finally he mutters, not quite looking at Dean, "It's time to go," and he simply starts walking away from the treatment chair. Dean scrambles to his feet and is in mid-stride to follow him when he remembers that the little plant is still sitting on the bedside table. Dean hesitates, looking back at the plant, very uncertain whether to bother Cas with it.

Cas notices Dean's hesitation and pauses at the edge of the curtain to look back at him. He follows Dean's gaze back to the plant. "What's that?" Cas asks.

Dean picks it up. "It's a plant," he says, turning toward Cas with it.

"I can see that," says Cas drily. "I mean, where did it come from?"

Dean finds himself holding it out slightly toward Cas. Cas just stares at it, confused.

"Got you a plant," Dean says at last, taking an uncertain half-step closer, still holding it out.

Cas takes it slowly.

"What, from the gift shop?" Cas asks. Now he's turning it around and looking at it.

"No, it's from a Home Depot," Dean says, making a vague gesture toward the outside with one hand. He then shoves both his hands in his jeans pockets, his shoulders hunched as he waits for Cas to discard the plant. "A Home Depot back in Kansas," Dean explains. "That one near your Gas-n-Sip. Picked it up on the way here." He adds, "You don't have to keep it."

Cas still looks puzzled, and he regards the little yellow blooms and the dark green leaves for a long moment in silence. Then he looks up at Dean, and there's that familiar squint on his face now as he says, inevitably, "Why did you think I would want a plant?"

Dean can only shrug. Why did he ever think Cas would want a plant? "It had bees on it?" Dean says, hopelessly. He's looking around now for some place where Cas can leave it. Maybe some other patient might want it? Maybe the nurses would like a plant for the lobby? "You can just leave it on the table here," he suggests, gesturing back toward the little side table. But now Cas has tipped the pot a little bit to see the sides, and he turns it till the bees come into view, and then he's staring at the little cartoon bees.

Dean gives a stiff little laugh, and says, "You probably don't even like bees any more, huh." Cas looks up at him again, and this time Cas is truly looking at Dean, meeting Dean's eyes straight on and really holding his gaze for the first time in this whole awful evening.

Dean can only gaze back at him.

"I still like bees," says Cas, rather softly. He doesn't say anything else about it, just looks down at the pot again, and at the plant, but now he's cradling it against his chest. He looks up and says, as both his arms fold around the little plant, "I, uh, I do need to get home soon. Back to my motel, I mean. I know you probably weren't actually expecting to give me a ride, but..."

"I'll give you a ride," says Dean, nodding.

"I kind of need a ride," Cas adds. "Now that they've cancelled the driver—"

"I'll definitely give you a ride," says Dean, still nodding. "Wherever you need."

"It's just to a motel," says Cas. "It's not very far. I could get a cab."
"No cab," says Dean. "I'm giving you a ride. Car's right outside. Come on."

A/N - That's it for now, just one little scene but an important one. Baby steps, right? For both of them.

More next week.

Thanks to you all.
Cas looks at the plant for almost the entire elevator ride down, just as Dean did earlier on the ride up. The elevator's crowded with other people, so Dean can't say any of the questions that he still has stacked up ready to ask. Instead he stands by Cas's side in silence, watching him touch the plant's leaves lightly, and the yellow blooms, and watching him look again at the bees on the side of the pot. And while Cas studies the plant, Dean studies Cas.

There's been a running list going in Dean's head for the past half hour or so, of all the things that he should have been noticing during the last several months, and he keeps noticing more things to add to the list. The lines at the corners of Cas's eyes seem more noticeable than usual, aren't they? His posture's more hunched than it used to be, isn't it? And he's holding himself a little stiffly — hadn't he looked like that when he first came back to the bunker, a couple months ago? That day when he'd come walking down the stairs so slowly, and had gone sidling around the map-table so stiffly? He looks like he's feeling cold right now, too, even despite the hat and scarf and jacket, and even though he's not even outside yet. It's been getting really chilly out recently — does he need an even warmer coat than the one the hospital staff gave him? (Dean wonders if he should offer to run out and buy a better winter coat.)

Then there's the way Cas keeps straightening his right arm every few minutes. He periodically removes his right hand from the plant pot, straightens the arm, and flexes his hand lightly a few times, as if his arm still doesn't feel quite right after the IV. He also seems to have a habit of placing that hand on his stomach briefly — he's done that before, hasn't he? Running one hand down the front of his jacket, even glancing down at himself sometimes. Cas has been doing that particular little move for months. Dean had assumed, weeks ago when he'd first noticed Cas doing this, that it was something to do with the trenchcoat. But now he's wondering if Cas's stomach or abdomen has just been hurting, all along.

The list-of-things-Dean-should-have-noticed is getting longer and longer and Dean's eyes are practically glued to Cas by now. When Cas finally raises his eyes from the plant, Dean's keenly aware of everything Cas is looking at. There's a woman standing about a foot and a half in front of them, a hospital employee of some kind who's leaning against the elevator side wall with her arms crossed, and Cas's eyes drift to her and linger on her briefly, his gaze flicking up and down her body. He only does this for a moment (then Cas shifts to staring at the elevator buttons), and maybe it's only because she's standing directly in front of him, but it's a jolt because Dean is suddenly reminded, Wait, he isn't gay. The Aaron thing was all a misunderstanding.

He's not into guys. He's into girls.

Dean somehow hadn't fully taken this in until now.

Though it's utterly irrelevant now, of course.

And yet... it's not.
Stop thinking about that, Dean chastises himself. Stop it. Stop it. That doesn't matter now. It doesn't matter anymore.

By the time they reach the lobby, Dean's staring fixedly at the toes of his leather boots, no longer looking at Cas at all. It's taking some concentration to try to repack the last several weeks of Cas-related thoughts (some of which, it has to be admitted, qualify as fantasies) back into the box that they'd somehow escaped from. And shut the box. And put it away, back in the mental corner where it's been sitting quietly for years.

Forget all that, Dean orders himself. He's actually pretty appalled that the "is Cas gay" issue should have surfaced in his mind at all right now, even for a fraction of a second. That's not what he needs, Dean thinks, still staring at his boots. That's not what he wants. Just forget it. Forget all about it.

"Dean?" Cas says, and Dean lifts his eyes to discover that the elevator door's open, they've reached the lobby, and Cas is looking a little puzzled that Dean is just standing still.

They leave the elevator and cross the long lobby, Dean trailing a little bit behind Cas. Dean entirely fails, once again, to ask any of the questions he should be asking, and they reach the front doors in complete silence.

At the lobby doors Dean pauses, wondering if he should offer to go get the car while Cas sits here and rests for a moment, but Cas spots the Impala on his own and strides right out into the parking lot toward it. Dean has to scamper ahead of him, through the chilly night air, in order to reach the car first and unlock Cas's door. Then Cas just gets right in on his own and closes the door without a word.

As Dean's scrambling into the driver's seat, Cas says, without the least bit of preamble, "Pineview Motel, 6505 Colfax." He's got the little plant centered in his lap, both hands wrapped around the pot to hold it steady, and he's staring straight ahead out the windshield as he adds, "Also, um, it would be good to get there soon. I'd like...uh... to get settled for tonight."

There's something a little odd about his phrasing, but Dean doesn't push for details, just nods and says, "You got it." Dean enters the address into his phone, starts the car and at last they're moving. It's a great relief to have to focus on driving again.

The phone is soon calling out directions to guide them along the fifteen-minute drive to the motel, but Dean's having a little trouble concentrating and he misses a poorly marked exit. Then they get stuck in some rush-hour traffic while the phone tries to figure out which way to send them. Cas starts shifting in his seat.

"The drive usually doesn't take this long," Cas says. "Isn't there a faster route?"

"It'll just be a little longer," says Dean. "Sorry, that exit wasn't really marked that well."

"It's just that I'd like to get to my motel soon," says Cas. "Because... there's... a... movie starting on the television soon. A movie that I wanted to watch."

Dean darts a glance at him. Cas evades Dean's gaze, turning his head to look out the side window.

"Sorry," Dean says again. "Sorry I missed that exit. That sign made it look like it was the next exit. It
wasn't really clear. I, um... I'll get you there. We'll be there in just a few minutes."

Cas is silent, but Dean can practically hear his thoughts: *My usual driver never misses that exit. My usual driver knows the way.*

Dean speeds up the Impala a little, snatching opportunities to weave in and out of the road lanes where he can, to try to recover a little of the lost time.

Cas speaks up again with, "Maybe you can drop me off and I can take a bus the rest of the way. Or I could walk. We're not far away."

It stings, to a surprising degree, that Cas would consider cutting short this little ride in the Impala with Dean. Especially given that he doesn't really look like he's in great shape for walking. "It's just like ten more minutes," Dean points out. "And, I mean, look, dude, I'm not gonna just let you walk. It's cold out. And you just had... look, you just had... Didn't you just have... Back at the hospital, wasn't that...."

The word is extremely hard to say.

"Chemo," Dean says at last. "Right? That was, uh, chemo, right? Chemotherapy?"

"Yes," says Cas.

There's a moment of complete silence.

"For..." Dean starts.

The next word turns out to be even harder to say.

Dean finally manages to get out, "For, uh, for, is it, um, is it for cancer?"

"That's typically what chemotherapy is for," says Cas, in a very even tone. He's gazing straight ahead out the windshield now, fingers laced tightly around the little plant pot.

"I mean... that's what it is? That's... definitely what it is?"

"Yes," says Cas. He doesn't elaborate.

Dean had known perfectly well that's what it was, but it's terrible to hear the confirmation. It's like all the air has been sucked out of the car. Dean almost can't breathe for a moment, and he has to remind himself to take a long, slow breath, and keep his hands on the wheel, and focus just on steering the Impala.

Dean thinks, *We deal with the Mark of Cain. We deal with the Darkness. We deal with the Apocalypse. We can handle this. We can handle this. We'll find a way.*

The phone finally guides Dean onto another street that's a lot less trafficky, and soon they're making much better time, cruising past a long line of darkened auto shops and car dealerships. The whole area looks completely deserted but nonetheless Cas says, "You know, Dean, how about if you drop me off at the next corner." He gestures towards a weedy-looking, poorly lit sidewalk. "I can take a bus."

Dean's fingers tighten on the wheel, and he says, his voice suddenly a lot gruffer, "Okay, let's get something straight here. I'm not 'dropping you off' in the middle of nowhere in the freezing cold to take a bus when you just had chemo. Okay? And besides we're all of two minutes away now from
"Your motel. All right?" Dean whips the Impala around the next turn as quick as he can, hoping to shave just a few more seconds off the transit time. "We'll be there any second. Also I'm staying there too. At the motel. Tonight."

"Dean, no," Cas says, quite firmly. "No. I'd just be a... distraction. You should get back to your work. Besides, I sort of..." He hesitates. "My room works best for one person," he says. "There's not really room for anyone else."

Dean has to shove down a memory of sharing a hotel room with Cas in Flagstaff that one night, months ago now. He can't help picturing how happy Cas had looked, back then, when Dean turned up at his door.

"You don't have to share your room," says Dean. "You don't have to share. I didn't mean that. I'll get another room. I won't be in your way. But I'm not just 'dropping you off.' I'll get another room and stay and help."

"There'll be nothing for you to do," says Cas, a little stiffly. "You'd just be bored. I appreciate the offer, but I don't need any assistance beyond this ride." He takes a slightly uneven breath and adds, "I'll be fine."

"So just one more thing," says Dean, navigating one more rapid turn. "If you are not fine, then don't tell me that you're fine. Because, every single time you've told me you were fine? You were not fine. You ever notice you have a habit of that?"

Dean's aware, even as he's saying this, that the "I'm fine" thing is pretty much the Winchester way, actually, and he's expecting Cas to point that out. But Cas has gone silent.

Dean takes a breath. Now the awful "chemo" and "cancer" words have been spoken out loud, now that they're on this quiet darkened road, it's become a little easier to talk. "Cas, you should've told me," Dean begins. "You should've told us. Sam and me. You really should've. We could've been helping."

Cas doesn't say anything. Dean shoots him a glance and finds that Cas is leaning slouched against the Impala door now, with his hands still wrapped very tightly around the plant's pot. The wool hat has gotten slightly askew on his head, but he hasn't fixed it. He's staring out the side window with his jaw clenched.

"We thought you had a, uh... a girlfriend, actually," Dean confesses, with a sad little laugh. "And, c'mon, dude, you just let us believe it. You knew that's what we were thinking, didn't you? You knew we were off on the wrong track. And you just let us believe it."

"I realize that," Cas says. His voice has gone a little faint.

"Why didn't you tell us?" says Dean. "I mean... how bad is it? What kind is it? What have you tried? Have you asked the other angels? Have you talked to Crowley? Because if you—"

"Dean," Cas interrupts. "I can't talk about this now."

"Well, too bad, you've kind of got to," says Dean. "Because we're gonna figure it out, and there's gonna be a solution, I promise. We'll fix this, I swear. But you gotta talk to me, Cas. You can't hide this kind of thing. We gotta work on this together, dude. I know we can figure something out, I'm certain—"

"No, I mean I can't talk about this now, I mean I can't talk, I—" Cas pauses, sits up a little and suddenly shoves the little plant over toward Dean with one hand, pushing the side of the pot against
Dean's thigh. "Take this," says Cas, sharply.

Dean's confused at first. He slows the car as he glances down at the plant.

He realizes, then, that Cas is refusing the gift.

Cas doesn't want the plant.

"Okay," says Dean. "Okay, that's cool, that's totally cool, if you don't want it I'll just—"

"No, hold it, hold it," insists Cas. He's practically shoving the plant in Dean's lap now. Dean grabs it with one hand, even more confused now. Only when he glances over at Cas does he realize that Cas has gone pale, and that he's started sweating despite the chilly air. "Pull over," Cas says, his voice strangled, and now he's fumbling at the door saying, "Pull over, pull over, I'm going to be sick—"

Dean manages to pull over to the shoulder of the road just in time, and Cas barely gets the door half-open before he's retching out the door. It's hit him out of the blue, and it's powerful, a series of full-on retching spasms that are shaking him from head to foot. Dean catches a brief glimpse of a thin, watery vomit that's pouring out of Cas's mouth onto the ground outside. It sounds horrible, it looks horrible, and Dean's so startled by how suddenly it took over Cas that he can't even figure out what to do. At last he remembers to shove the Impala gear lever into Park and flip the blinkers on. Then for a long moment Dean's totally unsure whether he can best help Cas by just kind of waiting casually here in the driver's seat, acting like this is no big deal so as to help Cas laugh it all off later.... or whether Cas might actually need some physical assistance. Cas answers that question a second later by falling out the door.

Dean shoves the plant aside, bolts out of his own door and scrambles around the back of the car. Cas is on his hands and knees, still caught in a series of heaves that aren't even bringing anything up anymore, and he's half-straddling the puddle of vomit that's right outside the passenger door. Dean tries to help, hurrying over and reaching out to try to grab hold of Cas's shoulders to steady him, but Cas gasps out, "No—" and he shoves Dean away with one hand, surprisingly hard. He manages to scuttle on all fours around the puddle of vomit by himself, but he's so unsteady he almost faceplants into the gravel as he makes his way toward the back wheel. He's still half retching and Dean again tries to brace him by one shoulder, but once more Cas tries to shove Dean away, gasping, "No, Dean—"

But he no longer has enough strength to shove very hard. He ends up grabbing onto Dean's shirt instead, knotting his fingers into the front of Dean's shirt. Dean crouches next to him, holding on to Cas's upper arm with both hands, trying to brace him.

"You're okay," Dean tells him (though he's fairly sure this is not true). "You're okay. Just breathe. Breathe."

Then at last the worst of it has passed, though for several more moments Cas is still struggling to take a solid breath of air.

As soon as Cas can breathe again he starts apologizing. "I'm sorry," Cas gasps, as he releases Dean's shirt. "I'm sorry, Dean, I'm so sorry—" Now he's trying to get to his feet. "Sit a bit," Dean suggests, but Cas seems determined to stand, and he staggers up. Dean manages to get one arm around him, and wheels him around a little to prop his back against the Impala, where Cas braces his hands on his thighs, leaning half over. (Dean keeps his arm around Cas's back, and one hand on his shoulder too, in case Cas buckles again.)

"Dean, I'm sorry—" Cas says again. "I got some, I got some on—" He's still having a little trouble
breathing; there are abortive half-heaves interrupting his speech on about every other breath, and it's hard to understand what he's saying. Cas finally manages to get out, "On your, on your car, on the door." He's waving one hand at the open passenger door. "I got some on your car, I'm so sorry. Don't touch it—" He points. Dean looks at where he's pointing: there's a little splash of vomit on the very lower edge of the open passenger door.

For a moment Dean's actually hard-pressed not to laugh, for a dozen memories instantly come to mind of the many much worse things that have happened to the Impala over the years. For vomit, let's see, there'd been several times with seven-year-old Sammy getting carsick in the Impala, and there'd been twelve-year-old Dean with the flu, and later a very drunk fifteen-year-old Dean, and then again a few times in his twenties....

Not to mention all the blood and gore. Dean's swapped out the floor mats and scrubbed down the seat upholstery more times than he can remember. Entire seats have been changed out, door panels replaced.

Cas takes an gulping breath and says, in a sudden flow of words, "I'm so sorry, Dean, I'm sorry, I was hoping to get to the motel first, I was trying so hard not to throw up, this whole drive; it always hits around now, the other driver always has a bag, just in case, he knows I always get sick, there's always a bag—"

"It's okay," Dean says, patting Cas's shoulder uselessly. Cas just goes on apologizing. It's occurring to Dean now that the "other driver" probably also doesn't get lost and miss a critical exit and get stuck in traffic and take ages to get to the motel.

The other driver probably doesn't pester Cas to answer a ton of complicated questions about his diagnosis, either. Especially not right when Cas has just finished a round of chemo and is probably feeling his very worst.

The other driver also probably doesn't whip around turns too fast. Cas was already feeling sick, thinks Dean, and I started driving fast.

"I didn't want to tell you about it," Cas is going on, "and there's no bag in your car, and I didn't want to mess up your car, Dean, I'm so sorry, I was trying not to throw up, I was really trying—" Cas is trembling; whether it's shivers from the cold or something else Dean can't quite tell, but he's still got one arm around Cas's back and he can feel bouts of shaking that are running through Cas's ribcage. In fact Cas sounds like he's nearly on the verge of tears. And Dean, meanwhile, is having a moment of clarity. Dean's thinking, There's a problem with me being here.

The problem with me being here is, Cas wasn't expecting it. I totally messed up his routine. And now he's having to worry about me. But it's not about me. It's not about me at all.

With that thought comes a calmness.

"Can you stand on your own?" Dean asks. Cas nods, so Dean risks letting go of him for a few seconds to kick some dirt and gravel over the offending puddle of vomit, till it's fully covered up — enough so that Cas will be able to get over it safely to get back in the car. Cas, still leaning against the side of the car, watches this almost numbly.

"Can you walk?" says Dean, looking back at Cas. Cas nods again.

"Okay then, let's get you to that motel," Dean says, guiding him back to the passenger seat.
"I'm sorry, Dean," Cas says again, as he sinks down into the seat.

"Cas," says Dean, "Stop apologizing."

"There's some on the door," Cas says faintly, pointing again at the splash of bile-green vomit on the lower edge of the door. "Don't touch it," he adds. "I'll clean it up." With some effort he extracts a Kleenex from the pocket of his jacket (Dean immediately has a flashback to the piles of Kleenex in Cas's dresser) and now Cas is making a feeble effort to try to wipe the door clean. Dean says "Leave it. I'll clean it later."

"But, it's your door, it's the door of your car —"

"The door doesn't matter."

"It's the door of your car, Dean—"

The door doesn't matter," says Dean, and he's so intent on making this point clear to Cas that it comes out sounding almost angry. Cas blinks up at him, Dean takes a breath and says, forcing himself to soften his voice, "It's not a problem. I swear." Now Cas is just gazing up at him mutely, and Dean tries to think what the next step is. "Do you feel like you're gonna throw up again?" he asks Cas.

"Uh," says Cas. He's visibly trying to regroup, and he straightens up slightly in his seat, pulling another Kleenex out of his jacket pocket and wiping his mouth. "Not immediately," he says. "Usually I get more warning. It comes in waves."

"Okay, um—" Dean says. Long-ago memories of dealing with little carsick Sammy are resurfacing, and Dean thinks, Bag. He needs a bag. A bag to throw up in. And water to rinse out his mouth. Dean looks around at the sidewalk, as if a bag is going to magically appear out of nowhere, and it occurs to him to check the back seat of the Impala. There's often a liquor-store shopping bag or two sitting on the floor back there, and sure enough Dean soon spots, through the Impala window, a stray plastic bag that's partly wedged under the seat. He opens the rear passenger door and grabs it.

"Here's a bag just in case," says Dean, coming back around to Cas's door and handing him the plastic bag. Cas takes it with a tired nod, and Dean adds, "Soon as we get back to your motel you can rinse out your mouth, okay?" Cas nods again; he looks exhausted now, his face almost slack with fatigue. Dean shuts his door carefully, now thinking just, Bag. Rinse out his mouth. Then get him to bed.

Dean gets back in his seat and starts the car up, taking a critical look at Cas as he does so. Cas looks like he's marginally holding together, but he definitely seems exhausted. He's curled up against the door almost as far away from Dean as he can get. He can't even seem to really hold his head up, and he's avoiding Dean's eyes.

Apparently he's still able to argue, though. As soon as the car starts moving, Cas says, "When we get to my motel, I want you to just drop me off. I'm serious. Drop me off and be on your way. I'll be fine on my own, I promise." He adds, "You should get back to your case anyway."

"There's no case," says Dean. There seems to be absolutely no point anymore in sticking to the original story.
"What?" says Cas, glancing at him. "You said you had a case."

"There's no case."

"What about..." Cas pauses. "What about when you came to the Gas-n-Sip?"

"There was no case then either," says Dean. They're arriving at the Pineview Motel now, and Dean says, as he swings the Impala (gently, this time) into the motel's parking lot, "I just came to hang out a bit."

Cas only gazes at him, looking mostly just confused and tired. He finally says, as Dean's parking the car, "Well... regardless... you should... You should go back to Kansas, then." He regains some momentum and adds, more forcefully, "Go back to Kansas. You've got to understand, this always happens. The vomiting. Every time. Apparently my vessel reacts more strongly than average. I'm used to it. It's normal."

Dean nods. "Uh-huh," he says, cutting the engine. "So I'm just gonna run into the office and see if the motel has a room next door to yours, okay? I'll be right back." He pops the door open and has even started to get out when Cas stops him with a hand on his arm.

"You're not getting it," Cas says. There's a note of frustration in his voice now. "The first twenty-four hours after treatment are... challenging. The first thirty-six, really." His hand tightens on Dean's arm as he says, "It's worse than what you just saw. It's more than you will want to deal with, trust me on that. And I do not need assistance. I've done it on my own many times."

"Yeah, and you're not doing it on your own anymore," says Dean. Cas releases Dean's arm slowly, and he looks so dismayed that now it's Dean who feels compelled to apologize. "Sorry, Cas," Dean says. "I know you've been on some kind of crazy campaign to see this through by yourself, but that's over now. I'm staying. That's the way it's gonna be."

Cas gives a tired sigh, and slumps down a little in his seat.

"What's your room number?" says Dean. "So I can ask for a nearby room."

Cas doesn't answer immediately; he shifts his gaze to staring out the windshield again. But Dean sees one of his hands tighten on his knee, and realizes that Cas has already got his motel key in his hand. A key that no doubt has a room number on it.

Dean says, "Or I can just take a look at that key that you're holding. Or watch till you go to your door and use it." Dean thinks a moment and adds, "Or I can sneak a look at the guest register. Your choice."

Cas is still staring out the windshield. His expression has been, until now, primarily a mix of fatigue and worry, so it's a bit of a surprise when one corner of his mouth crooks up slightly, and he lets out a very faint huff of a laugh.

"Should have known..." Cas mutters to himself.

"Sorry, it comes with the package," Dean says.

"Yeah," says Cas, with a nod. "I've been worried about that." His eyes shift to the little plant, which has been sitting between them for the last part of the drive. Cas reaches over to pick it up.

"I wasn't returning the plant, by the way," Cas says, putting it back in his lap and looking down at it. "Earlier. I wasn't returning it."
"I kind of figured that out when you fell out the door," says Dean.

"I just didn't want to damage it," Cas says. "I was worried I was going to drop it, or..." He hesitates before confessing, "... or vomit on it. To be honest I was rather worried I was going to vomit on it. I don't want to hurt it. I, um, I really want to be sure it's okay." He pauses, still looking down at the plant. "It's going to need light, and water," he says, touching one of its leaves again with one hand. "Maybe some kind of fertilizer."

"I can take care of it if you want," says Dean.

"No, there's a place in my room," says Cas. One of his hands is still on the plant, and his other hand tightens on the motel key. "My motel room has a window. I can put it there. I think there's enough sunlight. I'd like to keep it there."

They both look at the little plant.

"Want me to help you carry it in?" offers Dean.

Cas looks up at Dean with a frown. "I am still capable of carrying a houseplant for twenty feet," Cas says. He actually sounds a little insulted — though he looks, in fact, barely able to carry a blade of grass, and twenty feet definitely seems like a stretch. But Dean accepts his statement with a nod.

"But... maybe you could get the door?" Cas suggests. "And I'll carry the plant."

Rather slowly, Castiel opens his hand and holds out the motel key, and Dean takes it.

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A/N - There's nothing like a real crisis to make Dean step up to the plate, right? Poor Cas, though; in addition to feeling terrible physically, he hates to be seen this way, and he especially hates knowing he's causing worry and stress for Dean. (And, soon, for Sam as well.) But at least it's making Dean realize what really matters. And at least Cas will no longer be alone.

Next week's a travel week for me, from Brazil back to the US, and a few days after I get back I have to have all my stuff packed up to start my cross-country drive to my new home. It's going to be a long series of 14 hour driving days from Maine to Arizona so I'm not sure if I'll be able to get another chapter ready too! If I miss a week (or even two) please forgive me. I'll try to get something up though, even if it's short.

If you liked this chapter please do let me know. :)
It's bedtime for angels

A/N - Sorry for the skipped week, and sorry in advance if I have to skip next week. I'm in the middle of my cross-country move and there's just been no free seconds at all! It's all pack-pack-pack, drive-drive-drive. I finally got from Brazil to Miami to Philadelphia to Boston to Maine, and then more pack pack pack, and then to New York and then Michigan and now I have a whole 2 days in Michigan in one place. I actually got some writing time in Ypsilanti yesterday and today, but even so I have only 1 scene for you. Just a tiny little bit of Dean and Cas's next hour together. (At this rate it'll take months of real time just to get through the next 24 hours in the fic!) At least it's something, right?

Each minute in this fic seems to take such thought and care... this is actually only one very short scene, but I've been thinking about it for two weeks. Hope it feels right to you.

Many thanks to Beezy's cafe in Ypsilanti for the free coffee refills yesterday and today; it helped me see Cas and Dean through this next little part of their journey together.

There's a "Do Not Disturb" sign on Cas's doorknob. Dean pushes it out of the way, unlocks the door and swings it open to find a simple and very plain motel room. Even by Winchester standards it's a pretty rundown place. Dean takes a step inside, looking around at the worn polyester bedcover on the bed, the thin-looking blanket that's heaped on the floor, the home-made curtains, the dim lighting, the beat-up dresser with the crooked drawers. Cheap vinyl flooring creaks a little underfoot; an old minifridge tucked under the kitchenette counter is chugging noisily as if it's on its last legs. It's not dirty, exactly, but it's a step or two below Dean's usual minimum standards (and his minimum standards are pretty low).

The room's a bit of a jumble, too. In addition to the blanket on the floor, Cas seems to have kicked all his pillows onto the floor too, during the previous night. And some of the furniture's in weird places, chairs shoved haphazardly here and there in the middle of the floor. There's even some pots and pans strewn around on the floor too, and a few towels scattered around too, and even some drinks — water bottles and the like. Dean's frowning as he takes it in; Cas isn't normally so messy.

"You know," Dean remarks, turning to look at Cas, "If you don't put the Do-Not-Disturb sign up on your door, there's this person called a 'housekeeper' who'll come and clean up."

"I didn't want to be disturbed," says Cas. He's paused in the doorway, holding the plant carefully with both hands. There's a rather wary look on his face as he watches Dean assessing the room.

"It's not bad," Dean says, trying to give him an encouraging smile, "Clean, at least." (It may not be tidy, but there's no actual dirt visible anywhere.) "And look at you — you actually made it twenty feet," Dean adds to Cas. "With the plant, even. Wanna sit down?" But even as Dean's saying this, Cas's head droops a little, and his eyes go a little unfocused, as if he's listening to something very far away. He's still standing in the doorway, and now he puts one hand on the doorframe to steady himself. He leans over slightly.
His face has suddenly got that pale, clammy look again.

"Cas?" Dean says sharply, taking a step closer. Cas silently holds out the plant. This time he doesn't have to say anything; Dean just grabs the plant, and Cas totters rapidly past Dean to the bathroom, one hand over his mouth now, and he goes inside and shuts the door.

There's the sound of the bathroom door locking, and then there's the sound of the shower starting up. The shower noise almost, but not quite, covers the sounds of the retching.

Dean's left standing in the middle of the room, surrounded by the scattered chairs and pillows, holding the little plant. All he can do is watch the closed — and locked — bathroom door. Watch, and listen.

*Long showers*, Dean thinks. *All those "long showers" he's been taking. For weeks now.*

After a moment of standing there uselessly, Dean sets the plant on a battered linoleum table in the corner of the room and tries to occupy himself by straightening the place up a little. He puts the chairs around the table, and tosses all the pillows and the blanket back onto the bed. But he can still hear the sounds that are coming from the bathroom, not quite drowned out by the shower, and as Dean's picking the scattered pans and water bottles and towels up off the floor he falters, staring at the locked bathroom door again.

It's always disturbing to hear someone be sick, of course. But it's extremely disturbing, really almost unbearably disturbing, knowing that it's Cas. And, of course, knowing why it's happening. As Dean slowly sets an armful of towels and pans in a heap on the kitchenette counter, he thinks, *An angel shouldn't have to go through this. It's not right.*

Not that this kind of thing is ever "right", of course. But it must be especially bewildering for an angel. Castiel's even tried to explain a few times how overwhelming human sensations feel to angels — and he was talking, then, about very ordinary human sensations. Routine ones like hunger, and sleepiness, and the minor pain of a scraped hand. Nothing like this.

*He didn't grow up with this*, Dean thinks. Cas has been injured, of course, he's been weak, in the past; he's even had a bout with that "stolen grace" and a few scant seconds of illness during that brush with Pestilence, but he's never been routinely sick in quite this way. Cas doesn't know what it's like to get colds, even; he's never had those childhood experiences of having fevers, or the flu; he's never been carsick like little Sammy was. He's never really known extended human illness of this sort.

Had he even understood what was happening to him, the first time he'd thrown up?

And Cas is in there alone.

And... he's locked the door to keep Dean out. Which stings a little, actually.

*Getting him to give me that motel key was only half the battle*, Dean thinks. *A tenth of the battle.*

There's finally a pause in the retching sounds.

"Cas?" Dean asks, taking a few steps closer to the door. There's no reply. Dean raps sharply on the door with his knuckles, now starting to think about picking the lock. Or, maybe, just kicking down the door. "Cas! You okay in there?"

"I'm fine," says Cas.
Dean actually rolls his eyes at this. "What did I just tell you, about the I'm-fines? I swear, you better unlock this door, or I'm—"

There's the sound of the toilet flushing. Then the shower stops.

The bathroom door unlocks and creaks open, and there's Castiel, pale and shaky but on his feet. Dean takes a moment to look him over; Cas is having to steady himself with one hand braced on the wall. He's breathing a little heavily, like he's been running, and he's wiping his mouth with another Kleenex. He tosses the Kleenex in the toilet and gives Dean a tired look. "I'm fine now," he says.

Dean ignores that comment. "You should drink some water," Dean says, thinking about how much fluid Cas has probably lost just in the last hour. "If you can keep it down, I mean. You're gonna get dehydrated." He glances over at the water bottles that are now lined up on the kitchenette counter, suddenly realizing that's exactly what they're for. (And he's starting to have an idea about why they'd been all over the floor.) "Come and sit down—" Dean says, and he starts to put a hand on Cas's shoulder, thinking to steer Cas to the little linoleum table so he can sit while he tries to drink something. But Cas wards Dean off with one hand, knocking his arm away sharply.

"Go get your room," Cas says. "Go. You said you'd get another room." His voice is almost stern as he insists, leaning heavily on the bathroom doorframe, "Go, Dean."

It brings to mind a memory of another time, years ago, when Cas had shoved Dean's hand away like that. Another time he'd told Dean to "go," in fact. Back in Purgatory, when Dean had been forced to leave him behind.

At that memory, of course Dean's immediately extra-determined not to leave him. "Okay, Captain Masochist, how about we make a deal?" says Dean. "The deal is, you let me help you for all of one second, and in return I'll help you not fall on your face. Cause you are not looking too steady on your feet there, fella." Again Dean reaches out a hand toward Cas's shoulder; again Cas bats Dean's hand away, and then he tries to sidle around Dean. But sure enough he's only able to take two wobbly steps on his own before his knees simply fold right under him and Cas sinks to the floor. He looks almost confused as this happens, looking all around him as if he can't figure out why he's going down.

"Whoa, whoa there—" says Dean, grabbing him ineffectually around the waist as Cas starts to crumple. It's not a good hold, and for some reason it also makes Cas flinch. He gives an unmistakable gasp of pain and scrabbles hurriedly at Dean's hands with both of his own. That makes Dean let go at once, and Cas slithers right through Dean's arms to the floor, his fall broken only slightly by Dean flailing to grab one of his hands, while Cas somehow gets hold of the side of Dean's jeans with his other hand. He slides down Dean's side, hanging onto the pocket of Dean's jeans, and lands with a soft thump on his knees, his legs folding almost neatly under him.

"You okay?" Dean says urgently, bending over Cas now with both hands on his shoulders. "What was that? Did I hurt you?"

"No... I'm fine... but where's..." Cas says hoarsely. He's looking around again. "Where's my chairs?"

"Oh, dammit," Dean says, glancing over at the chairs, which are now neatly tucked around the linoleum table. "I moved them. Sorry."

Shit. I moved the chairs. I moved the chairs.

He was expecting a chair right here, a chair to sit on, Dean realizes. But I moved the chairs.
The chairs hadn't been placed randomly at all. They'd been stationed strategically, hadn't they? Cas had put them in those places on purpose. Dean straightens up a little now, still patting Cas's shoulders but also now eyeballing the room layout as he tries to remember where the chairs had been.

Two of them had been placed about two paces apart in a little line between the bed and the bathroom door. Those had been marking a path to the bathroom, hadn't they? A third chair had been positioned halfway from the bed to the kitchenette sink.

Rest stations. Placed about every two steps.

Dean's starting to understood why the pillows had been on the floor, too. He glances over at the kitchenette counter, eyeing the towels and pans and bottles of water. There'd been a blanket on the floor too. All of those had been on the floor by the pillows. Not on the chairs; not always close to the chairs, even; on the floor.

The chairs had been rest stations for when he couldn't walk very far. And, rather horrifyingly, Cas had also laid out a crawling path too. The pillows and the blanket and water bottles, set out every few yards along the floor; that had been a crawling path, for when he was too weak to even walk. And the pots and pans had been to throw up in, probably.

The thought of Cas setting all this up beforehand, putting the chairs in their positions, setting the pillows on the floor... buying the water bottles in advance.... The thought of him planning for it, preparing for it, is awful to contemplate. When had he put it all in place? Last night? This morning? He must have adjusted the arrangement over the weeks, refining his preparations as the months went by....

_I moved his chairs, I moved his pillows, thinks Dean. I moved everything. I'm messing it all up._

"Okay, Cas, um," says Dean, a little hoarsely. "It's bedtime for angels, I think. And I'll put the chairs back, and the other stuff. I'm sorry. I didn't know." Dean crouches by Cas's side, delicately maneuvers one of Cas's arms over his shoulders, and carefully puts one arm around Cas's back. He's very conscious now about Cas's bruises and sore spots. "Tell me if this hurts," Dean says, but Cas just mutters the inevitable "I'm fine" and struggles to his feet, with Dean's cautious assistance. But then Cas says, in a rough whisper, as Dean half-drags him over to the bed, "Don't... Don't help me. You can't."

"Cas, come on," says Dean. He's so rattled now, both from having apparently hurt Cas a minute ago, and also from the new, terrible mental image of Castiel methodically setting out those pillows in that little row on the floor, that Dean's getting almost angry. They reach the bed, where Dean deposits Cas, as gently as he can, on the edge of the mattress. Cas sits there in a little heap, gets his breath and looks up at Dean.

"I'm fine," says Cas, and Dean has to laugh.

"This is ridiculous," says Dean. "You gotta let me help you. And you gotta tell me if there are things I'm doing that are gonna hurt."

"Dean, I don't need assistance," Cas insists. "If I need help I'll call you." He makes an effort to push himself a little more upright, bracing himself with one hand, but he looks positively woeful anyway; he's sitting all hunched, half-curl-ended, his free hand clutching the scarf that's still around his neck (as if he's feeling cold) and he's shivering again. "I have my phone," he insists. "I'll call. I'll text. You should go."

"Cas, forget it, I'm staying with you," says Dean, as he drags the three chairs back to approximately
their original locations.

"You can't be near me," Cas says insistently, shaking his head.

"Dude, you can barely walk!" Dean says, throwing a couple of pillows on the floor in what he hopes are roughly the right positions. Then he grabs a water bottle and a pan from the kitchenette counter, and sticks both in Cas's hands. Cas takes them silently, looking up at Dean with a truly exhausted look on his face. Dean says, "Look, I'm not gonna leave, you gotta get that through your skull."

"You're not getting it," Cas says, almost glaring at Dean now. "I'll be sick. Again. Many times, tonight. Look, you might... you might..." He hesitates, his eyes flicking over Dean's face, and he seems to recognize Dean's stubborn expression. Cas gives an exasperated sigh. "You might get some on you, Dean," he finally says.

"And so what?" says Dean. (Sure, the thought is a little gross, but no way is Dean going to let Cas be the one who has to clean the stuff up.) "If you get sick, I'll help you clean it up. I've dealt with way worse, believe me."

"But it's full of the drugs!" Cas bursts out, looking up at him in real dismay. "I'm full of the drugs! Don't you see?"

Dean blinks at him.

"It's full of the drugs," Cas repeats, with a pained look toward the bathroom, and another glance out toward the parking lot where the Impala is... and the Impala's soiled door, Dean remembers. Cas seems reluctant to say the next few words, but finally he comes out with, "The... the vomit. It's full of the drugs. The chemotherapy drugs. It's toxic. You can't touch it."

This hasn't occurred to Dean at all, and he stares at Cas blankly. Cas lets out a heavy sigh, puts the pan and the water bottle down at his side and points at himself emphatically. "I'm full of the drugs. Don't you understand? The chemotherapy drugs are all throughout my whole vessel right now, Dean, my, my, my body—" (It's odd to hear Cas use the phrase "my body." He's always just said "vessel" before.) "My whole body's toxic right now," Cas says. "I'm toxic. It's running all through me right now, it's in my blood! If you get any of my bodily fluids on you, any at all, if any even gets on your skin, it can make you sick too, Dean. Aaron warned me about it."

Dean can only blink at him again. This is a real health risk? Dean's never even heard about it. "They warned me," Cas repeats. He's breathing rather heavily again; it's clearly costing him some effort to talk this much. He's now really having to brace himself with one hand just to remain mostly upright and he's again clutching the scarf tightly around his neck with the other hand, but he manages to lift his head enough to look Dean straight in the eye. "At the clinic. Dr. Klein warned me: Any caretakers have to wear medical gloves. I can't let you get sick too, Dean, I can't, I don't want you to feel like this, ever. I couldn't bear that. You have to keep your distance. Please. Go get your room, and stay there. I'll call if I need you."

_He's trying to protect me_, Dean realizes.

_He's forgotten something._

_He's forgotten that Sam and I know how to keep ourselves safe._ They've spent their whole lives dealing with bodies, after all. And "bodily fluids," of all sorts.

_He's also forgotten that I'm not that easy to order around._
"For how long?" Dean asks.

"W-what?" says Cas, blinking up at him.

"How long are you toxic? The drugs don't stay in you forever, right?"

Cas gazes up at him for a long moment. "Twenty-four hours," he finally says. "That's what they said. About twenty-four hours. For the type of chemo I'm on."

"That's all?" says Dean, relieved. "Just the first twenty-four? That's it?"

Cas nods mutely, looking up at him. He looks almost like a little kid right now, what with the way he's sitting there all curled up, gazing up wide-eyed at Dean.

"Okay," says Dean. "I've got gloves. This is not a problem. I'll use gloves for twenty-four hours."

Cas blinks. "You've got... medical gloves?"

"In the trunk," says Dean. Now Cas looks doubtful, and Dean reminds him, "It's part of the gig, Cas. Morgues. Examining bodies. Digging up graves. Cleaning up the Impala after, y'know, beheading somebody or whatever. We've always got a few boxes of gloves in the trunk, some my size and some Sam's." And as soon as Dean says Sam's name, he remembers, *Sam doesn't know.*

*Sam still doesn't know. And I'm going to have to tell him.*

*I gotta call him right away.*

All Dean's thoughts stall a moment then, and he has to almost shake himself to table that problem for a while and get back on track. "That the only reason you want me gone?" Dean asks Cas. "That why you keep shoving me away? So, no problem, I've got gloves."

But Cas's eyes shift a little; his gaze slides away from Dean's face to the floor. Dean cocks his head, narrowing his eyes as he watches Cas's expression. Cas glances to the side, his mouth tight. It's not the Cas-is-about-to-be-sick-again look, Dean decides, after a moment's study. It's more the classic Cas-is-hiding-something look.

"What else?" Dean demands.

Dean waits through a long pause. He's aware, as he's standing there, that Cas is truly exhausted, and really needs to rest, but Dean's also increasingly certain that there's something else that Cas is not telling him. Something, that is, that's still preventing Cas from letting Dean help. So Dean waits, and finally Cas looks back up at Dean almost sheepishly and says, with an air of confessing something slightly embarrassing, "I also don't want you.... associated... with this. With any of this."

"Associated?" Dean repeats slowly, trying to figure out what Cas means. Now Cas is staring down at the floor with an look on his face that's downright bashful.

"Your... your..." Cas begins, and at last he gives a sigh and waves one hand up at Dean, at Dean's jacket and then at his hair. "Your scent," he says. "Your odor. Your smell. The smell of your jacket, your car, your hair.... all of it." Then Cas adds, apparently thinking this is going to clarify everything, "Olfactory conditioning."

"Olfactory... what?"

"Olfactory conditioning," Cas repeats, and, seeing the blank look on Dean's face, he tries to explain.
"I get so very... so... nauseated," Cas says. "It's so strong, Dean. And it's such... a completely horrible sensation. So terrible. I'd had no idea, before, how awful it can feel. It's worse than pain. And, Dr. Klein warned me, if there are... distinctive... tastes, odors, scents, around me, when I'm feeling like this, then, later, those odors, they, um...." He hesitates a moment, glancing down at the water bottle at his side. (Plain water, Dean notices now. The only drinks that Cas has in the room are just bottles of plain water. There's nothing flavored.) "The problem is, you see, later..."

Dean's getting it now. "Later those smells can make you feel sick too? All by themselves?"

Cas nods. "It's already happened with some foods. The hot dogs.... Actually I got worried it would happen with your hamburgers too. It hasn't, but I stopped eating them just in case. I don't want to stop liking them. And, you see...." Castiel pauses for a moment, and then, slowly, he looks up at Dean. He seems to have gotten over the shyness, for now he looks Dean right in the eye, and he says, very simply, "You have a scent that I like."

Dean just looks at him.

Cas explains, "Your jacket. Your car. Your, your, cologne, maybe, I'm not sure what it is, but it's you. It's your scent. I don't want it associated with this."

"Okay...." says Dean, as it sinks in. "Okay. I think I get it...."

Cas nods. Clearly he thinks he's made his point, for he seems to let himself collapse now. He mutters, "So you see, you have to leave," and with that he just folds right over onto his side on the bed, without taking off his jacket or scarf (or the hat, of course) and without even bothering to get his feet fully up on the bed. He ends up slumped on his side with his legs still dangling off the side of the bed, blinking blearily at the little houseplant that's sitting on the table.

Dean wants to help Cas take off his shoes, but he's now intensely aware of precisely how far he's standing from Cas's nose. There's a distance of four feet or so separating them right now; is that enough? The thought of Cas actually maybe feeling nauseated, in the future, just from Dean's very presence, is a truly frightening idea. Which way is the air circulating in the room? There's a little room heater installed in one wall of the motel room and it's blowing warm air around, and it's suddenly become very important to determine whether Dean is standing upwind or downwind of Castiel.

I gotta help him anyway, Dean realizes. I absolutely have to.

At least Cas doesn't seem to be feeling very nauseated right at the moment— he's just gazing at the plant now, almost calmly, and he's breathing more evenly — so at least Dean gingerly inches just close enough to reach down to take one of Cas's shoes off, and then the other. Cas lets out a soft sigh as Dean does this, but he says nothing; his eyes drift to Dean for a moment, and then he returns to looking at the plant. Dean carefully lifts his feet up on the bed, still oddly aware of the exact distance from his position at Cas's feet to Cas's nose. Then, gently, Dean shakes out the blanket over Cas.

Throughout all this, Dean's thinking about angels, and their exceptional senses, and about how good Cas's sense of smell has always been. Even when Cas has been mostly mortal he's always had that extra-sharp hearing... and that extra-keen sense of smell.

And Dean's also thinking about how Cas keeps simultaneously shoving Dean away and yet also (often mere seconds later) grabbing onto him again.

And then Dean remembers about werewolves.
Werewolves track people by scent. They’re extraordinarily good at it. Better than angels, even; Dean's pretty sure werewolves have got to have the best scenting capabilities of all. Yet even so, there'd been that one time when Dean had worn another person's jacket to cover his own scent, and it had actually worked. He'd actually managed to sneak up on a pack of werewolves successfully.

The jacket trick worked for the werewolves; could it work for an angel?

*I'll change all my clothes,* Dean thinks, still standing a careful four feet away as he watches Cas's eyes drift shut. *And take a shower. No cologne, and I won't use my usual shampoo or aftershave or anything like that, and I'll switch out of my usual clothes... definitely a different jacket.... Something with a strong smell. But something that's not MY smell. If he imprints on some smell I'm gonna make sure as hell it's not gonna be mine.*

*And there's the gloves, too. With any luck Cas'll just end up hating the smell of exam gloves.*

*But even if he does end up hating my smell, I'm staying anyway.* That much is obvious.

Because it's not about Dean, after all. And it's not about what Dean wants. It's really not.

Cas's hands close on the edge of the blanket and he pulls it tighter around his chest. "Go, Dean," he mutters.

"I'll go," agrees Dean this time. "But I'll be right back. Will you be okay for, like, twenty minutes on your own?"

"Been doing this for *months* on my own," whispers Cas, his eyes still closed. He sounds barely awake, but what he says is true, of course. As Dean slips out the door with Cas's room key in his hand and as he gets in the Impala, as he spins the car out of the parking lot on a very hasty jacket-shopping expedition, he knows that it's true: Castiel has been doing this for months, all alone.

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*A/N - I have hopes of getting a bit written in motels on Mon & Tues nights, and hopefully having at least 1 more scene for you next Friday. But there might have to be another two-week skip since my drive doesn't finish till Thurs and then I have to move into my new house immediately on Fri. If you don't see anything on Friday, keep checking in over the weekend. (And yes, I've got a whole Winchester Road-Trip spotify playlist fired up for the road trip, thanks to the fine folks at fandomnatural.)*

*Thanks for your patience, and thanks for sticking with this so far. Hope it feels worth it.*
You'll never go to a frat party again

A/N - I finally reached my destination! 2700 miles of driving, all of it solo. 2/3 of it was on the original Route 66, with classic rock playing constantly on Spotify to put me in a Supernatural frame of mind. :) (I went past so many classic old Rte 66 motels and diners, and even saw a museum exhibit about Rte 66, which even included Kerouac's hand-drawn cover illustration for the original manuscript of "On The Road", the novel that inspired the Sam and Dean characters in Supernatural. Suffice to say I now have SO MANY IDEAS for Supernatural Route-66-based road trip fics!) Anyway it's taken a while to get internet running in my new place but it's finally running now and I got a couple days of writing time. Here's the first couple bits. The next piece after this is nearly done and will probably be posted tomorrow.

I should call Sam, Dean thinks. The Impala's paused at a red light that seems to be lasting a while, and Dean's hastily looking up the location of the nearest stores on his phone. He finds a Target nearby that's still open, and then tries to place a quick call to Sam. The traffic light's still red, the pedestrian crossing light hasn't even started blinking yet, and it'll only take a second to hit the Call button and put the phone on speaker. Then he can talk to Sam while he drives. But Dean hesitates for a long moment, finger hovering over the Call button, and then a car behind him is honking. Somehow the seconds have slipped away and the traffic light has turned green already.

Not really enough time right now to explain things anyway, thinks Dean, tossing the phone on the passenger seat as he accelerates through the intersection. The rest of the drive only takes a couple of minutes and then Dean's finding a spot in the Target parking lot. Again he knows, as he gets out of the Impala and begins striding rapidly toward the big front doors, that he could really take just one quick minute to call Sam. He's actually got his phone in his hand again now and could easily place the call. But he doesn't. It still seems there's not enough time. And of course, Castiel is sick and alone, all alone, back in that depressing motel room, and he's going to need some help tonight (whether or not Cas'll admit it), and that means Dean needs to get this errand done as quickly and efficiently as possible. So there's no time to call Sam.

I'll call Sam later, Dean decides.

But he knows, as he shoves his phone in his pocket, that he's avoiding the call, just because he's dreadning having to break the news. He's even starting to feel a qualm of guilt about it. But nonetheless the phone stays in his pocket as he grabs one of the big red Target carts.

Just buy some random weird-smelling stuff and get back the motel pronto, Dean thinks, rolling the cart along at such a fast pace that he nearly mows down a few people who are trundling ahead of him with a cart laden with food. He veers around them and almost hits another cart, which is also full of food, and then realizes that the whole store seems unusually crowded. Especially the grocery section, which seems crammed with people pushing carts that look totally overloaded with mounds of potatoes and vegetables and.... turkeys, and cans of pumpkin....

Oh, right, Dean finally remembers. Thanksgiving. It's Monday night of Thanksgiving week. One of the busiest food-shopping days of the entire year.

Dean hesitates, looking around at the chattering crowds of people. They're mostly in family groups,
usually with one adult manning an overloaded cart while others dart off on special errands. Small kids are zooming around, sent off on targeted single-ingredient missions to hunt down missing items like butter or flour, while other people are going all the way to the kitchen section to grab the last of the pie plates and roasting pans, or to the fabrics area to get extra towels for all their houseguests.

Dean wastes a good fifteen seconds just watching all the people rushing around. But it's like he's watching a stage play; the whole holiday seems irrelevant. The festive Thanksgiving families who are flowing around Dean, carrying their rolling pins and their bags of cranberries and boxes of stuffing mix this way and that, seem to belong to another universe.

All that really matters, the only thing that's real, is that Castiel is back in that motel room alone.

Dean pulls his cart into a U-turn and heads to the other side of the store, away from the food area and the holiday crowd.

There's relative calm in the bath-products section, and the shampoo aisle turns out to be totally deserted. Dean wanders past shelves of bubble bath, shampoos, and conditioners, as well as dozens of other bath products he's never really noticed before: "body washes," "face scrubs," "body butter". He's not even sure what these all are (all kinds of strange new stuff seems to have appeared over the last decade or so, while Dean's been busy with Hell and Purgatory and various other things). He picks up one bottle after another, unsure what they're for exactly, and totally uncertain what to get. It's becoming clear that this "weird-smelling things" shopping mission might take more thought, and more time, than he'd planned.

Funny that Cas noticed how I smell at all, Dean thinks, as he picks up some "coconut-vanilla body butter", unscrewing its cap to take an experimental whiff.

He probably just noticed because angels have such a good sense of smell, he thinks, as he sniffs a "grapefruit and gardenia body wash."

Well, that and the fact that he's definitely been around me during some stinky times. Dean's always taken some pride in trying to keep himself clean and well-groomed, even when doing those tiring cross-country journeys in the lowest tier of motels. It's important, in this nomad life, to take care of oneself; it keeps spirits up. (Not to mention that a professionally tidy appearance helps sell the FBI role.) But he has to admit that there've been times when certain personal hygiene habits had to be tabled for a while. Purgatory definitely comes to mind; Cas must've got a noseful of some pretty foul odors back then.

These days, though, Dean's hopeful that his "scent" is only the everyday faint mixture that every person carries, that inevitable, barely-noticeable blend of bath and laundry products, maybe with a dash of cologne on top.

Along with that unmistakable hint of individual identity.

Cas's exact words had been, You have a scent that I like. Dean can practically hear it again in his mind.

Cas likes Dean's scent. Enough, apparently, to have actually done some planning about it. Planning aimed at ensuring that he'll continue to like it.

You have a scent that I like, Dean hears again, and now he's getting embarrassed at how much he wants to take a little time to think some more about this phrase; how pleasant the idea is, how much it somehow seems to warm his heart, even despite all the awful things that have happened today. How much he'd like to sit down and just contemplate what else it might mean.
Focus, dude, Dean orders himself. He picks up a "bath foam" at random and finds it's strawberry-scented. But it'd be a pity if Cas ended up hating the scent of strawberries, wouldn't it? What if he wants to eat strawberries later? Or coconuts, or grapefruits, for that matter. Dean puts down the strawberry-scented bath foam, finally realizing that nothing in this entire aisle is going to be suitable for a scent that Cas might end up hating. Everything's scented with flowers, or spices, or foods. Nice things, like cinnamon and apples and lavender. These are all good smells, from good things, things that Cas might conceivably want in his life later.

Later. There's a certain optimism to this whole scent-shopping expedition, actually; it implies that there will, in fact, be a "later" to worry about.

Come to think of it, if Cas has been avoiding Dean primarily (or at least partly) to avoid scent-associations, that means Cas himself has been planning all along that there will be a "later," doesn't it?

This is an incredibly encouraging thought. Especially since Cas hasn't dropped any hints at all yet about diagnosis — or, even more critically, prognosis.

*Cas has been planning for a 'later,'* Dean thinks, and there's a little more bounce in his step now as he starts cruising through the rest of the store, now looking for non-flowery scents.

Soon he's completed a circuit of the store and is staring down at a cart that's loaded with a very oddball assortment of every "weird-smelling", or least unique-smelling, item that Dean could find. The assemblage includes a bag of little cedar chips to store with one's clothes, a box of mothballs, some sunblock, a bottle of insect repellent, a citronella candle, a few sticks of incense, a tin of shoe polish, a bag of curry powder, a few bags of odd-smelling teas, and nearly a dozen other things. *But what if he wants to polish his shoes someday?* Dean thinks, picking up the shoe polish, and then the cedar chips. *What if we end up in a cedar forest on some hunt?* And then, as Dean's sifting through the jumble of objects, he catches a strange whiff of tea and mothballs together. It's a peculiar blend that somehow smells like neither one but, rather, like a new third thing, and it occurs to Dean then that maybe he could create a new and uniquely weird aroma simply by mixing a few of these unusual scents together. Maybe if he makes a mixture, a mix that Cas is unlikely to encounter anywhere else, then any single component of it won't cause Cas too much trouble in the future.

Dean buys a random assortment of the weird-smelling things, along with a quick selection of soaps and shampoos (mostly just distinguished by the fact that they're not Dean's usual brands) and a new set of clothes. Soon he's heading out of the store laden with Target shopping bags, and ten minutes later he's back at the motel.

He still hasn't called Sam.

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Dean goes immediately to check on Cas, knocking on the door lightly first and then using Cas's motel key to pop the door open and peek inside.

Cas turns out to be up again; he's sitting on one of the chairs that Dean had hastily placed back in position, apparently on his way back toward the bed from yet another bathroom trip. When Dean first catches sight of him, Cas is sitting very slumped in the chair, his head down, and he's picking half-heartedly at the cap of the water bottle.
There's something awfully disturbing about the sight of Cas sitting there in that chair all by himself, in the middle of this barren, dimly lit motel room, just staring at the water bottle. But at least Cas seems more alert this time, and he lifts his head when he hears Dean at the door, and even puts a hand up to his wool hat, apparently checking that it's still in place. (He's still got his jacket and scarf on, too.)

"I'm back," Dean announces. "Hey, you trying to get back to the bed? Want some help?" Dean takes a step forward, but Cas shakes his head and holds his hand out in a "stop" gesture, as if to bar Dean from coming closer.

"Didn't I tell you?" complains Cas. "You have to stay away."

"Yeah, about that," says Dean. "I got a plan." He raises the Target bags with a grin. Cas stares at them blankly.

And then Cas sniffs the air.

"What is that... smell?" says Cas. He straightens up a little in his chair, putting the water bottle down in his lap, and he sniffs the air again. "Is that... What is that?"

Dean grins at him. "It's not me, I'll tell you that much."

"It's certainly not," Cas agrees. He's looking puzzled now, as he sniffs the air a third time, and he says, "It's rather like... a giant ground sloth? Or something like it. But they're extinct."

"Hold that thought," says Dean. "I'm just gonna go take a quick shower and change my clothes, okay? You good for another fifteen minutes?"

Cas nods tiredly. "I'm not going anywhere," he says. He then manages to stand on his own, and even totters the two remaining steps to the bed on his own — though he immediately collapses onto his side again once he gets there. Dean risks taking a few steps closer, just enough to help Cas get his feet up on the bed once more, and then Dean picks up all the Target bags, slips back out the door, and hurries to the motel office to book a second room.

The girl in the motel office says there is indeed a room available that's right next to Cas's, so Dean books it immediately. It seems likely that Dean'll be spending much of the night in Cas's room, actually, but a second room seems like a good idea anyway. Mostly because it'll provide a second bathroom, one that Dean can use while Cas retains exclusive use of his own (which it seems like Cas might need).

The new room turns out to be furnished much like Cas's — cheap vinyl flooring, polyester bedspread and another creaky minifridge. But Dean barely notices the details; all that he's concerned about is the shower. He plunks all his Target bags on one of the beds, upends the bag that has the bath products and most of the new clothes, and rips the tags off everything. Then he strips down to take a quick, but thorough, shower, scrubbing himself all over with the new brands of soap and shampoo. None of his final soap-and-shampoo selections are strongly scented (the strongest scent will come later, on an item of clothing), but they're all different brands than usual. After the shower Dean continues his scent-transformation with new brands of deodorant, toothpaste and mouthwash. He tops it all off with a light spritz of Axe body spray (which is absolutely not Dean's usual brand), muttering under his breath, "Sorry, Cas, you'll never be able to go to a frat party again."
Then Dean pulls on his new clothes: underwear, jeans, socks and a new plain t-shirt. All of these have only the faint, bland, slightly chemical scent common to factory-made clothing (presumably it's the smell of Chinese factories, or maybe of trans-Pacific container ships).

Last of all Dean pulls out his piece-de-resistance. It's a cotton hoodie sweatshirt, rather than a jacket; the hoodie seemed like it might soak up new aromas more quickly than a jacket, and it'll also be easier to wash if there are any particularly messy bathroom episodes. The hoodie's been spending the last half hour wadded up in a plastic shopping bag along with a mixture Dean had created on the spot, right there in the Target parking lot: two mothballs, a few cedar chips, several crushed cilantro leaves, a single shredded menthol cigarette, a tiny spritz of insect repellent, a dash of yellow curry powder and a handful of smoky-flavored Lapsang Souchong tea leaves (it was the weirdest-smelling tea Dean could find). Just a dash of each scent; the idea is not to be overwhelming, but to be unique.

Dean shakes the hoodie out over a pan from the kitchenette. All the loose ingredients fall into the pan, and when Dean takes a whiff of the resulting smell that remains on the hoodie, it turns out the overall aroma actually isn't bad. But it's certainly unusual, which is just what Dean was hoping. Best of all, it smells less like any one of its components and more like its own thing. Giant ground sloth, apparently, Dean thinks. Huh. Who knew. Maybe giant ground sloths had a thing for Lapsang Souchong tea.

Dean's also pleased to discover that once everything's been shaken out, the hoodie doesn't smell extremely strong; it's just a faint (but distinct) aroma. Hopefully it'll strike that balance between covering up Dean's own scent while at the same time not completely overwhelming poor Cas.

"All right, here goes nothing," says Dean out loud. "Eau de Giant-Ground-Sloth." He pulls on the hoodie, and then grabs his keys to head out to the Impala to fetch a handful of nitrile exam gloves. He's halfway out the door when his phone buzzes with a text. It's Sam.

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Sam's text reads:

So what'd you get for the gift?

Dean stares at the text for a long moment, and then he types, slowly:

A plant

... and he presses Send, even though he knows he should be calling Sam right away.

What kind of plant? replies Sam a moment later.

Once again, Dean finds himself not placing the phone call that he most definitely should be placing. Instead he texts back:

Potted houseplant. Don't know what it is

Sam asks, From the Home Depot?

Yeah, Dean replies.

Then Dean finds himself typing out:
He types it very slowly, one careful letter at a time. He sends that, and then composes another one and sends it too:

**And bees on the side. Painted bees I mean**

Dean's actually grumbling to himself, "Frickin' call him, you coward," by the time he sends off the text about the bees. But he still doesn't call, and a moment later Sam replies with:

**Not bad. They like it? What's she like?**

Dean stares at that message for a long moment.

He's keenly aware, as the seconds slowly tick by, that every second that elapses without Dean telling Sam exactly what's going on is one more second of relative peace and happiness for Sam. Because Sam has actually been pretty happy for the last couple months. Maybe not shouting-for-joy happy exactly, maybe a little bored even, but the days at the bunker have been mellow and calm, and Sam's been acting relaxed and comfortable. It's been really nice seeing him so relaxed, in fact.

But the moment Dean tells him about Cas, Sam's peace and happiness will end.

Then Dean thinks, *I bet this is exactly what Cas was thinking when he didn't tell us: Don't burst their bubble.*

*He didn't realize we would WANT to know.*

Dean pulls up Sam's number and, biting his lip, he punches the Call button.

Sam answers with, "I was just relieved you didn't give him girlie mags. Though I guess you wouldn't dare with Erin on the scene, huh?"

The cheerful joking tone in Sam's voice knocks Dean into silence.

"Dean? You there?"

"Yeah," says Dean, and he starts pacing in a small circle around the empty motel room.

"So what's she like? Did you meet her?"

"Um. Listen. I, uh." Dean stalls a moment, then stops walking, sits down on the bed, takes a breath, and finally manages to say, "I got some news. About Cas." Dean knows, as he's speaking, that the tone of his own voice is not totally normal. Every word's coming out clipped and tense and low.

There's absolute silence for a long moment. Dean closes his eyes, thinking, *That. That right there. That was the moment that the bubble burst.*

"What news," says Sam finally, and the cheerful joking tone is completely gone, as Dean knew it would be. In fact Sam's voice is now pitched about a half-octave lower than usual. Dean realizes then that Sam's gone straight to the worst possibility.

"No, no, not that," Dean says hastily. "He's alive. He's alive." *For now,* adds an evil little voice in the back of his head.

"What, then?" says Sam. He sounds only very slightly relieved. "Lucifer? What is it?"
"No, not Lucifer," Dean says. He tries to say *Cas has cancer* but somehow it won't come out, and Sam starts filling the silence with random guesses:

"Rowena?" asks Sam.

"No, not Rowena," says Dean.

"Crowley?" says Sam next.

"No... it... uh...."

"The angels? Did Cas get stabbed or something?"

"No... no stabbing... He's not hurt... He's right here actually... But...."

"Well then, what is it? Amnesia again? A coma? Something about his grace again?"

"No, nothing like that. It's.... " says Dean. Still the words won't come. Sam's quiet now, waiting, and finally Dean gets out, "We had it all wrong, Sam. Cas doesn't have a girlfriend. Or a boyfriend."

"Oh," says Sam, "Okay...." Now he sounds confused, and belatedly Dean remembers that Sam had never been thinking about Cas having a boyfriend in the first place. Sam never knew about the whole "Aaron" thing.

"Okay... so.... " Sam says. "Um, what are you saying exactly?"

"He, uh, the 'Erin' that Cas was talking about, it's spelled A-A-R-O-N. It's a he, and he's a doctor and, he's, uh... he's Cas's oncologist."

There's silence for a moment.

"He's Cas's what?" says Sam.

"Oncologist," says Dean. "It's a kind of doctor, y'know, it's a doctor who treats—"

*I know what an oncologist is," says Sam, in a heated rush, as if he's trying to cut Dean off before Dean can say the word.

But it has to be said. "He's got cancer," Dean says. He takes a breath and says it again: "Cas has cancer. That's what's been going on. That's what all his trips are about. He's on chemo. He's been on it for months. Three weeks on and a week off. I tracked him down and I found him in this, um, chemo treatment ward, in a hospital here in Denver. That's why he's been wearing the hat. That's why he's losing weight, that's why he's changed what he's eating, that's why he's been doing all the trips."

There's a very long pause. Dean can hear Sam breathing; it's a series of stiff jerky breaths, as if Sam keeps trying to say something but can't quite come up with any words.

Sam finally comes out with a rough, "And he didn't *tell us?""

"I know," says Dean.

"He *let us think it was a girlfriend?"

"Yeah. Kind of a sucker punch, isn't it. I found out a couple hours ago."
"I don't believe it," says Sam. "He... he didn't frickin' tell us? For months? Dean, I... are you serious?" Apparently Sam doesn't even need to hear the answer to that, for he goes right on with a series of the inevitable questions: "What kind? What stage? How bad? What's the prognosis?"

"I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know? Have you asked him?"

"He's kind of puking his guts out right now. I guess this is the worst night for him, right after chemo. Didn't seem like the best time to put him through an interrogation."

"Fuck," says Sam. It's a word he doesn't often use, and it comes out in a kind of gasping breath, as if he wants to cry. "I can't believe this! After everything...."

"I'm gonna stay with him tonight," says Dean.

"Yeah, yeah, of course," says Sam, like this is so obvious it didn't need saying. He pauses a moment, and when he finally speaks again, his voice is a little more controlled. Dean knows then that Sam has already switched gears into planning. "I'm coming out too," says Sam. "Where are you guys?"

"Pineview Motel, on Colfax, in Denver," Dean tells him, and it's amazing what a rush of relief it is to know that Sam's on board now. Sam can start on the research, Sam'll be here soon, Sam's always been good at medical stuff, Sam'll be a huge help — but then Dean remembers how long the drive is. It took Dean all day to get here, in fact, and it's late now. So Dean adds, "But don't start tonight. Come tomorrow morning."

"No, Dean, I could start driving right now. I'll just grab one of the other cars and —"

"And drive right through the night till five a.m.? Last thing we need is you wiping out pulling an all-night drive alone," says Dean. He means it; all those deadly everyday things that Dean's had the luxury of ignoring, like car crashes, like cancer, are suddenly seeming a lot more terrible, and a lot more likely, than he's really ever realized before. "Start in the morning," Dean says. "And you know what, now that I think about it, get a rental car that you can leave here in Denver. Otherwise we'll end up with three cars here. But you know what would be awesome: can you do some research tonight before you go to bed? Especially on chemo side effects? Like, what to do for chemo patients? And let me know if there's anything I really need to know? He warned me about needing gloves, which I totally didn't know, and, Sam, he's way sicker than I was expecting. Can you check up and see, like... how sick is normal?"

"On it," says Sam. "I'll text you with what I find out. You with him now? Can I talk to him?"

"He's next door. Barely able to talk though."

"Don't tire him out then. But tell him I said hi," says Sam. Then he adds, "More than hi. You know what I mean."

"Yeah," says Dean, "Got it."

"Okay, you get back to him then," says Sam. He adds one more heartfelt "Fuck," and heaves a tired sigh. "Well, we wanted normal-people problems, didn't we."

Dean almost laughs, remembering that conversation in the car a few months ago. Back when they'd left Arizona without Cas... back when Cas had chosen to remain in Flagstaff by himself. *Probably for those 'extra tests'* Dean realizes now. The tests that doctor in the Flagstaff hospital had wanted to run.
"Yeah, we did," says Dean. "And it turns out normal-people problems suck."

Sam gives a heavy sigh. "You told me I'd be sorry when the termites came," he says. "I really should've listened."

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A/N - Next part will be up later this weekend - it just needs a bit more polishing - so keep checking in.

Thank you for reading, and please let me know if there was anything in particular that you liked in these little scenes!
Still clad in the Eau-de-Giant-Ground-Sloth hoodie, Dean heads out to the Impala to grab the gloves. But once at the car he finds himself putting a hand on the Impala's sleek roof and just standing there for a moment. He takes a couple deep breaths, sets his other hand on the roof too, and even strokes the Impala's shiny surface a little with both hands, as if the car can stabilize him somehow. He realizes he's trying to settle himself. Sam's reaction had been more or less exactly what Dean was expecting, but that heartfelt "Fuck", so loaded with shock and misery, is still echoing in Dean's ears.

He stares up at the sky. In most cities it's hard to see any stars at night, but Denver is pretty high and the atmosphere's clearer here; a few stars are actually peeking through the darkness. Often, in his cross-country journeys, he tries to pick out the Big Dipper in the nighttime sky. It's one of the few constellations he knows, and it's one of the very few that's always in view, from anywhere in America, in every month of the year. He looks for it now. After a moment he finds it, hanging low in the north.

Serene, unchanging, an infinity away, there it is. Untouched by the chaos on Earth, it just keeps wheeling in its slow, stately circle around the northern sky.

We've been to Hell and back, all of us, Dean reminds himself, as he gazes at the Big Dipper. We've stopped the Apocalypse; we dealt with Lucifer, we dealt with frickin' God himself.

We can deal with this.

Finally he pops the trunk, grabs a box of medical gloves and pulls a pair on, and heads on in to Cas's room.

Cas is still on the bed, but when Dean enters he seems to be in the middle of pushing his blanket aside and trying to sit up again. He's looking toward the bathroom door with an expression of great concentration, as if getting to the bathroom again is going to involve a long, complicated overseas journey that he has to think about.

"Hey, dude, how ya doing?" Dean asks. Cas glances toward him. One hand goes briefly to his head again, checking that the wool hat is in place. (It seems to be almost a reflex for Cas to keep checking the hat now and then.) Then Cas's eyes drop to Dean's hands, which are both now sheathed in exam gloves, in that CSI-classic shade of bright blue. Dean's carrying the box of extra gloves in one gloved hand and he waves the box at Cas, saying cheerfully, "Told ya. See, I got a whole box more."
Cas relaxes detectably at that; Dean can almost see one of the layers of worry disappearing from his face. Then, as Dean closes the door and walks across the room to set his keys, phone and the box of gloves on the table in the corner, Cas sniffs the air again.

"That smell," Cas says. "It's really quite... different."

"100% giant ground sloth." says Dean, and he plucks at the front of the hoodie to show Cas where the odor's coming from. "My alter ego. Giant ground sloth at a frat party, to be precise. Courtesy of Target's tea aisle, and a few other things."

"I can't smell you at all," says Cas, with another sniff. He sounds half relieved and half disappointed.

"That's the idea," says Dean. "And now you'll let me stay, right?" He says this with a hint of challenge in his voice, already bracing for another argument, but Cas, who's sitting up on the bed now, actually smiles. It's a pretty weak smile, really just a twitch at the corners of the mouth, but it's such a relief to see him smile at all that Dean gives him a big grin back.

"You definitely owe me one for the Axe, bro," adds Dean. "And don't think I'll forget it. That stuff's horrific." Dean takes a seat in one chair that's still by the little table (carefully leaving all the other scattered chairs untouched) and he tells Cas, "And by the way Sam's on his way. He'll get here tomorrow."

Cas's faint smile disappears. His shoulders drop a little, and he looks at the floor, one hand clenching a little on the edge of his blanket.

"I'd hoped not... to bother... either of you," he says softly. (He seems quite tired; he's speaking in very short phrases.)

"We want to be bothered," Dean tells him. Cas just gives him a very sad look. It's clear he still doesn't really get it, so Dean adds, "Look, dude, Sam's coming out to help because he wants to. You have friends who wanna help, and we're gonna help, and you're just gonna have to suck it up and deal with it. Oh and, Sam says hi. More than hi."

"More than... hi?" says Cas, frowning. He sounds puzzled by the idea.

"I think he meant bear-hug hi," explains Dean, "but he can tell you himself when he gets here."

Cas thinks about that, and at last he nods. He still doesn't look happy, exactly, about Sam and Dean both knowing, but at least looks more resigned. He takes a rather deep breath as if to say something more, but then just lets out the breath without saying anything. He takes another deep breath, and lets that one out too, and it occurs to Dean now that Cas has been having some trouble speaking, and that now he's not even getting out any words at all. Dean watches him closely, now studying his rate of breathing. It's accelerating.

It keeps accelerating. Dean feels a twinge of worry, and he suggests, "Better lie down again, huh? You don't look so good, if you don't mind me saying."

"Actually," says Cas, speaking with obvious effort, "I won't be able to... stay in bed... much longer."

That doesn't make much sense — Dean had been envisioning that Cas would certainly be spending the entire night in bed, if not the next day too. Cas glances at Dean and seems to see his confusion, for he says, managing this time to get out a whole series of phrases in between the increasingly deep panting, "I have to move to... the bathroom... next. I'll... stay there a while. I usually... shift there for... most of the night."
Dean frowns, trying to picture what he's saying: does Cas literally sit on the toilet all night? Sit on the floor? Sleep in the tub? What exactly? Dean's opening his mouth to ask what he means when Cas stiffens and starts scanning around the bed, looking around to his sides with a distinct air of urgency. He's even pushing the blanket around. *He's looking for the pan,* Dean realizes, the rectangular brownie baking pan that Dean had handed him earlier; it's sitting on the other side of the bed behind Cas's back. Dean scrambles out of his chair, hurries around the bed, grabs it and offers it to Cas.

Cas clutches at it gratefully and then sits very still, holding the pan dead center in his lap, his head bowed a little, still taking those heavy, deep panting breaths. He's almost frozen for a moment, and Dean, now standing over him watching him intently, is pretty sure he's going to throw up again right then and there. But then Cas suddenly lurches to his feet and begins staggering toward the first of the bathroom chairs.

Dean grabs one of his arms and steers him to Bathroom Chair #1 (as Dean's now thinking of it), where Cas collapses abruptly, his legs almost giving way under him. Somehow he's kept hold of the pan, and he clutches it in his lap again, and sits there panting for a moment, Dean hovering over him.

"You all right?" Dean asks. Cas looks up at him.

"You should put... the TV on," says Cas, with a nod toward the ancient little TV that's squatting on top of the dresser.

This is such an unexpected comment that Dean gives a little snort of laughter. Cas frowns up at him and says, "You're gonna... get bored."

"You seriously think I'm gonna just lie back and watch American Idol reruns or something?" says Dean, looking down at him in disbelief. "Just lie back and eat some popcorn, while you're staggering around the room doing your best Frankenstein impression?"

Cas actually nods.

"Holy...." Dean starts to say, but words fail him. He gives up and shakes his head. "Think again, dude."

"You're gonna... get bored," Cas insists, still frowning up at Dean. He's still speaking in those halting phrases, and he seems barely able to keep his hold on the brownie pan, but he manages to say, "It's a lot of... throwing up. A lot. Repetitive. And, Dean, don't worry, it's normal for me if I...."

He stops talking. All at once, from one breath to the next, Cas's face pales, the blood draining from his face. He's also suddenly covered in sweat. His eyes go glassy — wide and unfocused — and he manages to mutter, "I gotta lie down..." and starts almost keeling over toward the floor.

Dean grabs one of his arms and tries to haul him back to the bed. But it turns out that Cas is trying to go the other way, toward the bathroom. With the last of his strength Cas tugs against Dean's hold and in the end he goes nowhere at all, but just slithers out of the chair onto his knees, the pan clattering down unnoticed. Cas gropes for the floor with both hands, and then he's on all fours, head down, hat askew, scarf dragging on the vinyl flooring.

Dean crouches beside him, both hands on his shoulders, saying, "Cas, take it easy, take it easy there —"

"Don't... worry," Cas mutters, his head still hanging down. He wobbles forward in a weak crawl, inching forward a little bit on hands and knees toward Bathroom Chair #2, but then, quite suddenly, he gives up on the crawling, lies down on his side on the vinyl flooring and shuts his eyes. Dean's
shocked to see that his face is almost a waxy grey now, his lips almost blue. And his panting is getting ridiculous; it's incredibly fast now, till he seems to be almost gasping for breath, as if he can't get any air at all.

"Cas?" Dean says, kneeling next to him and grabbing him by one shoulder. Dean had expected nausea and vomiting, but this is something else entirely, some kind of slow descent into fainting, maybe some crisis of blood pressure, and Dean's entirely unsure what to do. He wants to call Sam for advice, and casts a longing glance toward his cell phone — it's way on the other side of the room, on the little table. But Cas seems to be crashing right this very second, and Dean doesn't dare leave his side.

"Cas? Cas?" says Dean, shaking his shoulder again to see if he can wake Cas back up. "Cas, you okay?" It's a stupid question — Cas is very obviously not okay — and when Cas doesn't answer, Dean starts to feel around at his neck for a pulse, trying to remind himself, *Whatever's happening, if his heart's still beating and he keeps breathing, he can get through it.*

Dean does find a pulse, but it seems way too fast, more a thready series of rapid-fire little flutters than a proper heartbeat. He looks around frantically for a clock to time Cas's pulse. The other motel room, the one next door, had a big round analog clock on the dresser but this room doesn't seem to have a clock anywhere. But after a moment's searching Dean spots it; Cas has set the clock on the floor for some reason, propped at the foot of the bed (which is about as close to the bathroom as its electrical cord will reach). It's an old-fashioned squat alarm clock with a round dial, and it has a long black second hand that's sweeping its way slowly around the clockface. Dean watches it intently as he counts Cas's pulse.

Fourteen heartbeats in six seconds. That means 140 beats per minute.

*That can't be right,* Dean thinks, and he tries again and gets 145 the second time. Cas's heart rate is racing, even though he's lying absolutely still on the floor.

Dean's near to panic now, and again his eyes dart over to the cell phone that's on the far-away table. But then Cas stirs. His eyes flicker open and his feet shift on the floor. He's still panting so hard he can't seem to talk, but he glances up at Dean, and from the look in his eyes Dean knows that Cas has seen him, that Cas knows where he is and has recognized Dean. "It's okay, buddy, I'm here, I'm here," says Dean to him, patting his shoulder again. "Just hang in there." Cas still can't seem to say anything — Dean's getting a strong impression now that Cas has been clobbered by the kind of extreme, stunning fatigue that happens sometimes during fevers, the kind that makes it almost impossible to form words. But Cas does manage to shift one hand a few inches over to Dean's leg, and he touches Dean lightly on the knee.

It's unclear whether this is an attempt at reassurance or a weak grasp for help, but Dean's hoping it's the former.

Cas then seems to gather himself up: his panting gets even deeper and he grits his teeth, and with a grunt he makes a rather impressive effort to roll onto his stomach and get to all fours again. He succeeds, but the effort taxes him to the limit, for all he can seem to do afterwards is just hold himself there, head hanging low, arms braced and shaking. His scarf's still dragging on the floor, the wool hat a little askew on his head.

Dean's about to dart for the phone when Cas mutters, "Pan?"

*The damn pan,* Dean thinks, *where'd it get to —* There it is, a few feet away. Dean makes a lunge for it, grabs it and tries to slide it closer. But Cas is trying to veer over to the pan just as Dean's sliding it over to him, and somehow Dean's elbow whacks Cas right in the temple. Cas's hat falls off and lands...
halfway in the pan, just as Cas start throwing up, and some vomit lands on the hat.

*Dammit*, Dean thinks. *Dammit, dammit, dammit.* He pulls the poor hat gingerly out of the way with one gloved hand, but it's too late; it's already gotten some vomit on it. It's ruined. *Toxic*, Dean remembers sadly. He manages, at least, to rescue the scarf, whisking it smoothly off Cas's neck and flinging it to the bed; it's the only thing he can think to do to help Cas right now.

There isn't even all that much vomit this time (just enough to ruin the hat, it seems). Cas doesn't seem to have much left in his stomach to throw up, and the next bout of retching only brings up a thin stream of liquid. But the retching continues anyway, and his arms have started shaking, and it soon seems fairly likely that he's about to collapse face-down right into the brownie pan. At that point Dean realizes, *I can hold him; that's what I can do, I can hold him*, so he shifts closer and gets one arm under Cas's chest to help hold him up, saying, "I gotcha, I gotcha." With the other hand he tries to support Cas's forehead.

Dean holds him like that for what seems a very long time, a foot or so above the brownie pan, as Cas suffers through what seems an endless bout of retching. He's barely even bringing anything up now, just thin dribs and drabs, but the retching just won't stop. It's not even clear he's even conscious anymore — his whole body weight now seems to be hanging in Dean's arm, his head limp and heavy against Dean's hand — but Dean keeps talking to him, between the spasms of retching, whenever it seems like Cas might be able to hear. Dean knows he's not even saying anything useful, just vague reassurances, but he keeps talking nonetheless, in a steady soft murmur: "I gotcha. It's okay. I gotcha. You'll be okay. Hang in there. Just breathe. We'll wash out the hat. It'll be fine. We'll get another hat. I gotcha."

Dean's slightly surprised, as he's saying all this, that he's not feeling grossed out by all the vomit. But he's not. The vomit's become completely trivial. It's like the world has suddenly and without warning narrowed down to a single battle, a critical battle that Dean and Castiel have to get through together. Everything else has vanished; nothing else matters. The vomit doesn't matter, the scarf doesn't matter, and even the hat doesn't really matter, not really; it's just collateral damage that has to be set aside if they're to get through the battle successfully. All that matters is getting Cas to the end of the battle in one piece.

And Dean's job is to hold him up. Dean's job is to make sure that Cas's heart keeps beating, that he keeps breathing, and most of all that he doesn't choke, and that means holding him up.

It turns out that Castiel is actually rather heavy, and he seems to be getting heavier with every passing second. Either Dean's getting tired, or Cas is letting more and more of his weight hang onto Dean's arms, or both. A full minute or more drags by, and Cas is still shuddering in Dean's arms, still retching so continuously that he can barely breathe. The arm that's under Cas's chest is soon starting to burn with fatigue, but Dean thinks sternly to himself, *Keep holding on. You can keep holding on. You can.* A series of tactical contingency calculations start running through a corner of his mind, a surprisingly calm series of decisions about things like: At what point exactly should Dean set Cas down and go for the cell phone? Will Cas be okay if he's left in the classic "recovery position," on his side, for a few seconds, or is there a chance he might choke on his own vomit even so? How many seconds exactly will it take to grab the phone and place a call? And who should be called first? Sam, or Dr. Klein's office, or those chemo-ward night shift people at the hospital, or maybe the motel front office? Or should Dean just go for 911 right off the bat?

Dean zips through all these decisions rapidly, considering and rejecting one possibility after another, and in about six seconds he's settled on a plan, which is this: if Castiel doesn't stop vomiting in the next thirty seconds, Dean's going to set him down on his side, but with the back of Cas's head propped up slightly on a pillow (so that Cas's mouth is tilted a little downwards and he doesn't
choke). Then Dean'll lunge for the phone and then he'll call 911 first and Dr. Klein's office second.

Now Dean's got his eyes glued to the clock on the floor, watching the second hand sweep through thirty seconds. But at fifteen seconds in, Cas's retching slows. By twenty-five seconds he's finally slowed down to a few last jerky, gasping heaves, taking desperate gulps of air in between. Dean keeps holding him (Dean's arms are burning now, but there's no way he's letting go).

There finally comes a moment when Cas manages to swallow, and Dean's amazed how reassuring that is, what a relief it is to hear that tiny swallowing sound and to know Cas has regained even that minuscule amount of control.

Cas spits deliberately into the pan. He's trying to clear out his mouth. He reaches one hand up to his chest to touch Dean's, briefly and lightly. When he puts his hand back down to the floor, some of his body weight finally disappears from Dean's arm; he's holding himself up a little now. Dean helps him push himself up into a sitting position and takes a close look at his face. Cas is still deathly pale, but his eyes are open, and his breathing has at last slowed a little. He meets Dean's eyes.

"You okay?" Dean says, almost shaky with relief. "You with me?"

Cas gives a tiny nod. "Water," he whispers. The nearest water bottle is just a few feet away at the foot of the chair (it's the one Cas had been picking at earlier, when Dean had just returned from the Target). Dean hands it to him, and Cas fumbles at it with both hands but soon makes a soft little gasp of frustration. He's having trouble removing the plastic wrap that's around the cap, and Dean realizes this is why Cas had been picking at the cap earlier. Dean's instantly kicking himself for not having double-checked that the plastic wrap was off all the water bottles (no doubt Cas had already removed the wrap from the bottles that originally been on the floor, but Dean's rearranging must have swapped those for the wrong bottles). Dean grabs the offending water bottle from Cas's hands and rips the top off in one gigantic yank of fury. The entire bottle nearly explodes, the plastic wrap and the cap tearing off all at once and flying across the room, and half the water shoots across the floor. But the bottle's still got some water in it, and Dean holds it up for Cas to drink.

Cas takes only a few short swallows (apparently all he can handle), and he wipes his mouth with another Kleenex. The Kleenex comes away red, and then Cas spits more red into the brownie pan. Dean looks down at the brownie pan and realizes, in horror, that all the vomit is tinged with blood.

"Cas," Dean says.

"As I... was saying," Cas whispers hoarsely, "It's normal."

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A/N -

:(

You see now why I wanted to post this part separately. It needs its own moment of attention.

The various symptoms, btw, are drawn from a combination of real-life experiences and do all have a medical rationale behind them; I won't explain more details just yet other than to say, Cas is having a worse experience than most, and yes, he did have a BP crisis there, but managed to pull out of it. And poor Dean, of course, is getting a trial by fire.
The ugliness and graphicness of these scenes are something I've wrestled with. It could be skipped over; but I find I want to go through each horrible moment. The reason to go through it all is... well, partly just because THEY have to go through it. There's a way in which I want to honor it, to witness it, instead of skating over it or hiding the ugly parts away. Also it has a huge impact on both Dean and Cas, emotionally, for them to go through these extremely physical moments in such close contact. Dean has to keep shifting gears, keep adjusting, keep strategizing. As for Cas, we are not in his head as much (or at all, really) and he won't be able or willing to verbalize his thoughts for a while yet, but... though he hates to be seen this way, nonetheless it was a revelation to him how reassuring it was to have Dean there to lean on.

More next week. I'm unsure how my workflow will go over the next few weeks, but I'm hopeful that I can return to weekly updates. I'll try, at any rate!
I can't get another Castiel

A/N - Been sick all week. Just got better today - been writing all day and just got this done. It's still un-beta'd - forgive me the inevitable typos, but it's 1:00 am now so I've just gotta post it! I'll fix the errors in an editing pass tomorrow.

Apparently bleeding can happen, Sam reports by text, after Dean's sent him a fairly panicky series of messages. Oral bleeding, mouth sores especially. Whole GI tract can bleed. Watch for rectal bleeding too. (By this point, the thought of problems at the other end of the GI tract doesn't even faze Dean.) Low platelet counts, Sam goes on. Also anemia - might be why he passed out. Make absolutely sure the bleeding has stopped. And you gotta make sure he keeps drinking. He's stable now though right?

Yeah but what if it happens again? Dean texts back.

Call his dr's office, says Sam. Call 911.

Already been arguing w him about that, Dean reports. The last several minutes have actually been spent wrestling Cas for the cell phone, after Dean made an abortive attempt to call 911. Cas has been insisting (once he finally got enough breath to get a full sentence or two out) that 911 isn't necessary. And after seeing how worried he's gotten about it, Dean's reluctantly decided to wait on the 911 idea for now. Mostly because it seems like, if Cas is strong enough to knock the phone out of Dean's hands twice in a row (which he just did) and then grab it away entirely (which he also just did), only reluctantly giving it back when Dean promised just to text Sam and not call 911 after all — well, maybe Cas is in fact feeling a little better. (It turns out that even when Cas is this weak, he's still amazingly effective at wrestling, and surprisingly wily about it, too. All that angel-blade experience, presumably).

Dean's now hoping that the fainting was just due to Cas not having drunk enough water because of the plastic-wrap problem. Between the texts to Sam, Dean's been removing all the plastic wrap from the water bottles, and he's stationed water bottles everywhere possible. There's three near Cas right now. And though Cas is not looking exactly healthy (he's still lying on the floor, now half in and half out of the bathroom, while Dean sits on the edge of the tub), he's at least awake. In fact he's twisting his head around to glare at Dean suspiciously.

"No 911," Cas says to Dean now, for about the tenth time.

"I swear I'm just texting Sam," Dean says to him. "Promise. See?" He turns the phone toward Cas so he can see Sam's last text — remembering too late that Sam's last text happens to say, Call 911.

"No 911," Cas insists, eyes narrowing. He even props himself up on his elbows a little to state, intensely, "Tell Sam this is... all normal." And then, rather dramatically, he collapses back down on the pillow that Dean's set out for him.

"Right, dude," Dean mutters. "It's all normal."
He's saying this is normal, Dean writes dutifully to Sam, but then adds an editorial follow-up: Really not convinced he knows what's normal, though. Also I think he's worried he can't afford it.

Sam replies: I'll get on the health insurance thing, see what I can work out. For now - if he crashes again call 911 anyway. But also, haven't they given him antiemetics?

Anti what? writes Dean.

Anti-vomiting pills, Sam replies. There shouldn't be that much vomiting. It should be under control. There's drugs for that. Supposed to be part of standard treatment.

Dean looks down at Cas. He's sprawled out on the cool bathroom tiles, his head toward Dean, his legs extending halfway out of the bathroom door. He seems to be having a rare moment of calm right now, his eyes closed and his breathing fairly steady. Dean hates to disturb him just when he's finally lain down, but...

Anti-emetic pills, thinks Dean, and he levers himself quietly down off the side of the tub and onto the bathroom floor closer to Castiel's pillow, and says gently, "Hey, Cas, sorry to bug you—" He reaches down to put one gloved hand lightly on Cas's head, just to wake him enough to ask him a question.

He realizes a split-second later, when Cas flinches and hurriedly raises one hand to Dean's, that totally by accident Dean's put his hand right on one of the bald patches, where a broad patch of scalp is showing through Cas's thinning hair.

For a moment Dean's paralyzed, unsure whether to pretend he doesn't notice the hair loss, or whether to remove his hand.

"Hair loss doesn't actually hurt, does it? he wonders. Is he sore here too?"

Cas has placed his hand over Dean's gloved hand now. But he doesn't say anything, and he doesn't make any attempt to pull Dean's hand away, so Dean decides to keep his hand where it is. And then Dean even finds himself stroking Cas's bare scalp with his thumb, very lightly, moving just his gloved thumb gently along the patch of bare skin.

There's a light, steady warmth coming off Cas's skin. Dean can feel it even through the glove. Fever, maybe?

After a moment Cas gives a small sigh. He removes his hand from Dean's, and puts his arm back down on his stomach.

"Cas, there are these things called anti-emetics," Dean says, still keeping his hand where it is. "Anti-vomiting pills. They're supposed to help. Didn't they give you any?"

There's a very small movement under Dean's hand; Cas is nodding his head. He doesn't even bother opening his eyes, but he lifts his hand a little, this time to point back toward the outer room.

"Already got 'em," Cas says, in a rather hoarse croak. Dean looks at where he's pointing, and realizes there's a little row of pill bottles lined up on the bedside table.

But Cas adds, "Don't work." He puts his hand back down, wrapping his arm around his stomach again.

"What do you mean they don't work? Did you try them?"

"Now why in the world would I want to try anti-emetics?" says Cas, this time summoning up enough energy to get out an entire sentence in one breath, complete with a genuinely sarcastic tone.
It seems to tire him, though; he then takes several quiet breaths in a row without speaking. Dean keeps doing the tiny thumb-stroking move, hoping it might at least be cooling off Cas's scalp a little, and finally Cas adds, "Take 'em every time. Took 'em when you were... at that store. Just in case. But... they never work."

Dean frowns. "Does your doctor know?"

There's a little headshake under Dean's palm. Cas says, "He wouldn't know what to do. I think it's...." He pauses and stiffens, curling up slightly, his arms clamping more tightly around his stomach.

Dean knows the signs by now, and he removes his hand so that he can push himself up to his knees, ready to leap to action if needed.

But this time the moment passes. Cas lets out a slow, uneasy breath and says, now talking half into his pillow with his eyes still closed, "Think it's because I'm an angel." He pauses, and adds, "Or used to be."

"But you don't have any grace," Dean objects.

"Still some... grace... remnants," says Cas. (Dean remembers, now, that odd phenomenon of vessels still carrying pieces of grace, even long after the angel — or the main part of the grace, at least — is gone.) Cas adds, speaking with more difficulty, "And... the way I'm... connected... to the vessel. It's different. Different than... a native-born human. Some drugs just don't work." With a quiet sigh, he stops talking.

Dean thinks about this.

_Some drugs just don't work._

It occurs to Dean that chemotherapy is a kind of drug. Cas has mentioned the "chemo drugs" several times. Chemotherapy is, really, just a certain kind of drugs.

Dean says, slowly, dreading where this line of thought is taking him, "Cas... uh... if drugs don't work....then...."

Cas's eyes flicker open, and he raises his head a little. But it's already clear he's not listening to Dean anymore. He's suddenly got that look again: that intent, focused look, half urgency and half helplessness — as if he's being swept down some wild river, swept away by an implacable force that he's powerless to control. Dean scrambles up even as Cas starts pulling himself up onto all fours to make an uncoordinated lunge to the toilet. The toilet's only about two feet away but even so he almost doesn't make it; Dean has to reach forward, grab Cas by the scruff of his jacket with both hands, and physically yank him across the last foot over the slick bathroom tiles. Just in time; a moment later Cas is throwing up into the toilet bowl.

It turns out to be a bit easier to support him over the toilet than it was with the brownie pan. Cas can lean a lot of his body weight against the side of the toilet bowl, and Dean mostly just has to stabilize him from sideways collapses, and, of course, Dean can help hold his head up. Dean's determined that Cas shouldn't have to put his forehead right down on the edge of the toilet bowl, so he gets his hand between Cas's forehead and the rim of the bowl to provide as comfortable a resting spot as he can. With a few adjustments and some wriggling around, Dean also soon finds a way to brace his elbows so that he can hold Cas in place there for a very long time. For as long as necessary.

There's blood, again. Though now that Dean's prepared for it, he's less shocked. But he's still
worrying about how much blood is too much, and so this time, he finds himself doing much closer observations. He keeps a watchful eye on the thin stream of vomit, and again it's surprising how Dean doesn't feel grossed out; but there's simply too much to think about, too many important things to keep aware of. This time, Dean's trying to assess how many tablespoons of fluid Cas is losing, how many electrolytes, how much iron, how many red blood cells. All of this will need to be replaced. Cas's vessel is a sort of a machine, after all; any body is, really, any human body. A machine like the Impala. And just like the Impala, this human machine needs certain kinds of fuel and care to keep running, and Dean's trying to make a list, trying to track exactly what Cas will need to replace what he's losing. Water, definitely, lots of water after every time, thinks Dean, bracing Cas through a long string of dry-heaves. Dean's murmuring constant reassurances to him even as he's thinking, I should ask Sam about electrolytes. Iron pills maybe? But water most of all. Then later he'll need fuel — sugar, carbs — as soon as he can keep anything down.

After, Dean helps Cas lie down again on the floor, and gets the pillow back under his head. Cas is shivering again now, and his forehead feels even warmer; is it really a fever? Is fever normal? (Dean doesn't bother asking Cas, for he doesn't trust Cas at all anymore to judge what's "normal.") Dean holds a water bottle for Cas to drink, watching carefully and coaxing him to drink more till he's sure Cas has taken in, in a series of tiny sips, more than he's lost. He gets the blanket back over Cas's legs, studies him for several long seconds to be sure he's breathing well, and then grabs the phone to start texting Sam with questions about fever and electrolytes.

Three more bouts of vomiting later, Dean is sitting against the bathroom doorframe, one hand resting lightly on Cas's head and the other hand holding the phone. Dean's exhausted with worry by now, but Cas actually seems to be holding his own after the last hour or so. (At least he hasn't bled much more, and he hasn't shown that terrifying kind of passing-out again.)

Sam's most recent text reads: So, some chemo causes mild fever right after, but be sure it doesn't go over 100.5. He'll need electrolytes, yeah, see if you can find some potassium, or a banana or Gatorade or something. Also did you get a flu shot? We both need flu shots asap, Cas is really vulnerable, his immune system will be shot to hell.

Dean's re-reading all this, trying to remember when his last flu shot was, when Cas speaks.

"Clock," Cas says, indistinctly.

"What?" says Dean, turning toward him. He leans a little closer, so Cas can whisper instead of having to speak out loud. "You need something? Want more water?"

"Can I see... the clock," says Cas, and Dean, looking around, realizes that Castiel can no longer see the clock that's sitting at the foot of the bed. Normally Cas would be able to see the clock from here, by gazing past his own knees into the bedroom. But Dean's blocking his view.

Dean glances at it. "It's ten-thirty," he tells Cas, trying not to show any obvious discouragement at the realization that it's not even close to midnight yet. Cas has been throwing up for hours already. (How long did Cas say this was going to last? Twenty-four hours? It's going to seem like a lifetime.)

"No, I... want to see it," Cas says. Dean looks down at him, a little puzzled, but he moves obediently, getting to his feet and carefully stepping over Cas, and then squatting down by the tub, back where he'd been stationed three vomiting-bouts ago. Cas shifts a little and Dean sees he's adjusting his
position to get a clear view, across the bathroom floor and through the door, of the little round clock dial.

"That better?" asks Dean, still unsure why Cas needs to see the clock for himself.

"I like to see... the hand move," Cas explains. "The second hand." He takes a breath and adds, "To see that... time is passing."

Dean's looking down at him, puzzled, when Cas adds, "Means it's not Hell."

The phone happens to vibrate in Dean's hand right then, with another text from Sam, but Dean doesn't even notice, for he's staring at the clock now dry-mouthed, watching the second hand sweep slowly around. And all Dean can think of now is that horrible, strangely elastic way that time dragged in Hell; how time slowed; how it stuttered and stuck. Till one horrific second would seem to stretch out infinitely, lasting virtually forever.

Cas is right. In Hell time just wouldn't pass, somehow. A single moment could last a year, there.

Dean stares over Cas's shoulders at the clock, and it's an immense relief to see the little second hand keep slowly moving. Around and around it goes. It's not exactly fast — it's frustratingly slow, actually, crawling along. But it does keep moving.

"You're not in Hell," Dean says, leaning a little closer to Cas to make sure he can hear. "You're not in Hell. I swear to you. Time's passing." He puts his hand on Cas's head again, and leans even closer to say to him, "This won't last. I promise."

Cas nods under Dean's hand. He takes a slow breath and says, "Sometimes I think... I can't get through an hour. But I can get through a minute." He takes another breath and adds, "But only if time's really passing. So I watch the clock."

Dean strokes his head softly, and together they watch time pass.

The second hand crawls slowly onward, circling endlessly. Cas eventually slides into a brief doze, and Dean takes advantage of the opportunity to place a quiet call to Dr. Klein's office. Indeed there's a 24-hour night-nurse answering service, and the night nurse confirms, after a long series of detailed questions, that Cas's condition sounds "mostly stable." But she gives Dean some clear numbers to look for in terms of vital signs, and a list of changes that might mean a serious turn for the worse and that will require immediate action. Dean scribbles them all down and promises to call back, and to take Cas to the hospital, if Cas crosses any of those thresholds.

Between Sam's steady stream of texts and the night nurse's advice, Dean's soon got a little list of things to do that occupy his time pretty well (and, thankfully, it helps keep him from thinking about much else). He checks Cas's pulse and respiration every fifteen minutes; he makes a brief foray outside to the motel vending machines that yields the considerable prize of three bottles of Gatorade (with electrolytes!), and also discovers some potassium pills among Cas's set of pill bottles. When Cas wakes, Dean coaxes Cas to drink some more, and helps hold the water bottles, and the Gatorade. Dean checks Cas's temperature every half hour, with a little thermometer that he finds in the bedside table drawer. Cas is holding steady at 100.1°F, which according to both Sam and the night nurse is not exactly ideal but is acceptable.
Cas's brief doze doesn't last long, though. Bouts of vomiting soon start happening again, with miserable regularity. Dean helps Cas through each one.

A few times Cas rouses enough to chase Dean out of the bathroom entirely, each time locking the door behind him and turning on the shower. Dean's certain this is due to diarrhea, and he's willing to help even with that, but Cas seems to have drawn a line in the sand here and won't let Dean into the bathroom at all. It's frustrating, and Dean stalks around the outer room getting progressively more worried and planning to kick the door down if need be. But each time Cas gets through it on his own, unlocking the door after about ten minutes, though looking weaker and paler than ever.

After each such episode Dean cleans the toilet, though Cas keeps protesting, weakly, that he can do it himself. Once, the floor needs a clean too (Cas insists he's managed to get himself clean, at least, but scrubbing the floor too is definitely beyond his strength). So Dean half-draggs Cas to the bed, despite more protests, and parks him there while Dean scrubs the bathroom floor clean and sets out a new bathroom-floor nest for Cas — a spare sheet over the tiled floor, just in case, and on top of that a new clean blanket and clean pillow.

By the time Dean's setting up the little floor-nest, Cas is already starting to totter back to the bathroom on his own. He's reached Bathroom Chair #2 by the time Dean realizes what he's doing. Dean's a little annoyed that Cas won't just let Dean take care of him — after all, Cas could perfectly well just stay in the bed full-time, with Dean bringing him bedpans and throwing-up pans as needed. But Cas seems absolutely determined he has to try to do everything on his own, and seems convinced he has to station himself in the bathroom. They've been around this topic a few times already and there seems to be no arguing with him.

Dean then discovers, as he helps Cas totter the final leg from Bathroom Chair #2 to the bathroom, that Cas is now muttering a constant whisper of "Sorry, I'm sorry. I'm sorry...."

"Would you stop apologizing," Dean tells him, as he helps Cas lie down. Dean gets the pillow under Cas's head and adds, "You sure you don't need any help cleaning yourself up?"

"No..." Cas says, clutching the blanket around himself. He's suddenly racked with a bout of shivering but still tries to say, "No... n-no. You shouldn't have to do... any of this. You shouldn't... I'm so sorry, Dean, I'm sorry...."

Try as Dean might, he can't seem to calm Cas back down. The fever seems to be making Cas restless and anxious, and the "I'm sorry's" just won't stop. The only thing that finally halts all the apologizing is that Cas starts throwing up again.

The night is interminable. Dean loses track of the bouts of vomiting somewhere around number fifteen.

At last there start to be moments when Cas is breathing relatively easily, lying there curled up in his little nest of the blanket and the pillow, and Dean can sometimes let himself lean back against the bathtub and close his eyes for a moment.
But then he wakes with a lurch, out of a deeply disturbing nightmare in which Castiel is drowning in a rain gutter in the middle of some kind of monsoon, lightning flashing all around while Dean tries to pull him out of a whirlpool. Dean blinks awake to find he's slumped against the side of the tub, his neck kinked painfully, and Castiel's crouching next to him, clutching his blanket around him with one hand and shaking Dean's shoulder with the other.

"You're all right," Cas informs him, and he slumps back to lean against the side of the toilet. "You were just dreaming."

"What time's it?" Dean croaks, rubbing his eyes.

"Three in the morning," says Castiel, and he turns to the toilet and starts throwing up again.

Much later, after several more nasty bouts, the worst of the vomiting seems to have passed at last. Cas is curled up on the floor again, now shifting restlessly through bouts of fever and chills that seem to come and go. Dean realizes that this might be a good opportunity to try one of the night nurse's recommendations for easing fever. He goes and gets a few ice cubes from the little minifridge, and wraps them in a damp washcloth, and then he sits just behind Cas's back and holds the ice cubes to the back of Cas's neck, bracing Cas's head lightly with his other hand.

After a moment Cas's eyes blink slowly open. He's not really looking at anything much; his back is to Dean, and he's just gazing dully at the white porcelain base of the toilet ahead of him. But then he murmurs, so faintly that Dean can barely hear:

"S'good."

"It's ice cubes," Dean informs him. "The night nurse said it might help some."

"S'nice," whispers Cas.

It's not actually clear whether he means the ice cubes, or Dean's hand on his forehead (Cas's head is still warm with fever, and Dean knows his own hand must feel cool in comparison.) Cas doesn't say anything else, and it's been clear for a while now that it tires him out to talk, so Dean just crouches there silently, holding the ice cubes in place and keeping one hand on Cas's forehead.

The steady ticking of the clock, and Cas's slow, rasping breaths, seem the only sounds in the world. The minutes drift by. Dean's in a somewhat awkward crouch just behind Cas, and his knees are soon aching; he shuffles around to try to get one leg straightened out parallel to Cas's back, with other one folded tightly under him. Then the folded leg gets crampy, but Dean stays there, watching the clock's second hand sweep through a full minute, and then another, and then another. He thinks to himself, I can't get through an hour, but I can get through a minute.

And he thinks, as he had earlier, Keep holding on.

After another minute Dean has to shift his legs again. He figures out a way to do so without kicking Cas in the back. Once the ice cubes are all melted, Dean gets creakily to his feet, and goes and gets some fresh ice cubes, and sits back down next to Cas, knees aching even more. Again he holds the ice cubes to Cas's warm skin, right at the back of his neck, till the ice cubes melt.

Can't get through an hour, but can get through a minute.
Keep holding on. You can keep holding on.

Can't get through an hour, but can get through a minute.

Cas hasn't vomited in a nearly an hour now, so maybe it's helping?

The ice cubes have melted. Dean goes and gets more ice cubes and does it all again.

And again.

And again.

A buzz on the phone makes Dean jump. He's still crouching by Cas, experimenting now with damp washcloths and ice cubes at various locations around Cas's head (it seems like Cas is rather soothed whenever Dean strokes the back of his neck with the damp washcloth, so Dean's been doing that for a while). Right now Cas seems to have slid into one of the rare, precious dozes, and he doesn't even stir when the phone rattles on the tiled floor. Dean fumbles to grab it before it wakes Cas up; it's a text from Sam.

I'm heading out, Sam has written. Be there by dusk I think.

Dean looks around blearily. Only now does he notice that there's a thin light streaming through the dusty windows out in the bedroom. He blinks at the clock and discovers it's seven in the morning.

Sam adds, You guys doing ok?

Been partying all night long, replies Dean.

Aw shit, Sam replies. He okay?

Hanging in there. Fill you in later, Dean texts. Drive safe. And then he thinks of something else and adds, Hey, could you bring a hat for him?

Sam replies: Sure, but doesn't he have the gray one?

It got messed up.

Messed up? asks Sam.

Needs a wash, Dean replies. See if you can find another hat. He's lost some hair. Self-conscious about it I think.

Sam replies: Roger that, and then, a moment later, Never seen Cas self-conscious.

Dean writes back: Yeah. Funny an angel would care about hair. He then adds, I mean, he already lost his feathers and he was fine with that.

There's a pause.

Sam writes something, deletes it, and writes something again.

Finally a text arrives: We don't know that he was fine with that.
Dean looks at Sam's text for a long moment, and now he remembers Cas in the Gas-n-Sip talking about missing his wings. He looks down at Cas. There's a little oblique daylight slanting into the bathroom, and in the pale morning light Castiel somehow looks especially small. Curled up on the bathroom floor under the crumpled blanket, he looks like a little wounded animal.

Which, of course, is exactly what he is, now, isn't he? A little wounded animal.

Dean takes in the sight, studying the weakened human vessel that Cas is trapped in now. The vessel that is now Cas's only home. A vessel that has become Cas, blended with him almost, become his very own, in some unlikely way.

Dean reaches out and sets one hand against Cas's head once more, very gently, trying not to wake him, but wanting, somehow, to try to cover up the bald patch of scalp. The few remaining tufts of soft dark hair are lying matted and lank against Cas's skin. Dean strokes one tuft lightly with his thumb. Cas stirs, his hands shifting on the tile floor, and so Dean shifts his hand to the back of Cas's neck; stroking him there always seems to settle him somehow. Cas relaxes, with a quiet sigh, and he doesn't wake. Dean continues to stroke the back of Cas's neck, and he looks down at Cas's back, and he thinks, No wings.

No wings, no feathers, and soon no hair.

Dean finally replies to Sam, texting now with one hand: Right. Anyway could you bring a hat.

Will do, texts Sam.

"Think you can sleep a bit now?" suggests Dean. "I can get you back to the bed. I already changed the sheets, by the way. The motel girl dropped off a whole fresh set."

It's well past noon. Over the course of the morning Cas has slowly progressed from his near-coma on the bathroom floor to a point where he's actually sitting up, and he's now leaning back against the side of the tub, his arms propped on his knees. He hasn't thrown up in a few hours; and he's downed some more water, and he's even chewing on a saltine. Though he's nibbling around the edges of the saltine incredibly slowly. A field mouse would eat it about ten times quicker.

Worryingly, he's been very quiet, too, answering Dean's questions only in monosyllables and barely looking him in the eye. But Dean hasn't pressed him to talk; seems it's best to let him revive at his own pace.

"Bed's all cool and fresh," adds Dean, trying to make it sound enticing. He gives Cas a bright grin, which Cas doesn't return — Cas isn't even looking at him — and says, "You'll like it. Much better than a bathroom floor, I promise."

Cas nods, slowly. But he says, "I should get clean first." He eats approximately one more molecule off the edge of the saltine, nibbling an infinitesimal crumb off the side with delicate care, and then reaches up and sets the half-eaten saltine on the edge of the sink very carefully, like it's a precious artifact that he has to preserve. "I need a shower," he says, and he starts to struggle to his feet.

Dean grabs his elbow to help him up. Again Cas avoids Dean's gaze, keeping his eyes down.

"Maybe let me help you wash?" Dean suggests, for he's not altogether sure that Cas is going to be
steady enough on his feet. "Or I could put one of the chairs in the shower," Dean adds. "You could sit while I wash you off."

Cas glances sideways at Dean, meeting his eyes very fleetingly.

"I can do it myself," he insists, "I always do, around now. Twenty-four hours on." It's actually been only twenty-two hours since the chemo, but Dean doesn't point that out. Cas then makes a clear effort to straighten up and not lean on Dean as much, and he even pushes Dean away, placing a hand square on Dean's chest and shoving him toward the door. Cas adds, with such a formal tone that he sounds rather like a diplomat thanking a foreign emissary, "You've done so much for me already. Thank you very much for your assistance. I'll be fine."

With that Cas shuts the bathroom door right in Dean's face.

Dean sighs. It's clear Cas does need some privacy for certain things. Nonetheless it's a little worrying, especially when considering the logistics of a shower, which suddenly seem very complex and challenging now that Dean really thinks about it. Shower floors get slippery, and soap gets slippery, and even getting one's clothes off requires some leaning over and some balancing on one foot, and there's the edge of the tub to step over too. There's just no way Cas is totally stable on his feet right now. What if he slips? What if he falls? What if he hits his head?

What if he passes out right in the shower? What if he **drowns**?

Dean paces around by the bathroom door for a few moments.

But Cas **has** been doing this on his own for quite a while. (Though, twenty-four hours on, not twenty-two hours.)

Finally Dean make himself turn away. He occupies himself for a few minutes with tidying up — cleaning out a last few pans in the kitchenette sink, opening the windows and airing out the room a little. He discards the gloves, too, and scrubs his hands, for it's pretty clear now that Cas is feeling much better, which implies he's probably non-toxic by now.

Dean's in the middle of shaking a fresh blanket out over the clean sheets on the bed when there's a **thump** from the bathroom.

"Cas?" Dean calls, striding over to the bathroom door. He raps sharply on the door. "Cas, what was that? You okay?"

There's no reply for a moment. Then a faint, rather wobbly, "I just dropped the soap." Dean can barely hear him over the shower.

But then there's another thump. This one's louder, and heavier-sounding, and is followed by a scrambling sound and then a gasp and then a ripping noise.

"Cas, I'm coming in," Dean calls, and he backs up half a step, bracing himself to kick the door open, when he thinks (at the last second) to try the doorknob. Rather to his surprise it opens right up. Cas hasn't locked the door this time.

Dean opens the door to find Cas kneeling in the tub, naked and soaking wet, the shower water drumming down on him. The bottom half of his body is partly shielded by the shower curtain, which he's clutching in one hand. The shower curtain has ripped off several of its rings.

All Dean really sees is a glimpse of Cas's bare side and his naked back. But it stabs at Dean's heart, it actually **hurts**, to see how vulnerable Castiel looks, how helpless, how pale and thin and weak, as he
crouches there hunched under the streaming water. His head's down, his patchy hair clumped now into thin tendrils that are streaming with water. His ribs stand out starkly on his sides; his spine's a dramatically sharp line of ridges down the middle of his back. The bruises on his arms seem dark and malevolent, and it turns out there's other bruises too, everywhere, on his back and his sides and on his legs, and even some strange dark claw-like marks, streaks like he's been mauled by some animal. Dean catches a quick glimpse of a couple of angry red lines on Cas's abdomen, too, maybe some kind of half-healed surgical scars, which Cas seems to be trying to cover up with the shower curtain.

It's all terrible. Yet as terrible as it is, nonetheless, impossibly, Castiel seems beautiful nonetheless.

Beautiful and terrible and vulnerable and destroyed, all at once.

When Cas sees Dean, he tries to stand, still trying to shield himself with the shower curtain, and Dean's torn between wanting to help and wanting to give him some privacy. Cas lunges to his feet somehow, but staggers, and the shower curtain rips off one more ring with a pop. Dean hustles over to help then, but Cas lurches away so hurriedly that he nearly loses his balance and he thumps hard into the opposite wall of the shower. He's trying now to wrap the torn edge of the shower curtain around his hips, and Dean realizes he's trying to cover himself up. It's strange to see him so shy; Cas has never seemed concerned with human issues of nudity before. But something's different now. Everything's different now.

Dean grabs one of the motel towels from a little rack above the toilet, and hands it to him. The towel's instantly drenched, but it does give Cas some cover, and he lets go of the shower curtain and clutches at the towel, wrapping it around his waist. Dean helps him get the towel edges knotted over each other (discreetly not looking down — it's apparent that Cas is feeling miserably exposed, and Dean doesn't want to make him feel even more uncomfortable).

"There you go," says Dean, once the towel's securely in place. "See, you're okay." But when Dean glances at him he finds that Cas is staring down at the shower drain in silence. Something in his expression makes Dean take both his shoulders and try to catch his eyes. But Cas won't look at him.

"Hey, hey," Dean says, "Cas. It's okay. It's okay."

Cas shakes his head, and he says, with almost a philosophical tone, "You know, it's funny. I used to wonder, or I guess I used to hope, if, one day, if we might ever...."

He stops.

"If we might ever what?" Dean says. But Cas doesn't answer. The water's drumming on the tiles, and water's dripping off Dean's hair now too, and running down both their faces.

Finally Cas looks up at Dean. He says, softly, "I didn't want you to see me like this."

"I know," Dean says, for that's been obvious all along. "I know."

"Not like this," Cas says, and his eyes drop again. He seems to notice then, for the first time, that Dean's getting pretty well doused by the outer edge of the shower stream. "You're getting wet," Cas says, brow furrowing in concern. "Your clothes are getting ruined." He puts one hand on Dean's chest and pushes, lightly, trying to get Dean out of the shower.

Dean refuses to budge. "The clothes don't matter," he says.

"But they're getting wet," says Cas, gesturing at Dean's hoodie, which is, indeed, soaking wet.
"The clothes don't matter," Dean insists again. "I can get more clothes." Cas just shakes his head and tries to push Dean out of the shower again, and Dean says, suddenly boiling over with frustration and almost wanting to shake him, "Don't you get it? I can get more clothes, but I can't get another Castiel. You're the only Cas I've got. Don't you get it? You're the only one, Cas, and you gotta let me help. Please. I gotta help." All of a sudden Dean's desperate for Cas to stop pulling away, to stop closing the door, stop pushing Dean away, stop apologizing, stop avoiding Dean's eyes. Dean has been helping all night, of course, but it seems like Cas has never quite made his peace with Dean being here, and Dean's outright begging now as he pleads, "I need to help, Cas, please let me help. I have to."

The water's beating down; it's starting to cool off, actually, and Dean starts to become aware the hot water's running out, but Cas doesn't seem to notice. Something in Dean's voice seems to have reached him this time. Cas nods, and he says, in a whisper so faint Dean can barely hear him, "Okay. Okay." He nods again, and when Dean pulls at him, Cas lets himself be pulled closer; he turns toward Dean, at last, and buries his face in Dean's neck, and raises both his arms to put his hands around Dean's waist. "Okay," Cas says again, "Okay." He's leaning on Dean now, and he's still nodding. The water's getting chillier, but Dean doesn't want to let Cas go for even a second, not now. They cling together for a long moment, till Dean realizes Cas has started to shiver again. Dean says, "The water's cold," and Cas says, almost absent-mindedly, "Right, right," as Dean scrambles to turn off the now-freezing water. Dean then bundles Cas in several layers of white towels, first helping him exchange the wet one for a dry one and then wrapping several more dry ones on top of that. Cas seems almost in a stupor now, shivering and stumbling with fatigue; Dean has to guide his feet one at a time over the edge of the tub and then half-carry him to the bed.

Dean settles him in bed, and wraps another towel around his head as a makeshift hat. As he tucks the clean sheets and blankets around him, Cas says, yet again, "Okay, Dean. It's okay," and he's patting Dean's hand, and then Cas is lost in sleep. He's still holding Dean's hand as he drifts off.

Dean's clothes are indeed totally drenched. But that doesn't matter at all.

A/N - There might be a two-week gap to the next chapter since my new job starts Monday and I'm not sure what the week will be like. I'll really try to get something up next week though.

Hope you liked this one. This is a key turning point, obviously, where Cas at last starts to willingly let Dean in. A rather sad way for them to have their first real embrace, but at least they're together.
You can keep holding on

Had to skip a week because of the new job starting, and even so I didn't get a full chapter written. It's just a half a chapter, a quiet interim scene, but it took surprisingly long anyway - this one's been oddly difficult in fact. At least it's something.

S12's underway too so this fic is officially off into A/U-land now! S12 will steam merrily away in some other direction, but I hope you still find the world of this particular fic worth following. (PS I haven't been able to watch the S12 premiere yet, so please no spoilers!)

And one last thing, I feel bad that I haven't yet been able to respond individually yet to all your comments. There have been so many heartfelt and wonderful comments, about so many real and intense experiences you've all had. I am having that happen again in my own life too... a dear friend just was diagnosed with breast cancer a couple days ago. Agh. It keeps hitting everybody I know. Anyway, I want so much to respond to everybody, but have just had no time w/the new job & the move. Hope to catch up soon, though. Please know I cherish every comment.

Cas is so sound asleep that he doesn't even wake when a trickle of cold water makes its way down the sleeve of the hoodie and drips on Cas's hand. Dean jerks back from the bed, looks around and realizes the edges of the damp hoodie are now slowly dripping all over the floor.

"Hang tight, Cas," Dean mutters, and he heads to the other room for a swift change of clothing.

Next door, Dean pulls the wet hoodie off and hold it out at arm's-length for a quick inspection. Should he could try to dry off the hoodie in a hurry, and revive the Giant Ground Sloth costume for tonight? Or... is Cas past that particular problem for now? Should Dean maybe be trying not to smell like a sloth anymore, now that Cas is feeling better? (Or a little better, at least.) Is it time for Dean to switch back to his usual toiletries?

These aroma-related questions have come to seem extremely important, so Dean ponders the issue for a few moments. He finally decides that he can probably retire the sloth hoodie for the rest of the week. I'll check with Cas when he wakes up, he thinks, but for now I'll switch to a Day-2-Scent. Something bland; not quite back to my usual routine, but not the sloth either.

He decides to let the hoodie air-dry, and spreads it out over an empty towel rack, planning to stick it back in the Target bag later, back with the tea and the other odors, for next week.

Next week.

Dean's hands slow as he's smoothing out the hoodie over the towel rack.

It's going to happen all over again next week.

Then there'll be one week off, and then it'll start all over with another whole month of treatment, doesn't it? Another "cycle."
The thought is incredibly discouraging, and Dean glances at the hoodie several times as he strips for
a quick shower. As he gets in the shower he's thinking, How many rounds of this, how many
"cycles," are there going to be? How many have there already been?

Has every time been as bad as this one?

Does Cas pass out every time, like he did last night? Does he always vomit all night long? Does he
always end up spitting up blood, crawling across the floor, spending the entire night curled up on the
cold floor, with barely even enough strength to drape himself over the toilet?

All those "trips" Cas has been taking come back to mind once more... all the times he's disappeared
out the bunker door. All the times he's said "See you in a few weeks," hoisted his bag over his
shoulder, and calmly walked away. Sam and Dean had always just waved a cheerful goodbye, and,
once he was gone, had fired up another movie on Netflix.

We were watching frigging movies, thinks Dean, turning on the water full blast. The water's cold
(apparently this room shares the same plumbing as Cas's) but Dean steps right into the icy blast,
gritting his teeth.

Movies. We were watching movies.

They'd been on a sci-fi kick for a while there, he remembers; Star Trek, the first couple seasons of
Battlestar Galactica, some cheesy Transformers flicks.

The thought of the sheer amount of suffering Cas must have been going through, while Dean and
Sam had been sacked out in the bunker watching "Star Trek III: The Search For Spock," makes
Dean want to punch the walls.

And then there's the risk that Cas has been taking! Now that Dean's got a minute alone, now that the
immediate crisis seems to be past and he's got a second here in the shower to think it all over, it's
making his stomach turn to realize how dangerous this must have been, all along. Dean's no stranger
to the limits of the human body. He's seen (and he's had) injuries of all kinds. He's experienced the
worst of trauma and disease, the extremes of exhaustion, he's kept watch by hospital bedsides many
times, and he's seen a lot of people die. And he knows now, he's certain, that Cas has been walking
a very fine line, here in this dingy little motel alone. The fainting, the bleeding; the racing heartbeat
and the panting; the constant loss of fluid, the inability to drink or eat; none of that is good, and none
of it is safe. Especially given that Cas has clearly been hiding (or at least downplaying) some pretty
important details from his medical team.

And he said it's "normal," remembers Dean, a grimace passing over his face as he remembers how
Cas had literally been spitting out blood while he'd said that.

Dean works a dollop of shampoo through his hair roughly, raking his fingers hard across his scalp
with his eyes closed, as if he can scrub the frightening image away.

"Normal," my ass, thinks Dean. I am NEVER letting him do this alone ever again.

The shower helps a little. It's good to get some of that up-all-night grimy feeling rinsed away (along
with the last of the Giant Ground Sloth odor). But the exhaustion doesn't seem to lessen, nor the
grinding sense of worry, both of which seem to settle around Dean all over again, like a heavy fog,
as soon as he gets out of the shower.

Just do what needs doing, Dean thinks. He towels off and does a quick shave, saying to himself,
Next step. Do the next step.
The next step, of course, is to get back to Cas and keep watch over him till it's clear that the nausea and vomiting are over. At least Cas finally seems to be letting Dean help.

The next fight's probably going to be to get Cas to let Sam help too.

Dean goes with his "Day 2 Scent" plan: a bland mix consisting solely of the new shampoo and soap, with a change of clothes. Just his regular clothes this time, but clean ones from his duffel, ones he hasn't been driving around in for days: undershirt, jeans, and a flannel shirt that's worn loose and open like usual. And no cologne of any sort. (It's a definite relief to put the Axe away; Dean tucks it with the Lapsang Souchong tea and the other "sloth" ingredients).

Once dressed, he checks his phone; it's four in the afternoon. A text's appeared from Sam, asking if Dean'll be okay if Sam stops for a few "errands" that might delay him an hour or so. Errands? thinks Dean, puzzled and a little annoyed. What errands could possibly be worth slowing down for? Does Sam not realize what's going on?

Well, maybe Sam doesn't fully grasp how bad it's been. Once he gets here, he'll get it, Dean thinks. Besides, another hour or two doesn't really matter at this point, so Dean texts Sam a quick "Ok."

On the way back to Cas's room, Dean finds he's automatically patting his side where his gun holster usually is — even though the holster, and the gun, are actually sitting in Cas's room right now on the kitchenette counter. Dean realizes then that he's gone back on alert, as if Cas's little motel room is a battle zone where Dean might have to fight some unknown monsters at any second. But when Dean cracks the door open, all is quiet; Cas is still on the bed, still breathing, still asleep.

Dean shuts the door as silently as he can, tiptoes over to the bed and stands looking down at Cas for a long moment. Cas is taking those long, heavy breaths of the very deepest stage of sleep — hopefully the kind where there's not even any dreaming, just restful blankness and blackness. In fact it looks like he's barely even moved since Dean last saw him. He's in the same position, curled up on his side facing the door. One arm's even still outstretched, hanging off the side of the bed toward the door, as if he's still reaching for Dean's hand.

The edge of the motel blanket has worked its way down a little, though. It's now bunched up halfway down Cas's ribcage, and parts of various towels are visible: one wrapped loosely around his head, another one draped over his shoulders like a cape, and a third wrapped around his chest. There should be one around his hips, too, somewhere down there; Dean remembers now that he'd never managed to get Cas back into any kind of clothes or pajamas. Under that blanket, Cas is wearing nothing more than a messily wrapped set of white towels.

Dean half-smiles when he realizes it's almost the setup to a bad gay porno. (Or a good gay porno, even.) The thought of Castiel naked under the bedspread, all the towels coming undone....

But it's a hypothetical sort of thought. There's a wistfulness to it, a twist of regret and lost opportunity, but it's a could-have, should-have kind of feeling. Those kinds of imaginings were probably just dreams all along. Daydreams, really.... unlikely and foolish. Dean knows he needs to put them away. What Cas needs is support and care, and what he definitely doesn't need is Dean getting distracted by ridiculous gay-porno daydreams about towels falling off.

Dean's still standing there, trying diligently to stop wondering about whether Cas's lower towel has
come unwrapped under the blanket, when Cas shifts position. Maybe he heard Dean tiptoeing into
the room, or maybe he's just dreaming, but he gropes in the air a little with his outstretched hand and
then pulls his arm in. Both his hands close on the edge of the blanket and he folds both arms, his
hands pulling the edge of the blanket up under his chin and his head tucking down a little, as if he's
trying to curl up and get himself a little more covered. He only succeeds in pulling the blanket (and
the towels) more out of position. The head-towel unwraps a little and the shoulder-towel slips off his
shoulders too. Suddenly that bare bald patch on Cas's head is showing, and one of those spooky
claw-like bruises across the top of his shoulderblade too, and Dean remembers the scars on his
abdomen as well; and just like that all the gay-porno thoughts are gone. The feeling that floods over
Dean now, just from this one moment of watching Cas's small shuffling of position, is one of intense
protectiveness. Cas looks too cold; Cas looks too exposed; Cas's bruises are showing—

_I'm never going to get used to the bruises_, Dean thinks, and he reaches down and gently extracts the
edge of the blanket from Cas's hands and pulls it a little higher, tucking it up well over Cas's
shoulders so that the blanket covers him right up to his chin, hiding all the bruises. Dean checks Cas's
temperature, too, resting a hand lightly on his forehead for a moment, and he's pulling the head-towel
gently back into place over Cas's head when he sees a few loose strands of dark hair lying on the
pillow.

Dean pauses, looking at the little stray pieces of hair. He looks at Cas's face then, and notices
something he hasn't seen before: there's no five-o-clock shadow. Dean just had to shave; looks like
Cas won't need to. That stubble Cas has always had, that slightly scruffy look he often gets across his
chin and cheeks, is gone. In fact his eyebrows are looking sparse, too. These are not obvious
changes, but now that Dean's looking for them, they're there.

The words _Diagnosis? Prognosis?_ float into Dean's mind.

Diagnosis, and prognosis. This is what matters now. What Cas has exactly; and what the outlook is.

Dean gets a chair, pulling it close to the bed so he can sit down by Cas's side. There's not much more
to do, and now that the _diagnosis, prognosis_ thoughts have started, it turns out that they won't shut
up. It's like some kind of "Now let's think full-time about nothing but cancer" mode has kicked on,
like an unwelcome visitor knocking insistently on the door, and the little voice in Dean's head keeps
going _Diagnosis? Prognosis? Diagnosis? Prognosis?_ ?

_What kind, what organ, what stage, how bad? What kind of treatment, for how long, with what side
effects?_

_How many years, what probability, what chance?_

There's no answers yet. Dean's pretty sure, actually, that even after Cas wakes there still won't be any
answers right away, for Cas has been acting like he won't be forthcoming with many of the details.
Dean suspects he'll have to press Cas on this at some point. Probably soon. Because cancer's a
killer....

No, wait. Cancer _can_ be a killer, but it doesn't have to be. In fact, often it isn't, these days. Lots of
people beat it now.

_It won't be a killer for Cas_, Dean thinks. He shifts position in the little wooden chair, trying to get
comfortable for a potentially long evening shift. _Not Cas. He's beat too many other things; he's too
tough. There's no way this'll get him._

_Besides, we've got some strings we can pull. We've got friends in high places, and maybe in some
low ones._
If you stretch the definition of "friend" pretty far, that is. (Far enough so that it includes "enemy." )

Only fifteen minutes later, though, Dean's struggling to stay awake. The chair's not even that comfortable, but even so his head's actually nodding down on his chest now and then. The diagnosis and prognosis thoughts go blurring together into hazy dreamlike worries, interspersed with vivid memory-flashes of Cas being sick, of holding him over the toilet, of watching him on the floor. When a noise out in the parking lot catches Dean's ear, he snaps back to alertness, bringing his head up with a jerk and almost jumping out of the wooden chair toward Cas, certain that Cas is throwing up again and needs help.

But Cas is still sleeping. It was all just half-asleep dreams. Dean checks his phone and finds there's still probably another hour to go before Sam arrives, so he starts flipping through the other apps on the phone, planning to find some pointless games to play just to try to keep himself awake. But then somehow he's opened up a web browser, and then he's googling the keywords "cancer diagnosis prognosis" and immediately a whole set of hospital websites and NIH patient-information pages pop up.

Sam's probably already read all this, Dean thinks, but nonetheless he starts clicking his way through it all. He selects one hospital's website at random and soon he's squinting at the phone's little screen, trying to make his way through a huge alphabetical glossary about all the different types of cancer and their treatments, "Pancreatic cancer," "stomach cancer," "liver cancer," "lung cancer," — the names of all the different cancers go scrolling by. The phrases, the names of the cancer types, seem relentless and blunt and rude, and there's dozens of them, and each one is a clickable link to a whole separate world of misery. There's a lot of links.

There's quite a lot of links, and Dean doesn't know which one to click. He blunders through a few of them and only succeeds in discovering that certain cancers seem to be extra-awful, with horrible survival rates. Pancreatic's one of the very worst, apparently, and liver looks bad too, and stomach cancer's not good either....

It's soon clear that Dean won't be able to figure out anything truly useful till he knows what Cas has got exactly — though he's starting to truly dread that conversation. He finally finds another set of links, down at the bottom, for downloadable pdf's about basic types of treatment and general information. It all seems depressingly matter-of-fact; there's an almost corporate polished air to the glossy little brochures. Dean dutifully scans through the titles, planning which ones to download later when he's back at his laptop. "Living With Cancer" looks like it might be worth a look, and "What To Expect During Chemotherapy" for sure, and the one on "Nutrition and Cancer" might be helpful, and then Dean notices one called "When Chemotherapy Doesn't Work," and another one called "Hospice Care: A Patient's Choice."

All at once Dean finds himself twisting around to the bedside table, in order to plunk the phone face-down and grab the TV remote. Apparently the googling is over. Apparently it's time to watch TV. (Just as Cas had advised last night.)

Dean's so distracted and tense now, and also so exhausted, that he forgets all about muting the sound. When he powers on the TV there's a blast of deafening Spanish so loud it makes him jump, and it takes several agonizing seconds to find the mute button. Those few seconds seem like years, but finally Dean finds the right button, jabs it desperately, and at last a quiet silence settles over the room once again. Dean darts a guilty glance over at the bed, but, miraculously, Cas's eyes are still closed.
A cruise through the TV’s few channels soon reveals that the motel only has a very sparse selection of basic cable. Dean’s soon flipped through all the channels, still unable to concentrate much, and he ends up circling round again to the Spanish channel he'd started on. It's showing a telenovela. He gets the closed-captioning on, thinking maybe he can follow the Spanish a little (he's got enough broken Spanish under his belt to deal with a basic telenovela plot).

But when he tries to read the Spanish it seems like the only words he can see are "When Chemotherapy Doesn't Work" and "Hospice Care: A Patient's Choice."

Dean turns the closed captioning back off and watches the screen in silence.

Turns out he doesn't even need any Spanish to get the gist of it, though, for by some sort of cursed luck, the telenovela turns out to be in the middle of a hospital scene. There's some kind of dewy-eyed bride lying in a hospital bed looking noble and tragic (yet remarkably well made-up, her hair perfect and her lipstick flawless). Weeping family members are clustering around the bed having a series of excitable, teary arguments. They all quiet down when the patient launches in on an incredibly long speech (with unrealistically long sentences, thinks Dean — there's hardly any gasping for breath, and not even the least bit of hemorrhaging, diarrhea or vomiting). The weeping family members are soon weeping even more dramatically, and it becomes clear that this is a last-words speech. It's a death scene.

Dean manages to avoid hurling the tv remote right through the tv screen. "Goddam fricking telenovelas," he mutters, punching the remote's power-off button as hard as he can.

"You should lie down," says Cas.

Dean jumps, and jerks around to look at him. Cas hasn't moved, but his eyes are open now, and he's watching Dean. No doubt that brief blast of thundering Spanish woke him up. Dean doublechecks that the TV is really off, wincing internally as he realizes that Cas might have seen some of the hospital death scene. He turns back to Cas with a pasted-on smile. "Sorry if I disturbed your beauty sleep," Dean says. "How're you feeling?"

"You should lie down," Cas repeats. His voice is slurred with fatigue, and he looks very sleepy, his eyes half-lidded. He hasn't even shifted position or lifted his head at all. But even so he seems to be inspecting Dean critically, and he's frowning as his eyes flick over Dean's face. "You're tired," he says. "You need rest."

"Nah, I'm fine," says Dean. "Not my first all-night rodeo, you know. And you're the one who was the star attraction. Crawling all over the floor like a half-drowned kitten — you sure know how to play the pathetic card. Totally stole the show, you know." He realizes Cas is now looking at Dean's clothes; his attention seems to have been caught by Dean's flannel shirt.

"I retired the giant ground sloth," Dean explains, glancing down at the shirt and plucking at the flannel a little bit. "Thought maybe you might not need it now? But I can go back into ground sloth mode if you think I should."

Cas shakes his head. "First night's always the worst," he says. "Odors usually aren't a problem on— on the second—" His voice is already very hoarse, and it goes dry halfway through the sentence. Cas tries to clear his throat to continue, but just ends up coughing.

"Oh, hey, you need more water," says Dean, grabbing a water bottle from a small stack that are lined up on the bedside table. "Here. You gotta drink some more." Dean twists the cap off, scoots his chair closer and holds the bottle out. Cas makes a slight lurch upwards, as if to try to sit up and grab it, but he only gets his head about an inch off the pillow before he gives up and lets himself flop down
again. "Lemme help," says Dean, leaning in and sliding a hand behind Cas's head.

And glory be, Cas lets Dean help. He accepts the assistance quietly; he lifts one hand to the water bottle to steer it a bit, but he's letting Dean carry the weight of the bottle, and he's also letting the whole weight of his head rest in Dean's other hand too. Gratifyingly, he takes a very long drink this time, longer than any he's taken in hours — not just tiny sips but several long thirsty gulps, big healthy-looking swallows, all in a row. He even closes his eyes for several long moments, his fingers tightening on Dean's, as if he's truly savoring the water.

Once he's downed two-thirds of the bottle he opens his eyes and pushes the bottle away."It actually tastes good this time," Cas says. Dean's beaming at him, like Cas has performed an incredible feat. Cas explains, "It didn't really taste like water before. It does now."

"You're definitely feeling better," Dean says, lowering the bottle. "Want to eat anything? Maybe another saltine?"

Cas shakes his head.

"One crumb?" suggests Dean. "Half a crumb?"

Another headshake. "Usually I still can't eat much on the second day," Cas says. "Though..." He gets a thoughtful look for a moment, like he's checking in with himself internally, and he reports, "The nausea's gone now. But I know it'll come back if I eat when I don't really want to." (Despite the discouraging topic of conversation, it's awfully good to hear him talking in such long complete sentences. His voice is still quiet and hoarse, but he's getting entire thoughts out now.) Cas adds, "Tomorrow I might be able to eat more. A little."

Dean rests the partly-drunk water bottle on his knee, tapping it with one finger as he watches Cas adjust the towel that's still wrapped around his head. Dean's thinking, again, of all the weeks Cas has been doing this, and all those informational brochures about "Living With Cancer" and "What To Expect During Chemotherapy."

"Cas," Dean says, "Is every week like this?"

"Oh, this is an easy week," Cas says. "Though..." He gets a thoughtful look for a moment, like he's checking in with himself internally, and he reports, "The nausea's gone now. But I know it'll come back if I eat when I don't really want to." (Despite the discouraging topic of conversation, it's awfully good to hear him talking in such long complete sentences. His voice is still quiet and hoarse, but he's getting entire thoughts out now.) Cas adds, "Tomorrow I might be able to eat more. A little."

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"Cas," Dean says, "Is every week like this?"

"Oh, this is an easy week," Cas says. Dean blinks at him, and Cas says, "Week 1's always worse. It's three days of chemo."

"Three days... like... in a row?" says Dean, trying to sound casual, because this is a horrifying thought. Three days?

Cas nods, reaching for the water bottle again. "But that was last week," he says. "This is Week Two." His hand closes over Dean's on the bottle, and again Dean helps him lift his head again to drink.

But now Dean's thinking, Three days of chemo in a row.

That sounds bad.

And.... it sounds serious. Heavy-duty chemo. Major league treatment. Serious treatment... for a serious cancer?

Dean remembers the list of the especially dangerous cancers.... pancreatic, stomach, liver... and he realizes, with a jolt, that these are all abdominal cancers. Cancers of abdominal organs. At that point Dean also remembers the abdominal scars, those red lines he'd glimpsed when Cas had been in the shower. It looked like Cas has had some kind of abdominal surgery.
Dean's blood has gone cold now, and he's biting his lip. Cas doesn't notice; he finishes the water bottle, mutters "Thank you," and turns over onto his side again. He's now looking extra sleepy-eyed and is obviously about to drift off, but then Dean blurts out, still clutching the empty water bottle, "What kind is it?"

Cas stiffens, darting a quick glance at Dean. He's suddenly wide awake again. Dean's immediately kicking himself for asking. He'd planned to ask sometime, of course, but not now. This isn't the right time at all; this is a recovery night, and Cas needs to rest. Already Cas is getting that evasive look, his eyes sliding away from Dean's, and he shifts in the bed, his expression a strange mixture of worry and sorrow and uncertainty. It's hard to interpret, but it's clear he's uncomfortable.

"You can tell me later," Dean says, at exactly the same moment that Cas asks, "Can I tell you later?"

"Yeah, later, later," Dean says, with a bit of a laugh, but now he's unable to stop himself from reaching out to Cas. He really just kind of wants to give Cas some sort of a hug, but ends up covering that impulse with a whole series of bedding adjustments. Dean adjusts Cas's head-towel, and tucks the loose corners in, and wraps the shoulder-towel more snugly around him, and then Dean feels Cas's forehead again for possible fever, and he smooths the blanket over Cas's chest. Cas's expression has changed yet again; now he's squinting up at Dean looking almost puzzled.

"Sorry. I jumped the gun," says Dean, smoothing out the blanket again and re-adjusting a loose corner of towel that's gotten flopped around Cas's neck. "Just... curious, I guess. Never mind. Later. So, you just rest, okay? You just—" Dean is still fiddling with the blanket-edge when Cas reaches up and takes Dean's hand.

There's a little silence. Cas squeezes Dean's hand lightly, and doesn't release it. The contact is oddly reassuring; Dean swallows, looking at him, and Cas holds his eyes for a moment.

"You need to rest," Cas says, as he had earlier. "You should lie down." He nods toward the other side of the bed. "This is a queen-size bed," he points out. "Quite large. Plenty of room. I don't need it all."

It's an incredibly tempting thought. But Dean's worried about crowding Cas, and he's also worried that if he does lie down, he'll fall asleep; and he doesn't want to leave Cas unsupervised (at least not till Sam gets here). However, the thought of sitting next to him, being that little bit closer, even if just to monitor him better, is very appealing.

"Maybe I could just sit on the bed," says Dean. "Just for a little bit. Till Sam gets here. Because, actually, this chair is a little uncomfortable."

"That chair's very uncomfortable," says Cas. "I've sat in it. I completely agree."

Dean props up a whole set of pillows on the other side of the bed so that he can sit upright and, hopefully, not fall asleep instantly. He brings his phone around to the far side of the bed in case Sam calls; he gets the tv on, too (switching channels to a basketball game that he has absolutely no interest in, but hoping, again, that the TV will help keep him awake). Cas has already drifted off again by the time Dean kicks his shoes off, sits on the bed and, very gently, swings his legs up.

Dean's on top of the covers; Cas, a couple feet away, is underneath them. The basketball game goes on and Dean watches it blankly. He's not really seeing the game at all, of course; he's thinking over
Cas's worried expression when Dean had asked what kind of cancer it was, and he's wondering why Castiel didn't want to say what cancer it was.

Dean's thinking, too, about those abdominal scars.

The basketball game's gone on quite a few more minutes when Cas shifts in his sleep, turning to face Dean. Dean glances down at him, but Cas seems to be okay, still breathing evenly; he's just rolled over. It's starting to seem like this might be an entirely non-vomiting evening (which is, of course, a huge relief).

Dean returns to watching the game again, but he finally realizes he's now been watching it for nearly half an hour and still has no idea which teams are playing. He considers checking out the minifridge and seeing if it might have any whiskey. This thought instantly has a very strong attraction to it, but when Dean starts to shift his weight in order to swing his legs off the bed, there's a tug on his shirt. Dean looks down to find that Cas has taken hold, in his sleep, of the edge of Dean's flannel shirt. He's even kind of knotted his fingers into it.

"Well," Dean whispers, "Okay, dude. I'll stay a minute longer."

Dean waits a few more minutes, thinking Cas will shift position again and let go of the shirt, but Cas doesn't let go. The whiskey's still calling. Dean's soon wondering if he could extract himself from the shirt, shedding it quietly and leaving it behind on the bed (in Cas's grasp) while Dean makes a quick dash to the minifridge and back. But then there's a touch on his arm; Cas has now got one hand around Dean's wrist.

There's no going to the minifridge at all now, of course. Not while Cas is holding on.

Dean sits there a long time, with Cas holding on to his arm. For some reason the sleepiness is gone. Eventually Dean turns the TV off. Outside, the sun is setting. The light in the window begins to fade, and the little room grows dim. *I could turn on a light*, Dean thinks, but that would require moving, which would require disturbing Castiel, so he doesn't move. The room gets dimmer and dimmer, and Dean stays where he is, till he's sitting quietly in the gloom, with Castiel's warm hand on his arm.

Dean's phone buzzes. He manages to check it with his other hand, without moving; it's Sam, texting to say the "errands" are done, and he's just half an hour away now.

"Oh," comes a hoarse voice beside him the dark. The phone's buzz must have woken Cas up; the touch on Dean's arm disappears. "Sorry," says Cas. "I got onto your side of the bed, didn't I? Sorry." Cas shuffles a few inches farther away, and his hand does not return.

"You can keep holding on," offers Dean.

Cas doesn't move for a moment.

It's so dark now that it's hard to see anything, but finally there's a soft rustling sound of the blanket being shifted a little, and then the warm hand reappears on Dean's arm. It's so reassuring to feel that touch again; Dean feels better immediately, and he pats Cas's hand and settles back a little against the stack of pillows. After a pause, Cas adds his other hand too, both his hands around Dean's forearm now. Then there's a change in Cas's breathing and Dean knows he's fallen asleep again.

For many minutes more Dean sits quietly there on the bed, trying to think about nothing at all except for the feel of Castiel holding on in the dark, and the sound of his slow, steady breathing.
A/N - As I said, just a quiet interim scene. But so hard to write, somehow! The shifting direction-of-worry between Dean and Cas, each of them alternating worrying about the other... and that very delicate dance they're starting to do about physical contact and what it means to each of them. All overlaid with the medical details & related fears. Tricky.

Anyway, hope you liked it.

And yes, there's the fic title again, this time as a chapter title too. You saw it before when Dean said it to himself; now he's saying it to Cas; and it won't be the last time you see it.

Please let me know what you think, and if there was anything particular that you liked. Thanks so much for reading. I really hope you're all doing well.
There's a knock on the door. Cas only stirs slightly as Dean gently extracts his arm from Cas's hands and levers himself creakily to his feet. Grabbing his gun from the kitchenette counter (this is standard protocol), Dean cracks the door open a hair.

It's Sam.

"Jeez. You look—" Sam starts to say, in too loud a voice, and Dean makes a shh gesture, holding one finger to his lips and nodding back toward the room. Dean slips outside the door and edges it almost shut, so they can talk a little without disturbing Cas.

The motel's the kind where the door opens directly to a little parking lot, and the nose of the Impala's just a few feet away, its sleek finish shining in the soft glow of a nearby streetlight. Sam backs up a step and leans on the Impala's hood. He's got his duffel slung over his shoulder, and he hitches it up onto the hood. With his other hand he's balancing a couple of bulging shopping bags across his knees. He looks tired, and more than a little worried.

"Sorry," Sam says, in a much quieter voice, once Dean's gotten the door almost closed. "I was gonna say, you look like shit."

"Aw, quit it with all the compliments, you're making me blush," says Dean. Sam gives him only a faint smile, and Dean adds, "Drive go ok? Get your errands done?"

"Yep. Took a while. Got the bus to town, grabbed a rental car there," replies Sam. "Then I stopped for a couple things—" he raises the shopping bags slightly— "and I dropped off the rental already, at a place here in Denver a mile or so away. Walked over here." Dean's starting to understand why Sam looks so tired. But apparently Sam's not done with the driving yet, for he adds, "Thought I could maybe take the Impala right now actually and go get some dinner for you guys. You had anything to eat?"

It's not till Sam asks about it that Dean discovers he's starving. "Not much," he says, realizing, with some surprise, that the only thing he's eaten all the previous night, and all day today, has been a handful of rejected saltines — the ones he couldn't get Cas to eat. "Six saltines, I think?" says Dean.

Sam's worried look deepens, so Dean says, trying to make a joke out of it, "Maybe eight saltines, I lost count. And some crappy coffee from the motel office. You and your healthy-eating obsession, Sam, are you seriously gonna try and convince me that isn't a balanced diet?"

But Sam doesn't laugh. He just nods thoughtfully and says, "I'll go and get you something." Then he adds, dropping his voice even further and craning his neck a little to peer over Dean's shoulder toward Cas's door, "How about Cas? I mean, um, does he want some dinner?"
"He's already had his half-a-saltine for the day," says Dean. "Though I think he's got plans of working up to a whole saltine tomorrow."

Sam's quiet a moment. He hefts his duffel onto his shoulder again, stands, and takes a small half-step toward Cas's door. But he hesitates, pausing there while still a few feet away from the door, and looks uncertainly at Dean. "Do you think I could say hi? I mean, is he, uh...."

At this point Dean realizes that Sam's probably spent the entire drive wondering how bad things are — how bad Cas is going to look, whether he's capable of conversation... whether he's at death's door. Dean's about to suggest that they slip into the other room for a confidential pow-wow when there's a faint, rough, rather sleepy-sounding "Dean?" from inside the room. It's Cas.

"Yeah, I'm here," calls Dean. "Right outside."

Sam calls out, "Sorry, Cas. I was just, um—"

"Sam?" Cas interrupts, suddenly sounding much more alert. There's a creaking noise, like he's sitting up in bed. "Sam, is that you?"

"Yeah, um—" says Sam. He glances again at Dean and steps forward to give the door an uncertain knock. Only when Cas says, "Come in," does Sam gently nudge the door open (though only about four inches). Sam peers hesitantly into the dark room to say, "Hey, sorry, didn't mean to bother you. Were you asleep?"

"It's all right," says Cas. "Come on in. You can turn the light on."

Sam swings the door all the way open, Dean reaches past him to flick the light on, and there's Cas, blinking in the sudden light. He's actually managing to push himself up to a sitting position on his own. However, as he sits up, various towels start sliding off, almost in slow motion. Dean spots the moment when Cas remembers that he's not wearing any real clothes: with one hand Cas checks that the blanket is still covering him up to his waist (it is) and his other hand then grabs futilely at the shoulder-towel. The shoulder-towel's a goner, though — it's already slipping off the bed entirely, to the floor, and as Cas turns his head to see where it's gotten to, his head-towel slithers off too.

All the arm-bruises are suddenly vividly in view. And the hair loss. Dean, looking at him now with fresh eyes, is a little taken aback at how much Cas seems to have settled into the classic cancer-patient look. He looks like a frail, tragic figure straight out of a Lifetime movie.

Sam's blocking Dean's way, standing stock-still in the doorway, and he just stands there, apparently frozen. Dean thinks, _I was so damn lucky that Cas was asleep when I first saw him. I got to have my freakout without him seeing._

Castiel slowly raises his eyes to Sam.

But Cas doesn't cover his head this time, and he doesn't cover his arm bruises. He just says, quietly, "Hello, Sam."

Dean's almost frantic now to cover Cas up, so he squeezes past Sam (giving him a quick pat on the shoulder on the way), saying to Cas, "Hey, dude, we totally forgot to get you some real clothes after your shower. Here, put this on." Dean's already pulling his own flannel shirt off before he's even halfway to the bed. He gets to the bed, flips the shirt over Cas's shoulders, helps him steer his arms into it, and even buttons up a couple of the buttons for him. Cas looks up at him with a small smile, as if what Dean's doing isn't really necessary any more but is appreciated nonetheless.

The shirt's big on him, especially with how thin he is now, but the bruises have successfully been
covered. The hair loss, however, has not been covered at all. Dean's standing beside the bed now, and from this angle he happens to be looking right down at Cas's head, and it's startling all over again to see how much hair Cas has lost. It already looks worse than yesterday. Has Cas lost that much more hair just in the last twenty-four hours?

"Hey, Cas," Sam says at last, taking another step into the room and swinging the door shut. Dean gives him a pleading look, trying to telepathically convey to him, Don't act shocked. Don't make a big deal out of any of this.

But it turns out there's no need to worry; Sam just slings his duffel and one of his shopping bags on the floor by the door, and he asks Cas, "How you holding up?"

Cas shrugs. "Better now."

Sam nods. "Heard you had a rough night," he says, hoisting the second shopping bag in his hands. "If you feel up to it though, I got something to show you." Then Sam walks right over to Cas with shopping bag, pulls a chair up to the bed next to Dean, and sits down.

Sam looks completely unfazed. But Dean recognizes his tone of voice, and even the way he's moving: Sam's gone into his well-practiced victim-soothing mode. It's the same way he talks to traumatized witnesses and shell-shocked family members. It's got to be an act right now, of course, at least partly — because the hesitation and worry that were all over Sam's face just a minute ago, outside by the Impala, are totally hidden now. (Though they must still be there, somewhere, under the surface.)

"Dean mentioned you lost some hair," Sam remarks, with a mild glance at Cas's head, as if he's just commenting on a new haircut. Lifting the bulging plastic shopping bag, Sam says, "I brought you some hats. Wanna see?"

Hats, thinks Dean. Errands. Of course.

Cas shoots a puzzled glance at Dean, and then looks back at Sam with a nod. Sam then upends the bag right over the bed. A pile of multicolored fabric and wool tumbles out all over Cas's blanket-covered legs. It's a sudden profusion of colors and fabrics, blues and greens and reds spilling all over, and Cas and Dean both stare in surprise.

It is, indeed, hats. Lots of hats.

Dean asks, "So, uh, how many hats did you get exactly?"

"I think it's like ten or something?" Sam says, starting to sift through them. "Twelve maybe? Not sure. So, Cas, I wasn't sure which ones you'd like. By the way, some stores have this, like, serious deficiency in hats! And in colors. See, at first I was looking for a gray one like your other one, but I couldn't find any gray hats in the first couple stores, and then I realized I didn't know what other colors you like. So I ended up getting an assortment. Figured you could use some different hats anyway, like, different warmths? And in different colors." He glances up at Dean. "That's why I was late. Sorry."

"So..." Dean says, "How many stores did you check exactly?"

"Five or so? Six? I dunno. Finally hit some pretty good paydirt at that mall just over the state line. So, Cas, first off, there's these basic beanies—" Here Sam plucks a light-colored wool cap out of of the heap, a classic simple men's woolen hat designed to just cover the crown of the head. He holds it up for Cas to see. "Kind of the same shape as the gray one you had, right? Just a different color. They
didn't have gray, like I said I looked for gray but they didn't have it, but I thought this white one with
the gray flecks is decent. And here's another in blue. Then this one's a classic black watch cap,
slightly different style, military, like the Army uses; might look good on you. And I kinda liked this
dark blue one." Sam's pulling hats out of the pile as he talks, holding them up one at a time by Cas's
face as if he's assessing Castiel for some kind of modeling photo shoot. Cas takes the blue one from
Sam's hand and pulls it on, glancing up at Dean once he's got it on.

It's remarkable how much better he looks with a hat on. The "cancer patient" look disappears almost
instantly. He's still pale and thin, and the hat doesn't quite cover his entire hairline, but he looks
almost normal. Though... a new normal, actually. It's odd to see him with this new color of hat (the
blue of his eyes suddenly seems especially vivid). And with the checked flannel shirt too, he looks
quite different. He looks...

He looks kinda good, actually.

"That one's not bad," says Dean. Cas squints at him for a moment, pulls off the navy-blue hat off (he
seems to have relaxed now about hiding the bald patches), and he takes a green one that Sam's
holding out, and pulls it on. Cas glances up at Dean again.

"Nice one too," says Dean. Cas squints at him again, and pulls the green one off.

Sam says, "There's a couple other styles too. There's these ones with pom-poms, like this one here." (Sam picks up a black hat.) "I didn't know if you're a pom-pom kind of guy but I thought it might
look good. Also they tend to be a bit warmer in winter, the pom-pom type."

"Pom... pom?" says Cas, quite doubtfully, as if maybe he's never heard that particular phrase before.
He slowly takes hold of the black hat Sam's showing him, a thick cable-knit winter wool hat with a
rolled-up brim and, indeed, a pom-pom on the top.

"Yeah, the pom-pom is the ball thing on top," Sam explains.

"But it only has one," Cas says, fingering the puffy wad of wool at the top of the hat. "There's only
one pom."

"It's a big pom," Dean points out. "It's so big it's worth two poms. Pom-pom." Sam snorts, but Cas
looks skeptical, glancing up at Dean with such clear suspicion that Dean has to laugh.

It's good to laugh. It's good to see Cas almost acting like himself again; even with just the last few
hours of sleep he seems to have perked up a little more. He's still clearly not totally back to normal
(in fact he's slumping a little tiredly, and Dean's starting to think he needs some extra pillows propped
up behind him). But it's a great relief to see something like his normal alertness back in his eyes.

Sam reaches out and puts the pom-pom hat on Cas's head. While Sam is carefully adjusting the hat,
Cas raises one hand to his head. It's that familiar gesture again, his head-shielding gesture, but this
time he's not touching the bald patch on his head; he's only feeling at the "pom" on the top of the hat.

Dean is standing by the bed now with his hands on his hips, and as he watches this little scene play
out — Sam reaching out with both hands to help Cas re-fold the edge of the hat, while Cas touches
the "pom" curiously — Dean's suddenly almost teary, for no reason that he can figure out. Damn, I
must be tired, Dean thinks. He even has to look aside and take a long, slow breath, and run a hand
over his face. Then he busies himself by stuffing two more pillows behind Cas's back.

Once the pillows are settled, he walks around behind Sam's chair and sits on the bed by Cas's knees,
where he allows himself one more deep breath to settle himself. He feels just about back to normal,
and he's sure he's hidden the whole episode completely. But when he glances up again, it turns out Cas is watching him.

Not to be outdone, Sam flicks a glance at Dean too.

Neither of them say anything; they return to the hats. Sam has Cas try on a beige hat next (the color on this one isn't the best); then a plaid sheepskin-lined one that makes Cas suddenly look so much like a lumberjack that both Sam and Dean get almost into giggles about it. But Cas reports that it's warm, so they decide to reserve that one for colder weather.

Then Cas picks up a multi-colored one from the bottom of the pile, examining it curiously. "This one's different," he says.

"Okay, so, I know that one's kind of weird," says Sam. "It just caught my eye somehow." As Cas turns it around, it becomes clear that the hat's shaped like an animal head. A monkey, it seems. The color scheme seems to be designed after sock monkeys, those crude puppets made out of a gray sock that have just had eyes and ears added. It's got monkey eyes and monkey ears on the top, and even a big broad mouth that's spread across the front of the hat. There's a puffy red pom-pom on top. And it's got ear flaps — nice warm-looking ear flaps, each with a long red braided tassel that hangs down the side.

"I know it's totally weird," says Sam, now sounding a little defensive about it. "But I kinda liked it, I don't know why." Cas, who still has the plaid lumberjack hat on, is holding it in his hands, eyeing the monkey face with a rather puzzled look as Sam explains, "They were at this booth at that mall. Whole booth of animal hats. Different kinds of animals, I guess for Christmas gifts for your kids or whatever. There was a panda and a cat and all kinds of animals. Kind of a crazy design but the great thing about these is, they cover your ears."

"Quechua," says Castiel slowly, turning it around again. "A Quechua hat. But with a pom."

"What?" says Dean.

"Quechuas," Cas repeats, glancing over at him. "I think you'd call them Incas. This is a Peruvian design." He's examining the ear flaps now, and the long braided tassel at the end of each ear flap. "I mean, not the monkey, but the shape," he explains. "This kind of ear flap, with the tassels, and the way the whole thing is woven; this is a Peruvian style of hat. They used these in the Andes. It's a very traditional design." He's quiet a moment and then he adds, "I went there a few times, you know. Long ago." He strokes the monkey's face and runs one hand down a tassel, and adds, "I used to fly there... and... well, anyway, they used to put little llama designs on them."

"It's super soft on the inside," Sam says, breezing past the "I used to fly there" comment. "It's got a fleece lining. I thought it might be comfy."

Dean's about to say, "Yeah, but it's completely ridiculous," when Cas pulls it on.

Immediately it becomes clear that this hat's particular kind of design, with the way the earflaps extend pretty far down, has a unique advantage: it totally hides Cas's entire hairline. Even the part of the hairline that's behind his ears, and even the part that's low on his neck. With the monkey hat on, it's impossible to tell at all that he's lost any hair.

Of course, the pattern really is ridiculous — the monkey's expression seems huge, its face weirdly spread across the top of Cas's head. It's ridiculous... and it's hilarious. But Cas has put it on anyway, and, as seems the usual routine now, he then looks at Dean to check Dean's reaction.
There's something so incredibly incongruous about Cas's solemn, pale face, and the way he's frowning at Dean, with the garishly cheerful monkey design and the "pom" on top, that Dean can't help but smile.

Cas studies Dean's expression a moment, and then turns to Sam. Sam's grinning too.

"I like this one," Cas says to Sam.

"You do?" says Sam. He sounds surprised — and pleased. "That one was a long shot! You really like it?"

"I do," Cas says, with another glance at Dean, as he strokes one tassel. "I like the Inca design. And the ears. And the pom."

"Great!" says Sam. He's got a broad grin now. "That's just great! Cause, it's yours now. They're all yours, actually. Keep 'em all."

"Angel in a pom-pom," says Dean, shaking his head. "With a monkey to boot. You know, it's really not half bad."

There's a moment, then, when they're actually all smiling — even Cas, who's got one corner of his mouth crooked up a little now as he looks back and forth between Dean and Sam.

The half-smile doesn't last very long. "Sam," Cas says, a serious look coming over his face. He gathers all the unused hats up in his arms, cradles them to himself in a pile of wool, gazes down at them for a long moment, and then looks up at Sam. "Thank you for all the hats."

"Oh, sure," says Sam. "It was nothing."

"It wasn't nothing," Cas says firmly. "It was the opposite of nothing. It was... not nothing. And thank you for coming all this way. You didn't have to." He looks at Dean then, and adds, "Neither of you did."

"Yeah, we did," says Dean. "We wanted to." Sam nods.

Cas looks down at his bundle of hats again, and he lifts a hand again to stroke one of the monkey-hat tassels. He says, quietly, "I didn't want to worry you. Either of you."

There's a little pause.

Sam glances over at Dean with a cautious look. Dean can read the question in his eyes: *Is this a good time to ask more details?*

Dean gives Sam a minute shake of the head.

Cas doesn't notice. Still looking down at his armful of hats, he lets out a small sigh and says, "I realize now I probably should have told you both. But ..." He's silent a moment, and then looks back up at them. He meets their eyes levelly now, one at a time; Sam first, and then Dean. Finally Cas says, "You've both been through so much. I wanted you to have a break."

"Cas," says Sam. "We're in this together."

"And you're damn straight you should've told us," Dean can't resist adding.

"But, this isn't your job," Cas objects, with another glance down at his hats. "Either of you. It's not your job. It's going to be such a burden — it's already been such a burden — Dean, I heard some of
what you said outside: you haven't even eaten!" Cas sounds appalled about this. "I should have
realized. You haven't eaten at all, you've barely slept. You should go eat something right away."
"I ate six times more than you did," says Dean, "You're the one who needs to—"
"Sam, will you make sure he eats?" Cas says to Sam, talking right over Dean. "Take him somewhere
and feed him. And you eat too." Sam nods; Dean gives up with a sigh.
"You'll be okay for an hour?" Sam asks.
"I'll be fine," says Cas. He's settling into his nest of pillows now, shuffling down till he's more-or-less
lying down. The alert look is fading now, and he's starting to blink, as if he's having trouble keeping
his eyes open. "I really am fine now, Dean," he says. "Assuming past patterns hold, I'll just sleep for
the next sixteen hours. Sixteen or twenty." Wriggling down into the bedding even more, with his
armful of hats by his side, he tugs the monkey hat a little more firmly onto his head and pulls the
blanket up around his chest. Both Dean and Sam are still looking down at him, and Castiel says,
"Go, both of you. Get something to eat. Oh, Dean, wait, you need your shirt back—" Cas half-sits
up again.
"You keep it," says Dean. "I've got my jacket. Back in an hour, then, if you're really set on us
stuffing our faces." Cas nods and slumps back down. Dean pats his knee, Sam pats his shoulder, and
the two brothers stand to leave.
Halfway out the door, though, Dean hesitates, looking back at Cas. It feels wrong to be leaving.
"Go," Cas mutters from the bed. He already sounds half-asleep again. "I promise I'll be okay."
"Yeah, but..." says Dean. "You sure you don't want some food? I could open another pack of
saltines. You need any water or anything? Your cell's still charged, right?" A thought strikes him.
"Hey, if you want the TV on, the remote's right on that other nightstand, on the other side. Also
there's water bottles on both sides. Also—"
"Sam," says Cas, and Sam has to physically pull Dean out through the door by the elbow, shut the
door behind him, and even give him a little push toward the Impala.

A/N - YES, it's THAT hat, the one we've all seen in real life. As soon as I realized Castiel was going
to need a hat, of course it had to be that hat. :)
And as for Sam - Dean only asked Sam to do one thing: bring a hat. So of course Sam spent almost
the whole trip thinking about hats. It was the only thing he knew that Cas definitely needed.
More next week! Thanks so much for reading.


"But we need to know what stage. He hasn't said what stage it is?"

"No."

"And the kind. Like, y'know, which organ, which kind of cancer. Did he at least say what kind it is?"

"Nope," says Dean, swallowing down a bite of burger.

They're in a booth at a diner just a few blocks from the motel. Sam's sitting in front of a big chicken salad that he's barely touched, scribbling things on the little pad of scratch paper that he always carries around for making notes on cases. And Dean, sitting across from him, is about halfway through a burger.

The burger had been seeming reasonably decent before Sam had gotten going on the cancer questions; now it's become a little tasteless, and Dean has to coax himself to take the next bite.

"We gotta ask his whole chemo schedule, too," says Sam. Now he's clicking through the calendar app on his phone, flicking back and forth between months. "What's his chemo schedule? Did you figure that out yet? I was looking it up and there are these, like, cycles. I was trying to figure out when he started... " Sam flicks back to the summer months and shows the calendar to Dean. "Like, right after Flagstaff maybe? How many cycles has he done already? Cause... this seems like a lot of time. A lot of cycles. Shouldn't he be about done by now?"

"Dunno. Another round next week is all I know. And I think more after that, later." Dean says. He's now just staring at the burger in his hands. He adds, "And sometimes there's three days in a row. I guess that was last week."

"Three days...okay..." muses Sam, and he writes 3d last week on his little pad of paper, and Cycles still going. "And the weeks are different... Do you know what kind of chemo it is, then? I mean, which drugs exactly? There's different ones for different cancers. With different side effects. Three days is a lot... I wonder why they don't just admit him to the hospital on those weeks?"

"Dunno," says Dean. The burger looks extremely bland and unappealing now.

"They all have different side effects. We should figure all that out. That hair loss, man... and those bruises. The arm bruises are from IV's, right? But what about the ones on his shoulders? He looked like... " Sam hesitates. "He looked pretty bad. It's amazing how much that hat and the baggy sweater were hiding, y'know? Anyway, we gotta figure out what type of chemo he's on. Did you get a
glance at his IV bag, in this hospital? To figure out what chemo drugs they're using?"

"Not really." Dean feels a twist of guilt that he hadn't thought to examine Cas's IV or medical chart more closely, yesterday at the hospital when he'd had the chance. (At the time, it had seemed almost more than he could handle just to sit very, very still next to the bed, and look at Cas, and wait for him to wake.)

"Didn't it have labels or something?" says Sam. "Didn't you look at his chart? Or talk to his doc? Didn't you say you called his doc's office or something, last night? Cause once we know what kind of chemo it is, then—"

"I don't know what kind of chemo it is," says Dean, a little too loudly. Several people at nearby tables glance over, and, even though their expressions are sympathetic, Dean glares at them and barks "What are you looking at? Haven't any of you ever heard of chemo before?"

The other people all turn back to their meals. A little hush has settled over the whole diner. Even the waitress, walking nearby with a stack of dishes, has stopped in mid-stride. After a diplomatic pause, she glides silently back to the kitchen.

There's really no point in trying to eat anymore. Dean sets the half-eaten burger down on his plate and looks up at Sam, who seems to have shrunk a little, slumping back against the booth's padded bench with both arms wrapped around his chest.

"Sorry," Sam says, quietly. He bites his lip. "Sorry. I'm grilling you, aren't I?"

"S'okay," says Dean with a sigh, balling up his napkin and tossing it on the plate.

"Damn. I promised Cas I'd get you to eat," says Sam. "Sorry."

"S'okay," Dean says again. "I ate some."

They both stare at their plates for a long moment, Dean looking at the half-eaten burger, and Sam staring at his chicken salad.

Finally Sam picks up a fork and pokes at his salad. Dean realizes then that Sam's barely eaten anything either.

"This is funny, huh?" says Dean, gesturing at both their plates. Sam looks up at him, confused, and Dean tries to explain. "We're the ones who can eat without puking. But we're not eating! So... heh. It's funny, isn't it?"

Sam just looks at him.

"Or maybe it's not funny," says Dean, leaning back in his seat with a sigh. "Look, Sam, I don't know any details yet. Like, none. He really doesn't seem to want to tell me much, and honestly he's been such a wreck. I've been pretty much just focusing on keeping him from faceplanting completely into the toilet bowl, y'know? That kinda seemed like the priority task. For, like, the entire past day."

"I keep forgetting it's been just twenty-four hours," says Sam, still poking idly at his salad. "Feels like a week already."

Dean snorts. "Feels like a month."

Sam's quiet a moment. He sets his fork down, and looks out the window at the night-time scene outside. The sidewalks are nearly deserted; only a few cars are cruising by now and them.
"I spent all night looking stuff up," Sam says, "and then I spent the whole drive trying to think what to do. I had a bunch of ideas." He looks back at Dean. "But of course you guys have probably really only had, like... five minutes to actually talk at all, huh?"

Dean shrugs. "Less than that. But at least he's talking in complete sentences now."

Sam gives him such a classic woeful puppy-eyed look that Dean almost laughs.

Dean says, "You're right, though. We gotta figure all that stuff out." Dean closes his eyes and rubs a hand over his face for a moment. Sam's quiet, waiting, and finally Dean lowers his hand and says, "He had this, like, row of pillows all laid out on his floor, Sam. All these pillows in a row, in a line, a line from the bed to the bathroom, and little pans and water bottles. So he could, like... just crawl along, on his own, a few inches at a time I guess.... It's, what, all of six yards to the bathroom? And he had it all laid out and organized like it was a frickin' Olympic marathon course. Water stations and everything."

Dean pauses, wondering why he's bothering to describe the details of Cas's crawling path; the details don't really matter. Sam's not even taking notes anymore; he's just looking at Dean.

Finally Dean says, "He was super borderline, Sam. Last night."

"I know," says Sam softly.

"We can't ever let him do that alone again."

"I know."

"We gotta figure out something." Dean says, and he adds, "We gotta fix him," and then finally he says it: "We gotta find a cure."

A cure. There. He's said it.

A cure for cancer.

The impossible dream.

Sam straightens up a little and glances down at his laptop bag (which is sitting at his side, on the padded bench), but he doesn't say anything. He doesn't object, though; he doesn't say it's impossible. Dean hesitates a long moment before saying anything more, thinking of all the other impossible tasks they've faced. All the apocalyptic disasters, all the angels and demons and God himself.

Dean pushes his plate aside, leans forward on his elbows and says to Sam, keeping his voice low, "I was thinking. You remember when Zachariah was being his usual dick self, that one time, and he did something freaky to your lungs? Made them vanish entirely or something?"

Sam nods, and says, "Like I could ever forget." And then his eyes widen. "And he gave you stomach cancer. Oh. Right."

Dean nods. "He gave me stage four stomach cancer and just like that I was coughing up blood and couldn't even stand. And it hurt like a motherfucking bitch." He pauses, remembering that Cas had, in fact, been coughing up blood last night; and he thinks again of the abdominal scars. Which Sam doesn't know about yet.

One of Dean's hands knots into a fist, but he makes himself continue with the story. "And then... Zachariah just fixed it. Fixed both of us." Dean snaps his fingers. "Just like that. He cured the cancer..."
"Only because Cas made him," Sam points out, and of course he's right. There's layers upon layers to the memory, and for a moment Dean's reliving the whole thing (and, judging by the expression in Sam's eyes, he is too). Castiel had come storming in so dramatically for that last-second rescue, the Greater Trenchcoat billowing around him, and he'd launched into a pretty forceful speech to Zachariah. It'd been one of those times when Cas's low voice had somehow dropped even lower, as if he'd been reaching deep within himself to find his most intimidating Heavenly-Lecture voice.

And he'd actually managed to cow Zachariah into healing Sam and Dean.

By that point in his angelic career, of course, Castiel had already been well on his way to abandoning his old Heavenly family for the new Winchester one. Well on his way to his downfall, that is. Or his destiny... or his emancipation? (Dean's never been able to settle, in his mind, which it is.) But even though he'd been leaning that way anyway, the confrontation with Zachariah had clearly been a turning point. Dean can still see in his mind, even now, the flicker of relief that had passed over Cas's face when Zach had finally folded — when Zach had healed Sam and Dean, and had fled. That fleeting look of relief, and even of surprise, on Cas's face had told a whole secret story: Cas hadn't been at all sure of success. He'd taken a major risk. He'd been prepared to fight.

He'd probably been prepared to die.

Sam breaks into Dean's thoughts to say, "But Zachariah's dead. And now Cas doesn't even have any power, so he can't—"

"Yeah, yeah, of course, Cas can't heal himself, obviously," interrupts Dean, who would really rather not think about that point. "Or he would have already, I know. But the point is that some angels can cure cancer, right? So..." He takes a breath and leans a little closer to Sam, dropping his voice even more, to almost a whisper. "I was thinking of asking the angels to help. Sending out another broadcast prayer, maybe."

Sam frowns, and his lips pinch together. He obviously doesn't like the idea, so Dean says, "I know it's a desperation move. I know we don't have many contacts up there now. Gadreel, Hannah, even Metatron... I mean, not that they were our favorites or anything, but we had some pull with them at least, and they're all gone. But, Sam, there are still other angels. Lots of them. There's got to be somebody up there who could heal him in a flash, right?"

But Sam's staring down at his salad again.

"What?" demands Dean.

Sam gives a little grimace, and he finally confesses, "I was kinda trying some prayers during the drive, to other angels. For... like... a little bit... a few minutes..." He glances up at Dean. "Maybe an hour or so...."

Dean glares at him, and Sam says, a little defensively, "Don't give me that look! I was doing all this reading, last night before my drive, about how exactly cancer plays out and it is not good stuff to read, and then you started sending all these freaky messages about Cas collapsing and fainting and coughing up blood and it sounded like maybe he was at death's door, okay? It sounded like he was dying right that second. So maybe I panicked a little."

Dean considers that. It's understandable, really.

"Anyway, sue me, the next morning I just went for it," Sam goes on. "Tried some prayers. Nothing.
And, one other thing. During the drive... well, it wasn't just the hat-shopping that slowed me down. I did one other errand too." He takes a breath. "I stopped at the playground."

"The... angel playground?" Dean says, frowning at him. "As in, portal to Heaven? That playground?"

"Yeah."

"Sam—" Dean says, and he can't even finish the sentence. Sam did this all on his own? Dean's stomach is practically turning. This is exactly how the whole Gadreel mess started, after all. It's also how Cas nearly got himself killed that one time — tortured and nearly killed: open-broadcast prayers without any backup. And while Dean's willing to take such a risk himself, and is willing to coordinate a plan to try it, it's a whole different thing to let Sam to go down that road all by himself. And with no backup! It was risky. It was sloppy.

But again Dean remembers those middle-of-the-night texts, and especially that terrifying moment when Cas had collapsed so suddenly, slithering right out of Dean's arms to lie gasping on the floor.

Dean leans back against the booth's padded wall, tapping his fingers on the linoleum table, and he sighs.

Maybe the lecture can wait.

It'd just be the usual lecture anyway, the one about not taking crazy risks alone. The lecture they already give each other at least five times a year.

"I'll skip the lecture," says Dean.

"Thanks, I know it by heart already," says Sam.

"So what happened? At the playground?"

Sam shrugs. "Nothing. Nobody's there. I tried a bunch of prayers...I even drew the sigil in the sand... nothing." He spreads his hands. "The weirdest thing was, there's not even any guards there anymore. It's deserted. It seems like... just a playground again, now. I'm kinda worried that maybe when Cas said the angels had sealed Heaven, he might've meant it literally. Maybe they're all sealed up in there and can't even hear us anymore."

They're both quiet for a moment. Eventually Dean picks up a French fry from his plate, mostly just to have something to do with his hands. He can't seem to eat it, though, so he just looks at it, twirling it slowly around in his fingers.

A memory comes to mind of Sam showing Cas how to dip French fries in ketchup. Cas had loved the taste, hadn't he? He'd never tried fries with ketchup before. That had been back in Flagstaff....

Had Cas already known, even then?

That had been the night that Dean had awoken to find Cas sitting silently on the other bed, watching Dean sleep.

Once Cas had seen that Dean was awake, he'd started talking about the first time he'd been human. There had been something a little odd about the whole conversation, actually, something strange about his rambling stories. It was like he'd been reconsidering what it meant to be human. Like he'd been gearing up for something.
Thirst and hunger, fatigue and pain, Cas had said, referring to the first time he'd lost his grace. They were all so unfamiliar.

Dean remembers now what his own reply had been: "It's not gonna be like that this time." He grimaces at the memory, at the way he'd worded it. Thirst and hunger and fatigue and pain were, indeed, all extremely familiar sensations for Castiel now, weren't they? No wonder Cas had given him such a strange look in return.

There's something I want to do, Cas had said a few minutes later, to both Dean and Sam. I've got some loose ends to tie up.

I was thinking I would do it alone.

"Loose ends," mutters Dean, shaking his head as he keeps spinning the french fry around in his fingers.

"What?" says Sam.

"I think it's Cas's term for chemotherapy," Dean says, finally setting the fry down. "Okay. We are not gonna give up on the angel cure idea, but we should explore other options too. I was even thinking, maybe, Rowena, or Crowley?" Sam's already shaking his head and opening his mouth to object, but Dean says, "Hey, at least my angel idea involved actually planning it. If you get to zip off and pray to all those psychotic angels totally on your own with no backup and without us even discussing it first, I get to come up with at least two stupid reckless plans of my own. That's the deal we've always had, right? If you get to be stupid, I get to be stupid too. So while I'm on the Reckless Train here, maybe there's spells we could try on our own. Never mind Rowena, we could just do some spells ourself, and — " Dean stops, because Sam's got that semi-guilty look on his face again. "What?" Dean demands.

"Still one step ahead of you on the Reckless Train," says Sam, and, looking a little sheepish, he reaches down to the laptop bag and flips it open. There's a few books wedged next to the laptop. Sam pulls two of them out and hands them to Dean.

One's a faded paperback. Dean takes it and looks at the cover: it's a cheap mass-market book that looks several decades old, a self-help type of book with a soft-focus cover photo of a 1950's type of happy couple who seem to be frolicking through a field of daisies. A title in scrolly font above them reads: "Beating Cancer Through The Ancient Art of Healing Spells."

The other book's much older — Sam's wrapped its crumbling cover carefully in a soft clean t-shirt, and when Dean unwraps it, the title turns out to be "On Ye Olde Spells and Dark Magicks for Cure of Bodily Ills."

"Already went through the library last night," Sam says. "But there's not much. These were the best two books I found and... honestly, Dean, I think they're worthless. These daisy people here—" (he's pointing at the couple in the photo who are gamboling through the field of flowers) "—it's complete bullshit, the whole book. And the other book just concludes that nothing works." Sam's looking grim as he adds, "People've been looking for a cure for cancer for millennia, Dean. We're so far from the first we're like... ten millionth in line. Everybody's been down this path before us, and I do mean everybody, and nobody's found anything. I mean, I've only just started looking but... it's not gonna be easy."

Dean starts flipping through the books nonetheless, but he can tell at a glance that Sam's right; the books aren't going to be much help. The paperback's full of standard-issue sigils that Dean recognizes as just minor charms. "These are just good-luck charms, aren't they?" he says.
"And not even relevant ones," Sam says, nodding. He points at an illustration on one of the pages. "That one there's actually for keeping powdery mildew off your berry bushes. That other one, on the next page, is a bedbug repellent. Not really what Cas needs. The whole book's useless. The other one just ends up concluding that using black magic would be evil."

Dean sets the books down by his plate and resumes twirling the fry. It starts to wobble when he spins it; the fry is developing a fracture point, and finally it breaks apart, the top half flipping around in the air to land between their two plates. Dean stares at the broken fry and says, slowly, "You know... I did find one guy once who actually could heal anything. A true-blue healer. Cured blindness, disease, you name it. He's the only healer I've ever tracked down who was the real deal."

"I don't remember that," asks Sam, frowning. "Are you sure? When was this? Was I with you?"

"You were down with the Lucifer bug," Dean reminds him. "That was why I was looking."

Sam blinks. (Dean's never really filled him in on all the awful details of that desperate month.) "Oh. Well... did you ever find him? What's his name?"

"Castiel," says Dean. "Though he was going by Emmanuel at the time."

They're both silent now, staring at the broken French fry.

"Cas wanted you to eat," Sam says eventually, and Dean sighs.

"No fair playing that card," says Dean, "but I will if you will." Sam looks at him and nods.

A few quiet minutes pass while Sam eats a few half-hearted bites of salad and Dean dutifully chews through a couple of the French fries.

Dean finally checks his watch; it's been nearly an hour. "Time to get back," he says, and he flags the waitress down for the check. He finds himself suddenly restless, and he stands and pulls on his jacket and even picks up Sam's books, eager to get back to the motel. Eager, too, to stop with the depressing conversation about cures that won't work, prayers that don't work, and books that don't work, and just get back to Cas. While Sam checks the bill and tosses down a twenty and some change to cover both their meals, Dean pulls Sam's laptop bag up onto the table to shove the two books back inside. But there's a third book in there, one that Sam had never pulled out.

"What's that one?" Dean asks, nodding toward book #3. "Useless like the others?"

Sam gives a slightly embarrassed little laugh. "Just irrelevant, actually. Don't know why I dragged it along, because it's not even about cancer, or healing. But it's about angels so I grabbed it anyway." He pulls it out and spins it around toward Dean. The front cover reads, in silver-stamped letters on smooth black leather:

_The Physiology of Angels_

_With Notes on Behavior_

_and_

_Additional Observations_

_by_

_Knut Schmidt-Nielsen_
"I don't know why I even bothered bringing it along," mutters Sam, sticking it back in the bag, along with the other two books. "I mean, he's stuck in a human vessel with no powers... so...it's probably not relevant, huh."

"Probably not," agrees Dean, as Sam flips the laptop bag closed.

When they get back to the motel, Dean, of course, checks in on Cas first thing. Cas is sleeping again, quiet and still. It's hard to see him; the only illumination is a slanting rectangle of light that's falling across the floor from the open door to the parking lot. The rest of the room is pitch black, and Cas seems just a dark lump on a dark bed in a completely dark room. Dean has to tiptoe over to him to stare at him from very close till he's sure Cas is breathing.

Cas is, in fact, breathing. And Dean's mouth crooks up in a little half-smile when he realizes Cas still has the monkey hat on, too, even while sleeping.

A shadow blocks the light; it's Sam, standing in the doorway. Sam creeps into the room quietly and goes over to his second bag of purchases, the one he'd left on the kitchenette counter earlier. He pulls out some kind of plastic thing and hands it to Dean. Dean turns it over, squinting at it in the dim light. It seems to be some kind of pink-and-white little radio.

"Baby monitor," whispers Sam, holding up a second plastic device. He turns on both little devices — Dean's got the transmitter, Sam has the receiver — and Sam backs out of the door and fiddles with the controls on the receiver.

"Good thinking," says Dean quietly, into the transmitter. Distantly, he hears the tinny sound of his own voice coming out of Sam's receiver, and Sam gives him a thumbs-up. Dean parks the transmitter on Cas's bedside table, and the two brothers head together to the other room.

"When you called this morning," Sam says, as he pulls his night-time stuff out of his duffel, "it kinda sounded like Cas was in another room and you were having to go check on him. Thought those little monitor things might come in handy. Grabbed one at the mall. We don't need to use it, but, I thought, why not have one around."

"Great idea," says Dean. "And, Sam... thanks. For the hats, too."

"No prob," says Sam, and he doesn't even look up from his clothes-sorting. But Dean's aware now that Sam did not just one but four or five "errands" on his drive, all of them carefully thought out.

*He's just as worried as I am,* thinks Dean. *He's been worried all day.*

Sam's at the kitchenette sink now brushing his teeth, so Dean goes into the bathroom to change his clothes. It's a little hard to get into the usual night-time motel routine; it's difficult to let go of the knowledge of Cas being on his own in the other room. Even knowing that the baby monitor is there
to relay any cries for help, any stumbling or falling or vomiting, it's still worrying to know that Cas is there alone. It's like there's a magnetic pull coming from the wall that separates them from Cas's room; Dean keeps glancing over in that direction, as if he could see through the wall with x-ray vision if he just tried, see Cas asleep and see that he's okay.

Dean manages, though, to get ready for bed. He changes into his usual t-shirt and boxers and gets under the covers of one of the beds. But the room lights are still on (Sam's now taking his own shower, in the bathroom; the night-time routine isn't quite over yet). So Dean ends up sitting up in bed, propping himself up against the bed's headboard and looking around at the room.

It's strange how normal this room looks now. Just another routine Winchester night in another routine low-rent motel. Now that Sam's arrived, with his stuff, the clutter all looks familiar: both duffels opened at the foot of the beds, stacks of clothes here and there, Sam's running shoes sitting by the door, both their jackets slung over two of the chairs. Sam's laptop is on the little table (along with The Physiology of Angels); both their guns are under their pillows, and the demon-knife and an angel-blade are out and ready, parked on the little table between the two beds. All the usual trappings of a normal Winchester motel-room stay. The "ground sloth" stuff is out of view in the bathroom. The only unusual item in sight is the little baby monitor, which is sitting incongruously between the two blades, looking oddly cheerful with its pink-and-white rounded-corners design.

It all looks nothing at all like the room next door, even though it's the exact same layout (just with two beds instead of one). There's no trail of pillows across the floor. No stacks of water bottles and Gatorade. No brownie pans, no saltine packets. No row of pill bottles lined up on the bedside table.

And, of course, there's no Castiel.

He's safe next door, of course. He's sleeping. He's fine now. Dean tells himself this over and over: Cas is fine now. He's just asleep. But he keeps looking at the baby monitor. He finally reaches over and picks it up to turn the volume up a bit more till he can hear a soft hiss of static.

If he turns it up enough, could he maybe hear Cas breathing?

But even once the baby monitor's turned all the way up, with Dean holding it in both his hands right at chest level, all he can hear is static.

As Dean sits in bed, looking down at the little baby monitor and listening to the static, it seems he can still, even now, see Cas gasping on the floor, spitting out blood.... curled on his side staring numbly at the clock.... It even seems Dean can still feel how Cas had relaxed, when Dean had stroked that damp washcloth with the ice cubes against the back of his neck...

How much noise had Cas really made, in that fainting episode? Say he passes out again, thinks Dean. Would we hear? If, say, Cas gets out of bed but then just slumps quietly to the floor, crumpling softly down without any retching, would any sounds really be audible?

What if he were to pass out right in the bed without even moving anywhere?

It's possible that an entire fainting episode, even a dangerous one, could be totally silent.

Sam comes out of the bathroom, now clad in his sleeping clothes — a loose t-shirt and boxers much like Dean's attire. He spends a few moments toweling off his hair (this is always a production, with Sam). He wipes his ears dry, he drapes his towel over a chair, he shuts his laptop... and he's watching Dean the whole time. Dean's still staring down at the baby monitor.

"Is it working?" Sam says.
"Yeah, I think," says Dean. He fiddles with the volume again. The static gets softer as Dean turns the knob, and then louder as he turns it the other way, but it's still just static. "Don't know. I think so. I just wish I could hear him breathing or something."

Sam walks over to his own bed and sits down on it, looking at Dean.

"Why don't you go back in there and test it," suggests Sam. "Go in and say something into the transmitter part. I'll stay here and listen."

This seems like a great idea, so Dean clambers out of bed, pulls on a pair of sweatpants and heads next door. He lets himself in, checks briefly on Cas (sure enough, Cas is still breathing, and still asleep), and then he leans over to the transmitter and whispers "Houston, do you copy?"

His phone buzzes a moment later with a text: *Loud and clear. I even heard you unlocking the door.*

The baby monitor's working.

Dean should, logically, leave Cas now. Dean should leave him to get some much-needed rest, without any disturbance from random people shuffling around the room and whispering stuff into the baby monitor. He should tiptoe right back to the other room and to his own bed.

But...

Dean stands by the bed for a long moment, in near-pitch black.

Finally he leans over to the baby monitor again and whispers, "Just gonna sit with him a bit, okay? Be back in a few minutes."

*Roger that*, comes a text on his phone. *Hey. Sleep there if you want to keep an eye on him. I'm cool here alone.*

"No, I'll be back," Dean insists to the monitor, still at a whisper. "Besides, you've got my wallet in there."

He can hear Sam's laugh, faintly, even through the walls.

Okay, with the baby monitor working *and* with thin walls to boot, maybe there's not much need to stay here after all.

Nonetheless Dean gets back on the other side of the bed, gently inching onto the broad mattress till he's sitting about where he had been earlier that day. He stays sitting up, on top of the covers, while Cas is hunkered down underneath the covers a couple feet away, facing away from Dean. Dean doesn't let himself really settle in; he's only gonna be there for a few minutes, after all.

But a few minutes pass and Dean doesn't leave. He keeps thinking he'll leave; Cas is obviously sleeping well now, and the little baby monitor is working. Any second now it'll seem like the right time to gently slide off the bed, tiptoe out the door, leave Cas in peace and go to bed.

The right time never comes. Dean stays, and stays longer. He starts to get fuzzy-headed with sleep, and allows himself to slump down on the covers till he's half-lying, his head crooked awkwardly against the headboard. Then, just to straighten out his neck, he wriggles down farther till he's fully
horizontal. Then he shifts onto his side, because that's a little more comfortable, and now he's facing the dark shape on the other side of the bed. He's only looking at Cas's back, but it's reassuring just to know that Cas is so close.

It's getting chilly. Then Dean gets worried Cas might get chilly too, so he gets up and pokes around the room as quietly as he can, till he finds a second blanket in the room's tiny coat closet. Dean carefully spreads it over the whole bed.

Now would definitely the logical time to leave. Dean's up on his feet now and ready to go.

Dean doesn't leave. Instead he slips back onto the bed, right back on top of the covers, under the blanket, right back into the fully-lying-down position. This time Cas starts shuffling around when Dean settles down, and Cas rolls over till he's facing Dean. He hasn't really woken at all, but he puts one hand out in his sleep, and his arm ends up draped over Dean's. Whether it's just by accident or not is hard to tell.

Now Dean can't move.

After a while, Dean's phone vibrates one more time. The phone's in a back pocket of his sweats; Dean pulls it out with one hand.

I'm about to pass out, Sam's written. I'll text you tmrw am to see how he is. If you need anything just give a shout.

Dean's actually in the middle of writing "I'll just be here a couple more minutes" when he realizes that he is, in fact, going to sleep here, next to Cas.

"Night, Sam," he whispers out loud, to the baby monitor.

Nighty-night, comes the reply over the phone. Don't let the termites bite.

Dean wakes in the middle of the night to discover that he and Castiel have somehow gotten much closer. They'd been an arm's-length apart earlier, when Dean had dozed off, but now Cas is so close that his head is actually leaning on the corner of Dean's shoulder. Cas has practically got his nose smushed into the side of Dean's arm. Somehow he's still able to breathe.

At first Dean thinks it's Cas who's migrated over to Dean's side, but then he realizes that both their heads are right between the pillows, neither of them really on a pillow at all. Each of them has moved toward the other, it seems, and they've met in the middle.

Dean lies there for several long moments, feeling the warmth and heaviness of Cas's head, and the feel of Cas's arm draped over Dean's. It's closer than they were earlier tonight when Cas was gently holding on. It's the closest they've ever really been, physically... well, aside from all the vomiting last night, of course.

Dean wonders, briefly, what this might lead to, in the future. Could it be that... Might it be possible...

But then a different thought entirely surfaces, a menacing and dark thought: How much more time do we even have?
How many more weeks will Cas be here? How limited is the time?

How much longer will Castiel be in Dean's life, in any way at all? Years? Months? Weeks?

What exactly happens to angels when they die?

Human souls survive. But, it seems, angels do not.

Dean's heart seems to clench up, a rush of icy cold running through all his veins, at the thought that someday soon this warm presence next to him, this staunch ally, this loyal friend, may be gone forever. Dean can't help himself then, and he rolls a little bit more toward Cas. Just a little. Just enough to put his other arm over Cas's shoulders, in a helplessly instinctive attempt to shield him, somehow, from all the terrors of the world. And just enough for Dean to nuzzle his nose down into the soft fabric of Cas's monkey hat.

And now Dean's wide awake, for the position they're in now is a familiar one: it's a sleeping position Dean has often used with girlfriends. That old habit of rolling sideways and reaching out for the other person, of shuffling closer, of getting an arm over their shoulders; this is something Dean has only ever done with... partners.

Cas wakes.

Dean feels him wake. There's a change in Cas's breathing, a shift in his shoulders. Then there's a slight indrawn breath; a moment of surprise, maybe, or of confusion, and Cas goes very still. He even stops breathing for a moment, and he lifts his head a little off Dean's shoulder. (Dean feels the weight of Cas's head lessening, as if he's trying not to lie on Dean's arm too heavily).

Cas holds himself there, very still, for a long moment.

"I was only gonna stay here a minute," says Dean. "Just got sleepy. Sorry. You said there might be room?" It seems a little absurd to be chatting so casually about whether there's room on the bed when Dean is not only on the bed already, but has been here for hours, and has even got his nose buried right in the top of Cas's hat. Not to mention the fact that Dean's arm is actually wrapped around Castiel's shoulders now. It's kind of glaringly obvious. And glaringly unusual.

Cas doesn't mention it.

He lets out a slow breath.

"There's room," says Cas. He doesn't mention the arm; he doesn't mention their close physical position at all, and Dean starts to worry a little about it. Is this too weird? Maybe Cas needs a little more space? This is supposed to be Cas's recovery night, after all, a night for him to relax, not a "Dean clings on for dear life" night. Dean's not exactly sure what the arm position even means, why exactly it is that he'd turned in his sleep toward Cas, and now he's trying, increasingly sternly, to tell himself not to expect anything. Don't play dumb here, Dean chides himself. Don't pretend you don't know why you ended up here. Cas is sick and he's tired... not to mention he's fricking straight! Don't take advantage, don't push. Just let him sleep.

Moving casually, shuffling around l'like he's just doing a minor repositioning, Dean rolls slightly away from Cas and removes his arm from Cas's shoulders.
Cas reaches out in the dark, gropes around till he finds Dean's shoulder, follows Dean's arm down to
the wrist, and then he takes gentle hold of Dean's wrist and pulls Dean's arm back exactly where it
had been. Then he wriggles slightly closer and puts his own arm across Dean's waist. And there he
relaxes, with a little sigh.

There's something oddly innocent about the position, especially because they're still separated by the
bedcovers. But with the upper blanket spread over them both, it feels like they've entered a little
private cocoon of mutual safety and warmth, and finally Dean lets himself put his nose down on the
top of Cas's monkey hat again. Dean closes his eyes, trying to blot out all thoughts of the future, all
the persistent thoughts of Diagnosis, prognosis.... all the anxious guesses about what might be
coming in the next weeks. And of what happens to angels when they die. He tries to focus just on
the feel of Castiel being next to him; Castiel, Dean's guardian angel and ally and friend, warm and
alive next to him in the night.

Cas's breathing slows; he's fallen asleep again. And finally Dean does too.

A/N - Next week I fly cross-country to start a three-week sea turtle thing. Also have a grant proposal
due on one grant, and a mega report due an another, so, not sure if the next chapter will be up next
weekend or the weekend after. Keep on checking, and again, thanks for your patience.

Thank you for reading my story! As always, please let me know if there was anything that
particularly worked well for you... a plot motif, a scene, a bit of dialogue. I love to get your feedback.
I hear there's some good pies

A/N - Sorry again for these terribly long delays - I'm desperately busy with travel, turtles and most of all a terrifying grant proposal that has had me stressed out of my mind. I had hopes of syncing the fic up with real time, but somehow real-life Thanksgiving has actually zipped on past while the fic is still slowly approaching fic-Thanksgiving! The last several chapters all took place early on Thanksgiving week. We're now just at Wednesday of Thanksgiving week, fic time. I have hopes of getting all the way to fic-Thanksgiving before real-Christmas arrives, ha ha.

Thanks for your patience. We return now to the scene of the platonic snuggles.

The next morning Dean wakes to find his arms wrapped tightly around a pillow.

Just a pillow. Cas isn't there. The blanket's been tucked around Dean, the lower edge folded under his feet and the corners curled down carefully around his shoulders. Dean's snug and warm, but Cas is gone.

Thin bright lines of sunlight are peeking around the edges of the curtain at the main window. It's still pretty dim in the rest of the room, though, and Dean blinks around at the gloom, fumbling with one hand at the empty mattress where Cas should be Then he realizes he's hearing running water, and that the bathroom door is closed.

Cas must be in the bathroom. Alone.

But wait, Cas-in-the-bathroom-alone doesn't always turn out so well, does it?

A rush of worry brings Dean awake, and as he shoves the pillow and blanket aside and swings his feet to the floor, he's already strategizing about what to do if it turns out that Cas has gotten sick again. *It sounds like the sink, not the shower, Dean thinks, so hopefully Cas isn't passed out in the shower, but what if he's being sick again in the toilet and he turned the sink on to hide the noise and what if he had that blood pressure thing happen again and what if he passed out—*

But then the sink turns off, and even as Dean's scrambling over to the bathroom door, it swings open and Castiel steps out fully dressed.

"Ah, you're awake," Cas says. "Good morning."

"Oh," says Dean, so startled that he backs up a few steps and sinks back down to sit on the edge of the bed. "Hey."

He's a little amazed by how normal Castiel looks; it actually seems odd to see him standing upright. Cas has changed his clothes, too, and looks almost dapper in a new clean pair of slacks and a clean white shirt. It seems he's just showered and shaved; he's patting a hand towel to the top of his head (apparently trying to dry off his thin remaining hair in the gentlest way possible) and there's even a damp pinkish post-shower look to his face. It's not exactly a ruddy healthy glow, but it's miles better than the ash-gray look he's had the last couple days.
The cancer patient's almost gone. It's Castiel again.

It's the Castiel that Dean remembers from last week, that is. The Castiel who's upright and talking and moving around, who looks like he's fine, who seems like he's fine, who acts like he's fine — and who, when asked, will always insist that he's fine. *Just wrapping up some loose ends*, this Castiel would say, his patchy hair carefully hidden under one hat or another, as he disappears on mysterious errands and long unexplained trips.

This is the Cas who might have had a girlfriend in Denver (or possibly a boyfriend...). This is the Cas who seemed to be drifting away so mysteriously.

Though there are clues, now that Dean knows to look for them. The shirt's a little baggy; it's draping more loosely over Cas's torso and arms than it used to. The belt is cinched up to its very innermost hole, and Cas's slacks are hanging a little loosely on his legs, as if even the muscles of his thighs have wasted away to some degree. Again Dean notices the thinness of Cas's face, how his cheekbones are standing out more than they should, and how the lines around the corners of his eyes are deeper. And then there's that slightly hunched way he's standing.

Cas hesitates in his towel-patting, narrowing his eyes at Dean, and he even glances down at himself; Dean's scrutiny seems to be making him a little self-conscious. "Do I look presentable?" he asks, glancing up at Dean again with a bit of a worried look.

*Presentable.* The word takes Dean back to a certain men's room in a hospital in Flagstaff, Arizona. Where the worst challenge he and Sam had faced had been to figure out how to tidy up Cas's trenchcoat and get him to fix his hair.

"You look weirdly okay, actually," says Dean. Cas narrows his eyes even more, clearly doubtful. "No, really," Dean says. *You look really good,* is what Dean wants to say, but it seems like that might come out wrong (is it okay to tell a cancer patient that they look good?), so he sticks to, "Definitely presentable."

"I hope you're right," is all Cas says. He turns to the kitchenette counter and does a rapid exchange of the towel for the monkey-hat, setting the towel down and putting the hat on so briskly that his head is uncovered for only about half a second. Then he heads across the room to the window. Dean watches all this in silence, from the foot of the bed, still transfixed by the incredible sight of Castiel walking around on his own two feet, conscious and alert.

Cas maneuvers the curtains partway open. A startlingly bright beam of sunlight slants into the room, so bright it makes Dean squint. There's a lumpy little shadow on the windowsill, silhouetted against the sun: it's the houseplant.

"I didn't want the light to disturb you," says Cas, "but I woke up a few hours ago thinking about the plant. I realized that it had gone two full days with no water and must be thirsty, and that it also had no sunlight in two days too. I got a little worried, so I set it in the window so it could get some of the morning light. I put it behind the curtain so that you could sleep." He leans over to examine the plant. "I watered it a little bit, too, but I wasn't sure how much to give it..." Now he's frowning at the plant, and touching the soil in a few places with one finger. "I think it's okay... I hope so. Do you know if two days without water or sun will have harmed it appreciably? I'm not sure of its requirements. Do you think I should give it some more water?"

"Sure," says Dean, who has no idea how much water plants need. "If the soil feels dry, give a little more, I guess?"

Cas nods, picks up a nearby water bottle, and starts watering the plant methodically, dispensing an
even trickle of water all around the base of the plant while turning the entire pot carefully with his other hand. The plant's little leaves wobble as he rotates it slowly around, and for a long moment Cas and the little plant are both silhouetted in the golden shaft of sunlight side-by-side. The light is blazingly bright; they're outlined with such clarity it's like they'd been posed for a shadow play. The little plant's sleek leaves seem painted with gold around the edges, and its blooms seem practically on fire, the radiant sunshine streaming right through the petals. Cas's profile is so cleanly delineated it could have been etched by a laser. His head is bowed toward the plant, and the tassels of the monkey-hat lend his silhouette a mysterious look, as if he's some kind of long-lost shadowy Incan god.

*It's like he's in a stained glass window,* Dean thinks. *Or a piece of medieval art: Angel Tending to Tiny Houseplant.* The aura of sunlight around Cas is, of course, absurdly halo-like, so much so that Dean wants to make a joke about it.

But no joke comes, and instead Dean realizes, with a flash of absolute certainty, that he's never going to forget this sight of Castiel and the little plant outlined in the morning sunlight.

*He looks like an angel,* Dean thinks.

*He'll always be an angel.*

No matter what. No matter what vessel he's in, no matter what powers he's lost, no matter how frail and failing the body. No matter how little time may be left. Castiel will always be an angel.

Dean's throat is aching, his eyes almost stinging, when Cas says, "It's fortunate I didn't vomit on it, don't you think?" Dean almost has to choke back a snort of laughter.

"Way to break the mood," mutters Dean, mostly to himself.

"What?" says Cas, looking at him in puzzlement.

"Nothing, nothing." says Dean. "Yes, it's fortunate you didn't vomit on it, and let's keep it that way." Dean gets up and maneuvers around Cas to open the curtains a little wider, to get a little more light into the room. "So, brand-new day today, huh?" says Dean, trying to focus on the next step: what does Cas need today? "You're looking a lot better, I gotta say. You slept okay?"

"Yes, very well, actually," says Cas, turning to Dean with a smile. "Did you?"

Dean's about to answer *Yeah, slept like a baby,* but he unexpectedly goes tongue-tied, for only now does he fully remember that they'd slept practically in each other's arms last night. He turns back to the curtain-cords, fumbling with them so clumsily that he accidentally starts re-closing the curtain instead of opening it.

Is Cas referring to that arms-around-each-other thing? Is that why he's got that little smile? Dean had actually put his arms around Cas.

And Cas had actually pulled Dean closer. And put an arm over Dean's waist.

There'd still been the bedspread, of course. The critical bedspread. It had still been safely separating them. The positioning of the bedspread seems highly significant: Dean had been on top of the covers, Castiel underneath them, and therefore they hadn't really "slept together," not really. They'd just slept *near* each other.

Well... *very* near other, to be fair. But really Dean had just stayed in Cas's room in case Cas needed
any help. (That's certainly how Dean'll describe it to Sam.) Maybe they'd ended up a little close on
the bed, but it had all been completely aboveboard. Because of that bedspread! The bedspread
matters. The bedspread's important.

The thought Oh, okay then, as long as there's a bedspread it's not gay at all drifts through Dean's
head, and he almost laughs at himself.

What the hell am I doing? What am I trying to do? Was that just... me comforting Cas, protecting
him, like it felt at the time? Or something more?

What do I even want?

More to the point, what does Cas want? And what does he need?

"Dean?" Cas prods. He's starting to look a little worried. "Did you hear me? Did you sleep all right?
Do you need more sleep?"

"No, I slept fine," says Dean, now attempting to re-open the curtain all the way as he makes a
focused effort to ignore the dozens of confusing questions that have all bobbed up in his mind.
"You?"

"I also slept fine," Cas says. "And... how are you feeling now?"

"Oh, uh... fine," says Dean, finally dropping the curtain-cords. "You?"

"Fine," echoes Cas. "You?"

"Fine," says Dean automatically. The conversation has somehow gone into an infinitely repeating
loop of "fine's," so Dean claps his hands, rubs them together briskly and announces, "All right then,
I'll just run next door for a shower! Be back in a sec. You just take it easy."

Yet the thoughts of What do I really want? What does Cas really want? follow Dean all the way
next door. They follow him through the chilly dawn air outside, back into the dark room where Sam
is still fast asleep, and into the shower, where even the stream of hot water doesn't wash them away
completely. And they're joined, soon, by the inevitable depressing drumbeat of:

Diagnosis? Prognosis?

Sam's soon complaining that Dean's "shaving too loud," but eventually Sam rouses enough to prop
himself up on one elbow and asks, "How's Cas? He surviving?"

"Looks much better, actually," Dean says, staring into the mirror as he concentrates on shaving the
last spots under his nose. "Up and walking."

"Well, that's a relief," says Sam. He sits up in the bed and stretches a little. "Do you think maybe he
can eat some breakfast? Or even eat a bit of a Thanksgiving dinner tomorrow?"

Dean glances over at him in surprise.

"I totally forgot about Thanksgiving again," Dean confesses.
Sam laughs. "Well, it's tomorrow. I was thinking we oughta do something. Even if it's just turkey sandwiches. Some kind of family meal." He glances around at the little room. "We could do it right here. Get a meal delivered, maybe? There's restaurants that'll deliver, you know. We could probably find one that still had three meals left over. Maybe watch some movies? Seems like Cas has been liking the movies, don't you think?"

A slow smile spreads over Dean's face as he turns back to the mirror. Thanksgiving with Castiel; of course. (It's actually odd to see himself smiling in the mirror. Almost as odd as it was to see Castiel walking.) "Great idea, Sam," he says, as he starts wiping off the last of the shaving cream. "And let's start with taking him to breakfast right now. If he can eat. Your turn in the bathroom, and make it snappy, we don't want to keep Cancer Boy waiting!"

Sam actually flinches a little at the "Cancer Boy" phrase, so Dean flicks some shaving cream at him, saying. "Come on, get over it. If we say the word a lot, we'll get used to it, and then it won't be so scary. Right?"

"Right...." says Sam dutifully. But he doesn't seem so sure.

Sam showers and dresses pretty fast, but he slows down while he's putting his shoes on. Dean's gotten his jacket on and is all ready to go next door to get Cas when he realizes that Sam's sitting in a chair with only one shoe on, staring vacantly down at the other shoe in his hands.

"Sam?" says Dean, one hand already on the doorknob. "Pro tip, that shoe goes on the other foot. The foot without a shoe on it."

"Yeah...." says Sam. "Just thinking."

"Anything you want to share with the class?"

Sam says, a little slowly, "It's just... don't you think Chuck must have noticed?"

Chuck. That's actually something Dean has considered. And has been trying to ignore.

Dean turns away from the door, a little reluctantly. "What do you mean?"

"Well... he's God, you know," says Sam, looking up at Dean. "Don't you think he must have known if Cas's vessel had a... a tumor? I know Chuck was kind of sick and all, for a while there, and maybe he wasn't fully paying attention right then. But these things take time to develop. The tumor must've been growing for a while, right?" Sam stares down at the carpet. "He must have known Cas's vessel was sick. He must have. He's supposed to be all-knowing. He could have cured it like... like nothing, with just a thought. And he didn't bother. Did he want Cas to have to go through this?"

Dean sinks down into a chair, turning it to face Sam. "That seems crazy," says Dean. "He's saved Cas so many times."

"But he sure hasn't made things easy on him, either," Sam points out. "Could he have even given Cas cancer on purpose?"

Dean doesn't even want to think about this possibility, for he already knows it leads inevitably to: Is this all part of God's plan?
"Is Castiel supposed to die?"

Dean shakes his head emphatically, but then finds he's unable to come up with a logical argument. "Look, we're never gonna know," he says at last. "If we've learned anything about Chuck, it's that all our theories about him are always wrong. And you know... I kind of have the feeling that he was never as all-knowing as we've all been told. Didn't he seem kinda... I dunno... not totally.... Not as omniscient as we were thinking? Not as benevolent, maybe?"

Sam considers that. "He did seem a just a teeny-tiny bit lacking in empathy," he concedes at last.

"And in foresight," says Dean. "Okay, I gotta be blunt here, the guy was about a thousand times more fallible and petty than I ever imagined."

Sam gives a little laugh. "We were trying Psych 101 techniques, on him and Lucifer, that I picked up from watching Oprah, for chrissake. And it worked!"

"Well, Oprah's a smart cookie, you gotta admit that," says Dean.

Sam nods, with a faint smile, but soon the smile fades. "There's a whole other possibility too, you know," he says, "About where the cancer might have come from." He looks over at Dean again, the smile totally gone now. "Lucifer."

Dean nods. This thought's crossed his mind too. "You mean, just in case it wasn't bad enough to have to deal with cancer at all," he says, "we have to also worry about whether it's a divine tumor or a satanic one?" Sam gives another sad little laugh and Dean goes on, "But I know what you mean. Lucifer was using Cas's vessel and he might've done something to it."

Sam says, "Chuck could even have sent the cancer into Cas's vessel to try to get at Lucifer. Not to get at Cas at all. Or... maybe Lucifer caused the cancer. On purpose. He easily could have done it."

"Like, one last fuck-you to Cas?" says Dean.

Sam nods. "Or even just some kind of unintentional corruption. When he's in a vessel, you know, it feels...." He hesitates. "It feels really frickin' awful, to be honest. It feels like damage is happening, every second. Not just to your soul and your mind, but, maybe, to the vessel too." He goes quiet then, and stares down at the floor.

And then he glances down at his own body and adds, "I always was kind of surprised that I seemed to come out of Hell unscathed."

"Well, you did get pulled out by an angel," says Dean. "And he's healed you up a few times since, too."

"We really just gotta ask him if he can get his healing mojo back," Sam says. "We gotta talk to him."

"Yup," Dean says with a sigh. "We need to ask him if Lucifer did this to him, or Chuck, or what. If he knows any clues."

"We also gotta ask him what the diagnosis is exactly," says Sam.

"And the prognosis," says Dean. "Don't forget the prognosis."

"And the treatment schedule," says Sam. "How many more rounds of chemo, what the drugs are, whatever appointments he has coming up, scans, surgeries, all of it." He finally starts to put his second shoe on. "You think he'll want to talk about it?"
Dean rolls his eyes. "So have you ever met my friend Castiel? His favorite hobby is to have an absolutely tormenting secret that he never talks to anybody about."

"Well, we just have to pin him down then," says Sam firmly. Shoes on at last, he stands and says, "C'mon. Let's take him out to breakfast."

"And grill him mercilessly?"

"And grill him mercilessly," says Sam. Together they head next door.

But when Dean knocks on Cas's door and pops it open, Sam close behind him, they're both a little puzzled to find that Castiel is loading the little houseplant carefully into a cardboard shoebox, padding the sides of the pot with a spare shirt. Cas's shoulder-bag's sitting nearby on a chair, all bundled up with the flap buckled shut, and laid out on the little table is a tidy row of clothing that includes Cas's blue sweater (now neatly folded), the cream-colored scarf (also neatly folded), and a small folded wad of blue fabric. Most of the rest of his meager set of clothing, along with the row of pill bottles, the pile of extra hats and the Lesser Trenchcoat, seem to have been packed into a small, battered suitcase that's sitting open on the bed.

It all looks surprisingly organized, and when Dean looks around the room, he realizes Cas has straightened up all the clutter from the last two days. The few water bottles that are still full are lined up on the kitchen counter, the empty ones have been thrown in the trash, and even the pans have been cleaned and put away.

"Good morning, Sam," says Cas cheerily, and Sam gives him a grin. "Check-out time is eleven," Cas goes on, "so I thought I'd start packing. It's nearly ten now. I know you two are probably going to want some breakfast, so—"

"Wait," says Dean. "What do you mean, check-out time?"

Sam adds, "Don't you stay here for the whole week?"

Cas shakes his head. He grabs the blue sweater from the table, gets both arms into it and pauses briefly to take the monkey-hat off. "I usually only stay two nights," he says, and he pulls the blue sweater on over his head. A second later his head emerges from the neckhole and he instantly gets the monkey-hat back on, adding as he tugs the sweater into position, "For a one-day week, I mean."

"A one-day... what?" says Dean.

"A one-day week," says Cas. He picks up the cream-colored scarf next, and starts looping it around his neck as he explains, "I mean, a week with just one day of chemo. On those weeks, I stay here two nights after the one day of chemo. Like, this week the one day was Monday, so I stayed here at the motel for Monday night and Tuesday night. It's usually only Monday night that's problematic, sometimes Tuesday. Usually by the third day I'm ambulatory again." He sounds perfectly businesslike about all this, as if the miserable hell that Dean witnessed him going through, just two nights ago now, was merely a minor, ever-so-slightly "problematic," logistical detail.

"You think being 'ambulatory' is good enough to check out?" says Sam. "Don't you want to rest up more?"
"Oh, two nights is enough," says Cas briefly.

Sam and Dean exchange a glance. *Money?*, mouths Sam, and Dean nods.

Dean says, putting his hands on his hips, "We can pay for the room, if that matters."

"We can *easily* cover the room," adds Sam.

Cas hesitates in the middle of arranging the ends of his scarf, glancing at them both. "I appreciate that," he says finally, tucking the scarf ends in, "but I'll be fine." He begins to busy himself packing a few last items into the suitcase on the bed. "I won't need any assistance for the rest of the week. You've both been so kind, but, um... I imagine you'll both be heading back to the bunker, right? For the holiday."

The holiday.

"Well, we *were* thinking we could do Thanksgiving here," says Dean. "Back when we thought our angel friend was still sticking around to eat with us. But if you've got something else lined up...." - and as soon as he says this, he realizes maybe Cas *does* have something else lined up. For Cas is looking between Dean and Sam now with rather an odd look on his face — wistfulness mixed with regret.

Cas has turned back to the table, where the folded wad of blue fabric is still sitting. "To be perfectly honest," he says, "there's nothing I would like better. But... I do have another commitment, unfortunately." He picks up the blue fabric and shakes it out.

It's a Gas-n-Sip employee vest.

Cas slips it on over his sweater, and checks the nametag. "I've got to go to work now," he announces, and he takes a couple steps back over to the bed and starts to close his suitcase.

"Wait," says Dean, reaching out to grab one of his arms. "Wait, wait, just wait a minute there, roadrunner. What do you mean, you're *going to work*? And where are you going to sleep?"

Cas gives him a steady look. "Work. As in, my job. I work there four days a week. And I sleep in the stockroom."

Dean slowly releases his arm, too startled to say anything. Sam seems stunned too, and for a long moment they're both just staring at Cas.

"My shift starts in three hours," says Cas, and he closes and latches the suitcase.

There are so many things wrong with what Cas has just said that Dean can't even think what to say at first, and it's Sam who finally bursts out with, "Cas, you're still *working*? While you're on chemo?"

Cas starts to look a little uncomfortable. "Yes. I take the chemo day off, obviously, and the next day. But then I work half a shift the day after that... Then the next three full days, if I can get the hours. Sometimes a double shift on the last of those days..." (His shoulders have started to drop as he's saying all this, as if he's starting to feel tired just describing it all.) "... and then sometimes another half a shift on the last day.... Then I drive back here and it starts all over." He looks back up at them, and now there's no hiding the tired look in his eyes, but he says, "It's not so bad."

"Hold on, back up," says Dean, who's trying to comprehend the appalling schedule that Cas has just outlined. "Back up. You're going there *now*? This is the half-a-shift day?" Cas nods, and Dean says, "*Forty-eight hours after chemo?* And on *Thanksgiving?* And wait, you're, wait, you're sleeping
"The stockroom," Cas says. He picks the suitcase off the bed with one hand and slings his shoulder bag over one shoulder. Last of all he scoops the plant-shoebox off the table, and then he looks at Dean, saying, "I used to do that years ago, in Idaho, remember, Dean? When you came and visited me? Remember how I slept in the stockroom then?" Sam gives Dean a startled look. Dean's totally confused for a moment — for he hadn't known at all, not till right this second, that Cas had been sleeping in the stockroom of that Gas-n-Sip back in Idaho.

"It's fairly simple," adds Cas. "One just needs a sleeping bag and a few supplies. A toothbrush, and deodorant, and shaving equipment... though I guess I won't need the shaving equipment much longer. Anyway I've got all the supplies in my car. There's a sleeping bag in the trunk. And a pillow." He squares his shoulders and raises his chin with what seems a deliberate effort, adding, "I'll be fine."

Dean takes a stride over to him and tries to pull the suitcase out of his hands. Cas resists, hanging onto it and saying, "Dean—" but Dean says, loading his voice with all the forcefulness that he can muster, "Cas, you can't live like this. You can't be working. Are you crazy? Not now. Not during chemo."

Sam's at Cas's other side now, tugging the precious houseplant gently out of Cas's grasp and pulling the shoulder-bag off his shoulder. (Cas grabs the plant back, safely in its shoebox, but seems to realize there's no chance of hanging on to the bag or the suitcase.) "Dean's right," Sam says gently. "You really need to rest, Cas. Human bodies just can't keep working like that when they're sick. Trust us on that one."

Dean says, "We're either staying here at the motel, or we're driving you back to the bunker, but either way you're going to rest. I'm serious."

"But, Dean," says Cas, clutching the plant-shoebox in both hands, "I have to work."

"No, you don't," insists Dean.

"Yes, I do," says Cas, and now he's sounding frustrated, as if both brothers are being very dense. "Don't you understand? I have to work thirty hours a week for the health care. I can't afford any of the treatment otherwise."

Sam and Dean both stare at him. And then they look at each other, appalled.

Sam sinks down onto the side of the bed with a sigh, still holding Cas's shoulder-bag. "God bless America," he mutters, shaking his head.

Dean sits next to him, plunking the suitcase on the floor. "You know, I don't think even Chuck could screw up something half as bad as the American health care system."

"I'm actually fairly certain that either Lucifer or Crowley has had a hand in it," says Cas. "Possibly both." He gives a faint sigh and adds, "I could swear I picked up the scent of several crossroads contracts, substantial ones, just when I was filling out the insurance paperwork."

"Thirty hours a week..." murmurs Sam. "Right. That's the threshold for full-time, right? And full time employees have to be given health care. But wait... isn't there disability or something? Some way you don't have to work?"

Cas shakes his head. "I don't qualify for that till I've been working six months," he explains. "I was lucky to get the health care at all." After a little pause, he confesses, "Also I need the money." They
both look up at him to find him glancing around the room, and now the worry and strain is clear on Cas's face, and in his voice, as he says, "It's been so... so worrying. There've been so many expenses. This motel room, even if it's just for a few nights a week, comes to a hundred and eighty dollars, and it was the cheapest one I could find that doesn't have cockroaches." He slowly sits down in a chair, setting the plant-shoebox carefully in his lap. "And there's the gas for the car. And the water bottles and saltines and whatever food I can eat; and all the co-pays, and all the prescriptions....." He sighs. "There are these things called deductibles... The second surgery wiped out everything I had saved."

SECOND surgery? thinks Dean, and he and Sam exchange another grim look. Cas doesn't notice; he's slumping down into his chair now, looking so exhausted it's as if all the strain and worry has caught up with him all at once. "It was so confusing figuring this all out," he adds. "It was... nearly overwhelming, to be honest. There's so much terminology. And a truly incredible amount of paperwork."

The room's quiet for a moment, Cas staring glumly at the floor from his chair while Sam and Dean watch him from the bed.

After a moment Cas adds, thoughtfully, "You know, it all really does have Crowley's touch, now that I think about it."

Sam asks, softly, "This is why you were putting in so many hours?" Cas nods.

"This is why you got the job in the first place," says Dean, and Cas nods again.

Actually, I was thinking I might get a job, Cas had said, that day when he'd come down the stairs. Walking so stiffly, holding himself so cautiously... so reluctant to accept a hug from Dean that he'd actually maneuvered around a table to avoid it. Touching his stomach now and then, too. Those abdominal scars... Thinking back on it now, it seems likely that Cas had been just post-surgery, barely recovered enough to walk. The stitches had probably still been raw.

After that, there'd been all those late nights that Cas had been working, putting in double shifts, driving all those miles. Snatching a quick few hours of sleep at the bunker and heading right out again.

Dean's getting angry just thinking about it. Angry at the hospitals, at the stupid health care system... Angry at Lucifer, at Chuck, at Fate.

He has to make himself take a few slow, deep breaths just to calm down.

"Cas," says Sam, "The health care databases are hackable. You're getting mostly Colorado care now, right? And some in Kansas?"

Cas nods, and says, "Gas-n-Sip is a national chain, so they cover employees in any state. That was fortunate — I can work in Kansas near to you two, but get the treatments here in Colorado where the deductibles are a little less. And also my first doctor's in Arizona. I still consult with him sometimes."

"Okay, three states," says Sam. "I can work with that. I think I can pull together some fake id's for those three states. Fake id's that are on a health plan, I mean."

"And we can definitely pay for your motel," says Dean. "And the deductibles and all that. Jeez, Cas, you really should've told us. I mean... you really should have, you understand?"

"I didn't want to bother you," Cas says softly.

Sam's apparently still thinking about the hacking plan, for he says, "We might not be able to whip
this together instantly. We gotta make sure you're covered for next week... Hm." He looks at Dean and says, "He might not be able to quit his job instantly. Like... not this week. Not till I make sure he won't be dropped from coverage right away."

"I've already signed up for the all the Thanksgiving shifts anyway," says Cas. "I wouldn't feel right abandoning my co-workers." He slips his phone out of his pocket and checks the time. "In fact, I'm a little worried I might be late for my shift today, and apparently it's a critical shift. Nobody else wanted to work on the holiday weekend so I said I'd cover Wednesday closing through Sunday opening, and they warned me that Wednesday, today, is the busiest travel day of the entire year, correct? And Saturday the next busiest?" Sam and Dean both nod, and Cas stands again, saying, "In that case, I'll be going."

"And we're coming," says Dean. "And we're helping."

Cas blinks at him, confused. But Sam gets it right away; a slow smile starts to spread across his face, and he says "I'll go pack up our stuff. You guys go check out." In a flash Sam's on his feet and out the door. Cas stares after him in confusion.

"I don't understand," he says to Dean.

"You're gonna have two assistants," explains Dean, as he grabs Cas's suitcase and shoulder-bag, and heads for the door. "Hope you don't mind doing a little training. C'mon, we're late for our work shift."

"No, you can't," says Cas, trotting after him with the plant. "It's a holiday, you two need to be with family—"

"Exactly," Dean interrupts him. "We need to be with family, so we're coming with you. Also we've never had a Gas-n-Sip Thanksgiving before. I hear there's some good pies!"

_A/N - Health care details for certain states will deviate from reality a bit in this fic; all that matters for this fic is that Cas doesn't have any disability coverage, but does have his surgeries and chemo covered. But only if he keeps working. (yes, this combination can happen. argh)

I'll update again as soon as I can (I'm really eager to get to the next snuggle scene, to be honest! Where Dean confronts his snuggling-confusion once again) But with this grant report due I'm not sure how the next two weeks will go. Wish me luck. Very best to all of you, and I hope Thanksgiving treated you well.

Please do let me know if you liked this!_
Do you want another blanket or something?

A/N - Here I am late again but at least I've got something! For a while there I didn't think I'd get anything written at all. Hectic holiday travel, and the grant deadlines have gotten ever closer and scary. I did get a key paper off to co-authors yesterday, though. And even through all the chaos I had very many things to be thankful about this last week, and I really hope you all did too.

PS apologies for all typos - I've been having to post chapters unbeta'd recently, and fix the typos later when my beta kindly sends them to me, just in order to get anything posted all. It's 4am Sat night now and I figure, if I don't post it now I won't get it up this weekend at all.

We return to the Wednesday before Thanksgiving at a certain Gas-n-Sip...

On the day before Thanksgiving, Dean's lugging two bulging garbage bags full of bathroom trash down the Gas-n-Sip aisle, trying to get to the back door without bumping any customers with the bags. (Cas has been very insistent about following proper trash-removal protocol.) But he encounters an entire family coming the other direction down the aisle, and so he has to stop. The whole family, five strong, grinds to a halt at the pie display and gets into a long discussion about whether it would be totally inappropriate to bring some Gas-n-Sip pies to Grandma's Thanksgiving dinner, given that an "Aunt Janet" has been tasked with making the pies this year and "everybody knows" she always burns the crusts.

"They're actually pretty good pies," Dean tells them. "You could probably pass them off as homemade. Say you just got mixed up about who was supposed to make what, and in the end you brought them as a backup in case extra guests came."

That sparks some animated discussion and then a lot of consideration about which type of pie to buy. But they're still not moving, so Dean has to back up and try another aisle. The next aisle over turns out to be blocked by a set of pre-teen boys arguing over the merits of Cool Ranch flavored Doritos versus Nacho Cheese, as a long-distance-car-ride snack that needs to last them clear till St. Louis.

"Nacho Cheese," Dean tells them. "Cool Ranch is for chicks." (He's actually hoping they'll leave some of the Cool Ranch ones for him and Sam and Cas to eat later. It's already looking like the whole store's going to be emptied out by the holiday travelers.)

Dean finally manages to lug his garbage bags down the third, narrowest, aisle. Thankfully that one's all clear — except for Sam, who's restocking the drinks in one of the glass coolers.

Sam catches Dean's eye and nods toward Cas, who's over at the cash register dealing with a long line of shoppers who all seem to be buying an absurd amount of road-trip snacks. (Cas is still wearing the monkey hat; he hasn't taken it off all day.)

"We gotta get him to take a break," hisses Sam under his breath.

"I've only tried about a dozen times," Dean whispers back. It's past sunset, they've been working eight hours already, and the store's been flooded with people the entire time. Busiest travel day of the
year, everybody keeps saying. Dean's been pretty dismayed to find out that running a Gas-n-Sip convenience store smoothly, and keep it all clean and functional and well-stocked, actually turns out to be a tremendous amount of work. Especially on the day before Thanksgiving.

And if Dean and Sam are both exhausted, how must Cas be feeling?

"He keeps insisting he's okay," whispers Dean. "And also he keeps worrying about how we're not really allowed to work here anyway. You know what he said, if the boss shows up—"

"Yeah, yeah, drop the mops and run," Sam says, finishing the sentence for him. "Or make like we're just buying hot dogs like everybody else. He's only told me like four times." Sam finishes restocking the last of the soft drink shelves and shuts the cooler door, turning to Dean to whisper, "But there's no way he can keep up this pace, even with us doing the heavy lifting. I know he keeps saying he's feeling all right, but.... look at him."

They both turn to watch Cas for a moment. He's across the store from them and he's got at least ten people waiting in line with food, several trying to pay for gas (one of the pump's registers is broken), one person asking for help with their car, another asking for lottery tickets, and a third who's just asked for a pack of cigarettes from the stacks behind the counter.

Cas deals with the cigarettes first and he has to reach up high overhead to grab a pack from a the top shelf. It's clear, even from across the store, that something about the reaching-up move is bothering him. He winces and sets one hand on his stomach, and then, after he hands the pack to the customer, he hitches himself up onto a stool, moving stiffly. He finishes the transaction sitting there on the stool, curled over a little. (He hadn't even had the stool at all till Dean found one in the back stockroom a few hours ago, dragged it out front and forced him to start using it.)

Sam whispers, "Well, at least he's finally sitting. Maybe you can convince him to take a break soon. Make him lie down in the back. Make him use that sleeping bag. He might listen to you."

"Me? Why me?" asks Dean, giving Sam a sharp look.

Sam shrugs. "I dunno. Seems like he listens to you a bit more these days, maybe? At least, about this health stuff. He opens up to you sometimes."

"What, you thinking we're married or something, just cause he's been up all night puking in my arms?" (Dean can't quite pin down why the "married" joke seems to jump to mind so readily.)

"I dunno," Sam says, with a little shrug. He shifts his feet. "I just meant—"

They both flinch when Cas looks over at them, and Dean's sure that Cas has overheard them. But he's beckoning them over to the line of people — and specifically, to a worried-looking elderly lady who's standing at the front of the line practically wringing her hands.

"Sam, Dean," Cas says. "Could one of you help this nice lady with her car tires? She says one of them seems to be the wrong shape." To the lady he says, "These are my friends. My family, actually. They're good men. They'll help you."

Dean volunteers to deal with the old lady, and a moment later he's following her outside to an ancient old Volvo that's been pulled up next to the Gas-n-Sip's creaky old air compressor. Dean glances over
at the gas pumps to find that a long line of cars has formed at all four pumps, several cars on each side waiting their turn. He sighs; it's already felt like a very long day, and clearly there's going to be nonstop work for hours more, probably right up till closing at eleven o'clock tonight.

The old lady notices his sigh, and smiles at him sympathetically. "Busiest travel day of the year, they say," she says, as Dean begins checking the four tires. "I hope at least you'll get tomorrow off? Thanksgiving day?"

"Unfortunately not," says Dean, frowning at the tires. Sure enough, one tire is definitely low, and he pulls the air hose over and crouches by the tire as he explains, "We're working all weekend. Straight through Sunday."

She looks appalled. "That's just not right!" she says. "Couldn't they get any other employees?"

"Well... actually I volunteered," Dean explains, "Me and my brother, in fact. We're just helping out our friend, there, the guy at the cash register." Dean nods toward Castiel, back inside the store. "He was gonna work alone all weekend, right through the holiday."

Dean kneels on the ground to unscrew the little plastic cap on the tire valvestem. He sets the cap carefully on the ground by the tire (it's a point of pride, for someone who works with cars, to not lose the little plastic cap). He's fitting the air hose nozzle over the valvestem when somehow he finds himself saying, out of nowhere, to an old lady who's a total stranger: "He's got cancer. He didn't tell us. We just found out."

"Oh, sweetie," she says. Dean risks a quick glance up to see that she's turned to look at Cas. She watches Cas for a long moment, through the plate-glass window.

A moment later she says, quietly, "I can see it now. It's a very cute hat, but...."

She turns back to Dean with a soft, resigned sigh, and a little shake of the head, like it's a story she's heard — and seen — many times. She looks at him thoughtfully, and Dean finds he can't hold her gaze. His eyes drop to the tire as he hears her say, "I'm so sorry."

"Shouldn'ta told you," Dean mutters, staring at the tire.

"Sometimes it helps to tell things to strangers," she says, and she reaches down and pats Dean's shoulder. "You're so sweet to help him. I'm sure he appreciates it, probably more than he can say. You're a good friend."

Dean's staring fixedly at the tire now, cursing himself for having mentioned it at all. It was Cas's secret; it wasn't Dean's secret to tell. And now he can't even say anything else. He can only give another uncomfortable shrug, and then silently he holds the air hose in place on the valvestem as the tire slowly fills.

He checks the gauge, and gives the tire a bit more air, and checks the gauge again, and then realizes that he's paid absolutely no attention at all to the gauge numbers and that he's overfilled the tire. He has to let some air out, and now the tire's too low and he has to add a little more air again. The old lady doesn't seem to mind all the delays; out of the corner of his eye he can just see her shoes, and she's standing there patiently, still right next to him. Presumably still watching him, though Dean still can't seem to look back up to meet her eyes.

How old is she, anyway? 65? 70? Her shoes are definitely the classic old-lady kind, plain comfy pull-on trainers with elastic laces and thick rubber soles, in sensible black.

It occurs to Dean that the old lady probably hasn't always worn sensible shoes in sensible black.
Once upon a time she must have been young; once upon a time she'd probably liked girly shoes, those feminine fashionable shoes that most girls go crazy for. She'd probably even worn high-heeled pumps, back in her day. Strappy sandals, maybe. Colorful party shoes. Once upon a time.

*When exactly did she put all that away?* Dean thinks.

*Does there come a certain day when you realize it's over, and that you're always going to be alone? A day when you just put all the fun stuff away forever?*

The tire pressure's finally right. 36 psi on the dot. Dean sets the air hose on the ground, and picks up the little plastic black cap.

"Is he going to be okay?" he hears the old lady ask. A quick glance up reveals that indeed she's still watching him; she's looking down with kindly eyes. "Your friend?" she adds. "Will he be okay? If you don't mind my asking."

Dean shrugs again and turns his attention back to the tire, trying now to focus on getting the little plastic screw cap back on, but his fingers seem to be getting cold: the little cap won't thread onto the tire valve. It slips out of his hand to the ground. He goes to pick it up but fumbles it somehow, and it rolls away and there's a bit of embarrassing scrabbling before he finally gets hold of the thing.

"I don't know," says Dean at last, finally getting the damned cap back onto the tire. "I don't know. He won't tell me much. He won't talk about it. He hid it for months. He won't tell me how bad it is."

"Maybe he just doesn't want you to worry," she says, as Dean stands and brushes his hands on his jeans.

"Yeah, maybe," mutters Dean.

She turns to look at Cas again, studying him now through the plate-glass windows. "You have to make him rest," she says.

"I know. He won't take a break."

"You may have to force him," she says firmly, and she turns back to Dean and adds, "And you have to cherish every moment, you know. But I'm sure you know that."

"Yeah, I know," he says.

"Even one day is precious," she says, "Even one day more." She looks at her car, and only now does Dean realize she's traveling alone. That's why she'd needed help with the car tires, after all; there's nobody else with her. Whatever husband or companion or partner she might once have had, she's traveling alone on this Thanksgiving holiday.

Dean asks, "Hey, uh... you got family to go to? For the holiday?"

"Oh, I've got some friends," she says. Dean glances down at her left hand, to see if she might be wearing a wedding ring, but she slips her hand into her jacket pocket before he can get a clear look.

Then she reaches out with her other hand. She's holding something. She seems to be offering it to him. Dean peers at it and realizes it's a neatly folded five-dollar bill.

"It's just a tip," the old lady says. "I know it's not much. I'm just hopeless with car things."

"No, I can't," Dean says, waving it off. "Just part of the job. Glad to help."
"Well, then, buy a slice of Thanksgiving pie to share with your friend," she says. "And your brother, too. In fact —" She fishes another five out of her purse. "Get a whole pie." And this time when she reaches out, Dean lets her tuck the two five-dollar bills into his fingers.

"Thanks," he says, in a whisper.

"No, thank you. For your help with the tire, I mean," she says. "Joe used to do all that sort of thing, but, well, you know how it goes." She pats Dean on the arm one more time and gets in her car. Just as she's about to close the door she looks over and says, "Even one more day is precious." Dean nods, and he watches while the ancient Volvo drives away.

It takes a bit of arguing, and Cas insists on giving Dean a twenty-minute tutorial about the lottery tickets and the cash register (demonstrating with the purchases of a series of increasingly impatient customers), but at last Dean convinces him to lie down in the back and rest.

Dean's first solo act at the cash register is to buy the best-looking apple pie, and set it aside for later.

Cas conks right out, back his stockroom-sleeping-bag nest; Dean and Sam have to rouse him at eleven o'clock to have him show them how to lock up the store. They have to fend off a few last-minute customers who are apparently desperate for Doritos and Slim Jims even at eleven at night, but they finally get the place closed up. Then both brothers have to vehemently veto Cas's confident suggestion that they all might be quite comfortable sleeping on the floor of the stockroom side-by-side, if they simply spread out the single sleeping bag as much as possible and pad its edges with paper towels. But they finally manage to drag him to a nearby motel. The Continental (which Sam drove from Denver) stays parked at the Gas-n-Sip; they all head to the motel together in the Impala, downing a few slices of pie in the car on the way.

Cas, of course, frets the whole way there about how to pay for his room, even though Dean's told him several times that Dean'll be covering both motel rooms. But when they get there, the motel clerk announces brightly, "Unfortunately there's only one room left, fellas. You'll all have to share." He adds, with a cheery laugh, "Busiest travel day of the year, you know!"

"No, really?" says Dean, "I've never heard that!" He turns to Sam with a look of mock surprise. "Did you know the day before Thanksgiving is the busiest travel day of the year, Sam? Because I, personally, did not know that. Until this very moment I had no idea."

"But I've told you that multiple times, Dean," says Cas, frowning at him. "And most of the customers mentioned it too. Don't you remember?" (Sam has to elbow Dean in the ribs to keep him from snickering.) With a sigh, Cas adds, "At least you only have to pay for one room now. Though I'm afraid I'll be crowding you both."
The room has two queen beds. Sam immediately plucks his own duffel and Dean's on the same bed, and he grabs Cas's bag out of his hands and puts it on the other bed.

"Cas, you should have your own bed," says Sam. "Don't you think, Dean? He should be comfortable, right? Enough of the sleeping-on-the-floor business. You get to stretch out in comfort tonight, Cas."

Cas and Dean glance at each other.

Cas is still wearing the monkey hat, and the tassels are swaying a little bit as he gazes over at Dean. *It looks good on him*, Dean thinks. And he remembers how nice it had been to bury his nose right in the top of that monkey hat. How good it had been to pull Cas close.

"Right, of course," Dean replies to Sam. "Obviously. Yeah, Cas, you take that bed."

Cas says, "But... Sam's quite tall. Are you sure that you both will fit?"

"Oh, Dean and I are used to sharing," says Sam, and he reaches over to clap Cas on the shoulder. "Don't you worry about it. You know..." Sam hesitates, but then forge ahead with, "Look at it this way, if you don't my pointing it out, it's kind of a perk of having, um, having cancer, I guess!" He gives a slightly awkward laugh, and adds, "I know there sure aren't too many perks, so why not use this one? Take your pick of the beds. You know... now that I think about it, you really should play that cancer card every chance you've got. You deserve it."

"The cancer... card," says Cas uncertainly. "Of course."

Sam heads into the bathroom for a quick shower (a full day's work at a Gas-n-Sip makes a night-time shower imperative). Once the bathroom door's closed, Cas and Dean look at each other again.

"Sam's right," Dean says, a little reluctantly. "You really should stretch out. You need your own bed."

"That's thoughtful of you..." says Cas, though he doesn't sound all that convinced. "Well... I suppose we all do need to get some rest. We do have to get up early tomorrow. The store needs to be open from eight to noon, have I mentioned that?"

"Only about a dozen times," says Dean.

"But I'm worried you and Sam will be too crowded."

"Cas," says Dean, "Sam's right, you really gotta learn to play that cancer card a little more."

"I don't think I really understand what he meant by that," Cas says, narrowing his eyes a little.

"Like this," says Dean, launching into an exaggerated speech: "Oh, woe is me, poor me, I have cancer, so I get the bed to myself. I have cancer, so I get the last piece of pie. I get everything I want. I'm too weak to wash the dishes or do any chores or even to lift the tv remote by myself, you have to do it for me."

Cas is only looking even more confused, so Dean says, "Don't you get it? It's the trump card. It's the ultimate sympathy ploy. Nobody can resist it."

"You mean..." says Cas, "one plays the cancer card as a tactical strategy? To get things one actually wants?" Dean nods, and Cas says, "As in, for example..." He thinks a moment. "I have cancer, and... my bed is too... cold?"
"Right," says Dean, "Exactly. Uh...." Dean hesitates. "So.... was that just an example, or do you want another blanket or something?"

"I don't know," says Cas, and they look at each other.

Just then Sam emerges from the bathroom, to find Dean and Cas gazing at each other in mutual confusion. "What's up?" asks Sam.

"My bed is too cold," announces Cas.

Sam nods. "I'll call the front office and see if they can drop off some more blankets."

Dean gets the next turn in the shower, and he reminds himself, as he lathers up and rinses off, that tonight certainly won't be the first time Sam and he have shared a bed. Not that it's Dean's absolute favorite way to sleep, exactly, but when it's a sibling whom you've shared motel beds with for years and years of travel, while growing up together, it's not a problem. It's completely routine.

And Cas should get his own bed, of course.

When Dean gets out of the bathroom Cas practically tiptoes past him to take his own shower, whispering "Shh, Sam's already asleep." Dean sees he's right; Sam's already snoring. So when the motel clerk knocks quietly on the door with a stack of extra blankets, of course now it's up to Dean to spread them out over Cas's bed.

Then Dean stands at the foot of both beds and takes stock. Sam is a gigantic behemoth. Cas was completely correct about that. Sam's all sprawled out like the world's biggest starfish and he's got one huge, mile-long leg going all diagonally on the bed, right onto Dean's side. And he's already hogging the covers.

Of course, Dean can just shove Sam over when it's time for lights-out, but it seems like a fine idea to sit on Cas's bed in the meantime. Just for a few minutes, just while waiting for Cas to be done with his shower. After another few moments, Dean realizes he's a little chilly, so he gets under the two extra blankets (but on top of the bedcovers) — because, why be cold unnecessarily when those nice two extra blankets are right here?

It's very late and of course Cas is right about how they'll have to get up early tomorrow. But Dean's always found it soothing, whenever they're in a motel at night, to spend a few last minutes just before bed flipping through some tv channels. So he finds the remote and puts the TV on with the sound down low. Then once Cas comes out from his shower he immediately wants to watch TV a little bit too. (He seems wide awake, actually, maybe since he's had that nap earlier today.) Cas gets under the covers, Dean stays on top of them, and Dean finds an HBO channel that's showing an old rerun of Flight of The Conchords.

The episode's hilarious, to Dean at least, though explaining it to Castiel proves to be a little difficult. ("Are business socks a sexually alluring item of clothing?" "It's just a joke, Cas. It's a joke song." "Oh. Because, you see, I have socks exactly like that." "Oh...") It's fun to watch it again, but turns out to be fairly challenging to explain, and by the end of the episode Dean's yawning. Eleven hours of Gas-n-Sip chaos have apparently taken their toll.

"Bedtime, I think," Dean finally says. "Time for me to jump ship and see if I can push Gigantor over
there back onto his own side of the bed. You all done too?” Dean raises the remote and points it at the screen, ready to click the Power button off.

"I have cancer," Cas states quietly, "and I want to keep watching TV with you."

There's a little pause.

"Dammit," says Dean, lowering the remote. "Should've known you'd be a fast learner."

Another *Flight Of The Conchords* episode starts up, and though Dean's nearly certain now that Cas still isn't getting most of the references, Cas seems to be enjoying it anyway. Dean's truly exhausted by now, but then Cas lets his head lean a little on Dean's shoulder and of course that wakes Dean up a little. *Every day is precious*, Dean thinks, and when the impulse comes to put an arm over Cas's shoulders, he doesn't second-guess it, and he doesn't try to talk himself out of it; he just puts his arm over Cas's shoulders.

It seems that Cas's head sinks a little more heavily onto Dean's shoulder. After a few minutes Dean lets his own head lean onto Cas's, too, and now Dean's totally losing track of the *Flight Of The Conchords* plot as he finds himself turning his head toward Castiel more and more, and leaning more fully onto him, till once again Dean's got his nose just about buried in the top of Cas's monkey hat.

Then Sam's tapping him softly on the arm; it's dawn, and Dean's still on Cas's bed, lying down fully now. And despite the fact that they're still safely in Innocent Bed Position #1 (Cas under the bedcovers and Dean on top of them, with the extra blankets spread on top), nonetheless they seem to have ended up in a spooning position. Dean is spooning Cas. It's not a super-close spoon, of course (it can't be, not in Innocent Bed Position #1), and there's a few inches between them. But Dean's arm is undeniably over Cas's waist. Furthermore, Cas has even got Dean's hand tucked between both of his own. Thankfully the exact configuration of the hands is hidden under the extra blankets, but nonetheless Sam starts right in on the teasing.

"You two look just adorable," Sam whispers. "A match made in Heaven. Literally! You'll have to let me know how it goes."

It's clear Sam's just joking — there's only a laughing, casual bantering tone in his voice, as if he truly thinks it's all innocent and is merely pleased to have found a rich new motherlode of potential jokes. But Dean feels himself flush anyway. "Can it," Dean hisses back, slipping his hand quietly out of Cas's grasp. "Just fell asleep here. Didn't mean to."

"Tell it to the judge," says Sam. "C'mon, we'll be late for work. And you know how the boss is."

_A/N - Hm, right, Sam, it's all totally innocent._

*I hope to have something more up next week, but the grant deadline's looming (budget has to be done in 1 week, full text in 2 wks) so I can't promise.... wish me luck._

*Hope you are still liking my story! As always, if there was something in particular that you liked, please let me know. I love to hear from you._
You have to try every pie

A/N - A surprise Monday update for you! Three days late on this, sorry - here's the Thanksgiving chapter at last. The grant's sucking up my life. It's due Friday, so the next chapter will be late too.

Warning, spoilers ahead for "Planes, Trains and Automobiles" if you haven't seen it.

On Thursday, Thanksgiving day, they only have to do only a four-hour shift; the store's scheduled to close at noon. And it turns out it's a much easier day. There's less traffic, and even from the scattering of drivers that do stop for gas, very few come inside to buy snacks. The travelers today are just on short journeys, headed an hour or two down the road to local family get-togethers, and most of them seem to be trying to hold back from snacking so they can feast at the big meal later.

Most of the action is, therefore, outside at the gas pumps, with only a small trickle of people coming in for coffee. Cas ends up spending much of the time curled up in the back again, while Dean and Sam man the store.

"It's going pretty smooth today, isn't it?" Dean says, about midway through their morning work shift. The store's deserted at the moment; Sam's in the middle of wiping down the coffee corner with a damp paper towel, Dean's at the cashier station, and Cas is still asleep out back. Everything's nicely under control.

Dean leans back on his cashier's stool (Cas's stool, actually), adjusts his blue employee vest (Cas's vest), straightens his nametag (Cas's nametag), and says, "You know, I really feel like I might have a promising career ahead of me in the Gas-n-Sip world."

Sam pauses in his coffee-wiping to look over at Dean, and gives a little snort of a laugh. Dean cracks a smile, but then confesses, "Only half-joking, to be honest." He glances around the tidy store and says, "I'm starting to see what Cas meant about having just one little corner of the world that you know you can keep control of. I'm actually starting to feel some pride in this place." He points out a minor coffee spill that Sam hasn't wiped up. "Speaking of. You missed a spot."

Sam turns to get the spot, still laughing a little, and he shakes his head. Coffee-cleaning finally done, he wads up his paper towel and tosses it toward a far-away trash can. It hits the rim and bounces out. "You're messing up my store, you hooligan," says Dean.

"My store too!" protests Sam. "That coffee machine doesn't refill itself, you know." He scoops up the paper towel from the floor, tosses it in the trash again (successfully this time), and then turns to Dean with a thoughtful look. "Seriously though... you definitely feeling like you got everything under control here? You think you could hold down the fort all by yourself? Even with Cas asleep?"

Dean frowns at him. "You gonna abandon me or something? But, Sam— " (he gestures expansively around the Gas-n-Sip) "—this kingdom could all be yours."

"It can be mine tomorrow," says Sam, walking over toward Dean's counter. "Today, though, I got an
idea. How about I take off an hour early and meet you guys back at the bunker in a few hours? I'll
take Cas's car now, and you guys follow in the Impala after you've closed up. You could get back
there by, like, three or four, right?" Sam checks his watch. "Hand me my jacket, would you?"
"Wait, what for? Where're you going?"
"Well, I just happened to notice this morning, while you two snuggle-bunnies were getting your
extremely slow asses dressed," says Sam, "that the supermarket down the road's open till noon."
Dean blinks at the "snuggle-bunnies" comment. Then he's momentarily paralyzed by a set of
surprisingly complex mental calculations about whether it would look most natural to Sam if Dean
continues the "snuggle-bunnies" theme with a related type of joke (maybe some joke about Sam's
masculinity?) or some self-deprecating joke (something about spooning? Something that shows that
Dean's so completely un-threatened and un-rattled by the snuggle-bunnies comment that he can even
crack more jokes about it?); or whether Dean should switch to a different joke; or whether it would
seem smoothest and most natural of all to loftily ignore it.
These hypothetical options all go flying through Dean's head in a split second. But it's rather like
being trapped in a mental hamster wheel; over the next few moments his thoughts only manage to
spin around in circles, and he soon realizes he's not coming up with anything at all to say.
Fortunately, Sam doesn't even seem to notice. He's staring off into space, apparently thinking about
something else entirely, and finally he says, "They might not have a whole bird left, but they
probably have some of those little turkey breasts or something." He adds, with a grin. "Not saying
I'm the world's best cook or anything, but I can throw a bird in an oven. If it's a little one I think it'll
only take a few hours. Might even be able to rustle up some potatoes."
"Oh," says Dean. It slowly sinks in what Sam's talking about. Today is Thanksgiving! Earlier they'd
been planning on a very low-key meal for delivery to the nearby motel, the classic Pizza
Thanksgiving of their nomadic childhood. But this...
Dean feels a smile spreading over his face. "Sam. You're a genius. Yes. Do it. But, you gotta make
sure there's some kind of pie, too. In fact... " He casts a worried look at the Gas-n-Sip pie rack,
which is totally empty after yesterday's frenzied shopping. "There's only a couple slices of pie left
from the one I bought yesterday. You better leave right now." He grabs Sam's jacket from below the
counter and tosses it at him. "Scoot. Get going. There's last-minute pies to buy!"
"You sure you're okay here on your own?"
"Am I not the very model of Gas-n-Sip efficiency?" says Dean, spreading his arms and looking
down in not-entirely-mock pride at his blue employee vest. "I got this place figured out. It's ticking
like a Swiss watch. Also it doesn't hurt that there are zero customers."

At noon sharp Dean closes up, loads a still-sleepy Cas into the back of the Impala, and they head
home to the bunker.
It's a couple hours of driving. During the long drive it occurs to Dean, multiple times, that he
probably really ought to be quizzing Cas about all the diagnosis and prognosis questions. But Cas
seems comfortable relaxing in the back, and most of the time he's asleep...


... and it's Thanksgiving day, after all.

Can't they take just one day off from this cancer thing? (It's not even been a week yet, and Dean's already exhausted from thinking about it.)

Can't Cas just have one good evening? One holiday? One family get-together?

Besides, there's plenty of time still, before the next round of chemo, to get the truth out of him. Three full days at least — Friday, Saturday and Sunday. Plenty of time.

Cas only finally wakes when the Impala turns onto the bumpy, rutted bunker driveway.

"Hey, Sleeping Beauty," calls Dean over his shoulder, as Cas sits up, yawning and looking around. "We're home!" Dean pulls the Impala into the bunker garage, and together they walk into the kitchen to a sight that's so startling they both stop short: Sam's wearing an actual apron (one with a 1940s style flowered print, no less), he's got two puffy oven mitts on his hands, and he's holding a pan that actually seems to have a perfectly roasted turkey breast. He's in the middle of carrying it over to the kitchen table. A heady aroma wafts over to Cas and Dean, a positively mouth-watering scent of warm roasted turkey and potatoes and biscuits. And pies.

"Holy shit, dead-on perfect timing," says Sam, pausing in mid-stride to grin at them. "Everything's ready. Welcome home! Happy Thanksgiving!" He plunks the turkey breast down on the kitchen table and says, "What do you think? Not bad for a few hours work, if I say so myself."

Dean and Cas can only stare. The kitchen table's completely laden with food. Sam's somehow summoned up practically the whole traditional meal — turkey, potatoes, hot biscuits fresh out of the oven, savory green beans, gravy, cranberry sauce — the works.

"It's just a turkey breast and not the whole turkey," Sam points out.

"That's okay," says Dean.

"The biscuits are just from one of those little tubes," says Sam, a little apologetically.

"That's okay," says Dean.

"The cranberry sauce is out of a can, sorry," says Sam. "And the gravy's from a jar."

"That's really okay," says Dean. He glances over at Cas, who is actually open-mouthed as he stares at the table, and Dean thinks, Has he ever even seen a real Thanksgiving meal before?

"But I did actually cook the turkey. Not in a microwave, either," says Sam, gesturing at the turkey breast proudly with one oven mitt. "Cooked it in the actual oven. Googled the timing and everything. And I did do one thing from scratch, the mashed potatoes. And, look, Dean—" Sam points with his oven mitt to the sideboard, and Dean realizes there's not just one but a full four pies laid out there. "I even just heated them up."

"Oh my god," says Dean, and he walks right over to the pies as if magnetically drawn, bending over to give each one a whiff. "Apple... berry... peach... and... what's this one?"

"Chocolate pecan," says Sam.

"Oh my god," says Dean again.

"I doubt God had anything to do with this," Cas says. "I think this was entirely Sam's doing." He's
now looking only at Sam, regarding him very thoughtfully, as if Sam has revealed himself to be a completely different sort of creature than Castiel had ever been aware of.

"It even all smells amazing," says Dean, still bent over the pies to huff in the warm-pie odors. "Though... " A thought strikes him, and he turns to Cas. "Wait, Cas, is this gonna be okay for you? All the smells and stuff? How are you feeling, anyway?"

Sam's forehead creases in concern and he says, shucking off his oven mitts at last and taking the apron off as well, "I was worried about that too. Cas, just tell me if it's too much. Here, lemme take your coat, you should sit down—" Sam helps Cas get his trenchcoat off and steers him to a chair, saying, "I know this is a bigger meal than you might have been expecting, and I know you haven't been eating much, so, if the smells are too strong or if food just puts you off or something, don't feel like you have to eat. You could go just sack out and watch a movie or something if you want."

"No, this is wonderful," says Cas. He lets Sam take the trenchcoat and settles into the chair, gazing around at all the food for a long moment. Finally he looks up at Sam to say, "To answer your question, don't worry, I'm feeling good today. And also, so far I've managed to keep the bunker safely associated with... feeling good, you might say. So, every odor here is... a good odor, for me." (Cas glances at Dean, very briefly, as he says this.) "I might have smaller-sized servings, though, if that's all right, Sam — they stay down more reliably — but, it's actually a huge help to have food presented this enticingly. It makes it so much easier to eat when the food looks this good."

Sam gives him a wide grin. "In that case," he says, "let's get started! Sit down, Dean, there's a beer right there for you. Um... we can skip grace, right?"

"If I had any grace I'd loan you some," says Cas. "But I don't, so let's eat."

"That about sums it up," says Dean, pulling up a chair. "Let's eat."

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It's still an open question, in Dean's mind, whether Cas will really eat anything. Cas nibbled a bit last night, and he's nibbled a bit today, but he still hasn't had what Dean considers a real meal. Not since Sunday, presumably. So Dean pays close attention as Sam starts assembling a plate of food for Cas.

It's soon clear Sam's taking some pains to arrange Cas's plate as attractively as possible, apparently taking Cas's comment to heart about "smaller-sized" yet "enticing" servings. A minute later Sam ceremoniously presents Castiel with a lovely-looking plate that contains two perfect slices of turkey, a dollop of choice cranberries, a drizzle of warm gravy, a tiny serving of steaming-hot green beans, and a modest scoop of the mashed potatoes. It looks beautiful — and not overwhelming. Cas seems delighted, and, for the first time in months, Sam and Dean get to see him dig into a meal with a real appetite.

"Thank you," Dean mouths at Sam, behind Cas's back. Sam just smiles.

Dean takes his cue from that success, and an hour later when they've reconvened at the sofa for the traditional post-meal evening of TV watching, Dean manages to coax Cas to eat a perfect sliver of pumpkin pie with a tiny round puffy dot of of whipped cream on top. Again Cas actually seems to enjoy it — and he actually eats the whole thing.

An hour later, while Cas is frowning doubtfully at the football game (Sam's in the middle of a valiant attempt to explain the cryptic distinction between a fair catch and a fumble), Dean sneaks off to
prepare an equally perfect slice of apple pie, flanked by an appealing — but small — scoop of vanilla ice cream. "You have to try every pie," Dean explains, when he returns to present Cas with the tiny pie slice. "It's traditional." Cas hardly even needs convincing; again he eats the whole thing.

A couple hours later, when the game's over, Dean coaxes Cas to take a few bites from perhaps the most attractive plate of Thanksgiving leftovers that Dean's ever put together in his life.

"I found the key!" Dean says to Sam when they cross paths in the kitchen a few minutes later. "He's actually eating! The key is, put things on little salad plates and make everything small, and laid out really nice. Like, arranged. Pretty. And not too much at once. Lots of little meals. That's the key."

"It's either that or it's my stunning culinary skills," says Sam.

Dean considers that, and gives a grudging nod. "The fact that you completely knocked it out of the park here, and that the food does not remotely suck, just might also have something to do with it. Lesson learned, I gotta step up my food game. Sam... You smoked it tonight. Seriously. I haven't seen him eat so consistently in... like... weeks. Maybe each bite is small, but they're adding up." Dean peeks out of the kitchen — he can just see Cas on the sofa. Cas looks all right, but...

Dean adds, dropping his voice to a whisper, "We gotta make sure he eats the next several days. Cause, you know, he's basically gonna fast for all Monday and Tuesday and half of Wednesday again." He turns back to Sam to mutter, "Bit hard to put on weight when you're fasting three days a week."

"Hey... um.... " says Sam. He, too, darts a look at Cas, and then he pulls Dean a little farther out of earshot, to a corner of the kitchen, to ask, "Should we ask him... about... you know. The details?"

Diagnosis. Prognosis.

"We need to know," Sam points out. "And ideally before the next round of chemo."

But Dean shakes his head.

"It's Thanksgiving, dude," he whispers back. "I was thinking about it on the drive, but, it's a holiday. It's his one night back here with, like... real family. We got all weekend to talk about that. Let's just give him a real Thanksgiving for once. In fact..." Dean checks his watch. "Movie time, I think."

"And a constant stream of leftovers," says Sam with a grin.

"For Cas and for me," Dean says. "In fact, I believe Cas may need a perfect piece of peach pie just about now, and I'd better taste-test another slice too—"

"A different kind of pie? That sounds lovely," Cas says just then, walking into the kitchen with a small stack of plates. "And I'd like to help clean up."

Sam and Dean smoothly separate, as if they hadn't at all been having a huddled discussion in the corner. Cas regards them with a touch of worry, and asks, "Is everything all right?"

"Just discussing which movie to watch," Dean tells him.

"But... don't we need to clean up? I was going to help with that."

"Movie night is traditional," Dean tells him. "Besides, did you forget about the cancer card? This is like the all-time perfect way to play that card. Getting out of the Thanksgiving clean-up is a time-honored American family tradition, you know, and you've got the world's best excuse."
"Dean's right, this is the ideal time to play that card," agrees Sam, "You really should be telling us you're far too tired to help clean up."

"But I'm not feeling very tired," objects Cas. "I had a nap, remember? I could definitely help cl—"

"You're far too exhausted from that long car ride," Dean says, overriding him, "and in fact, I'm pretty sure you only have exactly enough energy to spend the entire rest of the evening sacked out watching movies. C'mon, let's pick a movie." He steers Cas back to the TV room and pushes him back down on the sofa, instructing him, "Now, you lie there and relax. That's an order. The dishes are almost done anyway." Dean flips through a few channels and soon crows with excitement. "Jackpot! Planes, Trains, and Automobiles — this is a Thanksgiving classic! Sit and enjoy, angel."

He bellows toward the kitchen, "Hey, Sam! It's Planes, Trains and Automobiles! Leave that turkey pan to soak, we'll get it later!"

"And I didn't even have to play the cancer card," comments Cas. "Not with you both playing it for me."

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Planes, Trains and Automobiles is an old comedy classic that Dean remembers watching on several different Thanksgivings, usually with Sam, usually while they were stuck in a random motel having yet another pizza Thanksgiving. The movie's always kind of struck close to home, of course, what with the main plot involving two men, Neal and Del, who have to embark on an epic road trip together while attempting to get home for the holidays. It's cheesy and a bit dated, but it's one of the few movies that's actually set on Thanksgiving, and it's still funny. And it's got heart, too. The slowly growing friendship between the two men (played by Steve Martin and John Candy) has always been one of Dean's favorite parts about the movie.

It's been quite a few years since Dean's last seen it, though. But it's just as good as he remembers. He and Sam laugh like crazy through the opening parts of the movie, genuinely enjoying every scene as the Steve Martin character gets diverted to the wrong airport during a snowstorm. It becomes clear that he's going to be stuck for the night with a very annoying travel partner. The humor's broad enough and universal enough that even Cas seems to be getting all the jokes, and Dean's delighted to find that it all holds up pretty well.

That is, until the bed-sharing scene.

In the movie, there's a scene where the two men find the last room available in the last possible motel, and the room has only one bed. Like Dean and Cas, they end up sharing one bed... and, like Dean and Cas, they end up accidentally spooning in the middle of the night.

Unlike Dean and Cas, however, these two male characters in this 1987-vintage movie are horrified when they wake in the morning and realize what position they've ended up in. Somebody's hand has ended up where it shouldn't, and both men fairly fly apart from each other at light speed, nearly levitating out of bed to opposite sides of the rooms, where they spend several minutes writhing in revulsion. Disgust and horror are clear on their faces, as if they've both been contaminated by a near-brush with something truly hideous. At last the Steve Martin character says "How about those Bears?" and both men embark on a desperately macho conversation about football.

Dean's always remembered this whole motel sequence as being pretty funny. But in the many years since he's last seen it, this spooning scene has somehow escaped his memory — till now, that is. Sam
still finds it funny, apparently; he's chuckling at all the over-reactions to the spooning, and laughs out loud at the Bears comment. But Dean's gone dry-mouthed.

"Damn, I love this movie," comments Sam. "Such a classic."

Dean risks a glance over at Cas, who's been sprawled on the sofa but is now squinting at the scene in confusion. "I'm not sure I'm understanding this plot," Cas says. He hitches himself up on both elbows so that he can study the TV more closely. "Why are they suddenly talking about bears?"

"They mean the Chicago Bears," says Sam, still chuckling.

"Oh... the football team?" says Cas.

"Yeah," says Sam. "They're trying to act more manly, get it?"

Cas hesitates, and he sits up fully, tucking his feet down under him and hauling himself up to a sitting position. He's still frowning at the screen, and even hunches forward a little as if to study it from a few inches closer. "But why do they want to look more manly?" he asks. "Presumably they're normal human men already. Normal and... uh... healthy. So therefore, they're already manly. Why would they want to be even more manly? Isn't one, by default, already sufficiently manly, if one is a man?"

Sam tries to explain with, "Well, they woke up spooning, y'know."

"Spooning..." says Cas, and it seems clear he hasn't run across this particular phrase very often. Dean can see the moment when it clicks for him: Cas's eyes widen slightly, he glances briefly at Dean, and he asks Sam, "Oh, you mean, like two spoons in a drawer?" He glances at Dean again, his eyes flicking over for just the briefest instant this time. "Lying parallel? Nested together?"

Sam says, "Yeah. Hey, just like —" (Dean is holding very, very still) "— like you and Dean did this morning! Ha, that was exactly the same situation, wasn't it! Only one room left at the motel, stuck in the same bed, and ended up spooning! Ha ha, just the same!"

Except for the cancer part, thinks Dean.

And the fact that he's an angel, and didn't really understand any of this.

And... the fact that I sorta liked it.

"Though you two didn't react the same way, heh," Sam says, and he glances over at Dean with a tentative smile, as if expecting Dean to parry with a smile of his own, and counter with another joke. But once again Dean can't seem to come up with a joke. He can't seem to fake a smile, either, not even a tiny grimace of one; he can't even meet Sam's eyes. All Dean can seem to do is stare fixedly at the TV screen.

Sam's smile fades away, and he finishes, a little lamely, with, "You two didn't seem nearly as wigged out, either."

"Why would we be, um, wigged out?" asks Cas. He thinks a bit and adds, "Should we have wigged out?"

"Well, you know, it's just that..." And here Sam pauses.

He pauses for a very long moment.
He shifts his feet, delicately, with rather the air of someone who's just noticed that he's been casually strolling through a minefield. "Oh... no reason," Sam says — and, when Dean finally glances at him, it turns out Sam's gone a little red. "No reason at all," Sam says, running a hand through his hair. He clears his throat. "You guys, uh, you guys know each other. Those guys in the movie didn't know each other. They're strangers. So... you know."

Cas is quiet for a long time after that.

And so's Dean.

And so's Sam.

The movie carries on, and now the parallels start to hurt: the growing friendship between the two men, the discovery that one of them has no home at all, and no family, and nowhere to go for the holidays. And the almost romantic-movie moment when one chases after the other to invite him back home. (Followed mere seconds later by a gratuitous shot of a generic wife, complete with fluffy 80s hair, as if to clarify there's not anything even the teeniest tiniest bit gay about the men's friendship.) The awkwardness about the spooning scene begins to fade as Dean's swept up in the sentimental ending: everybody ends up home for the holidays.

"Sam," says Cas at the end. "Dean." They both turn to look at him, and Cas says, quite formally, "I want to thank you both for inviting me into your home."

Dean says, "It's your home too."

"No, it's not," says Cas. "It's yours." Dean and Sam both draw breath to object, but Cas says firmly, "You are both of the lineage of the Men of Letters; I'm not. And you've invited me in, both of you. And I just want you to know that I so... I so appreciate it. I don't really..." He pauses. "I suppose I'm like the fellow in that movie. I haven't had a home, or a family, in years. You both took me in. You fed me Thanksgiving dinner. I just want you both to know that I'm thankful. I truly am."

There's a cozy warm glow of family feelings after that little speech. Yet Dean already knows there'll likely be no spooning tonight. Last night had been a totally unplanned accident, after all, just a consequence of all being stuck in one tiny motel room together. Cas very likely hadn't meant anything by the fact that he'd ended up holding Dean's hand; he'd been fast asleep by that point. Cas probably hadn't even realized there was anything weird about two grown men spooning together. Now he knows better.

And, also, they're back at the bunker now, where they each have their own bedrooms. There's no TV in Cas's room (Sam's the only one who has a TV in his bedroom) so there's not even any possibility this time of late-night Flight of the Conchords.

Cas doesn't mention his bed being cold. Dean goes to his room to give him a big stack of extra blankets anyway, just in case, and Cas merely nods and accepts them. As Dean hands over the blankets he's feeling a little let down, for reasons he can't quite pin down, and he reaches out a hand to Cas and pats the top of his monkey hat. Cas smiles at him; it almost hurts to see the smile, and to know that Cas is still here, and still alive, and that he's smiling at Dean. Every day is precious, Dean thinks, and he lets his hand drift down to cup the side of Cas's face for a moment.

"Glad you're here," Dean says, patting Cas's cheek. "Glad you're feeling good. Sleep well, okay?"
"I will. But, Dean, are you two sure you want to keep helping at my job tomorrow? I'm really feeling better now."

"We're absolutely coming with you," says Dean, finally dropping his hand to his side. "Tomorrow and Saturday too, and that half Sunday shift you mentioned. And then we're taking you to Denver, later on Sunday, soon as the work shift's done."

"You don't have to, you know."

"It's already decided, Cas. Just accept it." Dean reaches out again to give him one more pat, on the shoulder this time, and Cas lifts a hand to squeeze Dean's forearm lightly in return.

But Cas says only a soft "Thank you, Dean. Good night."

As Dean's turning away he's rather hoping that Cas will call him back for some reason. But Cas doesn't; so Dean walks away.

Dean could, of course, figure out some plausible reason to return to Cas's room.

Given a few more minutes, he could probably even come up with a plausible reason to spend the entire night there.

In fact it has begun to seem that there are constantly little such schemes going on in the back of Dean's mind, schemes that always seem to involve Cas. Rationales for being near Cas, usually; reasons Dean might need to contact him or check on him, reasons Dean might need to go to his room to chat about something, or even might need to hang out in his room for a while. It's even become second nature to be constantly assessing the validity of these potential reasons-to-stay-near-Cas, as if some part of his mind is always pondering whether they'll realistically stand up to external review and outside opinion. (Like... just for example... Sam's opinion.)

It seems, at times, that Dean can almost feel these gears whirring in his own mind... and, in the brief moments when he allows himself to think about it, he knows the reasons that those gears keep whirring.

Part of it's the cancer, obviously. A very large part of it is genuinely about making sure Cas is okay, and cherishing his company.

But part of it is about something else, isn't it?

Every day is precious, Dean thinks as he reaches his room. Today was a good day, really, and as he's changing for bed he reminds himself to appreciate what an amazing job Sam did with the food, and Cas's sheer delight at the meal, and what a relief it was to see Cas eating again, and how sweet Cas's little speech at the end of the evening had been. And how nice it had been just to see Cas smile.

Dean tries to focus on all those things, and let everything else go. Yet when he clammers into his bed and discovers that actually the bed is quite cold, the mental gears begin, inexorably, to whir again.

The bed is cold, and it occurs to Dean that Cas now has all the spare blankets and therefore that it would make incontrovertible, positively unassailable sense for Dean to go to Cas's room right now to discuss the blanket situation. Surely even a jury of one's peers would regard that as a perfectly good reason to go to Cas's room.

Dean's already halfway out of bed. But then, all of a sudden, all he can hear is Sam's laughter at that Planes, Trains, and Automobiles bed-sharing scene.

He sinks back into his chilly bed, rolls onto his side and buries his face in the pillow, trying his best to think about nothing at all.
Just as Dean's drifting off he finds himself thinking, *Maybe tomorrow night.*

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*A/N - Aw, Dean. Just go down the hall!*

Several of you have noticed that Sam, last chapter, is actually not quite the classic shipper-Sam. Not yet. Rather, in this fic he's actually been a bit oblivious. He loves his brother, he loves his angel friend, he's not homophobic in the least, but he actually hadn't been picturing them together (he has been assuming they're both straight). He knows they have a close friendship, of course, but to some extent it's going to take him by surprise to realize that the friendship is becoming romantic. I haven't written him this way before but it's been really interesting to consider the case in which Sam actually doesn't notice for a while. Only in this chapter does he start to get a clue for the first time. And he's still not at all sure... but he suddenly got just enough of a clue to make him blush. :)

... and that exact same moment has sent poor Dean down a rabbithole of worry! Stick with it, though, the fic shifts gears here from Thanksgiving to Christmas, and Castiel is starting to understand what he really wants for Christmas this year. Or maybe before Christmas.

Grant is due Friday so I think the next chapter will be up Sunday. If you have any feedback please let me know what you are thinking! Thanks so much for reading. :)
I don't mind

But the next night, Friday night, doesn't really work out either. On Friday morning they have to re-station back near the Gas-n-Sip for a long three-day-weekend of work. And that means staying in the nearby motel again, the motel near the Gas-n-Sip — the "Colorado Border Special", as Dean's been calling it. And it turns out that the Colorado Border Special has two rooms available now, instead of just one. So Dean books two rooms for Friday night, and for Saturday night too.

Sam asks, a bit tentatively, if they're going to divide the rooms "like usual." Meaning, Sam and Dean sharing one room and Cas in the other.

"Cas probably needs a room to himself?" says Sam. "So he can... relax?" He seems a little hesitant about the suggestion, even though it's clearly the obvious arrangement. But it makes sense, and there seems no obvious reason to suggest another arrangement. (No reason that would stand up well to external review, that is.)

So Dean, reluctantly, agrees.

There's not much of a break the next couple days. The floods of travelers pick up again on Friday, and Saturday is a madhouse. It's nonstop work. Dean tries, several times, to get Cas alone to talk to him in private, but it always seems that there's some Gas-n-Sip crisis to deal with. On the rare occasions when there's some downtime, Cas is snatching more nap time in the back room, and Dean's reluctant to disturb his rare moments of rest.

Somehow the whole weekend slides by in a blur of bathroom-cleaning, floor-mopping and hot-dog-restocking. Then all of a sudden it's noon on Sunday and Cas is scurrying around the store hissing, "Put the mops down! Pretend you're just here to pick me up! Dean, I need the vest back!" There's a car pulling up in the back; it's the store manager, come to relieve Cas for the Sunday night shift. The Thanksgiving weekend is at long last over.

They're all tired on the drive to Denver. Cas has brought the houseplant along; he seems to want it with him in Denver, which means it's spent the whole weekend propped in the Gas-n-Sip window behind the counter (with Castiel fussing over it every morning and adjusting its position constantly, so that it always had the best exposure to the sunlight). Now he's cradling it in his lap again, as he sits next to Dean. But they're barely into Colorado when Cas falls asleep. (Sam's in the back seat.) Dean has to pluck the plant out of his hands and set it back in its little shoebox-nest, which is propped between them on the front seat.

Sam and Dean hold a quiet whispered conversation for a while after that, but eventually Sam drops off too. For the rest of the drive Dean's the only one awake, with not much to do other than listen to his brother and his angel both snoring lightly while an old Creedence album plays softly from the tapedeck, the volume down as low as Dean can stand to put it.

The hours slide by. There's a thin icy haze hanging in the air today; the sky seems an endless flat white, and it looks much more wintry than it had last week. A weak sun is barely breaking through the cloud cover, just a pale silver disk hanging in the sky, as faint as a moon. Dean regards it thoughtfully as he drives past endless flat winter fields, and at last comes into the foothills of the Rockies.

It's almost winter. Time's sliding past.

How much time is left?
Dean can only grit his teeth. Literally, in fact, and he does so for so long that his jaw starts aching — something it's been doing, off and on, for a few days now.

He wants to pat Cas's knee, but doesn't want to risk waking him. So he settles, instead, for patting the glossy leaves of the little houseplant.

As Dean takes the exit off the interstate into Denver, the sun's already setting. It's nearly dark by the time he guides the Impala into the motel's parking lot.

"Rise and shine, boys," calls Dean. Sam and Cas both blink awake.

"I'll check us in," Sam volunteers, yawning as he shrugs on his jacket. "You two sit tight. Hey Cas, do you usually get the same room?" The back door creaks open as Sam starts to clamber out. "Want that same room again?"

Cas doesn't answer at at first. His head's twisted around to the side; he's looking out the passenger window, gazing at the door of his old room. Dean glances over at it too, and is startled by how foreboding it seems. Just the simple sight of that one motel door, with its familiar scratched paint and its slightly crooked room number, brings back a shockingly vivid memory of Cas crumpling in Dean's arms, panting and pale, to lie gasping on the floor.

Sam's still sitting in the car with one foot out the door; his door's wide open, and an icy wind's swirling into the Impala interior. Cas shivers, and turns to face front.

"Sure," Cas says softly. "Same room." He's not looking at either Sam or Dean. He's gone a little pale, and now he's staring down at his lap, both arms wrapping slowly around his midsection. He shivers again, visibly, and from the stony look on his face Dean's suddenly certain that Cas, too, is caught up in some unpleasant memories.

"Sam, can you swing that door shut for a sec?" says Dean. There's a creak from the back seat as Sam pulls his foot back inside and edges the back door shut. The icy wind settles down; Dean reaches to the dashboard to crank up the heat.

"Cas, you okay?" Dean asks.

"Um," says Cas. He clears his throat, and says, "Yes. I'm fine. It's just... " He risks another quick glance sideways at the motel door, and glances hurriedly down into his lap again. "This place does have some associations, I suppose," Cas says, and with a little sigh he adds, "It usually doesn't get to me till I get inside the room. There's a certain combination of odors here. The laundry detergent, I suppose? Or the floor cleanser... I'm not sure, but the place has a distinctive smell, and..." Another glance sideways, and Cas shivers a third time, this one a strong shudder that even shakes his shoulders, even though the air in the Impala's warming up now. His lips pinch together for a moment, and finally he swallows and says, "I haven't had such a strong reaction before to just seeing the parking lot and the door. It's nothing, though. Just... just a minor moment of nausea. I'm fine, really."

"Sam, could you start checking out other motels," Dean calls over his shoulder.

"Already on it," Sam says, and in fact he's tapping away busily at his phone, settling back into his seat as Dean pulls the Impala into a quick three-point turn and spins it around, heading out of the
"Wait," says Cas, "Where are we going?"

"Somewhere else," says Dean. "Ideally somewhere that won't make you puke just from the sight of
the parking lot."

"But, Dean..." says Cas. Dean glances over at him, and this time Cas meets his eyes. Cas is already
looking better; he's straightened up a little, and he's starting to unwrap his arms from around his
waist. But he's shaking his head. "That's a sweet thought, really," he says, "but I'm afraid any place I
stay will end up with the same odor-associations in the end. I'm going to be sick tomorrow no matter
what; I may as well be sick in a place where I know the layout. And they've been good to me here."

"Well, if you really wanna stay in the Chemo Motel again, we can come back here tomorrow night,"
says Dean. "It can be your Monday night place. Your favorite puking place. Tonight, though, we're
gonna level up." Cas frowns at him, puzzled, and Dean explains, "There's actually some better
places to stay in the world than dive motels, and I'm thinking maybe the last night before chemo
deserves a nice plush king-size mattress for once." He calls over his shoulder, "Whaddya think, Sam? A Marriott? A Hilton?"

"But those are terribly expensive, aren't they?" says Cas. "It's a nice idea, but I only really have
enough money for—"

"Sam, should we go corporate?" asks Dean, talking right over Cas, "Or is there some indie place that
looks good? Hey, does Denver have one of those places that have the two-story water slide into the
pool? Pull up Tripadvisor or something."

"I'm not sure I'm up to a water slide just now—" Cas is saying.

"Got one," says Sam. "Decent restaurant, good reviews, big rooms, modern, just a mile away.
They've got two rooms tonight, too. Take the next right, I'll steer you there."

Cas spends the rest of the drive saying things like, "But isn't this terrifically expensive?" and "You
two really shouldn't have to go to go to so much trouble." In the end, though, when Dean pulls into a
sparkling clean modern hotel near the airport, he quiets down and starts to look curious. The lobby
turns out to be beautiful, and as Cas looks around at the sleek polished lines of the place, and at the
Christmas decorations that are being hung, his last objections seem to fade away. Once Dean's
checked them in they explore their two rooms. Maybe the place doesn't have the retro charm of some
of Dean's favorite small-town motels, but both rooms are wide and clean and impeccably furnished,
with spacious kitchenettes to boot, and the beds are huge, new, and comfortable. Cas reports, with
obvious relief, that the odors are "quite unfamiliar." They get him settled in a roomy single room with
a king-sized bed and a gigantic new flatscreen TV, while Sam and Dean take the room next door, a
decent room with a little dining area and two queen-sized beds. (Sure enough, they seem to be
dividing the rooms "like usual" again.)

It's getting late already and none of them want to waste time at a restaurant, so Sam orders a pizza,
after some consultation with Cas about toppings. They eat in Sam and Dean's room, Dean carefully
slicing the enormous pizza slices into tinier (and hopefully more attractive) slices and setting one out
neatly on a paper plate for Cas, with a tidy serving of a little side salad. He's gratified to see Cas start
eating; cas seems to have started enjoying the idea of a "plush hotel."

The plan is that they'll all relax together over pizza and beer and maybe watch a movie together, sharing one last pleasant night in congenial comfort before the chemo ordeal starts all over again tomorrow. But of course there's some discussion they have to have about tomorrow's chemo, and somehow the pizza conversation ends up focusing entirely on the looming hospital visit and the likely aftermath.

It turns out Cas still thinks it best to switch back to the "Chemo Motel" for the worst of his sickness, moving back there after tonight's luxury stay in the modern hotel. So Sam volunteers to take care of the checking-out from the current motel tomorrow and checking-in to the "Chemo Motel". Then Sam asks which room Cas wants, and inquires about where exactly Sam should set out Cas's stuff in the room. And where he wants the pillows and pans. It's a little depressing to have to go into such detail, but of course it has to be discussed. Cas has to be coaxed through some balky shyness about discussing it at all, but eventually he ends up giving Sam the details, and even starts drawing a neat little sketch for him, on a piece of hotel stationery, about how he usually sets out his crawling-path to the bathroom. Sam's clearly having to hide his dismay as Cas draws a set of little arrows on the diagram, each arrow showing how far he can usually crawl in one go, but by the time Cas finishes the sketch and looks back up at him, Sam's managed to mask his reaction with a calm air of business-as-usual.

"Great, thanks, I'll set it all out just like you drew," Sam says, folding the diagram neatly and putting it in his wallet.

Then tomorrow's schedule has to be discussed; when Cas has to be at the hospital (apparently he has a set of appointments before the chemo even starts), how long the drive will take, whether Sam should drop them off or whether they should get a cab. And Dean has to explain to Sam about the odor issue and about setting up a second Ground Sloth hoodie (Dean's brought his own, currently triple-sealed in three plastic bags in the trunk of the Impala, but Sam'll need one too.) Sam's soon scribbling down a long shopping list.

"Lapsang Souchong," Sam mutters. "Different soap... no aftershave tomorrow morning... Anything else?"

"Oh, look for bendy straws," says Dean.

Cas looks puzzled, and he pauses in the middle of a (small) bite of pizza. "Bendy straws?"

"The kind where you can bend the straw in the middle. I mean, so you can sip from a water bottle while...." Dean hesitates, looking at him. Cas looks so normal right now, and so healthy (relatively speaking), that it seems almost surreal to be planning for how weak he'll likely be tomorrow. But last week there had been a solid sixteen hour stretch when Cas had been unable even to lift his head off the floor. He'd needed a lot of help every time he needed a drink of water, and Dean's still worried that he'd gotten dehydrated. Straws might help.

Dean explains, like it's no big deal, "Bendy straws make it easier to drink while you're lying down."

Sam hesitates, like it's no big deal, "Bendy straws make it easier to drink while you're lying down."

Sam hesitates the briefest instant, his eyes flicking to Cas as he registers what Dean means.

"Bendy straws," says Sam smoothly. He adds it to his list. "Got it." He look over the list for a moment. "Okay," he says. "Just to recap, I've got here: a Ground Sloth hoodie for me — Dean can use the one he made last week — a case of twenty-four more water bottles, some Gatorade in different flavors, a box of saltines, plain white bread to make plain toast, some microwavable rice, a couple bananas, a couple apples for later on, and, um, bendy straws." He looks up. "Anything else?"
"Maybe some baby wipes?" says Dean, thinking of the bathroom episodes; baby wipes might help Cas keep clean during the worst of it. They could just put a stack of them in the bathroom for him to use.

Cas sets his pizza slice down. He hasn't eaten much of it.

Sam adds "baby wipes" to the list. "Bendy straws, baby wipes," he says. "That everything? You need anything else, Cas?"

There's a little silence.

"No, that should be sufficient," says Castiel. He makes no move to pick up the pizza slice again.

"Okay, so," says Sam, "So, you guys'll take off at ten in a taxi, and I'll check us out here, and I'll have the Impala and I'll go pick up all this stuff at Target, and check in to the other motel, and I'll set out Cas's pillows and things, and uh... wait for you guys to get there, I guess. And Dean, you'll text me when you're on your way. Right?"

"Sounds good," says Dean.

"Yes, that's a fine plan," says Castiel, a little stiffly.

"Cas, you get a week off after this, right?" says Sam. That, at last, coaxes a real smile from Castiel, and he relaxes a little.

"A full week off," Cas agrees. "That's when I used to relocate back to the bunker." He glances back and forth between them. "If any hunts come up, maybe I could help out? As I have before. I could assist with the research, maybe? Or any advice you might need?"

Sam and Dean exchange a glance. It's odd to realize that Cas's periodic bunker visits — during which he has, indeed, often helped them with research — have actually been his only weeks off from the chemo. His only respite. And he'd spent them doing research.

Dean holds Sam's eyes for a second, and Sam gives a faint shake of the head.

"I was thinking we might take it easy for the rest of December," says Dean.

"Oh," says Cas, and he looks a little crestfallen. "Oh... okay."

Sam then asks, "And what happens next? After your week off? Another cycle?"

But Cas has gone quiet. After a moment he pushes his chair back, stands, picks up his paper plate and tosses his half-eaten pizza slice in the trash, and then he busies himself with clearing away a litter of crumpled napkins and drink cups that Sam and Dean have left scattered over the table. There’s still two slices of pizza left in the pizza box, and Castiel carefully puts one slice more on Dean's paper plate, and one on Sam's as well, saying, "You should both eat a little more. You've been working so hard all weekend. I really appreciate all your assistance—"

"How many more cycles?" Sam asks.

Cas folds the pizza box shut. He doesn't answer for a moment.

But Sam's quietly relentless. "Is there another cycle after this one?" His voice is calm, but he's clearly not letting Cas off the hook, and Dean, sitting in silence by Sam, is immensely grateful that Sam's taking on the role of the bad guy. Or the pushy guy, at least. (Because they do, of course, need to
know.) Sam presses on with, "Will there be a cycle that goes through Christmas?"

Cas turns away and carries the empty pizza box to the trash. Then he comes back to the table, picks up a clean paper napkin and starts wiping the pizza crumbs off the table.

Dean reaches out one hand and rests it on Cas's arm, gently halting his crumb-cleaning for a moment.

"Cas," Dean says.

Cas look up at him slowly, and finally he says, as he resumes the table-wiping, "One more cycle for sure. After that it depends on..." He pauses briefly, his hand hesitating in mid-wipe. "On how things go," he continues smoothly. "I've got two more treatments before Christmas, and the day after. And then they'll be doing some tests, the week after Christmas. To... see how things are going. I've got a set of appointments on the twenty-eighth. Aaron, my doctor, he said they should be able to tell me by the thirty-first whether..." He hesitates again. "Whether it's working, I suppose."

Cas is speaking with deliberate casualness, but the dates he mentions, the twenty-eighth and the thirty-first, ring bells in Dean's memory. Cas's little calendar, back in the bunker... there'd been lines drawn through certain weeks. Chemo weeks, Dean now knows. The last line had ended on the twenty-eighth. And a few days after that there'd been a big question mark in a circle, on December 31st.

Dean had assumed, originally, that the question mark must be about some New Year's Eve decision, maybe something about going to a New Year's Eve party with "Erin."

But it hadn't been about a New Year's party at all, had it? It had been about the cancer. About the results of the tests.

About whether or not the chemotherapy is working.

_They never work_, Cas had said last week... about anti-emetic drugs, though. But chemotherapy is just another kind of drugs, isn't it?

_I think it's because I'm an angel, or used to be._

_Some drugs just don't work._

Dean's gritting his teeth again, thinking to himself, _It has to be working, it has to be, he can't be going through all this hell for nothing_, when Sam asks, "Cas, how bad is it?"

Sam's voice is, again, perfectly calm, just as when he'd been pressing Cas about the number of treatment cycles. But Cas (who's still wiping the table) comes to a complete halt now, freezing in mid-motion. Dean's almost holding his breath as he watches; Cas is motionless as a statue for a long moment, half bent over the table, one hand poised at the edge of the table to catch the crumbs and the other still pressed to the table, clutching his crumpled napkin.

"What kind is it?" says Sam. "What stage?" He's shifted into his Gentle-Sam voice, quiet and encouraging, as if Castiel is an extremely skittish horse that Sam's trying to calm down.

There's another beat of silence. Finally Sam says, shifting forward a little in his seat, his voice soft as velvet, "Cas. You can tell us." Dean can only nod.

Slowly, Castiel resumes motion, brushing the remaining crumbs off the table and into his hand with one long sweep of the napkin. His face is impassive. He turns away, to the trashcan, shakes his handful of crumbs into the trash, brushes his hand clean, and tosses the napkin in the trash too.
He turns back to them, and Dean knows that Cas isn't going to answer. Castiel has that ready-for-battle look now, a look that Dean's seen many times: his chin's up, his jaw tight, and he's looking not quite at them but rather over their heads, to the far wall of the room, with a thousand-yard stare that seems so remote he almost looks made of stone. A memory flashes into Dean's mind of a time he'd once seen Castiel cry tears of blood — a sign of true and deep distress in an angel, Dean learned later — yet all the while perfectly expressionless.

"We can talk more later," Cas says smoothly. "I'm afraid it's going to be a long night tomorrow, so we should probably all get some rest now. Thank you both, very much, for all your assistance this weekend, and for such a pleasant hotel; it'll be awfully nice to have such a comfortable bed for a change. Dean, I'll meet you in the lobby at a quarter to ten tomorrow." He turns and leaves the room.

The door clicks shut behind him.

There's a quiet silence for a moment.

Dean lets out a tired sigh and takes a long swig of his beer, draining the rest of his bottle in one swallow. He looks over at Sam, who's slumping down a little farther in his chair, gazing almost sightlessly at his little shopping list on the table.

"Shut you down cold, huh," comments Dean.

"Ice cold," Sam agrees glumly. He looks worried — and regretful. "Dammit. Sorry. I thought maybe I could just go for it, kinda force it out of him. But he just really doesn't want to talk, does he?"

Dean tries to give Sam a reassuring smile. "Cas isn't easy to force. About anything. But it was worth a shot. I'm glad you tried."

Sam looks only slightly reassured. "I tried to ask him a couple times over the weekend, too" he says. "But he was always suddenly busy. Or suddenly needed a nap."

That makes Dean think. An entire week has somehow slid by now without even the slightest clue emerging about Cas's exact condition, and now that Dean looks back over the week, he realizes there've been quite a few times that he, too, has tried to get Cas alone for a chat. But somehow all the moments have slipped away. Just as Sam says, each time suddenly Cas was busy, or suddenly he was dozing off, or already asleep. It becomes clear, now, that it's not just that Dean's been reluctant to bring up the topic. Castiel himself has been avoiding moments of quiet conversation.

"Wonder if he was even ever asleep," Dean mutters, half to himself.

"What?"

"Nothing. Just... He's been avoiding the topic all week."

"He's not ready to talk," Sam says. "He's still not used to us knowing." He adds, with an uncertain but hopeful air, "He'll come around. He'll talk to us eventually. It's only been a week. Could be he's, sorta... unsure about it?" Sam pauses a moment, thinking, and he adds, "Must be weird for an angel to feel so physically vulnerable. Maybe he just feels shy about the whole thing? About, you know, being so sick and needing our help and everything. And with it all being so physical and messy."
"Maybe," says Dean.

_or maybe he just doesn't want to crush us with the truth._

"Want any more pizza?" Sam says. Like Cas earlier, they're both just staring down at their uneaten slices now.

Dean shakes his head, realizing that not only is his stomachache back, but his jaw, is aching again too. Just as it had in the car. "Not hungry," he says.

"Me neither," says Sam with a sigh.

An hour and a half later, as Dean’s staring up at the ceiling in the dark, he’s starting to be glad that the stomachache is back and that his jaw is aching nonstop, because at least it’s a distraction from the sleeplessness. He’s been lying here in his bed for what feels like ages, waiting for sleep, but sleep just won’t come.

It's odd to be awake for so long. Dean's long had a soldier's ability to snatch sleep at any opportunity, no matter how uncomfortable the surroundings and no matter how much stress he's been under. So it's kind of ridiculous that now that he's got such a nice bed he can't seem to fall asleep at all. He glances around in the dark, squinting to see if he can make out any details of the room, but there's only a thick black inkiness, broken only by the occasional tiny winking light of a smoke detector. The window drapes must be very thick; there's no light at all leaking in from the city lights outside.

In fact it's strange being in such a nice hotel. The bed's very plush, the room's very dark, and it's very quiet. They're several stories up, and there's no sounds of traffic outside; there's no noise of late night arrivals laughing as they unload their car from a nearby parking space, no headlights shining through the window, no car doors slamming nearby like Dean's used to.

In fact, there's no noises at all from the hallway or the adjacent rooms. The only noise Dean can hear is the soft, slow sound of Sam's breathing. All the walls in this fancy hotel must have been built with sound-proofing.

Which means that if Cas calls for help, Dean probably won't be able to hear.

He worries about this for a few minutes, wishing he'd thought to give Cas the baby monitor again. Or at the very least, he should've checked to be sure Cas's phone was charged, so that Cas could text or call if he needed anything.

But then again, Cas should be fine tonight. He's been fine for several nights. It was really only that one night, the Monday night, not even a full week ago, when he'd seriously been in trouble.

Not quite a full week ago...

_A week ago, I didn't even know_, Dean thinks.

_A week ago I had only just figured out — or, thought I'd figured out — that Cas had a boyfriend and not a girlfriend._ It's Sunday night, now; last Sunday was when Dean had gone into Cas's room at the bunker. He cringes now to remember how he'd rummaged through Cas's things (the drawings, the feather... the medications). But on the other hand, that's also the only reason he'd found out Cas's
secret. When he'd spotted the "Aaron" note on Cas's calendar.

It seems now like it was years ago. It's odd to recall the strange rush of mixed emotion that the "Aaron" discovery had elicited. That mingled, conflicted sensation of lost opportunity... of jealousy... ... and of hope.

Dean makes himself shut his eyes; he rolls onto his side, he tries some deep-breathing to send himself to sleep, he shifts around looking for a better position, and rubs his jaw a bit to try to make it stop hurting, but still sleep won't come.

He thinks, then, I wonder if Cas is having any trouble sleeping too?

Without even really planning it, he finds he's pushing the covers aside and sitting up on the edge of his bed, swinging his feet to the floor. He gropes around in the dark for his duffel, looking for a pair of socks. So that he can put his shoes on. So that he can go padding softly next door. Just to check on Cas quickly.

When Dean drags his duffel closer over the carpet, it makes a soft scraping noise, and Sam's breathing changes slightly. Dean knows that sound; Sam's woken up. Then there's a slight shuffling noise in the dark, rather like a hand being slipped under a pillow. Dean knows that sound too — Sam's groping for his gun (which, of course, is always under his pillow). Just in case.

"It's just me," Dean says softly. "Sorry. Didn't mean to wake you. Can't sleep."

There's a click as Sam turns on the bedside light. He yawns sleepily and blinks at Dean, who's still sitting on the edge of his own bed, leaning over with one hand on his duffel bag, as if he was just rummaging in his duffel in the middle of the night for no reason.

"Something wrong?" asks Sam.

"No, just...." says Dean. He leans over, pokes randomly at some flannel shirts in the duffel, and shrugs. "Just can't sleep."

Sam looks at him a moment. "You worried about tomorrow?"

Dean hesitates before answering.

"He'll be fine," Dean says. "It's not gonna be pretty, but he'll be fine. You're gonna get those bendy straws, right? Don't forget the bendy straws."

"I'll get the bendy straws," Sam reassures him. "And the Gatorade. And the baby wipes and saltines and all the other stuff." He studies Dean a moment, looks at the duffel, and suggests, "Why don't you go check on Cas?"

Dean pretends to consider the idea. "Yeah, maybe," he says, and he pokes at the duffel again and idly pulls out a pair of socks as if he's only just thought of putting some on. "Sure," he adds. "Good idea. I'll get some shoes on and run next door for a sec. He's probably asleep already though."

"He might be awake," says Sam. "Go and check."

"I could just text him," says Dean, glancing at his phone, which is over on the bedside table.

"No, go and check," says Sam. Dean looks at him, and Sam makes a shooing motion toward Cas's room.
"You know..." says Dean. "If he does turn out to be up, I might stay in his room a bit. Just to keep him company a little. I mean, if, um, if he doesn't mind. For like, maybe fifteen minutes or so, if he doesn't —"

"See you tomorrow, then," say Sam. He rolls over, pulls an edge of his blanket over his eyes and says, "Turn the light off when you leave, would you?"

Dean's a little nonplussed by Sam's encouragement, but it does give him the impetus to get out the door. (Without his shoes. In the end Dean slinks down the hotel hallway wearing just his pj's and a pair of wool socks hurriedly shoved on his feet. He's clutching his phone and his hotel room card in one hand, and his pistol in the other, mostly out of habit, but has nothing else.)

Cas doesn't answer the first knock on his door, and Dean knocks again and says, quietly, unsure if his voice will even carry through the door, "Cas, you up? It's me."

The door opens a tiny crack. The safety chain's in place, and Cas is peering alertly through the crack, an angel-blade at the ready in one hand. (Seems that he, like the Winchesters, has learned to be cautious about who might be knocking at his door in the middle of the night.) But when he sees it's Dean, a smile flickers onto his face and he lowers the blade, unlocks the chain and swing the door wide open. "Come in, Dean, come in," he says, with an inviting sweep of his blade. Dean inches in past the blade, suddenly feeling quite uncertain about what exactly he's going to say.

Looking around, he realizes Cas hasn't even gone to bed yet. Cas has at least changed into his sleeping clothes (a t-shirt and sweats that Dean gave him at the bunker) but the bed's untouched. It seems he's been sitting at the room's little round table, where a chair is half pushed back. There's a large book lying open on the table, and a clutter of pencils and a pad of paper, and there, too, sitting in the exact center of the table, is the little houseplant with the yellow flowers and the cheerful painted bumblebees on the pot.

Cas walks over to the table and sets his angel-blade down on the table by the book. "What can I do for you?" he asks. His smile at the door had seemed genuine enough, but as he sees Dean regarding the things on the table, he seems to raise his guard. The formal tone's back in this voice, as it had been when he'd said goodnight earlier; and that slightly steely impassive look is back in his eyes.

"Oh, nothing, I just couldn't sleep," Dean says, taking a few steps closer to set his gun and phone down. "Thought I'd just see if you were up too...." As he takes another half-step closer, he realizes three things about the items that are spread out on the little round table.

One, the big book is open to an illustration of a wing. A huge wing, fully spread. It could be some kind of bird wing, of course, an eagle or a hawk or something, but even from a brief glance Dean's sure it's an angel wing. It has just the same proportions as Cas's wings. (Or rather, the shadows of Cas's wings, which Dean's seen only a few times, but he's never forgotten the sight.)

Two, there's an actual black feather here too, lying at the base of the plant's little pot. It's propped up slightly so that one broad vane is leaning on the pot, just below the colorful bee design. It's black, it's about four inches long, and it looks very familiar.

Three, Cas has been making another drawing. The pad of paper turns out to be an artist's sketchpad, and the pencils are artist's pencils. There's a box of lots of colored pencils. The ones scattered out on
the table are all in shades of black and green and yellow, for the sketch he's been working on is a still-life of the houseplant with the little black feather. It's fully outlined already, the bumblebees and the feather and the little flowers all sketched out neatly, and half of it is filled in with delicate countershading and bursts of color. Dean stares at the drawing for a long moment, a little taken aback, and then his eyes are drawn to the shining black feather.

"Is that the feather that was in your room?" Dean says, before realizing that he still hasn't quite confessed just how much he'd been rummaging through Cas's stuff. "Um... sorry, I... when I was in your room, um, I might not have mentioned, I looked in your... in your dresser."

"I know you did," says Cas.

"You do?" says Dean, a little startled.

"I felt you touch my feather," says Cas.

Dean stares at him.

"It's a feather from my wing," says Cas. "My left wing. From my last molt." He reaches past Dean, picks the feather up and places it directly on the drawing, and then he folds the sketchbook closed. The drawing and the feather both vanish from view.

_Cas's feather. It's Cas' feather._

Of course it's Cas's feather.

Of course it is.

_And Cas felt me touch it..._ This is an entirely new piece of information; angels remain connected to their feathers? Angels can feel when somebody touches one of their old feathers?

"You saved one of your feathers?" asks Dean at last, and Cas just nods. Groping for something else to ask, Dean says, at random, "And you're, uh, drawing it? With the plant?"

"It's called art therapy," Cas says briefly. Now he's gathering up all his pencils and setting them neatly in the little plastic container, and he spends a moment turning a few of them around so that their pointed ends are all facing the same direction. "They have sessions at the hospital sometimes, for the patients who are still waiting for the chemo or who are in between appointments," Cas explains, padding the pointed ends with a crumpled paper towel. He clicks the little pencil-case shut. "They bring wigs and hats and various free items, like my sweater and scarf, and sometimes they have activities. There's an art teacher who comes once a month. She suggested we draw things that we want to remember. Moments we'd like to focus on, and preserve, and... re-live, in a way, I suppose." He picks up the pencil case and the closed sketchbook (feather safely tucked inside) and sets them in his little battered suitcase nearby. He adds, "It's restful. I've been doing about one a day."

And Dean's left standing there mute.

_Moments we want to remember._

_Moments we'd like to preserve. To re-live._

The drawings in Cas's dresser... some had been just pretty scenes — a deer in the fog, a bird, a bee on a flower.

But then there had been all the drawings of Dean, too.
Dean in the car, that time he’d told Cas he was family.

Dean striding toward Cas in Purgatory, greeting him with a wide, relieved smile.

Dean and Sam in the library, relaxed, their feet up on the tables.

The Impala, seen from overhead...

Sam, relaxed by a fireplace, looking into the flames... There’d been a few others of Sam, as well.

Dean sitting in a deck chair by a lake.

A burning wing, seen from over one shoulder. Had that been a memory? Why would Cas have wanted to remember that? Let alone re-live it?

Then it slowly dawns on Dean that of all Castiel's long life, apparently the primary moments he wants to "preserve" are ones that involve Dean and Sam.

Dean slowly raises his eyes to Cas's, and finds that Cas is looking him up and down with narrow-eyed scrutiny. "Why are you still awake?" Cas asks.

"Why are you?" Dean counters. His mouth is a little dry, and he has to struggle to get back into the flow of conversation.

Cas gives a short laugh. "I suppose I didn't really tell you two this," he says, "but often I stay up late the night before. It's my last good night for a while, you know.... It's hard not to want to cherish every moment. I almost always stay up later than I should." He narrows his eyes again at Dean. "You look stressed," he adds after a moment. "Is something wrong?"

*Is something wrong.* Dean almost laughs.

Where should he even start?

"Cas, about what Sam was asking earlier...." Dean says. He hadn't planned on this; Cas has certainly made it clear that he doesn't want to talk about it. But it just comes out. "We gotta know," Dean says.

Cas's head bows a little.

"I know," says Castiel. "I know you do. And I'm sorry I've been avoiding both your questions." His gaze drops slowly to the table, and it takes Dean a few moments to register that Cas is looking, now, at the wing illustration in the big book. Cas adds, a little regretfully, still looking at the wing illustration, "I do hope I wasn't too rude to Sam. I felt bad about it, after. I know you both mean well. And I do appreciate it. I hope you know that."

He doesn't say anything else. But throughout the whole conversation the formal tone has been slowly disappearing from his voice, and the impassive look from his face, and now Cas is starting to look sad. With one hand he reaches down and actually strokes the old illustration, letting his fingertips run along the illustrated lines of the feathers. Then he does it again; it looks almost as if he's trying to pet the wing, or feel its feathers.

A horrible idea comes into Dean's head then, and before he can stop himself he blurts out, "Wait... it's not... it's not some kind of *wing* cancer, is it?"

It's a totally weird idea — especially since Cas has repeatedly referred to having "lost" his wings, as if they're gone entirely. But somehow now the idea of the wings themselves being riddled with
disease is all Dean can think of. He's greatly relieved when Cas only gives a little chuckle.

"No," Cas says. "No...I don't think angel wings can even get cancer, actually. No part of an angel's true form ever does. Cancer is a...a mortal affliction. A flaw in Creation." But when he looks back at the wing illustration, he's biting his lip, and he's blinking a little, with such a clear sorrow in his eyes now, that for an awful moment Dean's sure that Cas is about to cry.

He doesn't cry. But he says, his voice unusually hoarse now, "I almost wish it _were_ a disease of the wings. Because my wings are already destroyed, of course, so it doesn't matter what happens to them anymore. They could even theoretically be amputated, if need be. Maybe that would be better: to have them cut away cleanly, rather than just remain in such tatters, and so useless..." He pulls his hand away from the wing illustration, and his fingers curl into a fist. Slowly, he drops his hand to his side, adding, "The old tales say that angels aren't supposed to be able to survive the loss of both the wings. But it's never been clear if that's just true. And at least, if the cancer could have been simply cut away, in a clean stroke, maybe my chances would have been better. I don't know."

Dean's chilled by the implication.

"You still, uh, have your wings, then?" Dean asks, tentatively. "I mean, are they still... Are they still attached to you, then?" He's aware this is drifting a little off-topic, but now that Cas has started talking about the cancer, suddenly all Dean really wants is to hear more about the wings instead.

Cas slips one hand under a corner of the book's cover and flips the heavy cover shut. The elegant wing illustration vanishes, and together they look down at the sober black leather cover. _The Physiology of Angels_, says the title, the gold-leaf lettering glinting quietly in the dim light, and only now does Dean realize it's the book that Sam brought, on their last trip to Denver. For some reason Castiel's brought it along again.

"My wings are still attached to me, yes," says Cas. His voice has gone stiff and stilted. "They are in the etheric plane, as always. But they're crippled. I won't ever fly again."

"Do you know that for sure?" says Dean.

Cas is quiet a long moment, staring down at _The Physiology of Angels_.

"I guess I don't, really," he says, and for the first time he sounds uncertain. "There's actually been some debate, among the angels, about whether the wings of the fallen angels might heal, with enough time. But with present realities..." He gestures down at his body. "Given my present condition, even if wings could heal, I won't have enough time to heal them in any case."

He turns toward Dean then. They're standing just a couple feet apart, and it's almost overwhelming to meet Cas's gaze directly, face to face, from so close. And it's overwhelming, as well, to see the regret and the sorrow so clear in his face. "I don't have much time, Dean. I have to accept that," Cas says.

"No," Dean says, shaking his head. "You'll have time. You got plenty of time. And your wings will be fine. Someday. You'll see."

"Dean, I don't think so," says Cas, with a slow shake of the head. There's a very gentle look in his eyes now, as if his primary concern now is just to break the bad news gently, and he says, "You will need to accept it too."

"Don't say that," Dean snaps. "Don't. Just don't. I don't have to accept a damn thing if I don't want
to." But Cas is still looking at him with that steady, level gaze. The soft light of the room is catching
his eyes now, highlighting the blue, and now it seems his eyes are infinite pools of sorrow that Dean
could fall into if he's not careful. Fall into and be lost forever.

Now Dean's worried that he's the one who's going to cry, and he's determined to not start crying in
front of Cas when Cas has so many other things to worry about, so he spins away and says roughly,
"Do we have to talk about this right now?" (He's entirely forgotten that it was Dean, not Cas, who'd
raised the subject in the first place.)

"No, no, of course not," say Cas hastily, and he gives an unhappy sigh. "Oh, no...." He shakes his
head. "It's starting to happen as I feared it would: I've become a source of stress to you, haven't I? A
source of stress, and worry...."

"Maybe," Dean says. (For there's really no point in denying it.) "Maybe, yeah. But it's a hell of a lot
better than you carrying it all on your own. This is what family is for, you know. It's what we do."

"More than anything I wanted to spare you this," Cas says.

"You're worth it," Dean says flatly.

"I'm really not at all sure that I am," Cas says. "And now you're having trouble sleeping. Dammit...
There must be some way I can help you relax." He starts looking all around the room now, as if
searching for something that will help to magically de-stress Dean. Dean's well aware that there's
some X-rated options that he could be joking about, but he seems to have lost all capacity to joke
these days, so he remains quiet, watching Cas turning in place as he studies every item in the room,
from the minifridge to the easy chair.

Then Cas's gaze lands on the TV. "How about a TV show?" he says, brightening, like he's sure he's
found the solution. "You wanted a movie earlier, didn't you? And we never got to watch one. Let's
find a show for you to watch." All of a sudden he's taking Dean by the hand, wrapping his own
hand around Dean's and pulling him toward the bed. "There must be something on that you'd like,
right? I know it's late, but, you seem so tense, and I'm afraid I've been worrying you, and maybe
some entertainment will put your mind at ease—" Still tugging Dean toward the bed, Cas scoops the
TV remote up off a side table with his other hand, and soon he's clicking his way through a few
channels. Apparently the TV stations have wasted no time shifting gears to the Christmas season, for
almost immediately Cas finds a late-night holiday-weekend rebroadcast of "Rudolph the Red-nosed
Reindeer." It's just started.

"This one's excellent," says Cas solemnly, pausing by the edge of the bed with Dean in tow. "It's
quite touching. I've seen it before. You should watch it." He turns to Dean and says, very seriously,
"It's about a juvenile caribou with a congenital nasal deformity."

"Reindeer," says Dean, who's now feeling almost too confused to laugh.

Cas is unfazed. "Well, yes, but a reindeer is, of course, a domesticated strain of caribou."

"Yeah, but the song is about a reindeer— starts Dean, but Cas interrupts (a little impatiently) with,
"It's about a juvenile caribou and he has a congenital nasal deformity and he's exiled by his kin and
he needs some friends. Sit down and watch."

Dean doesn't even get a chance to explain that he has, in fact, seen Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer
once or twice (or twenty times), for now Cas is rearranging all the pillows on the bed, making a long
double row of pillows that he lines up along the headboard. "Sit," Cas says, pushing Dean firmly
onto the mattress, and now Dean is experiencing the sensation of being swept helplessly along by
some sort of completely implacable oceanic tide. The tide cannot be disobeyed; Dean settles down on Cas's nest of pillows.

Dean's on top of the bedcovers, of course, and Cas slips into his now-customary place under the bedcovers, and they sit side by side against the mound of pillows.

Dean's still feeling quite shaken by the cancer discussion earlier (during which, he's slowly now realizing, Castiel once again somehow failed to provide any actual details). But Cas leans against his side, and Cas is warm and he's alive and he's right here, and eventually Dean puts an arm around him. Dean starts to relax a tiny bit, and hears himself let out a slightly shaky sigh.

"Are you feeling any better?" Cas asks.

"Actually, yeah," Dean says.

"I knew you'd like a TV show," says Castiel, a little smugly, and he leans his head on Dean's shoulder.

They watch in silent companionship as Rudolph The Red-Nosed Reindeer unfolds with all its charmingly familiar stop-motion animation. Dean flinches, though, when they get to the part where the young reindeer are learning to fly. But Cas turns to him and says, softly, "It's okay. I already knew the plot; I knew it was about flying creatures. But flying doesn't actually work like that, and they don't even have any wings, so it's all right." He adds, as he lets his head sink back down on Dean's shoulder, "Actually I wanted to watch it because of his friendship with the elf. It's rather rare to find shows about friendships between species. And, you know..." He pauses. "The little caribou is exiled by his kin because he's different. But in the end, his difference is what they need. I suppose I can't help feeling some familiarity with the story. Though I don't think I'll ever get that sort of ending...."

Dean then spends most of the rest of the show wishing that he and Cas, and Sam too, could all just run away together to the Island of Misfit Toys.

At the end, Dean says, reluctantly, "I guess I shouldn't keep you up too much longer."

"Right, we probably should get to sleep," says Cas. "I'll get the light. Get under the covers."

Dean looks at him.

"Maybe I wasn't clear," says Cas. He's acting calm and confident, but there's a flicker of uncertainty in his eyes as he raise his chin a little and declares: "I have cancer, and I want you to get under the covers. And stay the night here." He hesitates, and adds, "I mean, that is... if you don't mind."

"I don't mind," says Dean.

A/N - One thing I do love about Cas, he can definitely be bold sometimes, even when he's unsure of himself.

Grant's done, I get almost two weeks off now, and I hope to give you another chapter very soon,
within a couple days, so keep checking in. The next chapter continues this scene, by the way. Part 2... under the covers.

I hope you're enjoying this! If there was a particular scene you liked, please do let me know. I love to hear from you.
'Twas the night before chemo

Merry Christmas! Here's a Christmas gift for you all: the under-the-covers chapter. A reminder to anybody who forgot: this fic is rated Explicit.

The rest of the world disappears.

All those outside opinions that Dean's been worrying about — the jury-of-one's-peers, the external review, the obsessive need to find all those logical justifications for every visit to Cas's room — those considerations all, at last, evaporate. Even the awful possibility of a some sort of sub-optimal reaction from Sam fades into the background; the worry on this front is not quite gone but it's not, at the moment, a priority.

Everything goes to the back burner, completely outweighed by the simple fact that Castiel wants Dean's companionship tonight.

And what Castiel wants, Dean will provide.

It doesn't hurt that this happens to be something that Dean wants too, of course. In fact, as he kicks his wool socks off and folds his legs up to his chin (to try to maneuver the edge of the bedcover around his feet), he's aware of a self-centered sense of thrill, a greedy delight even. It's still not clear what, exactly, Castiel might conceivably want beyond mere companionship, but just to get to spend the night with him is a precious treat.

Dean has to remind himself about the chemo. And the cancer.

It ain't all fun and games here, he thinks. It's the night before chemo. Don't push it. Just keep him company.

One foot's stuck; Dean's left heel, the one closer to Cas, has somehow gotten caught in a twisted fold of the top sheet. Finally Cas sits up a little, grabs the edges of the bedding in both hands and gives an impatient yank. Everything comes free all at once, the bedcover and blanket and top sheet all lofting up together like a great warm sail over them both, loose and light and free. Dean slithers underneath and stretches his legs out, the covers settle down as soft and warm as a layer of silky cloud, Castiel's right next to Dean now, and Dean's stunned at how it all feels. The difference between covers-in-the-way and no-covers-in-the-way turns out to be like a quiet, peaceful moon compared to a blinding noontime sun. The mattress seems a mile wide; the bed's an entire realm, a whole kingdom stretching out around them, full of limitless possibility, and Castiel's a blazing beacon of warmth. He's lying stretched out along Dean's left side and he seems suddenly to have acquired the bulk and physicality of some sort of huge wild animal. Every sense Dean's got is tuned in his direction, as if it were a half-tamed panther or leopard that was lying here in bed with Dean rather than a mere human vessel, something Dean has to pay intense attention to. Cas is also radiating heat like a furnace. Dean had actually been getting pretty chilly on top of the bed while Cas has apparently been cozy and warm underneath, and the warmth feels wonderful. Paradoxically, it makes Dean shiver.

"You were getting cold," says Cas. "This is better." He turns off the bedside light.
The room's plunged into darkness. Cas shuffles around a little, the covers tug slightly, and Dean senses, rather than sees, that Cas has rolled toward Dean. Dean's lying on his back, a little afraid to make any sort of a move, but Cas curls comfortably toward Dean till his chin rests against Dean's left shoulder. Other than that they're not in contact; there's a safe couple inches between them.

Cas reaches out and rests one hand on Dean's chest, placing his palm lightly on the center of Dean's t-shirt. Right over Dean's heart.

*Not-so-Innocent Bed Position #2*, thinks Dean.

But Castiel doesn't move any closer. In fact he doesn't move at all. His hand is quiet on Dean's chest.

Maybe it actually is still an Innocent Bed Position, for Cas?

*He's an angel*, Dean reminds himself. *He doesn't know what this sort of thing means to humans.* Cas knows about sex, obviously, but as far as Dean's aware he's had very limited experience. It seems likely that Cas is not going to have a good handle on the subtle implications that can accompany these apparently-minor acts of physical contact. Things like, oh, chins on shoulders, and hands on chests... things that can slide a session of mere companionship into something... more.

*I might have just wanted me to warm up*, thinks Dean. *Just that, just warm up, literally.*

Relax, he instructs himself. *Just keep him company. This is his last night to get any rest, after all. It's the night before chemo.*

At the phrase "the night before chemo", the lines of an old Christmas poem jump to mind. But with one change:

*Twas the night before chemo*, Dean thinks,

*And all through the house,*

*Not a creature was stirring,*

*Not even a mouse.*

Well, something's stirring, actually. Just faintly, only a twitch of possibility at the moment, but something below the waist is definitely stirring. It's totally the wrong reaction for a night before chemo. *And it's more than a mouse*, Dean thinks. *Bigger than a mouse too, or I sure like to think so at least,* and then he has to bite back a slightly hysterical laugh. He holds his breath a moment, lets it out carefully, and commands himself, once again, to relax.

Cas's hand shifts on Dean's chest.

"You're tense," Cas says.

"Oh," says Dean. "Um... just... settling in."

"Are you still cold?" Cas says.

"No," says Dean. In fact he's starting to feel more like he's overheating.

"Oh, okay," Cas says. "If you do get cold, though, we might be able to share body warmth. That might help."

*I should've said I was freezing*, Dean thinks.
"Are you comfortable?" Cas says. It's odd to hear him talking from so close; his low voice is mere inches away from Dean's ear, and with the way Cas's chin is resting on Dean's shoulder, the rumbly sound of his words goes thrumming right through Dean's bones.

"Yeah, I'm fine," says Dean, who's still lying extremely still, now hoping to avoid alerting Castiel about certain physical reactions that may not be what Cas wants. And that really are probably not the best idea on a night before chemo.

"Are you..." Cas hesitates, and his breathing pauses a few times, as if he's trying to ask something but is unsure how to word it. At last Cas says, "Angels sometimes rest with close companions, in nests, rather like this. Especially during molt. But, for humans, with the way that you sleep, with... your other habits, I'm not sure if this will be comfortable for you—"

"It's fine," says Dean. "I'm comfortable."

"I meant sexual habits," Cas says bluntly. "I'm aware, of course, that humans do both activities, sleeping and also sometimes sexual congress, in a nest such as this — " He stops and clears his throat. "Bed, I meant to say. Bed, obviously. Anyway, I'm not sure of the exact protocols. I don't mean to cross any lines that might make you uncomfortable."

"I'm comfortable," lies Dean.

"My hand's all right here?" Cas presses lightly on Dean's chest.

"Yeah, totally. It's fine, Cas."

"Okay. I won't get closer than this," Cas assures Dean. (This is a bit of a bummer to hear.) "I just wanted to be sure you were warm enough." And he goes silent, for what seems a very long time.

The quiet minutes tick by. The bed is vast and wide and warm, and Dean's instructing himself, *This is innocent, it's all totally innocent, he just wants a companion, an angel companion, that's all this is, it's just an angel thing about wanting a nest companion.... I gotta read that angel book and see if has anything about nest companions....*

And if that's all that Castiel wants, then that's what Dean will provide.

Dean tries to concentrate on neutral sensations. He makes himself note, dispassionately, the pocket of coolness far down in the bed at his feet; he considers the perfect softness of the mattress (it's one of those fancy pillow-top kinds, and it seems to be almost molding itself around both Dean and Castiel). The pillow's got just the right soft fluffiness, the sheets have that silky feel that Dean suspects must have something to do with "thread count", and everything's got a clean, fresh smell. *We should splurge on hotels like this more often,* Dean thinks. But none of this is very successful at diverting his thoughts; he's still exquisitely alert to Castiel's presence, the weight of his hand, and his tantalizing proximity.

After a time, Cas spreads his fingers over Dean's heart.

Dean closes his eyes.

"I can feel your heart beat," says Castiel. "You know, I used to be able to feel your heart beat, like this, whenever I had a wing on you. But I didn't have to be touching you on your chest. I could feel it from anywhere nearby. When I had my wings...."

He stops. For the space of several breaths he's silent. His fingers have tensed and curled slightly, and each fingertip's now making a little dot of pressure through Dean's t-shirt.
"Wait..." Dean says slowly. "When did you 'have a wing' on me?"

"Oh, many times," says Cas, and there's a tiny motion in his arm and in the covers, as if he's shrugging. "I shielded you with them whenever I was able to, of course, during battles or attacks, if we were standing close enough. Sam too, obviously. Didn't you know that?" (No, I did not know that, thinks Dean.) Cas goes on, "They were usually still in the etheric plane. In those situations I rarely had enough energy, or enough advance warning either, to bring them over. But they can provide a small degree of protection even so. And then also... occasionally I'd just..." He hesitates; there's a tentativeness to his voice, as if he's a little embarrassed, as he adds, "Well, sometimes I've brushed you accidentally with a wing. Like, often that would happen when I was flying you somewhere." He hesitates again and repeats, now sounding a little defensive, "It was accidental."

"That's okay," says Dean.

"It was almost always accidental," says Cas. "But, you see, the thing is, whenever I had a wing on you I could get such a clear read on your physical state. On your injuries, on whatever healing needed to be done. The times when I've healed you I almost always put a wing on you — just briefly, from the ether, I mean — in addition to touching you with my hand. Angels always have better sensation with their feathers than with their vessel's hands. It's actually our main sense of touch."

Curious despite the abundant other distractions, Dean asks, "What's that like?"

Cas takes a slow breath, and he moves his hand a little, sliding it back and forth a few inches over Dean's t-shirt, as if he's trying to adjust to using just one hand, and no wings at all. "It's hard to explain," he says. "It's a sense humans don't have, and it's one I'm lacking now."

Dean turns his head toward him a little. "Can't you still put your wings on me now?"

Cas hesitates. "I could, but... they're ruined. It wouldn't be right. I keep them well tucked now, always. It wouldn't be right to put a ruined wing on you...."

Dean's taking a breath to say it would actually be just fine, but Cas adds, "And besides, the feathers are gone. I don't have the same sensations without them. With the feathers, it was if I could see your whole body all at once. See through it, almost."

"Like... x-ray vision?" Dean says. "X-ray wings?"

A soft chuckle from Castiel. "Not a bad way to put it, actually," he says, "It's a fair analogy. But the mode of perception is far less material than that, less physical. What I really would see is the way the energy is flowing through you. It's like shades of energy, and of spirit." Cas reaches out then, shifting his hand from Dean's torso over to Dean's right arm. Unerringly, his fingers brush the exact site where the Mark of Cain had once been.

His touch is delicate, his fingertips cool against Dean's skin.

"I used to be able to see what had been damaged," Cas murmurs, "And how to put it right...."

The past tense that he's using seems to hang in the air: I used to be able to.

"It feels different now," Cas says, and he slides his hand back onto Dean's chest. "But, you know, human hands have their advantages too. Some senses are gone now, others are muted, but there are new sensations too. Did I ever tell you, the first human sensation I felt was that of pain? When I first fully lost my grace, when I fell, I injured myself right away. Scraped my hand." He runs his hand softly over Dean's shirt, back and forth from right to left. "This hand, my left. Just from a clumsy fall,
in my very first moments here. It was minor, but the pain was so... bright! So commanding. So loud, really. Human sensations can be so amazingly strong. Overwhelming. Though... fortunately there are a few sensations that are good ones, aren't there?"

Dean bites his lip, staring up at the ceiling in the dark. It's impossible to tell whether Cas is deliberately guiding the conversation this way.

"Yeah," Dean finally says, carefully. "There's some good sensations too."

"It's remarkable, really, what a fine degree of sensation the human hand can provide..." Cas murmurs, and again he slides his hand across Dean's chest, gliding back and forth over the t-shirt. "It's not like my wings... but... I must say... it has its own charms...."

Once again Dean has to order himself to calm down. Whatever Cas is doing, whatever he's up to, it can't be what it seems; it can't be what Dean's thinking. All the objections and counter-arguments come parading through Dean's head: Cas is an angel, he's practically asexual anyway — either that or he's straight — either asexual or straight but not gay, and besides he's not even human, and this isn't even his own body, not to mention he's sick, he has frickin' chemo tomorrow; he just needs a friend, he just wants a nest-companion. Surely he's just exploring the sensory capabilities of human hands? He's just missing his wings, he can't possibly be—

"Your breathing's accelerated," murmurs Cas.

"Uh," says Dean. "Yeah. It does that sometimes."

"I see," says Cas. "Does that mean this feels good for you?"

There is no way Dean is going to lie about this one. "Yes," says Dean, right away. "Yes. This is, ah, really nice actually."

"Oh, good," says Cas. "Because I'm enjoying it too. It's most pleasant to have you here. But your shirt's probably dulling the sensations, isn't it?" — and with that he slides his hand right under Dean's shirt, working his way under the hem and pulling the shirt up a little till he gets his hand on Dean's chest. Again he places his hand directly over Dean's heart. It's exactly where he'd been before, but without the shirt in the way, the skin-to-skin contact is electrifying.

"Your breathing's accelerating again," comments Cas, as he begins gliding his hand around on Dean's chest. "Your heart rate too, I believe."

"Yeah, it's gonna keep doing that probably," says Dean. "Don't worry about it. You just... keep... ah... checking out those sensations."

Cas spends a while at it.

His hand doesn't go anywhere sensitive. That is, he doesn't go below the waist. (Rather to Dean's regret.) But he certainly goes everywhere else. He moves slowly, sliding his fingers with excruciating laziness back and forth. His fingertips drift all over Dean's chest, up and down and side to side, exploring every inch.

Partway through this Dean sits up to yank his shirt off. He throws it somewhere completely random in the dark and lies right back down. Dean hadn't announced he was going to do it, and since he's not quite sure what to say about it, he says nothing. Cas, too, makes no comment, but his hand starts moving in broad sweeps now. He still is staying to the innocuous areas only, but now he has more freedom, and he traces his way over Dean's collarbones... over one bicep... down Dean's arm again... back up the arm... He traces every rib.
He drifts right over the nipples. Dean can't restrain a shiver. It's starting to seem very important to figure out, or maybe even just to ask, whether Castiel might possibly interested in continuing all this exploration below the waist.

But then Cas starts exploring Dean's face.

He runs two fingertips lightly across Dean's cheeks; he goes down the line of Dean's nose, up his forehead, around his eyes. He's moving very slowly now. Cas pauses, briefly, at Dean's forehead, two fingertips touching Dean's skin, as if testing out the old healing-touch that he used to use.

Nothing happens. Cas lets out a small sigh, and his hand moves on.

Next his hand traces through Dean's hair. He runs his hand over Dean's head, still move with exquisite slowness. There's something so gentle and caring in his touch, that Dean finds his breath catching, and Dean realizes with surprise that he's very near to tears. It now doesn't even seem to matter if this turns into something sexual or not; either way, Dean just wants it to continue.

Dean dearly wants to start reciprocating, too, but Cas seems almost in a trance and Dean's somewhat afraid to break the spell. After a few more minutes of head-stroking, though, it becomes imperative that Dean get his own hands into contact with Cas somehow, so wriggles around till he manages to get one arm under Cas's head and around his shoulders. Cas doesn't understand at first, and doesn't lift up his upper body to help, and Dean has to almost to shove his arm under Cas's shoulders by sheer force, as if excavating a path into the mattress. But with a little rearranging it works out.

"Oh, I see," says Cas; now his head pillowed on Dean's shoulder.

"Yeah, this is a classic position," says Dean, turning his head toward Cas till his cheek's resting against Cas's monkey hat. "And now I can get to you better, see? Return the favor a little." Dean starts running his own hand over Cas's back and up to the nape of his neck.

Cas goes very still. There's a sharp intake of breath when Dean brushes his hand across the nape of Cas's neck, and the next time Dean's hand sweeps over Cas's shoulders, Cas actually shivers. Only then does Dean remember those odd bruises that had been visible on Cas's shoulders and back, that time in the shower.

"Wait, is this hurting you? Are you sore?"

"No, this area's fine now," murmurs Cas. Dean strokes Cas's shoulders again, more carefully this time, and Castiel shivers again.

It occurs to Dean, then, whether this counts as touching Cas's wings. In some ill-defined transdimensional way.

"This okay?" Dean asks, and Cas nods, vigorously, against Dean's shoulder.

Cas remains quiet for a while as Dean continues running his hand back and forth across Cas's shoulders, occasionally drifting up onto Cas's neck. It seems clear that these two areas mean something to Cas, or are doing something to him at least; he does that little shiver almost every time Dean strokes his shoulder-blades. And whenever Dean gets to the nape of the neck Castiel seems to relax, his head sinking more heavily onto Dean's shoulder, almost always with a quiet sigh.

"You like this?" Dean asks. Cas nods.

Dean ventures, "Am I, like... am I getting near your wings or anything?"
Again Castiel nods, without speaking.

"And that's okay?"

Another nod. So Dean keeps doing it.

After another minute or so Cas clear his throat. "I should perhaps tell you," he says, "that, um, these areas that you're touching, it's, um... It's where nest-companions tend to preen each other. The feathers at the back of the head especially. It's hard to preen there on one's own so we assist each other. I mean, I know I don't have feathers there now, not in this form, but it still carries that connotation."

"What, does it mean something?" says Dean. A tantalizing thought strikes him, and he adds, a little hopefully, "It's not, like, a turn-on or something, is it?"

Cas shakes his head. "Not a turn-on in the sense that you think of it, no. We don't function that way. Our true forms aren't built with the capacity for that sort of arousal. Preening at the back of the neck is more like... " He's quiet a moment, thinking. "Well, it's soothing. Comforting. And... " He hesitates here, and Dean feels him tense slightly. At last Cas says, "I guess I should probably tell you that among angels, preening in that location is generally regarded as a sign of affection."

He's a little tense now, as if he's expecting Dean to remove his hand. "I guess you should know that," he adds.

Of course Dean doesn't remove his hand; of course what Dean does instead is shift his hand fully onto the back of Cas's head, running his fingers up under the edge of the monkey-hat and stroking his skin softly. Almost all the hair in this area is gone now, but Cas's skin is very soft, and Dean caresses him there, gently, over and over.

"You don't have to do this," Cas whispers.

"What if I want to do it?" Dean whispers back, and they lie like that for a while, Dean stroking the back of Cas's neck while Castiel seems to almost melt in Dean's arms.

This all seems to be going very well, so after another minute or so Dean gathers up his courage and asks, trying to make it sound matter-of-fact, "Anything else you want to do? I know it's late, but if you had anything else in mind—"

Cas is already nodding, and his left hand shifts on Dean's bare chest. It starts sliding down. Dean freezes. Down, down goes Cas's hand, gliding down slowly, to the waistband of Dean's sweatpants. Cas doesn't even hesitate; he worms his hand right under the waistband and slides his hand lower still, and then he's got his hand directly on Dean's cock. Which is not erect exactly — the long, meditative minutes of the "preening" have been sending Dean down into a quite peaceful state — but Dean can't restrain a little gasp as Cas takes hold. A moment later, while Dean's still trying to take in the fact that Cas has gone directly to Dean's cock without the slightest hint of shyness or hesitation, Castiel starts feeling at Dean's balls.

After a moment Dean realizes that Cas seems to be exploring the anatomy. He's tracing out the shapes of things. Cockhead, cockshaft, balls, upper thighs — he goes over all of it, every part, every inch; and all with that same air of gentle care as Cas had used earlier on Dean's face. Weirdly, it's still totally unclear if this is intended as sexual or not, but whatever Cas's intent, of course the hard-on is returning. After just a few more moments of anatomical exploration, Dean's got a full erection and Cas calmly shifts to exploring his way up and down the cockshaft. It's getting a little awkward now — Dean's increasingly-stiff cock is now stuck along the left leg of the sweatpants, pointing down.
Cas shifts Dean's cock around till it's pointing up toward the waistband.

He cups the shaft and Dean's balls in one hand-hold.

He squeezes, lightly; Dean lets out a hiss.

Cas wraps his fingers around the shaft, traces the pad of his thumb lightly over Dean's cockhead, and starts stroking the shaft up and down.

His intent seems crystal clear now, but nonetheless Dean feels like he ought to check.

"So, you, you, uh, you wanna jerk me off or something?" Dean finally asks.

Cas's hand doesn't pause. "Honestly, Dean," he says, huskily, into Dean's ear, "I thought you would have figured that out by now."

"Yeah.... just...." says Dean. (Dean's having to concentrate now to get his words out without any gasping.) "Just doublechecking. Just wanna be sure about... uh!" (Cas has just run his thumb over Dean's cockhead again.) "... about where we're going here."

"I want to bring you to orgasm," says Castiel.

"Okay," says Dean. "Okay, that's fine, that's...." (his breath's coming in uneven hitches) "... that's a good plan. No objection."

If that's what Castiel wants... Well then. That's what Dean will provide. But there's one more layer to get rid of. First the bedcovers, then the shirt, now the sweatpants. Dean arches his back a little to work the sweatpants down off his hips, and kicks them off his legs entirely, down to the foot of the bed. Cas waits till Dean's settled back into place and then goes right back to work.

For all Cas's boldness, though, he's a little unskilled, and soon Dean needs firmer pressure, and faster movement. "Harder," Dean says, almost in a grunt, and he wraps his right hand over Cas's to demonstrate. A little pre-cum starts to flow; Dean adds a little of his own spit and he starts to work Cas's hand up and down. It's only been a few minutes and already Dean knows he's getting lost in it all; the sensations are so good, and the need for more, more, more has become so urgent, that Dean's soon using Cas's hand like a sex toy, gripping Cas's fingers hard and working them up and down ferociously. At one point Cas flinches slightly and Dean realizes his left arm has somehow clamped very tight around Cas's shoulders, and that he's hanging on to Cas for dear life — right over those bruises! Or over the invisible wings, maybe. "Sorry, sorry," Dean gasps, forcing his arm to relax.

"That's quite all right," says Cas. By now he's getting the hang of the rhythm and he takes over the rhythm of the jerking. He adds a little of his own spit, spitting into his hand, and spreading it over Dean's cock. This is intensely exciting and Dean's cock is rock-hard now. Dean's sinking into it, all his focus on his own sensations, when all at once he realizes how selfish this is: Cas is jerking off Dean instead of the other way around. And this is all wrong, for it's all for Dean's pleasure, and it's Cas doing all the work.

"Wait, no, I gotta take care of you—" Dean starts to say, already trying to twist around to reach his right hand over to Cas's crotch. But Cas grabs Dean's hand with his own right hand, pinning it across Dean's chest, and with his other he continues jerking Dean's cock.

"This is what I want," Cas says, right into Dean's ear, in such a throaty, husky voice it sends a shiver right down Dean's spine. "Tonight, I want to do this for you. Just let me do it, okay?"

"Okay..." says Dean. "Okay— ah — okay—" He soon has to give up any other attempts at speech
when Cas shifts into an erratic rhythm that Dean's never shown him, sets of rapid jerks at Dean's preferred tempo that are interrupted, very unpredictably, by an excruciating pause of about one or two seconds, during which Cas's hand goes absolutely still on Dean's cock. The first time this happens, the pause is completely maddening; Dean groans with frustration, twisting his hips and trying to thrust into Cas's hand, desperate for motion. But a second later Cas's hand starts moving again and it feels, somehow, twice as exciting as before, twice as wonderful; Dean can't help letting out a groan. Cas keeps doing the little pauses, and each time the sensations ratchet upwards, like a roller coaster car creeping up the first big hill.

Soon Dean's cock's like iron. It feels red-hot, ridiculously hard; it's throbbing almost painfully. Cas spits into his hand again and spreads the spit over Deans cockhead and Dean almost cries out.

"I'm— really close—" Dean manages to grunt. "You should probably— grab some tissues or something—"

"Oh, wait, I've heard about another option," says Cas. "I'm sure you know of it. I haven't tried it myself though. Wait, let me give this a try—" He dives down under the covers, squirming around to rearrange himself, sprawling out at right angles to Dean. *Thank god we got the king-sized bed*, Dean thinks, as he pushes the covers down to give Cas some air (besides, Dean is definitely overheating now). There's just enough time during this rearranging for the imminent orgasm to fade a little bit. And then Cas's mouth is on Dean's cock.

Dean has to turn his head into a pillow to try to muffle his moans. It turns out not to matter at all that Cas is clearly inexperienced at this. His pressure's tentative, and he's only got the cockhead in his mouth and none of the shaft, but none of that matters in the least, for his mouth, even if just on Dean's cockhead, is burning hot and silky wet. And most of all it's *Cas*, and Dean's just learned that Cas has never blown anybody before and as it dawns on him that he's going to be Cas's first, he nearly comes right away. He makes himself count backwards from ten to try to buy a little time. "That's so good," he grunts to Cas, wanting to give some feedback, any feedback. "S'good, s'good, s'good—" Cas does a few exploratory head bobs, and he starts to take in a little more of the shaft on each bob. Dean's got a death grip now on the poor pillow with his right hand. His other hand's down on Cas's head caressing the monkey-hat, and it's taking every bit of self-control he can summon up not to just shove Cas's head all the way down, not to start pounding his mouth like crazy. *Let him set the pace, let him get comfortable*, Dean's chanting at himself. Another inch of cockshaft disappears into Cas's mouth, then another, then another, and each move feels unbelievable. Dean's groaning and gasping with every move now, and his balls begin to tighten up incrementally, everything going hotter and harder with every head-bob. Dean grunts, "I'm close, so close, I'm so close—" He's desperate for release now, nearly keening with need, his feet thrashing in the sheets, clutching the pillow for dear life.

Cas's tongue swirls over Dean's cockhead, firm and hot and silky; Dean nearly shouts into the pillow. Another tongue-swirl and Dean's cock gives an exquisite, dry, preliminary twitch and Dean shouts again, his hips thrusting involuntarily up into Cas's mouth. A third tongue-swirl and that's the end; Dean convulses, hard, curling up, his whole torso coming up off the mattress, and his cock starts spurting into Cas's burning-hot mouth.

The orgasm wrings its way through him, spasm after spasm. Dean thrashes on the bed, bucking helplessly, groaning with every spurt as Castiel sucks him dry.

Cas rides Dean through it all. He's swallowing everything, and even after it's mostly ended Cas stays there, his mouth still on Dean's softening cock. He holds Dean in his mouth for a very long time, all through the last faint erratic twitches, and longer still, through the nearly-painful hypersensitive phase (Cas seems to sense that this is a delicate time; he goes very still, his tongue quiet along Dean's shaft,
a soft and velvety and incredibly soothing warmth). He holds Dean’s cock longer still, all through the slow minutes of afterglow as Dean catches his breath,

It's a new sensation for Dean; he's never had a partner give his cock quite such attention for so long after orgasm, and it's blissful. Not to mention it's nice to feel that Castiel wants to keep holding on, that he must be enjoying the whole process and wasn’t just aiming at the single moment of orgasm.

Several minutes have slipped by; Dean's caressing Cas's shoulders now with both hands, spending a great deal of time at the back of his head the nape of his neck.

_Twas the night before chemo_, Dean thinks, _And all through the house... Something's definitely stirring... much more than a mouse._

Then Dean really remembers about the chemo.

And the nausea. The nausea that's coming tomorrow.

"Oh, god, please tell me you're not going to get a taste aversion from this," Dean blurts out. "Please. Please."

Cas resurfaces from the blankets, and he clicks on the bedside light. He wipes his mouth with one hand as he says, "Does that mean you'd like me to do this again sometime?"

"Definitely yes," says Dean. "But, Cas, don't you see, you've tasted me now, and you're going to be sick tomorrow. What if the taste thing happens? Blow jobs won't start making you sick, will they?" (The thought is horrifying.)

"I already thought about that," says Cas. "The night before is usually perfectly safe. Just to be on the safe side, I was planning to go brush my teeth. So that the dominant flavor when I fall asleep — and tomorrow when I wake up — will be that of toothpaste."

Dean sits up and nearly shoves him out of bed. "Go brush your teeth right now," he orders. "Brush them really well. Promise. Use mouthwash. And floss. Brush your tongue, too. Maybe eat something. Something with a different taste."

"Something with a taste other than semen?"

"Exactly," says Dean, shoving Cas again. "Please. I've got some gum—" He looks around. "Oh, damn, it's next door, I'll run and get it—"

"Dean, it's all right, really. I've got some mouthwash that has a very strong wintergreen flavor. I'm confident this won't be a problem. Also, anything I eat before sleep is usually fine. The sleep seems to provide a psychological dividing line; as long as I get some sleep before the nausea hits, it'll work out."

"Okay, then, we have to get you to sleep immediately," says Dean. Cas gives him a rather self-satisfied smile, and finally slips off the bed to pad his way to the bathroom.

Dean flops back on the bed, pulls the covers up over himself and stares at the ceiling.

_I didn't know how much I wanted this_, he thinks. He'd known, to some degree, that it was a fantasy, of course. But the reality is a hundred times better. And a hundred times more addicting, apparently, for now all Dean wants is _more_ of this, all night, every night, Cas by his side every time.

_And I really, really want to return the favor_, he realizes.
Cas returns to the bed, crawls right back into the bed next to Dean and turns the light off.

"I'd like to take care of you too," says Dean, and he's already reaching out toward Cas, sliding a hand to his waist and trying to slide it downward. "We could do it quick, it'll just take ten minutes—"

But again Cas catches hold of his hand.

"I would like nothing better," whispers Castiel, as he folds Dean hand in both his own, and sets it carefully on Dean's waist. "But... I..." he hesitates. "I've got some bruises... Some surgical wounds, some other issues. It's not fully healed; I have to be careful. And, as you just pointed out, I really should get some sleep. There won't be any sleep tomorrow night, after all. I just wanted to do that for you while I still could. I didn't dare wait any longer... I hope you understand."

It crashes down on on Dean then: Cas has chosen, deliberately, to spend the last moments of his last good evening trying to make Dean feel good. Cas has cancer, Cas has chemo tomorrow, Cas thinks he's not going to live long enough for his wings to heal, Cas thinks he has limited time... and he wants to make Dean feel good.

Dean rolls toward Castiel in the dark and wraps both arms around him, kissing his cheek and his nose and his forehead, and the top of his hat. (Dean wants to kiss him on the mouth, too, of course; but he catches a whiff of Cas's wintergreen mouthwash and remembers, at the last second, about the taste aversion. Best not to risk it.) Castiel doesn't react immediately to the kissing — he doesn't seem to have an instinct to kiss back. But right away his hands go up to the back of Dean's neck and his fingers start stroking through Dean's hair again.

A sign of affection, Dean remembers, and he shifts one of his hands to Cas's neck, and starts running the other across the his shoulderblades (where, he now suspects, Cas's wings lie folded, in their little pocket-dimension). Cas gives a shaky gasp, and leans against Dean, curling up against him, in full contact from head to foot now as Dean caresses his neck over and over.

Cas relaxes by degrees; his breathing steadies, and slows. At long last he falls asleep, but even after that Dean continues to stroke him at the back of the neck, trying to preen the nonexistent feathers, and trying to caress Castiel's invisible, ruined, wings.

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A/N - In the original plan for the fic it was going to take another couple weeks for Dean and Cas to get to this point, but it started to become clear that they both are in a very carpe-diem frame of mind. And Cas, especially, decided on his own to just go for it (he would have gone for it whether or not Dean had given him that little verbal invitation). Castiel in this fic seems to have his own intentions, no matter what my original plans may be.

I was unsure also originally how explicit to go; whether to go hard-core a la A Room Of One's Own, or keep it subtle as in Flight. As the fic has unfolded, though, it's become clear that this story shouldn't, and can't, pull any punches. Every physical detail is in here — all the awful details of the nausea and the chemo are laid out in full, and so it seemed all the details of the good times should be in here as well. It seemed it wouldn't be fair to Dean and Cas to take them through all the bad parts in such 3D Technicolor without giving them the good parts too. Love is love through good times and bad, and the details are their own kind of truth.
The fic continues to unfold at its own pace. The real-life calendar has gotten ahead of it, but that's okay (especially since this chapter felt like a Christmas chapter anyway! Even though in fic time they're still 3 weeks before Christmas, this was the best present Dean could ever have gotten). I'm continuing to let it go at its own speed. There seems no way to rush it; every scene takes so much rewriting! But I think I'll have another chapter next weekend.

I hope you're all having a wonderful holiday. Many thanks for all your encouragement along the way, and I hope you enjoyed this chapter.
Dean wakes very early in a state of blissful comfort.

In his half-awake doze he's aware at first only of a sense of serene warmth that seems to be all around him. There's even three or four different kinds of warmth: there's a steady, reassuring warmth behind his back, there's a comfortably heavy line of warm pressure that's lying across his ribs, and there's a gentle puffing heat that's happening every few seconds or so on the back of Dean's neck.

And mixed through it all is an almost imperceptible sensation of some kind of overall embrace, a gentle radiance that's wrapped around Dean's entire upper body like some kind of cape.

He opens his eyes, blinks around in the dark, and sees he's in a dim hotel room. But there's no second bed in sight; where's Sam? Realization comes a moment later: ah yes, the plush hotel, the second room — Cas's room. The warmth behind him is Castiel; the comfortable weight across his ribs is Cas's arm; Cas's hand is even tucked up so that it rests right on Dean's heart. And the soft puffing feeling behind him is Cas's breath. Cas seems to have his mouth almost directly on Dean's skin, in fact, as if he'd been kissing Dean on the back of the neck and had fallen asleep in mid-kiss.

Yep, this is another case of full-on spooning... but this time, it's Castiel who's spooning Dean. And there is definitely no bedcover in the way, and, how had they ended up in this position, exactly?

The memory of last night comes blazing back then, and it's so vivid and unbelievable that it takes Dean's breath away. At first Dean's even sure it must have been a dream. Surely it can't have been real? He folds one hand over Cas's as he tries to figure it out: Surely it must have been some sort of fantasy that had only played out in a dream? But Dean is most definitely under the bedcovers right now, and not on top of them. Not only that, but he also seems to be totally naked, which seems like a little bit of a clue. (Though Cas, in contrast, still seems to have his own sleeping clothes on.). There's even a large cloth lump down at the foot of the bed, pressed up against some of Dean's toes, that he's pretty sure is his crumpled-up sweatpants. And he remembers, very clearly, the moment when he'd kicked them off.

It was real. It really happened.

Best of all is the realization that it was Cas who made it happen.

It's Castiel who took the lead, every step of the way. Dean, in fact, had been absurdly paralyzed for much of the opening phase, far too nervous about screwing things up with Cas to be able to even think of how to make a first move. (Thinking back on it all now, he's even cringing a little, for he's fairly sure it's the clumsiest and most unsure he's ever been, even given that new relationships always tend to be a little awkward at the start.) The stakes had felt terrifyingly high, the risks extreme. Thank god at least one of us has some guts, Dean thinks. Cas made it happen. Cas chose it, actively, which
means it was what Cas wanted and not just Dean.

*Cas wants this too, Cas wants this too,* Dean thinks, and as he takes it all in, lying there in the semi-dark holding Cas's hand to his chest, it's almost making him giddy now.

It's as if a shuttered window has somehow been flung wide open and the sunshine is pouring in. And now something's blooming, some long-knotted, long-frozen bud that's been waiting, patiently, in darkness all these years. Dean can practically feel it expanding and unfurling within him, and the sense of relief and rightness is overwhelming.

It slowly dawns on him, as he lies there with Cas, that there is no need at all to fight it anymore.

There's just no hiding it now. Not from Cas and not from himself. There's simply no doubt at all now. The green light has been given, the starting gun's been fired, the sky's the limit. And it seems so clear now to Dean how intensely he's been craving Castiel's touch all along. It's so ridiculously obvious now that it almost makes him laugh, to think back on how desperately he's been wanting it — and how miserable he's been while trying to hide it all away.

There'll have to be the telling-Sam thing, of course, which is still downright terrifying but can be dealt with later. Right now Dean's much more interested in thinking about all the things he and Cas might be able to do together. More sex, much more, seems like it should be the very first item of consideration, and Dean's almost licking his lips as he assesses the likely menu. Tons more blow jobs for sure, *mountains* of blow jobs, obviously, for starters. That Cas's very first blow job should have felt so incredibly fantastic, even despite his initial clumsiness, bodes *very* well for the future; and there's so much Dean wants to show him! So many tips and tricks, so many interesting techniques and types of caresses; those tricks of places to lick and ways to apply pressure, all the delightful nuances of friction and speed and timing and pacing.... and it'll definitely go both ways next time, of course. Dean's actually only very rarely been the blow-er himself (he has about a thousand times more experience as the blow-ee), and he's a little startled to discover that it's something he's very much looking forward to.

In fact surely the very first thing that needs to happen next is that Castiel needs to be given his very own blow job. Has he even ever had one? Does he even have any idea how intensely amazing it feels?

Not to mention there's a whole other orifice too to explore (which Dean's investigated with female partners, quite a few times really, but never with a male one). This thought, too, is intensely intriguing. *Let's see, we'll need some lube right away,* Dean's thinking now.

And next he realizes, with almost a physical lurch of surprise, that they haven't actually even kissed yet! Somehow they entirely skipped kissing, last night. Or, more precisely, Castiel skipped kissing, for some reason. (Dean had just been following his lead.) Could it be that Cas doesn't really know about human kissing? Well, he must know about it... but does he get it, at an intuitive level? He must have at least kissed that April chick at some point... but of course April had been trying to assassinate him and all, which possibly might have affected the whole feel of that evening. Maybe Cas has never experienced any really good kissing?

All at once Dean is burning with the need for a serious make-out session. What does Cas's mouth even taste like? What do his lips feel like, his tongue, what's he like as a kisser? Dean doesn't even know yet! This needs to be rectified immediately, so Dean starts wriggling gently around to face Cas. Cas is still asleep, and once Dean gets a look at him, the first thing that catches Dean's eye in the dim light is the wide white mouth of the monkey on Cas's hat.

*Cas never took off the monkey hat last night, not even once. All the way through that incredibly hot*
experience, all the way through that fantastic blow job, he kept that absurd hat on the entire time.

There's a reason he kept it on, of course.

Somehow Dean had forgotten till now.

It feels like a physical blow to remember that today is not, after all, going to be one of those wonderful, exciting Morning-After days of a new relationship. There'll be no wild morning sex, no lazy brunch, no slightly-awkward transition to domesticity; there'll be no second night of bliss, not tonight anyway. Cas will not be getting a blow job today at all, nor tonight either, and neither will Dean.

And there'll be no making out. At all. Because today is Chemo Day.

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Dean spends the next two minutes gradually inching both his arms around Cas's head. He's trying to do it so extremely slowly and gently, so that Castiel never wakes. Dean's phone alarm hasn't gone off yet, which means it's not time to get up yet; and every single minute of additional sleep that Castiel can get right now seems extremely valuable, like a precious currency that Cas needs to save up for tonight. So, though Dean still dearly wants to kiss him, and though he can't help thinking wistfully of the morning-blow-jobs that could have been, he settles for embracing Cas instead, rearranging his arms around Cas with as much caution as if he were de-fusing a bomb. He succeeds — Cas never wakes — and then spends the next twenty minutes lying very still with Cas in his arms, holding him while he sleeps.

During all the slow rearranging, Dean again has the odd sensation, several times, of some kind of gentle warmth that keeps shifting around across his upper shoulder and arm. It's barely perceptible now; it feels like a loose corner of bedsheet might be lying across his shoulder, maybe tented up a little so that he can barely feel it, just enough to trap some body heat.

But when he glances at his shoulder, there's nothing there. His shoulder's bare. Nothing's touching it, and nothing's above it.

It's a little puzzling, but it's not top priority. Dean ignores it and returns his attention to Cas. But a few minutes later, he allows himself a very light stroking motion across Cas's shoulderblades. Cas gives a slight shiver, much as he had last night. Simultaneously with the shiver, there's the faintest of fluttering sensations in the air across Dean's shoulder.

Dean goes still, thinking.

Cas shifts slightly, nuzzling his face down into Dean's chest. His arm tightens across Dean's waist; just as his arm tightens, the warmth across Dean's shoulders somehow seems to tighten too.

*Sometimes I've brushed you accidentally with a wing.*

Dean can still hear the slightly embarrassed tone in Cas's voice.

*It was almost always accidental,* Cas had added (and only now does Dean think to wonder why Cas had said "almost" always).

*They're usually in the etheric plane, but they provide a slight degree of protection, even so...*
They're ruined. I keep them well tucked now, always. It wouldn't be right to put a ruined wing on you.

Now Dean almost doesn't want Castiel to wake at all, for he's suddenly become certain that this faint and puzzling "warmth" that seems to be lying across Dean's shoulders might be an actual wing. Or at least some sort of wing-related aura.

And he's fairly sure Cas would only do this in his sleep.

I don't give a damn if they're "ruined," Dean thinks. I want your wings on me, ruined or not. He closes his eyes, and holds Castiel, in the dark, concentrating fiercely on that faint, barely perceptible warmth across his shoulders.

At last Cas shifts, and stirs, and yawns. He's coming awake on his own. Dean's been thinking about what the best sort of "good morning" might be. A good-morning kiss seems off the table for Chemo Day, but of course now Dean knows of another option that might (from Cas's point of view) even be better. So Dean shifts one hand up to the back of Cas's neck, slides his hand under the edge of the monkey hat, and strokes Cas's skin there, gently. Cas makes a faint noise, a pleased little "mm" sound. His eyes flicker open. Dean watches as Cas focuses on him. "Morning," says Dean, and he watches as a slow smile spreads across Cas's face. Dean can't help smiling back, and Cas's smile broadens, and so does Deans's, and for a moment they're just grinning at each other like idiots. Cas's arm tightens around Dean's waist again.

The mysterious warm wing-aura tightens too. It's barely detectable; but now that Dean's alert to it, he's certain.

There's just the briefest flicker in Cas's eyes of an alarm, or maybe it's a hint of embarrassment. He takes a quick breath, and the blanket of faint warmth disappears abruptly from Dean's shoulders, whisking away.

He just folded his wings, Dean knows. He just realized where they'd ended up, and he folded them back up, behind his back.

"Put 'em back where they were," he says to Cas. "I liked them there." Cas's eyes widen. And at that look in his eyes... despite knowing perfectly well that today is not a kissing day, it turns out a lifetime of chick-flick reflexes are hard to erase: all of a sudden Dean's just a hair's-breadth away from kissing him, starting to shift closer and even already starting to tilt his head to angle around Cas's nose. At first Cas just looks confused, but then understanding seems to dawn, and there's a breathless moment when it seems certain Cas is going to kiss Dean back. Dean's close enough now to smell his breath (it's minty; last night's hurried tooth-cleaning session seems to have paid off). Dean drinks in the scent, and leans in further, and there's only an inch between their lips when the phone alarm goes off.

Chemo Day.

Dean freezes.

Taste aversion, thinks Dean. Odor aversion.

Cas's whole body stiffens. He tucks his chin down a little and turns his face a little into Dean's shoulder, effectively removing his mouth from Dean's potential range of kissing targets.
"Ground sloth time?" Dean asks.

"I'm afraid so," says Castiel.

Dean settles for a kiss on the top of the monkey hat, and then he disengages entirely. It's surprisingly hard to make himself separate from Cas — it feels as if he's having to yank a powerful magnet off a refrigerator. And Cas, too, seems to be reluctant to let go; his hand drags across Dean's waist as Dean pulls away. But it has to be done. It's time to disguise all the body odors and shampoo odors and soap odors, and it's time to get Cas ready for the hospital.

It's also time for Dean to head back to the other room. There's a chance he can sneak back in there and maybe get into the shower before Sam wakes. With a little luck, maybe Sam won't even realize that Dean spent the entire night in Cas's room. (Not that Dean's planning on hiding everything from Sam — well, not forever, at least — but, given that today is Chemo Day, it might make things a little easier if that particular conversation can be put off for a while.)

Dean stands and starts grabbing his clothes. He's still naked, of course, and he realizes, as he walks over to the table to turn off the still-beeping phone alarm, that Cas is watching him. Cas even sits up in bed and turns the light on, apparently just for a better view. He's shamelessly curious about it — he even rearranges himself to sit cross-legged in the bed, watching Dean with bright-eyed attention as Dean, who's now feeling extremely naked, has to lean over to pick up his scattered socks. It's odd to feel this shy; normally Dean's fairly confident about his body, and the occasional morning-afters with random bar girls are usually pretty low-stress.

But Cas isn't a random bar girl, is he?

He's not a random anything. He matters.

And his opinion matters, and Dean's not really all that sure what a not-quite-human, not-really-male, angel might actually be into; that is, what sort of body might come across as attractive. So Dean can't help feeling a little self-conscious as he retrieves the socks, and fishes the sweatpants out from the covers, and starts looking around for the t-shirt (turns out he'd flung it completely across the room — it's lying at the base of a lamp clear in the opposite corner.) The entire time, Cas sits and watches, his eyes tracking Dean steadily with a warm and focused attention, and Dean gradually starts feeling a little more comfortable. Whatever this particular not-really-human, not-really-male angel might actually find attractive, he certainly seems very attentive.

"Enjoying the view?" Dean asks Cas, grabbing the t-shirt.

"Most definitely," says Cas.

But then Dean remembers the Chemo Motel last night, and how Cas had gone practically green just at a certain familiar sight. A familiar sight. Just of a door, not a person, but...

A new wave of shyness comes over Dean, and now he half-shields himself with the t-shirt as he turns to Cas to ask "Hey, um, sight aversion's not a thing, too, is it?"

Cas blinks. "I certainly hope not," he says. With an obvious effort he wrenches his gaze away from Dean and looks down at his hands. He clears his throat and adds, apparently thinking out loud, "I've seen you in many other contexts, of course. Hopefully you have enough other associations, in my subconscious I mean, that you wouldn't be linked with chemotherapy. But... now that I think about it...." He hesitates. "I really haven't seen you without clothes that many times. Not since I rebuilt your body, I mean."
The casual mention of "rebuilding" Dean's body is a little startling.

"I'd better not look at you," Cas adds sadly. He's still staring at his hands. "It's an awful temptation, though. Maybe you should just... get dressed?"

"Yeah..." says Dean, and he yanks on the sweats and the t-shirt and the socks, in rapid succession. Once he's clothed Cas finally risks a cautious look back up at him.

"I detest cancer," Cas says. "I'm not sure if I've ever made that clear."

"Yeah, you didn't really have to, actually," says Dean, as he grabs his pistol, checks the safety and tucks it in the waistband of the sweats. "Pretty sure we're on the same page on that one. Pretty sure everybody's on that page, actually." He picks up his phone and room card and adds, "We gotta refocus here, much as I don't want to. Hospital time. I'll go get that ground sloth hoodie. Meet you in the lobby like we said?"

"Yes, that's probably best," says Cas. He's staring down at his hands again. Dean glances around to make sure he's got everything. Pistol and phone and the room card.... that's everything; time is short, and really he should be leaving now, hurrying next door to sneak in before Sam wakes, and take that shower and then wake Sam and pack up all the stuff. Dean takes a step toward the door. But Cas is still looking down at his hands, a fixed expression on his face that's positively woeful. He looks like a little boy whose ice cream has just fallen out of his ice cream cone, and suddenly Dean can't leave him. Not quite yet. Dean has to take a couple quick steps closer to the bed, so that he can reach out a hand to give Cas another stroke on the back of the neck, just under the edge of the monkey hat.

Cas almost jumps. He gives a quick, grateful glance up at Dean. Dean strokes him there for a long moment, and Cas closes his eyes and even leans the side of his head against against Dean's arm. *If he were a cat I'm pretty sure he'd be purring,* thinks Dean.

Dean finally removes his hand. "Hey, so," he says as he steps back, "I know your schedule's kind of booked up this week. But, just wondering if you're free Friday? We could hang out or something."

It's coming out absurdly like an awkward Tinder conversation, or like he's asking a bar hookup for a second date. And it should be obvious, it should be *incredibly* obvious, that there's going to be another time just as soon as Cas feels up to it. But maybe it needed to be said, for suddenly Cas's face is beaming with relief. He nods, his eyes wide and eager, and says, "Yes, I'd like that. I'd very much like that."

"We could watch a movie, maybe."

"A movie would be excellent. Or more fellatio."

Dean blinks.

"Or both?" Cas suggests. "I was, ah... I was thinking I'd like to try out the fellatio again. If you liked it last night, I mean."

Dean almost rolls his eyes. "Liked it is kind of an understatement," he says. "And, yeah, definitely part of the plan. But next time you gotta let me have a try too." One more quick pat on Cas's neck and Dean makes himself pull away and leave the room.
No wonder these places make Cas feel sick, thinks Dean, as he paces back and forth in one of the waiting rooms at the hospital, where Cas seems to have an endless series of tests, scans and appointments before the chemo. It's making ME feel sick and I've only been here once before. And I'm not even the one who's thrown up here!

At least the general idea is familiar, now. The hospital's layout is now a little bit familiar, and the whole idea of the weekly cycles is starting to make sense. And of course it's quite a relief knowing Sam's nearby and is getting everything all set up for the evening. But it's weirdly maddening having to wait for the horrible parts to start. Over and over, as Dean paces back and forth, he wishes he could just fast-forward Castiel through the next twenty-four hours; press some magic button and whisk him past all the bad parts, to the part tomorrow where he'll hopefully just be sleeping.

But there's nothing to do but wait.

They finally get to the chemo treatment room in mid-afternoon, and after several more frustrating episodes of being separated from Cas (nurses keep shooing Dean away for almost every single procedure) at last the nurses let Dean sit by Cas's side in his chemo-treatment bay. It's the same area as before, the long line of reclining chairs facing the endless plate-glass windows. Cas is in a different chair today, but nonetheless it brings back jarring memories of the awful moment last week when Dean first tiptoed in here to find Castiel, angel of the Lord, soldier of God, lying asleep a chemotherapy ward, so fragile and frail.

Dean makes himself give Cas a cheerful grin now. Cas gives him a somewhat forced smile back; he's already got an IV running in his right arm, but it's still just saline and there's still more time to wait. It seems there's a half-hour or so more until the actual chemo will start, something to do with a delay in the schedule of the drug-delivery machines that hook up to the IVs.

In fact, it seems everybody's schedule has been pushed back a half-hour or more. Some people seem too sick to care; some pass the time stoically, reading or doing little drawings (the art therapy, presumably) or simply staring out the window. Others seem to be going on little visiting tours of the patients in the other treatment bays. It seems that many of them know each other, and there's quiet conversations happening here and there. Cas asks Dean to pull the bay curtains back fully, exposing as much of his chair as possible; apparently this is an informal sign that he's available for visits, and after that several other patients stop by to say hello. Cas knows all their names, and they know his. It turns out a lot of them have been on the same sort of weekly cycle, sitting for hours together in the chemo wards.

In between the sporadic visits Castiel keeps glancing at Dean, like he's continually surprised to find that Dean's here with him, sitting by his side. Dean, for his part, is feeling weirdly out of place; he doesn't know the routine, so he feels like he's not being very helpful. Also, more than a few of the other patients are giving him a puzzled look, as if they're used to Castiel being alone. Soon Dean's experiencing a nearly constant desire to take hold of Cas's hand. But it's hard not to be a little worried about potential reactions from others. Or a lot worried, in fact. It's a disturbing and disheartening feeling. Dean's known, of course, that public display of affection must feel a great deal different when one is part of a same-sex couple; he's long known that even mildly affectionate gestures, like holding hands or a kiss on a cheek, can be downright risky. Even in a fairly liberal city like Denver, there can be prejudice, and looks, and comments, and much worse.

Dean's known all that in principle. But feeling it in person, in the form of this gut-level uncertainty about even just taking Cas's hand in public, is very disturbing. It's like an actual anchor is holding down his arm.

So he settles for patting Cas on the arm now and then.
A few minutes later, Dean's gotten involved in rearranging a blanket around Cas's legs (if he can't hold Cas's hand, tucking a blanket around his feet seems somehow to be the next best thing), and he glances down the long aisle of chemo patients to see that a little girl is now slowly coming their way, accompanied by a woman who must be her mother. The girl's about eight years old and she seems to be the patient — she's wheeling an IV pole by her side. Oddly, she's wearing what looks like a complete Disney princess costume, a shiny blue faux-satin gown that looks like it's been hand-fitted, complete with puffy frills of lace around the neck and the hem. As she gets closer it becomes apparent that the lace-covered neckline is almost hiding some kind of permanent IV-port thing that is slightly visible through the lace at her neck (the IV line is snaking its way through the lace). She's wearing a pair of ridiculous long white satin costume gloves, which Dean soon realizes are probably to hide bruises. Her head is bundled up in a blue satin turban that's decorated with a little tiara pinned to the top, as if she's half a princess and half a genie from an Arabian Nights tale.

She looks a little tired, and she's moving a little slowly — her mother's hovering very closely behind her, obviously ready to help her if necessary, but the girl's actually getting around pretty well, all things considered. She makes a slow-but-steady beeline directly toward Cas's treatment bay.

Cas greets her with a warm smile. "Hello, Emily. Are you a princess today?"

"Yes, Castiel," says Emily, with a regal air. "You may call me 'Princess Emily.'" She performs a slightly wobbly, but very solemn, curtsey.

"Hello, Princess Emily," says Cas dutifully, inclining his head. "Should I rise to greet you?"

"No, no," she says, waving one white-gloved hand graciously. "My subjects need not tire themselves on my account. I bid you rest."

"Thank you, Princess," says Castiel. "Dean, this is Princess Emily. And her mother Sharon."

Dean rises to shake Sharon's hand, and he says to Emily, giving her a deep and formal bow, "Very honored to meet you, Princess Emily."

But when he stands from his bow he finds that Princess Emily has fixed Dean with a beady-eyed stare. She demands, "Who are you? Castiel never has anybody with him."

"Emily," whispers Sharon.

"Well, it's true," says Emily, throwing an unrepentent look over her shoulder at her mother. She turns to Cas to say, "That's how we became friends, remember, Castiel? I came over to chat because you didn't have anybody with you."

"I remember very well," says Cas. "I was grateful. But, I do have some family, actually." Emily seems unconvinced. She gives Dean another suspicious look and asks Cas, "Is he one of the brothers you mentioned?"

"Yes, exactly. This is Dean. My other brother is named Sam."

Emily still looks doubtful, and she says to Dean, "Why haven't you ever been here before? Castiel's always here alone. We felt sorry for him, didn't we, Mom?"

"EMILY," says Sharon again, shooting an apologetic look toward Dean.

"Well, we did," says Emily, again unrepentent.
Dean’s starting to squirm a little (he’s still automatically standing at attention, with his hands clasped behind his back, as if really in a royal court). For, of course, Emily’s right: Dean and Sam should have figured out long ago that something was wrong. Sure, Cas hadn’t told them, but the signs had been obvious. They should have figured it out; they should have been here.

Dean finally says to Emily, "I'll be here from now on. Sam's helping too — he's getting Cas' room set up. He'll be here later."

"But why weren't you either of you here before?" says Emily.

Dean's not sure how to answer. He hesitates, glancing at Cas.

Sharon breaks in with, "Emily, honey, grownups have very complicated schedules sometimes, and can't always get free, and I'm sure Mr. Dean here had very—"

"He didn't know," says Cas to Emily. "I didn't tell him."

Sharon stops in mid-sentence. She and Emily both look at Cas, and then at Dean.

Dean's awfully uncomfortable now, but he nods. "Didn't know till last week," he says. He adds, a little gruffly, "Would've been here."

"Oh," says Emily. She thinks about that, looks back at her mother for a long moment, and then shuffles closer to Cas's head, where she leans up to Cas's ear with one hand cupped over her mouth. She even goes up on tiptoe to try to get closer to him. Cas shifts closer to her, angling his ear toward her mouth, and Emily whispers to him, in a hoarse whisper that's so loud that everybody can hear it perfectly well, "Did you not tell him because you didn't want him to worry?"

Cas says to her, softly, "Exactly."

Emily nods. Another glance at her mother (who's now staring fixedly out the window, pretending not to hear) and Emily leans in for another loud stage whisper to Cas. "I understand," she hisses.

She straightens up and says to Dean, "Everything'll be okay. Castiel will be fine."

"Yeah, I know," says Dean, who's getting ridiculously choked up now. He adds, "Of course he'll be fine. And, um, so will you."

Emily looks at him. After a moment she starts making her way toward Dean. He's on the other side of Cas's reclining chair from her, and she has to wheel her IV pole carefully all the way around the foot of the chair. She comes straight up to Dean; he's a little startled by how tiny she seems close up. She's going up on tiptoe again now, with one white-gloved hand cupped around her mouth again, and Dean realizes she wants to whisper something to him, too. He bends at the waist to hear her. She's so short he has to fold himself almost all the way over.

Emily presses her cupped hand right up to Dean's ear.

"Actually I might—" says Emily, in another loud stage-whisper. But this time she seems to realize her whisper might be a little loud; she stops in mid-phrase, glances at her mother (who's now watching them both with an incredibly wobbly look on her face). Emily starts over again in a much quieter whisper, so quiet this time that Dean has to strain to hear her:

"Actually I might die," whispers Emily. "But don't tell Mom."

She settles back down from her tiptoed stance and backs off a step, looking up at Dean expectantly.
Dean straightens up slowly. "Oh," he says, unsteadily. "Um—"

Emily says, now back in a normal voice. "But, it's okay because everybody who dies of cancer goes directly to Heaven." She turns to Cas and says, "Like, remember Charlie, Cas? He was here two weeks ago? Remember, Charlie with the stage-four lung cancer, and his friend snuck in his dog Lobo to see him, remember how soft Lobo's ears were? Me and Mom just heard, Charlie died two days ago. But, see, it's okay, because that just means he's in Heaven now. Someday Lobo will be with him too."

There's a moment of quiet as the three adults all look at her.

Emily adds, "That's what you told me, Cas, right? Everybody who dies of cancer goes straight to Heaven."

"Yes, that's true," says Cas. Dean shoots him a doubtful look, assuming this must be some fiction he told Emily to make her feel better (because, surely some cancer patients must end up in Hell?). But Cas looks completely serious, and Emily seems satisfied. (Sharon, though, is biting her lip and staring at the floor.) And thankfully Emily at last changes the topic, saying to Cas, "I really like your hat. Did you lose the rest of your hair?"

"Most of it, yes," says Cas, "Do you want to see the hat?" She nods, and with a casual familiarity she scooches herself up to sit on widest part of the chemo-chair, by his hips, the blue satin dress poofing out around her like a big fluffy mushroom. Cas moves over a bit to make room for her, and he slips the monkey hat off his head and hands it to her. Dean's a little surprised by how easily Castiel does this; for once there's no hesitation at all about uncovering his head.

Dean's also a little surprised to discover that almost all of Cas's hair is gone now. Has he lost that much more, just in the last week? There's still a few little patches of soft strands, but he really looks bald now.

Emily takes in the sight with complete equanimity, gazing at Cas steadily as she holds the monkey hat in both white-gloved hands. "You kept your hair much longer than the rest of us," she says.

"Yes, some of the drugs affect me a little differently," Cas answers.

Emily nods, without surprise, as if she already knows there's something different about Cas. "Like how your nausea meds don't work?" she asks. Cas nods, and she then asks, "Did the marijuana work?" She turns to Dean to explain carefully, "Castiel's been trying medical marijuana. But he wasn't sure if it would work."

"It didn't, really," says Cas. "Though at least it distracted me. That helps, actually. But there was still the nausea anyway." Emily nods, but her attention's drifted to the monkey hat now, as if discussion of medical marijuana and chemotherapy is a fairly routine (and fairly boring) topic. She's soon fascinated by the monkey-hat, and she turns it around in her hands, looking at the monkey's grinning face.

"You can try it on if you like," says Cas. At once Emily pulls off her tiara-topped blue satin turban and hands it to her mother. Emily turns out to be totally bald. Which of course was to be expected — every patient here, including Cas, is in some stage of hair loss. But it's a jolt anyway to see that sort of look on an eight-year-old girl who's dressed up like a Disney princess, so much so that Dean's suddenly got the surreal impression that they're all trapped together in some kind of sickeningly heartwarming — or heartbreaking — Lifetime movie.

Little bald Princess Emily pulls the monkey hat on with her white satin gloves while Dean, Cas and
Sharon all watch. The hat's too big for her; the sides come down far over her ears, almost to her shoulders, and the front almost covers her eyes. But she seems to like it anyway. She tilts her chin up, peering under the hat's rim and grinning at all three of them, and feeling at the tassels with one hand. "I'm gonna go look at it in the mirror," she announces, and she hops off Cas's chair and starts making her way toward a bathroom at the end of the row of treatment bays, dragging the IV pole behind her. "Stay with Castiel, Mom," she instructs her mother. "Be back in a sec."

Sharon's still standing by the window, holding her daughter's tiara-topped turban as she watches Emily, complete with blue satin princess dress, long white gloves, monkey hat and IV pole, enter the bathroom.

Once the last glimpse of blue satin has disappeared behind the closed door, Sharon turns to Dean and says, almost defensively, "She's fine in the bathroom on her own. She really likes it if I don't follow her absolutely everywhere, and this is the only time when I know she'll be okay — there's staff everywhere and they all know her, and there's a call button in there and she knows about call buttons, and also we've still got half an hour to wait."

"Yeah, of course," says Dean. "I'm sure she's fine in there. Absolutely."

"She's trying to give you a break," says Cas. "She worries about you."

Sharon nods. "Yeah. I try not to let her see how much it, um, how much I, how much—" Her voice is suddenly shaking, and her eyes are watery. She grits her teeth, turns to stare out the window again, and takes a long, even breath. With one hand she smooths the edges of the absurd little blue-satin turban, and she glances down to check the safety pins that are holding the plastic-rhinestone tiara in place.

Dean has a sudden vision of Sharon pinning the tiara in place, getting it perfectly centered; and, very likely, hand-sewing the little blue satin princess dress as well. Including carefully designing the little sleeves and the neckline for easy IV placement.

Into the silence Cas says, to Dean, "Emily always comes over to talk to me."

Sharon turns back to them with a nod. She seems to have composed herself, and she says, her voice steady again, "She gets worried if somebody's here alone. She kind of adopted Castiel here."

"She seems like a really sweet kid," Dean asks. "How's she doing?"

An instant silence falls.

Sharon shrugs. "Last round of tests hasn't come in yet," she says. "Round before that wasn't too awesome. Cas, where'd you get the hat, anyway? I think she likes it."

"Dean's brother Sam got it for me," says Cas, following her abrupt change of subject willingly enough. "He got me the most wonderful set of hats, actually. This is my favorite."

"Do you know where he got it? Do you think they might have kid's sizes? She likes it," Sharon says. She seems to be thinking about something. "I could do a jungle theme for her next costume, maybe."

To Dean she adds, "She couldn't do Halloween this year and she was so bummed about it, so I told her we could do Halloween every week if she wanted. She can't keep any candy down anymore, but she still loves to dress up."

"It's been a different outfit almost every week," says Cas.

Sharon nods. "Not always as elaborate as this one — just, anything but hospital gowns, was what
she wanted. It's all washable. And everything's velcro so it can all come off in a hurry if we need."

"I'll ask Sam about the hat," says Dean, anxious now to be helpful. He's still chiding himself about the earlier faux-pax, thinking to himself, *For chrissake, Dean, do NOT ask the mother of a cute little eight-year-old cancer patient how her kid's doing. Might as well just say "So, is your kid gonna die or what?"

He's still kicking himself about it a minute later when Princess Emily comes out of the bathroom. She's beaming with delight about the monkey hat. When she returns it to Cas, Dean promises to ask Sam where the hat came from, and even sends Sam a text about it right then and there while Emily watches. And Sam, thankfully, replies right away ("Yes there were kids sizes. Can grab one next week").

Then Emily's name is called — the nurse actually calls out "Princess Emily" — and they have to head back to their own treatment bay, far at the end of the corridor.

Once they're safely out of earshot, Dean can't help asking Cas, "So what was that about a guaranteed ride to Heaven? Did you make that up?"

Cas shakes his head. "It's true. Cancer is a flaw in Creation." At Dean's puzzled look, Cas explains, "It's an inherent flaw of multicellular life. All life forms will get cancer if they live long enough, and if they don't die of anything else first; it's inevitable. It's widely regarded as a design flaw. Or at least that's been Legal's interpretation."

Dean's nearly sidetracked by the discovery that Heaven has a Legal Department (which, really, should not be a surprise), but he shakes that off and asks, "So, if it's a design flaw that means... what exactly?"

"It means it's an entirely innocent death. It's considered a breach of the implicit contract between God and his Creation. A mild breach, to be sure, but a breach nonetheless."

"And so... what, then you get a free pass upstairs?"

"Essentially, yes," says Cas, "For any human, that's how it works."

But now Cas is staring out the plate-glass window, studiously not meeting Dean's eyes, and Dean thinks, *Humans. "For any human."

*It's true for humans only. That's the part he's not saying.*

Humans have souls. And the soul is the part that goes to Heaven.

Angels, though, don't have souls.

Dean's long been certain they must have something, some sort of spirit or essence or core self. But whatever that may be, it's long been clear that it's not a soul.

The burning question resurfaces then: What happens to angels when they die?

Does anything survive when an angel dies? Anything at all, any piece of them, in any form? Dean doesn't know, and he desperately wants to ask; he desperately wants to know the answer, and desperately fears it too. But he doesn't want to harass Castiel with this issue right now.

Especially since it seems like Cas might not even know.
"They're coming," Cas says quietly, and Dean looks up to see a pair of nurses headed down the aisle. One of them's wheeling that large boxy IV thing that Dean recognizes from last time; it's the chemotherapy drug-delivery device, the thing that measures out the precisely timed little aliquots of poison that will be injected into Cas's IV line. It's an innocuous looking thing, really, but now that Dean knows what it does, it seems to have the menacing aura of some kind of medieval torture device. He looks at Cas; Cas is watching it approach, and he seems calm and collected. But his jaw's a little tight, and his breathing is a little deeper than usual. And when Dean reaches out and takes his hand at last (in full view of everybody, in the end), Castiel grabs on tight.

A/N - More soon! Next chapter's almost done - I was intending to get to the part where we learn more about the diagnosis, but little Emily appeared out of nowhere (one of those totally unplanned things...) and we didn't quite get all the other stuff in. Next update will finally have more about what exactly Cas's condition is. I'll aim again for Friday but might get a short chapter up earlier. Also I am really hoping to catch up on replying to all your incredible comments - I really wanted to take proper time for the replies and of course fell behind completely. But please do let me know if you liked this. OK, fingers nearly frostbitten now, must run.

Happy New Year to everybody! Here's wishing you all a healthy and happy and wonderful year. Full of all the love, and none of the stress. And no health problems at all.

PS I really do believe the bit about the free pass to Heaven.
It was the best

Spent all last week at a major science meeting and now I've got another terrifying grant proposal due next Thurs - this one to NSF, so, hellish and complex and unlikely and pie-in-the-sky, yet also exciting. I just got back from the meeting late Mon night and have been chugging in the lab late every night till tonight to try to generate some last pilot data to try to convince NSF that we know what we're doing. With all of that I had to skip a week on the fic, sorry! And even so I only got half of this chapter done. Here's the first half; second half to follow whenever the grant-writing allows.

It's just as bad as last time, thinks Dean, at about eight o'clock that night.

No, he corrects himself, some hours later. It's worse.

At first it seems like it'll be easier. In the late afternoon Sam brings the Impala over to meet Cas and Dean at the hospital, and at that point Cas still seems totally okay. Sam even seems a little nonplussed to find Cas on his feet and walking around, and Dean's actually starting to feel cautiously optimistic.

But as they're all walking together across the hospital parking lot to the Impala, Dean remembers that Cas seemed totally okay last time, too, didn't he?

Until all of a sudden he wasn't.

So just in case, Dean insists on taking the wheel for the drive back to the Chemo Motel. He grabs the car keys from Sam, chivvies him into the back seat, and directs Cas into the passenger seat where Dean can keep an eye on him. "I'm the one who knows the way to the motel," Dean says, as he slides behind the wheel. Sam gives an exaggerated sigh. It's nothing new for Dean to grab the keys, of course, but the real reason Dean wants to drive is because he's determined that, this time, he won't miss that critical exit. This time, Dean's going to steer the Impala extra-smoothly; this time, there'll be no sudden lane changes, and no unnecessary swerving around. This time, Dean won't be peppering Cas with difficult questions, either. This time, Dean's going to get Cas back to the motel in one smooth, swift journey, in the blink of an eye....

So that poor Cas doesn't end up crawling on his hands and knees again in the gravel at the side of the road, as helpless as a wounded dog.

Now that they're all in the Impala together driving, once again, to that miserable motel, that awful moment from last week is once again fresh in Dean's head. And more than anything, Dean wants tonight to go as smoothly as possible for Castiel.

Indeed Dean doesn't miss the exit, and indeed he takes all the corners as gently as possible. Indeed the drive goes smooth as silk, and they make it almost all the way to the motel before Cas starts
throwing up.

Fortunately, one more modification to today's drive is that there's now a whole stack of plastic bags heaped in the middle of the front seat. Cas has clearly been reassured by their presence, for he's been clutching one in his hand for the entire drive. He's also taken a few other precautions, taking his scarf off and removing his monkey hat well in advance. (He's handed the hat carefully to Sam, swapping it for a plain blue one - another one from Sam's recent hat-shopping expedition. Apparently the blue one's made of some machine-washable knit, and it doesn't have any vulnerable dangling tassels). Cas also seems to not be bothering much anymore with wasting energy on trying to hide symptoms from Dean and Sam. So when the nausea hits him, at least he's somewhat better prepared.

At least he's got the bag in his hand this time, thinks Dean, as he pulls the car over and throws the gearshift quickly into Park so that he can help brace Cas's shoulders while Cas retches, repeatedly, into his plastic bag. (Sam's trying to do what he can to help from the back seat, popping open a water bottle in case Cas needs to drink soon, and also shaking open a couple more of the plastic bags in case they're needed.)

At least he's got the bag, thinks Dean again, as he tries to hold Cas steady. At least Sam's here to help. At least Cas can stay in the car, where it's warm. At least he switched out the hat already. At least he's not faceplanting into the gravel.

But it's terrible just the same. It's terrible seeing Cas so helpless, it's terrible seeing him so overwhelmed by it — the first burst of retching has hit him so hard that he's almost in convulsions, buckling over with each spasm with his head nearly to his knees, heaving rough gasps for breath in between the spasms. It's terrible to see him so desperate for air, so racked with misery. And it's especially terrible realizing anew that despite all of Dean's and Sam's careful preparations, Castiel is going to suffer tonight anyway.

He's going to suffer a lot.

It's also weirdly, eerily terrible to have the memory of last night still drifting around in the back of Dean's head. The contrast is beyond surreal; Dean keeps trying to put it out of his mind but it keeps floating back up anyway, with brief and tantalizing visions of the extraordinary events that had occurred just one scant evening ago. Mere hours ago, really. The memories seem now almost like they're taunting him; memories of Cas smiling at him from just inches away... memories of the way Cas's hand had traced its way so magically over Dean's skin. The stunning moment when Cas's intentions had suddenly become so undeniably clear — how plainly he'd said it, how he'd just reached right out and grabbed what he wanted. The surprise of it, the shock and the amazed disbelief, the relief, the delight, the sheer unstoppable joy....

Could there possibly have truly been such pleasure in the world? Just last night, in this very same world that also has the cancer and the chemo?

It's as if Dean had stumbled, last night, into a private, magical garden that he'd barely even dared dream might exist... only to watch helplessly a few hours later as a Category-5 hurricane came barreling down and tore it all to shreds. It all seems blown to pieces, in the face of the misery Cas is caught in now.

Dean watches Castiel retching, and all he can do is try to brace him through it, and now and then pat him uselessly on the back.

Cas finally reaches some kind of pause point. He unfolds slightly, lifting his head up a little, and his gasping slows. Dean takes the little plastic bag out of his hands, careful not to spill the ugly contents
as he tries to zip it shut. When Sam says, "Give me that, I'll take care of it," Dean's beyond grateful. Sam whisks it away somehow. Maybe he's triplebagged it for disposal later, maybe he chucked it outside; Dean doesn't quite see, for he's busy now coaxing Cas to drink a little water. Cas takes a few sips and slumps back against the window bonelessly. He tilts his head back against the seat and closes his eyes.

"Sorry," he mutters, eyes still closed. "You can drive on now."

"Look on the bright side, at least we almost made it to the motel this time," remarks Dean, trying to put a cheerful face on things. He puts the Impala back in gear and maneuvers (very gently) back onto the road. "And no face-down-in-the-gravel at the side of the road. Better than last week at least, huh, Cas?"

Cas doesn't answer, but from the back seat Dean hears Sam mutter, quietly, "This is better?" Dean catches Sam's eyes in the mirror.

As if everything else weren't terrible enough, it's also terrible just to see the look in Sam's eyes.

Dean shakes his head at Sam. Meaning: Act like everything's no big deal. Sam's mouth thins, but he gives a brief nod, and says nothing more.

"He's so bad already," Sam whispers to Dean. "And it's only been, like, one hour. How long did you say this goes on for? I mean, how long did it go on last week?"

They're just outside Cas's room by the open trunk of the Impala, their shoes slipping a little on the icy pavement as they don their ground-sloth hoodies in the frigid night air. They'd left Cas, just a moment ago, in fairly good shape — he'd been sitting upright on the bed insisting that he was "fine" ("Really, you can go don your sloth attire") and it seemed a good time to get the hoodies on and grab some more of the blue nitrile gloves. It's also a good opportunity to have a brief whispered consultation without Cas overhearing.

"A full day, pretty much." Dean whispers back to Sam, pulling on a pair of gloves. "A night and a day." Sam looks thoughtful, and as he takes his own pair of gloves, he stares at the glove-box a moment, as if trying to decide how many more he might need. Dean realizes he'd better give Sam the complete picture, so he adds, "Puke and blood and the works, all night long, and most of the morning, till, like, noon or so. Then he just went kinda comatose for all the rest of Tuesday. Like, all Tuesday afternoon and all night, he just slept and slept and slept. Still not able to eat but not as much actual throwing up. He only really started eating on Wednesday."

Sam thinks a moment, and then takes a huge fistful of extra gloves and jams them all in his back jeans pocket. "That sounds like he's way too likely to get dehydrated," he says. "I really think we should call the night nurse —"

But Dean doesn't get a chance to respond, for there's a thump and a crash from Cas's room. Sam slams the Impala's trunk shut and they both rush back into the room, where they find Castiel lying crumpled on the floor halfway to the bathroom, the nearest chair overturned by his side. He's at least landed on one of the pillows that Sam had set out, but he's fumbling for the nearest pan, and when Dean dashes over to check on him, it turns out Cas is trembling with fever. Then he's retching again, and there's blood now too, and he's going pale.
Sam and Dean don't get to talk again for a while after that. There's a flurry of activity while they both haul him back to the bed, and get the pans positioned by his pillow for him to throw up in, and mop up some of the mess that's somehow gotten onto the floor. Finally things are settled down enough that they can break away to have a hurried discussion about whether Cas is losing too much blood, because, just like last week, Cas seems to be dripping blood from his mouth, slowly but steadily. Sam and Dean have both learned over the week (through diligent Googling) that bleeding from the "oral epithelium" is fairly common during chemo, but apparently "excessive" blood is still cause for concern.

Soon the two brothers are having a tense, whispered debate in the corner of the room about how much blood is "excessive." Cas takes advantage of their distraction by trying, once again, to get out of bed to make his way toward the bathroom on his own (he seems to have reverted to his old plan of lying all alone on the bathroom floor through the worst of it). This time he pitches head-first right off the end of the bed before they realize what he's up to. He falls so hard he smashes his face straight onto the floor and ends up with a gushing nosebleed.

"Okay, see, that's excessive blood," says Sam, scrambling for ice cubes and towels while Dean grabs a fistful of Kleenexes and tries to help Cas stop the bleeding. Cas is now crouched on his knees, holding both hands to his nose. Blood streams through his fingers as he mumbles, "Don't get any on you, don't, don't touch the blood—"

"We know, Cas, don't worry," says Dean. "We've got zillions of gloves. And we know how to clean the floor." He manages to tilt Cas's head up slightly to get a look at his face, and actually it's not too much blood (in the grand scheme of Winchester injuries), but still Dean is aching with frustration and worry and guilt. He'd turned away from Cas for a split second; he'd let himself get distracted talking with Sam, and he'd turned away — they'd both turned away! — and now poor Cas is bleeding like a stuck pig. There's a huge bruise spreading across one of Cas's cheekbones, and it's looking like he's split his lip too.

And suddenly Cas's eyes widen, and his face goes even paler under all the blood smears. He's about to throw up.

Dean can barely even figure out how to help him, other, than, once again, to hold him as he vomits, this time with the cascade of blood from his nose pouring out on top of everything else. There's a truly awful moment where Cas can't seem to get a breath of air — it seems he can't breathe through his nose now, and for a few terrifying moments he seems to be truly choking. Dean gives him a rattlingly hard thump on the back, and Cas coughs out a gout of blood and catches his breath with a huge gasp. After a few moments he finally seems able to breathe steadily again.

"I'm okay," he says. "I'm fine."

"You are going to stay on the bed," Dean orders him. Sam's hovering nearby with more ice cubes for Cas's nose, and the bleeding is slowing a little, but Dean's so shaken now that he's getting angry. "We already talked about this!" says Dean. "You're supposed to stay in bed this time! Don't you remember? We were gonna bring you pans so you don't have to spend the night on the bathroom floor! That means you stay ON the bed. You don't go falling OFF the bed! Got it?"

"I know, but..." Cas says. They both haul him back toward the bed, Dean still pressing a wad of bloody Kleenexes to Cas's nose with one hand. Cas goes on, his voice half-muffled through the Kleenexes, "I know, but, but, the nausea's worse today, Dean, some weeks are worse, and I'll mess up all the bedding, I just know I will, it'll be ruined, I can't help it—"

"The bed's got a lining," Sam says, as they hustle him into the bed. Cas is still weakly resisting, trying half-heartedly to sit up, and Dean finally loses patience, strongarms him into place and
physically shoves him down with both hands, until Cas finally subsides.

"I put one of those plastic covers underneath the sheets," Sam explains (diplomatically ignoring the lopsided Dean-Castiel wrestling match). Cas is at last lying still, and Sam checks Cas's Kleenexes, which are now just a sodden lump of red, and swaps them out for a washcloth, which is instantly ruined. Sam goes on cheerfully, "So the mattress is protected. And all the sheets are from Goodwill, they're not even the hotel's sheets, and then see all these towels on top?" (Sam's now wedging a group of clean towels under and around Cas's torso.) "I didn't have a chance to tell you, I found about a billion towels today at the local Goodwill. They had a whole stack of them for just twenty-five cents a pop and I thought I would pick up a bunch. So you can just stay on the bed, Cas, really. You just rest. Dean and I can just swap out the towels when we need to. Here, hold this ice on your nose. Wrap it up in the washcloth first—"

"The point is," says Dean, who's been trying to calm himself back down while Sam talks, "you can throw up right in the comfort of your own bed. Think of it as luxury chemo."

"Okay..." Cas mutters. He's definitely losing steam, and finally he just curls up on his side and closes his eyes. The battle's been won, apparently — though Dean and Sam spend the next ten minutes dealing with bloody ice cubes, bloody Kleenexes and bloody washcloths (and trying to coax Cas to drink some water in between all the bleeding). But Cas is at last lying still.

He does get sick again, of course. Many times. And he keeps disarranging the bedding and the towels — in fact he seems to get more and more restless over the next hour, till he's constantly pushing the pillows and blankets in odd directions, his feet stirring in fitful bouts, now and again muttering, "I'll mess everything up, I'll, I'll ruin it all—"

His speech is getting a little slurred, and finally Sam thinks to check his temperature. Of course it turns out that Cas is well into chemo-fever again. His forehead's radiating heat and soon he seems to be half-delirious with it. And he still keeps throwing up. But with Dean and Sam working together, it's manageable. A grim but efficient division-of-labor develops: whenever a real bout of retching hits, Dean arranges himself on the bed just behind Cas, crouching on his knees behind Cas's back with his arms around Cas's shoulders. From this angle he can hold Cas up, and help him aim his head so that he can throw up right into the pan that's always propped ready by his pillow. Sam, meanwhile, becomes the pan-and-towel wrangler. He's astonishingly unfazed about this task, facing the filth and the stink unflinchingly: he holds the pans steady while Cas throws up, he swaps in a clean pan when needed and takes the used ones away and rinses them out in the kitchenette sink, he runs out for more ice cubes, and he keeps changing the towels and bringing Cas water and Gatorade to sip.

Sam calls the night nurse a few times, too, to see if maybe they should bring Cas in to the emergency room. Surprisingly, though, every time the night nurse quizzes Sam about Cas's vital signs, it turns out that Cas seems to be staying reasonably stable and hydrated (probably because both Sam and Dean keep badgering him to take more sips of water, about every other minute). And though Cas is clearly exhausted and feverish, his pulse is staying steady this time.

"Want to... stay here," Cas mutters at one point to Dean; he's apparently overheard Sam's quiet conversation to the night nurse from the walkway outside. "It'll be... just as bad there. At.. the hospital. Their meds... don't work anyway."

Which, Dean realizes, is a fair point.

So they keep monitoring his vital signs, and Sam keeps calling the night nurse with updates, but, so far, it's looking like they might simply ride it out here in the motel room.
Even through his feverish delirium, Cas seems to recognize all the work Dean and Sam doing. Or, at least, he can't seem to stop apologizing about it. Both Sam and Dean eventually get accustomed to hear Cas' constant little whispers, in the brief windows of time when he's even got enough energy to speak, of: "I'm sorry, Sam... Dean... sorry."

He alternates apologies to Dean, to Sam, and to the two of them combined.

But as the evening drags on, Cas finally stops talking entirely. Eventually he's lying in Dean's arms almost completely limp, eyes shut, while Dean keeps holding the ice to his bruised nose and face.

Near midnight, at a juncture when Cas is curled up shivering and clutching fitfully at Dean's arm, Sam comes over with two clean, wet washcloths. "Blood's dried," Sam whispers. "I think his nose finally stopped bleeding." Sam wipes Cas's mouth clean with one washcloth, sets that one aside, and then very gently wipes his face with the other. Dean watches, struck by how gentle Sam's touch is. Cas's eyes flicker open as Sam's softly wiping Cas's face clean of all the flecks and smears of dried blood from the nosebleed.

"Can you drink?" says Sam to Cas, once Cas's face is clean. Cas gives a faint nod, and Sam holds a water bottle carefully in position for him, bendy straw in place. (The bendy straws have turned out to be a godsend.) Cas succeeds in taking a few sips without even having to lift his head.

Cas finishes drinking; Sam removes the water bottle and pats Cas's face dry with the edge of a clean towel. "There you go," he murmurs. Cas's eyes are already closed again.

"Sammy," Dean says, as Sam's walking away toward the kitchenette. Sam shoots him a quick glance over his shoulder.

Dean's hard-pressed to even know what to say. It's not just this face-cleaning moment; it's everything Sam's been doing. All day, and all night. All week, actually.

"Thanks," Dean says at last, in a very quiet whisper.

Sam gives him a slightly puzzled look, and a little shrug. As if to say, Well, of course, it's Cas, what did you expect?

The night crawls on, past midnight and into the wee hours. The retching gradually becomes less frequent, and Cas drifts into an almost catatonic state. At times he barely seems aware that Sam and Dean are even there.

They've already hatched a plan to trade hour-long shifts through the darkest hours, one brother sitting awake by Cas's side while the other snatches brief naps curled up in some blankets on the floor. That's the plan, anyway, and Sam's even brought a pile of blankets over from the other room already and has laid them all out on the floor. But as soon as Dean lies down for his designated sleep shift, he realizes that he's not going to be able to sleep even a wink. It's not that it's all that uncomfortable; the problem is simply that Cas is up on the bed, Dean's down on the floor, and Dean can't see him. Castiel is out of view, and he's too far away.

After about five minutes of lying tensely on the floor and staring at the ceiling, Dean kicks the blankets aside and stands back up. Sam, who's sitting in a chair near Cas's head, gives him a quizzical look.
"Can't sleep," Dean whispers to Sam.

"You only tried for five minutes," Sam points out.

"Not gonna be able to sleep," Dean says firmly. He tiptoes closer to peer at Cas, who's actually looking halfway calm by now; he's still huddled in a little ball under the covers, but he's breathing evenly. (Both his arms are wrapped around a clump of clean towels, as if he needs something to hang onto.) Dean adds, "Thanks for setting up the blankets and all, but, I just can't sleep."

"Floor too uncomfortable?" Sam guesses.

That's not really the problem, but Dean nods.

"What if you lie on the bed?" Sam says. Dean looks at him, and Sam points to the far side of the bed, beyond Castiel. "Bed's big enough," Sam whispers. "You might be a little more comfortable. You could just lie on top of the covers. I don't think he'd even really notice, if you use the far side."

*On top of the covers.*

Once again, the contrast with last night is positively surreal. Dean can't help glancing at the clock. Just twenty-four hours ago....

But sleeping on top of the covers near a comatose Castiel, as sad a situation as it is, is still a more appealing option than sleeping on the floor too far away from a comatose Castiel. A minute later Dean's gingerly stretching out on the bed, a careful two feet away from Cas, pulling one of the spare blankets over his legs for a bit of warmth.

He's barely breathing as he lowers himself down; he's trying to move so gently that he won't disturb Cas at all. He gets all the way down, and starts to relax, fairly confident that he's succeeded in not jostling the mattress even the slightest bit. But nonetheless Cas notices after all. He stirs a little, and moves his head, and then he's slowly, creakily, rolling over to face Dean. (Sam hurries to adjust the towels, and moves the throwing-up pan to a more convenient position.)

"Dean?" Cas mutters, eyes only half-open. He reaches out to Dean, and both his hands close on a loose fold in the sleeve of Dean's ground-sloth hoodie. Cas's eyes slide shut again.

Dean meets Sam's gaze over Cas's shoulder. Sam only smiles.

A moment later Dean feels a faint, vibrating heat descend across his own shoulder, along with a strange, subtle sort of pressure. It's rather as if something's shuddering in the air above him. Whatever it is, it's warm. Dean soon has to kick off his blanket to keep from overheating. Then he realizes Cas's hands are trembling too; Cas is shivering again. Dean reaches over to set a hand on Cas's brow; it's hot again; ah, yes, the fever.

*It's not just his hands that are shaking, thinks Dean. And not just his human body that's feverish. That vibrating, heated sensation in the air all around Dean has to be Cas's wings, right? The wings are trembling in fever just like Cas's hands are, and the wings seem to be radiating heat even from their pocket-dimension.*

But apparently Cas is trying to wrap them around Dean even so, sloth hoodie and all.

"He feverish again?" Sam whispers, leaning closer. "Maybe some aspirin? The nurse suggested aspirin if he can keep it down. She said no Tylenol, by the way — it'll stress his liver too much on top of the chemo."
Dean props himself up on his elbows to study Cas more closely. The heat sensation is coming and going now, sliding up and down across Dean's head and shoulders as if Cas's wings are shifting restlessly. He still looks pale, too. "No," says Dean, "I think he'll just throw it up."

"Maybe more ice? The nurse said, try ice. Ice in a damp washcloth, on his head. Like you were doing before with his nose. She said it can help with nausea and also the fever."

Dean nods. "Yeah, let's do that. Could you go get a bunch more ice cubes? In a bowl with some ice water, maybe? And a washcloth. Wait, two washcloths."

"For his forehead?"

"And the back of his neck," Dean says.

Over the next few hours there's still sporadic retching, there's a few hurried bathroom visits, and there's occasionally a little more of the mysterious blood-from-the-mouth, which prompts Sam to make a couple more calls to the night nurse. Dean keeps massaging the back of Cas's neck, using a damp washcloth that Sam has carefully folded around a few ice cubes. It does seem to be helping a little with the fever, but more than that, Dean's hoping that it'll soothe him.

And, in fact, gradually Cas does improve. He seems to settle down; his hands slowly stop their restless plucking at Dean's ground-sloth hoodie. And the faint sense of vibration finally stills, as if the wings (wherever they really are) have at last quieted.

"You could take a break," Sam whispers. "I can do that washcloth thing. It seems like it calms him down?"

"Yeah, it does. But don't worry, I got it," Dean tells him. "Why don't you go call the night nurse again, maybe? See if there's any more advice?"

Dean never does sleep, not really. Instead he stays sitting up in bed by Cas's side. In theory, Sam and Dean were supposed to trade shifts; in reality Dean sits by Cas's side for the entire night, stroking Cas's neck with the cool damp washcloth whenever he can. Sam, at least, manages to catch a few catnaps on the floor, but both of them are too worried to sleep much, and Sam spends a fair bit of time pacing around outside the room door in the chilly night air. Dean can hear him, faintly, through the window, as Sam talks to the night nurse about fever, and "oral cavity bleeding", and blood loss, and anti-emetics.

Sam calls her at least half a dozen separate times, and he's on a first-name basis with her (her name is Sarah, apparently) by the time the thin light of dawn starts to break outside.

By Tuesday the worst of it has passed. Dean still stays close to Cas, and after a little nagging from Sam he manages to remember to eat something himself, munching down a couple sandwiches that Sam orders from a take-out lunch place down the street.
By afternoon Sam's switched his focus to the health-insurance problem, and soon he's putting in long stretches of hours huddled over his laptop on the little table, trying one hacking attempt after another, while Cas dozes on the bed and Dean steals some (slightly guilty) naps by Cas's side.

"Got it," Sam at last reports. It's late Tuesday night by now. Cas finally seems to be getting some real rest; the fever's broken and he's breathing now with the slow, steady pattern of the very deepest stages of sleep. Dean's sitting next to Cas on the bed, staring mindlessly at some old Stargate reruns on the little tv with the closed-captioning on, while Sam chugs away at the health insurance problem. When Dean glances up, Sam whispers, "Found a loophole. Or a hack I guess, technically, but never mind the details. Got him on the Gas-n-Sip's disability plan for his whole next chemo cycle." He taps a few more keys, says, "There. Done," heaves a sigh of triumph, leans back in his chair and closes the laptop.

"Meaning...."

"Meaning he doesn't have to go to work tomorrow," Sam says, and they both look at Castiel.

"Which is lucky," adds Sam, "since he looks kinda like pushing a broom around a Gas-n-Sip would be about as easy as flying to the moon, at this point."

The analogy's an odd one, and Sam blinks once he's said it. Dean looks down at Cas's shoulders, remembering the faint shuddering feeling of Cas's wings twitching restlessly in the night, hot with fever. Sam says, slowly, "I wonder if he really could have done that? Once? Fly to the moon?"

"I'll be happy if he can just wake up and eat a saltine," says Dean.

"I'm sorry, Dean," Cas says, inevitably. It's late on Wednesday. He's actually walking now, though he's still a bit wobbly. They've finally gotten back to the bunker, and Dean's steering him by one elbow as they make their slow way down the hall, while Sam unpacks the Impala in the garage.

"Thought I told you to stop apologizing," Dean says. He nudges Cas's bedroom door open with one hip and guides Cas inside. "Pretty sure Sam told you that too. A hundred times or so."

"I don't just mean about the vomiting, though," Cas says. "I mean it in a different sense. I'm sorry that... " He pauses as Dean shepherds him over to the edge of the bed and sits him down. Cas sinks down obediently on the edge of the mattress. He looks thoughtful, as if he's unsure how to finish his thought.

At last he looks up at Dean and says, quite gravely, "I'm sorry I can't do more for you. I can't tell you how much I regret it."

At first Dean doesn't understand what he means. Then Cas adds, "I just have no... No energy. I'm still just... I'm so tired, Dean, it's the most amazing fatigue. It's like I'm at the bottom of the sea. Like my wings are covered with, with, I don't know, with tar or something, and I can't even fold them up..." Indeed he's slumping already, his shoulders rounding and his head hanging low, as if it's a substantial effort just to try to sit upright. It was a long drive from Denver, and Cas looks like he can barely keep his eyes open.
"All I seem able to do is sleep," Cas adds sadly. "But I so want to make you feel good..." (Oh, Dean thinks.) "But all I can do is sleep. All I can think about is just..." He gives a slow sigh. "...just, hoping the vomiting is over, trying to keep the next little bit of food down... and wanting to lie down." Cas drags his eyes back up to Dean's and says, softly, "You deserve so much more. You deserve so much better."

Dean thinks a moment, and asks, "I don't need the ground sloth hoodie anymore, right?"

Cas shakes his head, and so Dean sits right down next to him, as close as he can get, and wraps both arms around him. He feels Cas give a little twitch of surprise, but Dean only tightens his grip.

Cas starts to lean on him. Dean puts one hand up on the back of his neck, slides it under the edge of the hat (it's the monkey hat again) and strokes the back of Cas's head.

"You are far more than I deserve," says Dean. "Sick or healthy, you are so much more than I deserve."

Cas shakes his head. "One of those random women that you meet at those bars could do so much better for you. And I so wanted to do this right."

"I wanted to do the very best possible for you. I know I'm unpracticed, but I wanted it to be as good as possible. I know that the beginning of an... *encounter* like we've had, um... an...." He hesitates, his forehead tucked down on Dean's shoulder. "The beginning of an... *interaction*, a, um, *development*, such as we've had — " (Cas seems to be talking his way around the word "relationship," as if he's really not sure if it applies.) "The beginning is important. I know that. And I wanted to show you the very best experience. I thought maybe I had a window of opportunity, on Sunday.... but I see now this was such an awful beginning."

"Sunday night was the best I've ever had," says Dean. Which actually isn't precisely true — parts had undeniably been awkward, parts had been nervous. In one way, it had only been a rough start. But even so it's already standing out in Dean's mind as a precious diamond of an evening; a perfect encounter; a dazzling moment to be cherished forever.

Because, of course, what matters is not just the mechanics of the act, but the *person*. The companion that one has chosen. And what it means, what it truly signifies, to be with them at last.

"It was..." Dean repeats, but he can't seem to come up with the right word. His all-time go-to praise word, "awesome," just isn't going to cut it here, is it? And everything else he can think of ("perfect," "wonderful," "magical") seems either totally lame or ridiculously flowery.

"It was the *best,*" Dean repeats, and he tightens his grip around Cas's shoulders.

"But since Sunday I haven't been able to—"

"That doesn't matter," says Dean.

"But you deserve so much m—"

"I just want you to feel better."

"But it might be a while before I—"

"*All I want is for you to get better,*" Dean says. Maybe his meaning comes through this time, for Cas falls silent. Dean then says, pulling back a little to look him in the eyes, "Your *only* job right now is to sleep, and get better. That is your *only* job, and that is what will make me happy." Then he adds (desperately hoping it's true), "Cas, we'll have time. We'll have more time. You just rest. That's all I
Cas relaxes (slightly) then, and when Dean pulls him close again he lets his head lean more completely onto Dean's shoulder. Dean kisses him on the top of the monkey hat. This seems to have become the default kissing location, and though Dean's getting awfully fond of the hat, it reminds Dean that there are other kissing options that haven't been explored. Not that now is the time for any of that, but he wonders if he could at least just kiss Cas on the forehead or something. Yet when he tries to pull back slightly to get another look at Cas's face, he realizes Cas is starting to slump over. His head's not just "leaning" on Dean's shoulder — it's gotten about ten pounds heavier, for Cas is actually falling asleep.

Dean gently pushes him over onto his side and maneuvers him under the covers. Cas wakes only slightly (just enough to shift around and grab at Dean's hand, totally unhelpfully, just when Dean's trying to get his shoes off). Dean manages to get him settled, and once the covers are tucked up under Cas's chin, Cas falls back asleep at once. He still has hold of Dean's hand, and though Dean's exhausted too, he sits for quite a long time on the edge of the bed, watching Castiel.

A/N - This fic is so strange to write. Things I don't originally intend to write about end up clamoring for attention - not like the classic plot bunny, but more as if they demand a sort of respect and attention. Originally I wasn't planning to write any details at all about this particular chemo-night. (I was going to skip right over it to Wednesday.) But, the chemo in this fic requires respect; when it takes the stage it's as if some terrible ancient god has come into view and simply must be attended to. The helplessness and misery of it demand their own kind of respect; it didn't seem right to skip over it. Also, this was Sam's first time seeing it all, and he really rose to the occasion, and it seemed that deserved to be told.

And finally, poor Dean and Cas are both caught between two worlds right now, on this day more keenly than any other - both of them with the memory of Sunday in their minds, and both now miserably just trying to survive the horror of the Monday. It seemed that such an awful emotional dissonance, which is hitting both of them very hard, demanded respect as well, and needed to be shown.

I have the next part almost ready but it needs some more polishing, and I have to switch gears tomorrow to that proposal. I think I can get the next bit up on Sunday or Monday though, so keep checking back in.

Please let me know if you liked this chapter! And I swear to chuck I'll find time somehow to reply to all your comments this week - every SINGLE day for the last two weeks I was positive I was going to find time to do that, and never did, so, what better time to finally actually do it than six days before an NSF grant proposal deadline? :)

Anyway, thanks for reading my story; I really hope it has been worth it so far.
Dean finally hauls himself up from Cas's bed and goes back to the kitchen, thinking to grab a beer before bed... because, he could really use a beer right now. Sam's already there, slumped in one of the kitchen chairs, and he's in the middle of a huge yawn. This, of course, immediately makes Dean yawn too.

"Gotcha," say Sam, breaking into a chuckle.

Dean's already choking back a second yawn. "Damn, I'm beat," he says, and he checks the time on his phone only to find, with some surprise, that it's not even that late. "Jeez, it's only a quarter to ten," he says, pulling up a chair opposite Sam. "I feel like it's three in the morning at least."

"Been a long couple days," points out Sam. "He okay? He seemed pretty good in the car."

Dean nods. "Yeah, he seems pretty good now too. Crashed right into sleep though, like he'd been hit by a truck almost, but I think it's just normal sleep now." *Fell asleep right when I was hugging him,* he almost adds; but he bites back the comment, and takes a long swallow of beer instead.

No need to complicate things unnecessarily tonight.

"Dean... the last couple days...." Sam begins. He's looking thoughtful now, and he says, slowly, "That was kinda brutal, to be honest." Dean can only nod as Sam goes on, rubbing both hands over his face like he's trying to wake himself up, "I'm totally exhausted, and I wasn't even the sick one. I still can't believe he's been going through that alone." He lowers his hands and says, "But at least he gets a week off now, right?"

Dean nods. "Full week. Week and a half, really — rest of this week and all of the next one."

"We gotta make it count," say Sam. The sentence has a disturbing finality to it, as if this might be Cas's last good week ever. Sam fiddles with his beer, rotating the bottle in a little circle on the kitchen table, and adds, "I just meant—"

"I know what you meant."

"I just meant, we should make sure he has a nice week. Y'know, let him stab some werewolves or something."

Dean can't help laughing at that. Sam gives him a grin, but then adds, his expression going serious, "And also, we gotta really get cracking on some other options here. I mean, there's gotta be some strings we can pull, some healing spells we could try or something. Or find somebody who could do something."
"If we could just find a full-powered angel, we'd be all set," points out Dean. "They can heal all kinds of stuff. Not that they ever seem to give a damn about Cas, or about anybody actually, but maybe there's at least one angel up there who might be willing to help him out?"

Sam nods. "I was thinking exactly that. Really not helpful that Heaven's sealed now... maybe there's still some way we can make contact, though? And we should ask Crowley, too."

Dean frowns, and takes another swig of beer. Sam's right, but any dealings with Crowley always make him squirm a little. Especially since... well... there was that one time with Crowley and the male twins. Not all that long ago, even.

Though, of course, Dean had been both drunk and a demon at the time. And at least there'd been no actual direct physical contact with Crowley himself (And thank the fucking stars for that, Dean thinks now). But still....

*That whole year. I wasted that whole fucking year with the Mark of Cain and doing all that bar-diving with Crowley.*

*I could've been with Cas the whole time, couldn't I?*

*Instead I wasted an entire frickin' year. And for what? Just to finally get the Mark right back off again, and release Amara, and screw up everything even worse....*

*I could've been with Cas all along....*

Dean takes another long swallow of beer, trying to put the could-have's, should-have's out of his mind. But the whole Amara thing is now in his mind again and, all of a sudden, something clicks into place.

The reason Cas is powerless now — the reason he can't heal himself, the very reason he can't cure his own cancer — is because Dean freed Amara.

Because, it was the Lucifer possession, and the way Lucifer was torn out of Cas, that drained all Cas's power, wasn't it? And the reason all *that* came about — going into the Cage for Lucifer, Cas saying yes, Cas getting possessed, and of course the big battle at the end — was all because of Amara. It was all part of the effort to defeat Amara. Cas is still paying the price, even now.

And... the reason Amara had been freed in the first place is because of Dean.

So is it *Dean's* fault that Cas can't cure himself now?

Does it all trace back to that moment when Dean accepted the Mark?

Dean shifts in his chair, staring at his beer bottle as he tries to force his thoughts onto another path. He's long known that it's pointless trying to figure out blame or responsibility in situations like this. The long, bizarre chain of events of the past year (okay, the past *entire frickin' decade*) has always felt something like a runaway train headed down a mountainside, totally out of control. All the agonizingly difficult choices that he (and Sam, and Cas) have had to make, over the years, have usually been made blind — random throws of the dice, pretty much. Maybe they did manage to switch the train to a new track now and then, but it seems like it always kept barreling on downhill anyway, no matter what they did. It's impossible to unravel it all now.

*You just gotta keep moving forward,* he instructs himself. It's the same pep talk he gives to other people, the same ol' "Don't blame yourself, you did the best you could." It rings a little hollow now, but he tries anyway: *You gotta put all that aside, and move on. You just gotta play the hand you've*
got, the best you can.

Never mind how the cards ended up that way.

Dean's now scowling at his beer. Sam seems to misunderstand what the scowl is about, for he says, "Hey, don't blow off the idea. Crowley might be willing to help, you never know. The dude's got some serious chops, you know that. And so does Rowena. They might be able to do something, or at least they might know something. It's worth asking."

"No, you're right," says Dean. "We should ask. I'll call him tomorrow." With a sigh, he takes another swallow of beer.

After about only another five minutes of silently finishing off their beers, they head to bed. As they walk together down the hallway, Sam asks, "Hey, do you think one of us should stay up to keep an eye on him?" He eyes Dean from the side, looking him up and down. "You look wiped out, but I could stay up with him."

But Sam looks like he's struggling just to keep his own eyes open. Dean shakes his head.

"He says he's good now, just tired," says Dean. "And remember, I've got that baby monitor thing you bought last week. So, I'll be able to hear him if he needs any help."

This is half true; Dean will be able to hear him, but not because of the baby monitor (which is actually still packed away in Dean's duffel). The reason Dean will be able to hear Cas is because Dean's planning to spend the night right next to him.

He's unclear on why he doesn't just say this to Sam. It wouldn't be a big deal; it's clear Cas still might need some help, and Sam wouldn't think anything of it. But...

Jury of my peers, Dean thinks. It's late, and they're both tired, and it seems simplest not to go into it just yet.

He's really not planning to mislead Sam, and yet somehow it develops that way. An absurd little dance develops while Dean and Sam are both prepping for bed, in which Dean keeps trying to calculate when Sam has retreated permanently to his room — when, in other words, it'll be safe to walk down the hall to Cas's room. Dean's hovering in his bedroom trying to decide whether the coast is clear, but just when he steps out of his door, there's Sam making a last-second bathroom visit. So Dean veers to the kitchen for a glass of water.

Then it seems like the coast might be clear again, but suddenly Sam's walking down the hall to check on the laundry, of all things. (Apparently there's a big load of chemo-soiled towels that Sam's putting through a couple cycles in the washer.)

Dean ends up sitting in his own room for nearly an hour until Sam finally finishes a whole series of unexpected late-night tasks. Dean passes the time by setting up the baby monitor in his room, just to complete the charade.

This is ridiculous, Dean thinks, as he props the receiver on his nightstand and checks the transmitter over. But still he waits, checking the batteries and adjusting the volume, and then he sits quietly on his bed in the dark. Until, at last, he hears Sam shuffle down the hall one last time to his own room.
"G'night," calls out Sam, softly, as he passes Dean's door.

"Night," Dean replies through the door.

Dean waits another ten minutes, just to be sure.

The bunker's quiet. The hallway's empty. Sam's gone to bed.

Dean inches his door open. The coast is clear, this time. Finally! He makes his way down the hall almost on tip-toe, on stockinged feet, safely past Sam's door to Cas's room. Dean's got the baby monitor's transmitter half in one hand, and his phone in the other. The transmitter is, of course, completely unnecessary, and the phone is really just so that he can set himself an early-morning alarm in order to scoot back to his own room in the morning, before Sam gets up.

He's aware, as he slips into Cas's room and inches the door shut behind himself, that this is all absurd. Nonetheless he sets up the baby monitor, and carefully sets his phone alarm for six-twenty in the morning. Sam usually gets up at six-forty or so, to do a seven a.m. morning run before breakfast, even in winter. Dean's actually rolling his eyes at himself as he sets the alarm, putting the volume down low so it won't wake Cas, and sets it on the little bedside table, on the far side of Cas's bed. (My side, Dean's already thinking of it.)

_I'll sort it out later_, Dean thinks. _I'll tell Sam later._

_One step at a time._

Then, at last, for the first time since Sunday night, he slips into bed next to Castiel.

_Under the covers._

But nothing exciting happens. Dean's exhausted, and Cas is still practically comatose. In fact, Cas barely stirs when Dean first slides under the sheets; he rouses only slightly, murmurs, "Oh, you're back," rolls over clumsily toward Dean and falls right back asleep. Cas ends up tilted a little awkwardly against Dean's shoulder and side, snoring a little, with one hand draped at random over Dean's stomach. Nothing's happening, and nothing's going to happen. But that's fine; Dean wasn't at all expecting anything to happen.

It's enough just to be here.

It's enough just to be close. Despite the exhaustion, despite even that ridiculous farce he just went through with the tiptoeing down the hallway and the baby monitor and the phone, it's all worth it just to feel Cas so near again. Cas's body weight is lying heavily against Dean's side now, and he's wonderfully warm, and solid, and close. A wave of something like relief goes rolling through Dean. It's as if he's found his way home at last, making his way out of a blinding blizzard into a warm, cozy home, and he even finds himself letting out a couple of big, deep, exhausted sighs.

And after a couple more moments of lying there, Dean realizes there's a familiar sensation in the air above him. That faint soft presence, once again; that hint of warmth. As if something long and large and soft, something invisible, something that is not there but is there in some sense, has just extended across Dean's chest.

Dean leans his head against Cas's, closes his eyes, and slides into sleep.
All too soon Dean's phone is buzzing on the nightstand. He almost groans as he scrambles to turn it off before it wakes Cas, and then he blinks at the screen in sleepy confusion for several long moments; can it really be morning already? Dean's still so incredibly tired. And Cas's bed (not to mention Cas himself) seems so very warm and appealing that it's simply horrible to think of getting out of the bed.

But it has to be done, doesn't it?

Or else Sam will find out.

Dean drags himself out of bed. Cas gives a faint murmur of complaint as he slips away, and Dean leans back over to him to whisper, "You sleep a little longer. Sleep as long as you want."

"'Kay," mutters Cas, wrapping his arms around Dean's pillow. He seems to already be back asleep again, so Dean tiptoes through the dark to the door. But just as Dean sets his hand on the doorknob, Cas says, suddenly sounding much more awake, "Dean, wait."

The light clicks on; Cas is sitting up in bed now, one hand still stretched out to his bedside lamp. The monkey hat's slightly askew on his head, and he's blinking with that just-woken-up look. But as he folds his hands quietly in his lap, his eyes flick up and down over Dean's body with disconcerting alertness. He seems to be scrutinizing Dean, and he's got that classic squinty frown on his face.

It's the look he gets sometimes when he's trying to assess whether Dean's acting normal. Whether or not Dean might be in trouble. And whether Cas can do anything to help.

"Are you going back to your own room?" Cas asks, with alarming prescience. When Dean hesitates, Cas adds, "Dean, do you want me not to tell Sam anything?"

Now Dean's totally tongue-tied. Somehow it had not occurred to him, at all, that hiding things from Sam means asking Cas to hide things from Sam too.

Which essentially means asking Cas to lie. To his own friend.

The room's so quiet that for a moment Dean can hear his own heartbeat.

Cas takes a breath and says, into the silence, "I know that there's... well, societal constraints, shall we say. I won't say I understand them, but I really don't want to cause you any trouble. Whatever arrangement you prefer, just let me know. And also... uh...." He stops here a moment, glancing down at himself, while Dean blinks at him mutely. Cas's hands tighten slightly on each other, and he's still gazing down into his lap as he says, "I recognize that this vessel isn't the type you'd normally be interested in. It's the wrong sex for you. I'm aware of that." A rueful look passes over his face as he repeats, "I'm very well aware of that. And also, now, my vessel is... well... in very substandard condition, let's say. In all sorts of ways." He takes a slow breath and adds, "You've already been so generous, Dean. But you don't have to continue with all this. If you want to return to the way things were, that's fine." He raises his gaze back to Dean, his eyes dark and solemn as he concludes, "Just because I'm ill doesn't mean you have to keep sleeping in my bed."

And just like that, all of Dean's plans for the morning shift. All his plans for the day, and for the week; all of his plans for his life, really.

Dean takes a breath, lets it out wordlessly, takes another, and finally says to Cas, "I'll be back in, like, an hour tops. I'm just gonna go talk to Sam. I'll bring him up to speed. You don't have to hide anything."
"But you don't have to sleep with me," Cas repeats, now with extra emphasis, as if he's worried Dean didn't fully hear him the first time. "You don't have to. You don't have to do anything you don't want to do. Honestly, I just want you to be happy."

It's a blunt declaration, disarming in its simplicity: *I just want you to be happy.*

All at once Dean's reminded of a similar phrase he heard not all that long ago: *Let yourself be happy.*

Mom's advice, back in that weird rose garden in Portland. That strange episode seems so long ago now that her final words to Dean had almost slipped his mind, but it all comes back now: *Let yourself be happy,* she'd said.

Had she known?

Had she seen it, somehow, from up there in Heaven?

"I'm doing exactly what I want to do, Cas," says Dean, and as he heads out into the hallway to tell Sam frickin' everything, he knows it's the truth.

Dean walks down the dark hallway, but he doesn't tiptoe back to his room as he'd planned originally. Instead he goes to the kitchen, starts the coffeemaker, and sits in a chair and waits.

He's on his second mugful of coffee, turning the mug around in his hands nervously, when Sam finally comes shuffling into the kitchen. Sam's already clad in his winter running outfit (fleece-lined running tights that Dean never misses an opportunity to make fun of, and a light polarfleece jacket). He's got his running shoes in one hand, and he's rubbing his eyes sleepily with the other. "Oh, hey," he says to Dean. "You're up early. Cas okay?"

"He's fine," says Dean. "Slept all night. No issues."

"You checked in on him yet?" says Sam, glancing over his shoulder toward the hallway. "Today, I mean? Or should I?"

*This is it.* Dean steels himself and says, "Actually...uh, I spent the night with him."

"Oh, yeah?" says Sam. "That's probably smart." He turns away to pour himself a mugful of coffee and slugs down a few swallows, his back to Dean.

He seems totally cool with it! Totally unphased!

.... though he's so cool with it, so blase, yawning now as he shuffles back to the table and drinks some more coffee, that it's clear that Sam isn't really getting it.

So Dean forces himself to add, "Yeah, um.... I spent Sunday night with him too. Couple other nights recently too."

Sam takes this in without apparent interest. "Yeah, I noticed you were gone on Sunday. He's okay though, now, right?"

"Yeah. Look, I just..." Dean takes a breath. "I just wanted to say... I might be spending the night in his room again. Pretty often, maybe. Just wanted you to know."
"Yeah, okay," Sam says. He's bending over to his feet now, fiddling with his socks. Dean's heart sinks; Sam's still not getting it. In fact he seems much more interested in his socks than in anything else right now — apparently they're both bunched up wrong, for Sam spends a few moments adjusting each sock, one foot at a time, before he shoves his feet into his shoes. Partway through this, he glances up and seems to notice Dean's tension, for he says, "Just so long as the two of you aren't getting married or anything, right?"

Sam chuckles at his own joke, and Dean goes absolutely still.

Sam says, "Chill, dude, I was joking." He yawns again and starts tying his shoes, adding, "I know it's not like that."

As Sam finishes tying the first shoe and starts on the other, Dean sits frozen, trying to figure out what to say.

Was that just a completely innocent joke, the thing about the getting-married? Or could there have been a barbed edge to it?

Could it possibly even have been a deliberate warning?

.... or no, probably it was just a half-awake lame joke that Sam hadn't really even thought through. Right? Right?

There's still time to say something; there's time to clear this all up and set Sam straight before he heads out on his run. There's a wide open silence stretching out now, and there's plenty of time here to explain. But a horrid possibility has arisen now, one where Sam actually truly isn't cool with it. Scenarios start coming to mind, playing out rapidly in Dean's imagination like tiny glimpses into possible futures; one where there's a long awkward phase of Sam adjusting... another where he never adjusts at all, where he totally freaks out about it, so badly that maybe Dean and Cas have to actually move somewhere else.

The worst possibilities are parading through Dean's mind now, in bright and vivid color, and for a very long several moments he can't say anything at all. Instead he stands and pours himself yet another mugful of coffee (his third), and leans against the sink to drink it. He slugs it down in a single long swallow, and realizes he's having to grip the mug in both hands because his hands are shaking. And he's pretty sure it's not because of the caffeine.

A full minute ticks by; Dean pours himself a fourth mug of coffee and then just holds the mug in both hands, not even bothering to try to drink it. Sam's finished tying his shoes, and now Sam's pulling on the polarfleece running jacket. Dean watches while Sam does up the zipper, and checks that his running gloves are in the pocket. Sam heads for the map-room. Towards the stairs, that is, and towards the front door.

The moment's slipping away. Dean trails after him into the map-room, still clutching his mug of cooling coffee.

"Well, see ya," says Sam, and Dean drifts to a halt by the map-table, watching Sam go up the stairs.

Sam's halfway up the staircase, his feet clattering noisily up the iron steps, when Dean finally manages to blurt out, "Actually, it is like that."

Sam pauses near the top of the staircase and turns toward Dean, one hand on the iron staircase railing. There's a puzzled expression on his face as he looks down at Dean, who's still standing at the map-table, gripping the coffee mug tightly in both hands.
"What?" Sam says. His head's a little cocked in confusion, like he's not sure what he just heard.

Dean feels his face going warm.

"It is like that," repeats Dean.

Sam's just staring at him blankly.

Dean tries to clarify with: "You just said, it's not like we're, uh... getting married... and, um, what if it IS like that. I mean, not the married part exactly. We're not getting married. Heh, well, I don't think. Who knows. Early days, right? But..."

An incredibly terrifying silence follows this disjointed statement. The silence seems to grow, and grow, till it's pressing down on the entire room like a tremendous invisible boulder. Finally Dean's compelled to break the awful silence with something, anything, so he takes a jerky breath and adds, "Anyway, it kinda is like that. I think."

Sam's still just blinking down at him.

"You think?" Sam finally says. "You're not sure?"

"Just the one time so far," Dean says. "Though it was kinda just... one-way...."

"One... way?" says Sam.

He sounds so confused that Dean literally has to bite his tongue to keep himself from saying "I haven't had a chance to blow Cas yet." Dean swallows back that unwise phrase, and his throat now seems to be getting so tight that he wonders if he's about to choke, or might be having some kind of peculiar heart attack. But he finally manages to continue with, "But... the point is, uh... there's, y'know, something going on, I guess. And I wouldn't mind if... uh.... if the something continues. I mean, I wouldn't mind, is all I'm saying, though, uh, I don't know what he wants really. Honestly, I think he's just in this carpe-diem frame of mind or something, cause, I mean, I don't think I'm all that, not at all, but, he just sorta went for it... and, I, just... well, anyway, not complaining here, but it kinda accelerated all of a sudden. But, Sam, he's so sick. I mean, there's things like... he doesn't even think he's gonna be around long enough to heal his wings! He doesn't think he even has that much time yet! And, shit, he still won't tell me what the hell it is! What stage or anything." All the worries are suddenly spilling out, all the gnawing uncertainty about Cas's cancer, as Dean goes on, "He seems so sick this time, Sam, it's worse than before, it's worse even than last week— I don't know what's gonna happen." And right around here Dean realizes he's not talking at all about the sex anymore. The sex is not the most important part; he's talking, of course, about whether Cas is going to die.

Dean goes on, while Sam watches silently, "I just don't know what's gonna happen. I was thinking, we should take him to see some national parks or something, and just... fun things, you know? Like, I don't know, an amusement park? But it's the middle of winter. Maybe just some movies? He really likes movies, you've seen how into them he gets, so I was thinking he might like to go to an actual theater, the new kind with the fancy seats. He could just lay back in the fancy seats. With some popcorn. Maybe see the new Star Wars or something. We just showed him the old one, right? He just saw A New Hope just last week, right? And all those plots Metatron stuffed into his head, that was all just past movies, not future ones, so, I realized, he knows all the past Star Wars but he doesn't know the new ones! So I thought he might like to see the one that just came out. But what if this week's the only chance? What if it's the only chance, Sam? Cause, Rogue One's been selling out all week!" Dean's a little confused to find himself zeroing in on the topic of how to make sure that Castiel gets to see Rogue One in a theater with the fancy reclining seats, but suddenly he can't seem to think about anything else, and he adds, "I already checked, and, in Hastings, there's just that one
good theater and Rogue One's been selling out like every night—"

"Dean," Sam says.

"Yeah?" (It comes out as a soft little gasp of a word, for Dean's having some trouble drawing a full breath of air.)

"He's gonna be okay."

"You think?" Dean says, and his voice goes almost squeaky in his desperation to believe this. His eyes are stinging now, and he has to set the mug down on the map-table just in order to swipe his hand across his eyes.

"Yeah, he's gonna be okay," Sam says. "That's really what I think." Dean glances up to find, though, that Sam's actually still got rather a deer-in-the-headlights look, and he still seems pinned in place, in mid-stride halfway up the stairs. Sam says, slowly, "So, just to back up a second here, if I can set aside the Rogue One ticket issue for just a sec... ah, just to be clear here... uh... did you mean that you... and Cas... are... uh.... like... sleeping.....together?"

"Um. Yeah, I guess."

"You guess? I mean, by sleeping you mean... not sleeping?"

Dean nods. He manages to add, "But just the one time, like I said. So far."

"Just the one time so far," Sam repeats, a little robotically, like he's still taking it in. "And... there's gonna be more times?"

"I don't know," Dean says, and once again he's perilously near tears.

Sam's regrouping. He sounds a lot steadier as he asks, "What I meant was, do you want there to be more times?"

That's the question, isn't it? That's the real question; that's the reason for this whole talk, but Dean can't even speak now. So he nods. He nods several times; he nods a dozen times. He wants to convey to Sam how strangely this has all unfolded, how unexpected it's been, and yet how right it feels, how right and wonderful and... downright thrilling, really; but how awful and terrifying it's been too, what with knowing that Cas may not have much time left. But all he can do is nod. And now Sam's clattering back down the staircase, and striding over to the map table very fast, and giving Dean a sudden, very much unexpected, and completely rib-crushing hug.

Stop fucking crying, Dean then has to tell himself, because it's not just a single-man-tear this time, and not just a single manly swipe of a manly hand across the eyes; he's getting downright snuffy and he needs a frickin' Kleenex now. Not to mention his hands are shaking again. Whether it's from relief about Sam or from worry about Cas is hard to tell, but whatever the cause, Sam must feel it, for he tightens his grip and hangs on for surprisingly long, till Dean says, "All right, all right, jeez, let go already, what the fuck, are you gay or something?"

At that Sam lets out a bark of laughter and lets go, and suddenly it's all okay.

"Okay, I, uh, I'll admit I did not entirely see this coming," says Sam.

"But it's cool?" Dean asks.

"Of course it's cool, are you frickin' kidding me?" says Sam, sounding almost insulted. "What kind
of a question is that? Oh and—" (Sam suddenly looks dismayed) "—oh, damn, promise me you will forget completely about that stupid joke I said. The married thing. I was just kidding, I swear. It was just a joke, a really lame joke, and it was only a joke just because I was thinking it wasn't that, y'know? But if it is that, that's fine, I just didn't know that that's what it was — oh wait, shit, did I crack another joke like that earlier?" (Sam looks practically consumed with guilt now.) "Back when we were watching, what was it, Planes Trains and Automobiles? Why didn't you just punch me? Dean, man, you should have punched me! I just didn't know. I just thought... I assumed... look, I always thought you were only into girls, y'know?"

"Mostly into girls," Dean corrects.

"Mostly..." Sam repeats. He takes a breath, running a hand through his hair, and mutters, "Mostly. Got it."

"Not a hundred percent of the time, apparently," says Dean.

"Yeah... got it...." says Sam. After a moment he says, rather thoughtfully, "You know, I really should've realized when you about passed out when we met Dr. Sexy that one time—"

"I did not pass out!"

"No, just blushed like a frickin' twelve year old girl and lost the ability to talk for like five minutes, that's all. Look, uh, just, uh, putting the puzzle pieces together here. Gimme a sec to adjust, okay?"

"Take all the seconds you want," says Dean, wiping his nose on his sleeve. "I'm still not adjusted myself."

Sam takes a long look at Dean, rummages in his pocket, pulls out a Kleenex and hands it to Dean. Dean blows his nose, muttering, "I'm such a frickin' mess."

"It's allowed," says Sam. "Dean, he's gonna be okay, I swear."

"I really fucking hope so," says Dean, stuffing the Kleenex in his back pocket.

"I got some ideas. Remember, there's some things we can try. Crowley and all." And just like that, Sam seems to have shifted gears to the much more urgent topic: the cancer. He looks toward the library, and says, nodding toward the library table (where, Dean now realizes, a certain black book is sititng), "And also, that book there. The angel book. I think we gotta read that whole book. I've only gotten up to chapter 5, but it's definitely got some info about angels that we didn't know. Maybe you can take on some of the other chapters? The more we learn about angels, about how their bodies really function, how they fit into vessels and all — the more we learn, the better, I think."

"I'll get right on it," says Dean, nodding eagerly. "Chapter 6. I'm on it. I'll read Chapter 6 while you're on your run."

"Okay, you do that, and I was gonna do some thinking about other options while I run, and we'll pow-wow when I get back." Sam starts to turn toward the staircase again, but then pauses and glances over his shoulder at Dean with a narrow look. "You weren't thinking I was gonna truly freak out or anything, were you?"

"What? No," says Dean. "Of course not. No, not at all."

"Cause I'd be pretty insulted if you that's what you were thinking," Sam says. "You weren't thinking, oh, what if Sam totally freaks out and we have to move out, or some bullshit like that?"
"Of course not," says Dean. He hesitates and adds, "Well, only a little."

"Jerk," Sam says.

"Bitch," Dean replies automatically. Sam grins at him, and Dean can't help grinning back; then Sam lunges at him with one more hug, thumps him hard on the back, says, "Don't move out," and with that he lets go and dashes upstairs.

"Don't forget Chapter 6," Sam calls out as he's headed out the door.

"On it," Dean replies, and Sam's gone.

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A/N - More as soon as I get a chance. My samba band's leading one of those pro-women, anti-Trump marches tomorrow, apparently through a howling blizzard and two feet of snow, but they say that a volunteer "shovel brigade" has materialized to shovel the snow in front of us so that the march can happen. So, I gotta do my civic duty there and drum my little hands off for the cause, with a flask of Trump-B-Gone in my pocket to help out, but assuming I don't die of hypothermia I will get back to the fic Sat evening or Sunday. Hope to have more for you soon.

Thank you for reading! As always, please let me know if you liked this. I always love to hear from you!!
Once the front door's closed, Dean stands there a few moments longer, rubbing his forehead with one hand as he tries to settle himself back down.

The world's turned upside-down. Definitely upside-down.

Yet, impossibly, it's ended up rolling all the way around until it's somehow gone right-side-up again.

"Weirdest brother chat ever," Dean finally mutters to himself. He needs to blow his nose again; he knows there's a big box of Kleenex in the kitchen, so he picks up the mug of coffee (now ice-cold), heads to the kitchen, grabs a huge fistful of Kleenexes and blows his nose. Twice.

Then he throws out all the used Kleenexes, and stuffs his pockets with a bunch of clean ones (just in case). He sets the mug in the sink and splashes some cold water on his face; it feels very good, and Dean lingers there by the sink for a moment, dampening a dishtowel and holding it on his closed eyes. As he wipes his face dry with another towel, he's a little startled to find that he despite all the completely ridiculous tears, despite all the confusion, and despite all the lingering anxiety and fear about Cas, he's actually feeling hopeful.

He feels downright good, actually. And not just because Sam had been so frickin' cool about the whole Cas thing, the coming-out speech or the Rogue-One speech or whatever the hell that had been. Obviously Sam's support is great — really great. But the other reason Dean's feeling hopeful now is also just that Sam seemed so sure that Cas'll be okay.

Not that Sam has any inside info or anything about Cas's condition. But still, it's tremendous boost even to just be reminded that the future is not necessarily hopeless.

Dean pats his face dry and starts to wash out his coffee mug. He glances down the hall as he does so, and something occurs to him: he can go to Cas's room any time he wants. Even when Sam's around. It's a heady thought. Dean actually pauses for a moment, coffee cup frozen in his hand, tap water running down the drain unnoticed, as it sinks in.

I can go to Cas's room and hang out for hours, he thinks. Sam won't mind. Sam won't think anything of it.

I can sleep there at night! In Cas's room. In his bed. WITH him. (His next thought is, Though, probably should keep the volume down.)

Or he can come to my room. That'd work too.

I can take him out for drives or whatever, and Sam'll get it. I can take him to see Rogue One, and Sam'll get it. I can take him out see the Grand Canyon or whatever, and Sam'll get it. I don't have to come up with a story, I don't have to come up with some stupid rationale, I don't have to even think about it. I can just do it.
We can even sit together on the couch in the bunker when we're all hanging out....

Not that Dean's planning to rub Sam's face in it or anything, of course. Gonna act civilized, of course, around Sam, he thinks. No wild make-out sessions. No horny teen stuff. Because, as awesome as Sam has acted today, it's gotta be an adjustment nonetheless. It's an adjustment for everyone. (Not to mention that's never that fun to feel like a third wheel, regardless of the genders involved. And even if the other two wheels are your best buds.)

And it's an intense relief, too, to realize that he's not going to have to ask Cas to lie about anything.

Dean's almost humming to himself as he finally gets moving again. He scrubs out the mug almost merrily, rinses it and sets in the dish strainer, and then he grabs another dishtowel and heads to the library. Where he stands by the broad table, drying his hands carefully on the towel, as he looks down at a certain large black book:

The Physiology of Angels

With Notes on Behavior

and

Additional Observations

by

Knut Schmidt-Nielsen

Dean dries every finger thoroughly before he lets himself touch the book, for it's clearly an old book, and very likely a rare one. It's been read before; the corners of the thick black cover are rounded with wear, the spine creased with use. The Men of Letters must've studied it, thinks Dean, as he drapes the dishtowel over one shoulder and picks it up.

It's an intimidatingly big book, actually — almost a foot tall, some eight inches wide, and at least an inch and a half thick. It's heavy in his hands. He balances it in his left hand, strokes one forefinger over the worn cover for a moment, then lifts it open.

The heavy cover falls open quietly, leaning against his forearm. A soft scent wafts up from thick cream-colored pages, a faint mixture of worn leather, of inkwells, of old paper and dusty library shelves. Dean can almost imagine the Men of Letters sitting here as they read it, sipping their martinis and whiskey as they sat and studied in the big upholstered chairs; there'd have been a soft hum of activity in the background, dishes clattering in the kitchen, the old radio playing quietly in the background...

Dean leans over and sniffs the pages for a moment. It seems there's a hint of some other scent, too...
not just a Men-of-Letters library odor, but something else. The faintest scent of heather, or, perhaps, of mountain air.

Dean straightens up, flips past the title page and comes to the Table of Contents. It reads:

Author's Preface

1. The Variety of Angels
2. The Angel's True Form
3. Dimensions, Wavelengths and the Etheric Plane
4. Vessels and Possession
5. Grace and Power
6. Wings, Feathers and Flight
7. Senses And Communication
8. Healing, Time-Travel and Other Angelic Abilities
9. Holy Fire and Other Weaknesses
10. The Question of Lifespan and Death
11. Behavior and the Expression of Emotion
12. Additional Observations

Glossary (with Publisher's Note)

Acknowledgments

Chapter Ten, "The Question of Lifespan and Death", catches Dean's eye (the word "Death" seems to jump out rather aggressively). But Dean resolutely turns to Chapter Six instead, still balancing the book across his left hand and forearm as he flips through the pages. Illustrations start flickering past, and when Dean comes to Chapter Six he finds there's a carefully detailed illustration of a single feather on the left-hand page, opposite the first page of the chapter text. The feather illustration is printed on a smoother, more expensive paper stock and is protected by a translucent sheet of rice paper. Dean leafs the delicate rice paper aside and studies the illustration, which is of a small snow-white feather about four inches long, slightly curved.

Every detail of the feather is perfectly captured, each and every tiny fibril laid out with a precisely hand-inked line. There are tiny text labels pointing out certain parts, a whole feather-vocabulary that Dean has never known existed: Outer vane. Inner vane. Rachis. Notch. Calamus. Barbs. Plumulaceous section. Pennaceous section. After-feather.

"And I thought a feather was just a feather," Dean mutters. It occurs to him, then, as he looks at the illustration, that the dimensions and the shape of the white feather look familiar. Soon he places it; in shape and size it looks remarkably like the black feather from Cas's dresser drawer, the one that Cas had been making a drawing of the other day. Other than the white color of this one in the book, it could be exactly the same feather.

Below the illustration is a neat hand-lettered legend:

Figure 6.1. Fresh-molted alula-feather of an adult seraph, from left wing, while seraph inhabiting human vessel. Drawn to 1:1 scale.

Dean flips past a few more pages and soon comes to another illustration, this one showing a fully
spread wing. It's an impressive arc of a wing; a human vessel is drawn for scale and the wing seems truly immense in comparison, far bigger than even an eagle's wing. It must be some eight or nine feet long, a gleaming fan of dozens and dozens of perfectly aligned feathers stretched out in parallel arrays, almost architectural in their tidy organization. Groups of feathers are labeled with more of those tiny, elegant hand-lettered notes: Primaries seem to be the longest flight feathers on the outer part of the wing, Secondaries the ones on the middle part, Tertiars on the inside. Layers of delicate smaller feathers are labeled Greater Coverts, Lesser Coverts, and "Superior Coverts (Seraphs only)." Two tiny little extensions at the main joint of the wing are labeled "Alulae (cf. alulas)." There are a dozen other labels as well.

The figure legend reads:

*Figure 6.2. Spread wing of an adult seraph, with major feather tracts labeled. The alulae, or alulas, are doubled in seraphs only.*

"Adult seraph," murmurs Dean, reading the figure legend again.

Adult seraph. It's odd to think of Cas in such dry terms. It hammers home that Cas is a different species. Angel... seraph....

Not just a man at all, as much as he may look like one.

It's always a little odd to be reminded of that fundamental truth. It's also odd to realize, as Dean studies Figure 6.2, that Castiel probably has (or, at least, had?) this full impressive array of feather types. All the different shapes, with all the different names; this is part of Castiel's true body. So of course, Cas must know all this stuff inside and out... the terms, the vocabulary, all sorts of stuff about wing anatomy. He's had these huge wings his whole long life. It must all be second nature to him.

And it's clearly something he cares about. Or else why would he be making drawings of his very last feather?

It's something that matters to Cas, and Dean knows absolutely nothing about it.

*I gotta read this whole book.,* Dean thinks, closing the book thoughtfully. *Not just Chapter Six like Sam said, but the whole thing. The whole thing.*

But there's something else he needs to do too — something he needs to do first, actually, a promise he needs to keep. Earlier this morning, Dean told Castiel that he'd be back in an hour. He checks his phone now; it's been an hour, and the "adult seraph" might be waiting. So Dean tucks the big book securely under one arm and heads down the hallway.

*I'll just talk to Cas for a bit,* he thinks. *Give him the update. And then I'll get right to work on Chapter Six. And the rest of the book too.*

It turns out Cas is awake. When Dean knocks on the door and slowly inches it open, Cas is seated at his desk, his drawing-pad in front of him and a cardboard box of messy-looking charcoals lying open, a few chunky-looking big gray erasers sitting here and there and a water bottle off to the side. He's turned on his little desk light (the houseplant is sitting directly under it), and he looks up with a pleased smile and a warm, "Dean. Come in."
He's still in his sleeping clothes (t-shirt and sweats), supplemented now with the blanket from the bed, which he seems to have wound around his waist for extra warmth.

"You didn't go back to sleep?" Dean says. "I thought you'd be exhausted."

"I am, actually," Cas confesses — and now Dean can see the dark circles under his eyes, and a certain heavy-lidded look to his expression. "I couldn't fall back asleep." He turns back to his drawing-pad with an expression of forced nonchalance, and as he adds one more dark line to the page, he adds, a little too casually, "So... uh... I happened to hear Sam's door open, a while ago. And... so... I... suppose I was wondering if...."

"He's totally cool with it," says Dean, with a grin.

Cas's head snaps up and he looks at Dean sharply, all the nonchalance gone.

"You spoke with him?" says Cas.

"Told you I would, didn't I?"

"Yes, but I thought you'd chicken out," Cas says.

Dean can't help laughing. "Jeez, dude, have a little faith!"

"I have far more faith in you than I do in God," Cas says, quite seriously, "but even so I thought you'd chicken out."

"Yeah, okay, to be honest I almost did," Dean confesses. He sets the book down (Cas gives it a sharp glance, one eyebrow raised), and adds, "But, well, y'know, this one matters." Cas just blinks at that, looking back up at him, and Dean goes on, "Anyway, yeah, I spoke with him. Told him everything."

Cas narrows his eyes. "Even the fellatio?"

Dean laughs again. "Word to the wise, I don't think he's gonna want the exact anatomical details. But he's got the general idea. He's cool with it, Cas; he was, like, amazingly cool. Still adjusting to the idea in general, I think, but honestly it couldn't've gone better. I think we can, like... sit together and stuff, you know? Like, for movies, at dinner. I mean, if we want to."

Cas still seems a little skeptical. He thinks for a moment, still looking up at Dean, and then he asks, "Did you have a heartwarming brotherly hug?"

"What?"

"A heartwarming brotherly hug. I've noticed you two do that sometimes. It's generally a good sign."

"Uh... Yeah, actually. Yeah, we did."

"Really?" Cas brightens at the news, and he finally sets down his piece of charcoal and leans back a little in his chair. "That's... that's... quite a relief, actually," he says. "A considerable relief, I have to admit. I was getting a little worried. You were gone for quite a while. I could hear there was some kind of a conversation going on — I snuck out to the back bathroom at one point for a shower, but I didn't want to eavesdrop, so I just had the shower and came back here." He lets out a sigh, repeats, "Oh, that's quite a relief," and now he's slumping so much in his chair that Dean wonders if Cas spent the entire last hour here just worrying about how it was going.
"Dude, it's really okay," says Dean, taking a step closer to squeeze his shoulder. Though, in fact, Dean's now feeling a little hesitant. There are green lights and go-aheads from all sides now, but, paradoxically, the fact that all obstacles seem to have suddenly been removed makes Dean totally unsure about what to do next. (Do they have to be totally couple-y now? Or can they just chill? What's the normal next step?) He settles for patting Cas's monkey hat, and adds, "Have you been up this whole time? Just sitting here?"

"Oh, I was just doing a little drawing," Cas says, and suddenly he goes a little tense again. He starts to pile the scattered charcoals and erasers into their cardboard box, adding, "It's nothing, though, just something to pass the time." He now seems to be trying to subtly shield the drawing from view, mostly by leaning forward and blocking Dean's line of sight, so of course Dean sidles sideways, leans right over him and stares at the drawing pad, even angling the desk lamp shamelessly to give it some more light. Cas gives up pretty easily; with just a little sigh, he slumps back in his chair again and lets Dean take a look. "It's not coming out right," he complains.

At first Dean can't even figure out what it's supposed to be. The painting seems to be just a sheet of darkness, all muted shades of dark grays and blacks, with indistinct lines and contours here and there. It's like a close-up view of a dark storm cloud. In what way is this a moment to remember? , Dean wonders, leaning closer still, and all at once it snaps into focus: it's a view of somebody's shoulder, viewed from behind.

The angle is unusual, as if peering over a sleeping person's shoulder from very close. Most of the foreground is just the dim rounded hump of one shoulder, and there's a muscled bicep partly visible. Beyond the shoulder is a faint impression of a hand curled on a bundle of bedding. There's a dreamy aura of restfulness over the whole painting; the soft grays and blacks lend it a calm, peaceful quality, and the more Dean looks at it, the more the soft lines seem to come into focus. Over at one side, he realize, is the slope of the person's neck; just below that, a curved, folded line is the collar of their t-shirt; the impressionistic strokes above that are the dim outline of their head in the dark. There's even a very delicately detailed rendering of the short hair at the nape of the neck.

Oh.

"Is that... me?" Dean asks.

Cas colors a little, and swallows, but he nods. "I hope you don't mind. I just... well, since I couldn't get back to sleep, I thought I might try to capture this image while it was still fresh in my head. It's nothing much." He folds his arms over the wad of blanket that's still rolled up around his waist, frowning at the drawing. "Just a view in the dark. I woke up last night for a little while and I just happened to have this angle for a little bit. Just for a few minutes. I didn't want to wake you." His initial shyness seems to be evaporating; now he seems to be caught up in evaluating the drawing, and soon he's virtually scowling at it. "It's not quite right though. It's missing something. I haven't captured it...."

"Looks like you captured it fine," says Dean, who's slowly starting to take in that this hazy middle-of-the-night view of Dean asleep, just Dean asleep in the dark and nothing really happening at all, was apparently a moment that Castiel wants to preserve and remember.

"No, I haven't captured what it was like," says Cas. "What it felt like, I mean." He reaches out and starts putting the last of the charcoals away. Some of the charcoals seem to be normal pencils, but some seem to be more like raw chunks of something like actual charcoal, and Cas's hands are blackened with it. They're getting blacker still as he fiddles with the charcoals, and after a moment more of watching Cas rearrange the charcoals in their little box, and arrange them again, Dean realizes Cas is probably as uncertain about the next move as he is.
"We could, um," says Cas. "I guess we could have some breakfast. Or, you know, I wouldn't actually mind lying down again—"

"Let's lie down then," suggests Dean.

"Yes," says Cas in relief, nodding. Though his face falls a moment later. "I actually am quite tired, is the only problem. I'm still a little concerned that you shouldn't feel obliged to upend your life—"

"Cas," Dean say, and Cas falls silent, looking up at him.

An almost magical stillness settles over the little room. Cas is looking up at Dean now with a studious frown on his face, and Dean has the impression that Cas is trying to memorize the contours of Dean's face, maybe for some later drawing. The quiet pool of amber light from the little desk lamp is slanting over Cas's face from the side; half his face is in shadow, and the tassels of the monkey hat frame the sides of his face. What with the pile of bedding wrapped around him like some kind of peculiar old-time cape, and the darkened room behind him, he looks, once again, like a medieval angel from some ancient painting.

He's beautiful, Dean thinks. Many times Dean has found himself looking at Castiel; many times, for many years. But he's never quite allowed himself to verbalize it to himself in this way:

He's beautiful.

No matter how thin he is, no matter how tired, no matter how ill, he's beautiful.

Though Dean's pained to realize, as he gazes at Cas, that in addition to the thinness and the general air of fatigue, Cas is still bruised from when he fell on his face in the Denver hotel three days ago. The next day he'd insisted he was fine, but there's still a dark purplish shadow across one cheek and partway up his nose. His split lip's partly healed, at least; but it's swollen on one side, with a dark scabby spot still showing at the place where it had bled.

"I still think you should've let us get that lip sutured," Dean says, gesturing at Cas's mouth. "It's healing pretty well, actually," says Cas, lifting one hand to feel at the swollen spot on his lip. "I just have to remember not to smile too much — that's the only time it hurts. I'm not worried about it." He feels at his lip for a moment longer, and then traces his fingers over the bruise on his cheek and nose as well. "Everything's healing fine," he says. But, of course, since he's just been handling the charcoals, everywhere he touches his fingers leave broad smears of black and gray.

Dean can't help grinning. "You doing a new charcoal sketch right on your face?" he points out. "Your bruises weren't dark enough already?"

"Oh," says Cas. He glances at his charcoal-dusted fingers. "I forgot." There's a small damp rag sitting on a saucer nearby, and Cas pulls it closer and starts wiping his hands clean — or relatively clean. Cas then makes a move to wipe his face with the dirty little rag, but Dean reaches out a hand to block him.

"Not sure it's medically advisable to rub art supplies over injuries," Dean points out. "Lemme just—hold on, I actually have some clean Kleenexes here." (Not that he's about to confess that the reason his pockets are full of Kleenex is because Dean was bawling like a baby not twenty minutes ago.) He pulls a clean Kleenex out and dampens it with a bit of water from Cas's water bottle.

"Sit still," Dean orders, leaning closer. As as gently as he can, he wipes the charcoal off of Cas's cheek.
The light's a little wrong; Dean's now casting a broad shadow across Cas's face, so he kneels by Cas's side to get out of the path of the light. Then he has to brace Cas's chin with one hand, in order to angle Cas's face a little toward into the light for a better view. Cas lets Dean turn his head willingly enough. But Cas is watching Dean closely now, his eyes tracking up and down Dean's face. Their faces are only about a foot apart, and the light strikes Cas's eyes. That dazzling blue....

...and all of a sudden the air is crackling with potential, as Dean realizes exactly why he's ended up volunteering to clean Cas's face for him, when Cas could've done this perfectly well on his own. He's a grown man, after all. (Or rather, he's an "adult seraph.")

*If he were a girl I'd already be going for the kiss*, Dean thinks. But Cas isn't a girl — Cas isn't even a human — and also he's got that bruised lip — and the whole situation is just unfamiliar enough that now Dean's frozen in place, one hand still on Cas's chin. Cas is absolutely motionless too, as if waiting to see what Dean'll do.

Then Dean thinks, *If there's a reason I offered to clean his face, there's also a reason he's letting me do it.*

The uncertainty shifts into a delicious sense of anticipation.

*Charcoal. Get the charcoal off first*, Dean thinks. Moving slowly and deliberately, Dean wipes the charcoal from Cas's nose. Stroke by stroke, changing once to a new damp Kleenex, Dean gently cleans the bruises. Then, with extremely delicate dabs of yet another clean damp Kleenex, while kneeling at Cas's side and still bracing Cas's chin with his other hand, Dean cleans all the charcoal off of Cas's split lip.

Cas's eyes are on him every moment.

Dean finally lowers the Kleenex. (His other hand's still on Cas's chin.) Cas lets out a long, slow breath.

"Thank you," says Cas, quietly.

Cas raises his own hand to his chin, places his hand over Dean's, and squeezes Dean's hand lightly. Their faces are only about eight inches apart now as Cas says (still holding Dean's hand to his own face, still watching Dean closely), "I appreciate all the... all the assistance, Dean. All the care. More than you can know. But, you must understand, you really don't have to—"

"Yeah, I'm gonna kiss you now, okay?" says Dean.

Cas shuts up right away, with a rapid little series of nods, so Dean leans in and kisses him.

Dean first kisses him on the unbruised cheek, not right on the mouth (a memory has come to mind of Cas's seeming unfamiliarity with kisses-on-the-mouth, so Dean's planning to home in on that area gradually.) One kiss on the cheek; another; Dean goes slowly, tasting his skin, feeling the odd softness and sparseness of his cheek stubble. Dean turns Cas's chin a little, letting his lips almost glide over Cas's skin, and kisses once more, very near the corner of Cas's mouth now. Cas is breathing a little faster now, and Dean closes his eyes for a moment, breathing in Cas's scent.

Dean's picked up this scent before, in their few evenings together, but now he finally lets himself really concentrate on it. He drinks it in; it's a mix of that mint mouthwash Cas has been using, and the soap he must have used in the shower, and toothpaste... and something else. Something almost outdoorsy, like wind and ozone; like rain, or desert dust, or heather.

*Feathers*, Dean thinks. *Feathers of an adult seraph*, and he breathes it in again, their cheeks very
close, letting his own warm breath puff out over Cas's skin.

It's Cas who turns his head then, quite suddenly, and goes for the mouth.

It's a little awkward, actually. Cas's first sudden lunge takes Dean by surprise and their teeth knock together, and their noses too. They're also not quite at the right angle; Dean's having to lean forward and reach up a little, while Cas is having to twist his head down. None of this matters at all. It all seems absolutely perfect in every way, for there's nothing in the world but Cas now. Cas is all Dean can see, all he can taste, and all he can feel. Both Cas's hands are cradling Dean's face now, and Dean's somehow got hold of both the tassels of the monkey hat (which turn out to be a really great way to pull Cas closer; almost instantly Dean realizes he can almost steer Cas's head, by pulling on the tassels like reins). As he pulls Cas into a better position, mouth to mouth at last, Cas's mouth is hot and wet and minty and coppery all at once, and again that tantalizing feather scent is in the air. There's abruptly a sense of something all-embracing, something all around. Wings, Dean thinks. His wings are on me, and Cas is all over Dean's mouth now, nibbling at Dean's lips hungrily, the tip of his tongue running over Dean's lips too, probing and curious and delicate, like he's trying to taste everything all at once. And that taste, that scent... heather, mint, copper...

Copper? Wait.

Dean pulls back. Cas's lip is bleeding.

"Dammit!" says Dean, grabbing another Kleenex and dabbing at the cut again. "I was gonna avoid your cut! I was totally gonna avoid it. I forgot, I'm sorry—"

"Oh, that started bleeding right at the beginning, when our teeth bumped," says Cas, "But I don't really care about that at all. Unless it prohibits further kissing, in which case it's a tragedy. Would you like to go back to bed?"

Maybe Chapter Six can wait just one more hour, thinks Dean. Or two.

"I know you're tired, though," Dean says, as Cas shakes himself out of his toga-blanket (he's got it so well wrapped around himself that it takes him a minute to unbundle). Together they spread the blanket over the bed, and then Cas slides between the sheets on his side, while Dean goes around to the other side. Cas is giving Dean a rather narrow-eyed look as Dean goes on, "I mean, we don't have to do anything, like I was saying last night. If you need more sleep, then just sleep. I even brought a book to read, in case you just wanna conk out. So if you're tired, you just—"

"Yes, yes, Dean, if I get tired I'll sleep," says Cas, reaching out with both hands and yanking Dean closer. "I'm not tired right now though."

"I thought you said you were tired—"

"I've woken up. Could you just get these clothes of yours off before you lie down?"

Mere moments later Dean's stripped down completely. Just like last Sunday. Yet once again Cas has kept his own clothes on. He's just wearing sweatpants and a t-shirt, which really isn't much of a barrier at all, of course, but it makes Dean wonder if Cas might be feeling uncertain about how he
looks. About how thin he is, how bruised, how battered... How ill, really. So Dean tries to remind himself to go slow, and give him time. But Cas seems to have gone straight from zero to sixty again, for just seconds after Dean has finally gotten his own clothes off and has lain back down, Cas shifts closer, presses very close, and then, just like Sunday, he reaches right out and grabs Dean's dick again.

Which of course is getting hard by now.

Cas goes right to work, licking his palm and working his hand up and down, and Dean's soon getting lost in the sensations, eyes closed, starting to thrust into Cas's hand. It's incredibly tempting to just let him continue, but when Cas starts to shift around and burrow his way down under the bedclothes, obviously thinking about giving Dean another blowjob, Dean remembers that Cas still hasn't had his own turn yet.

"Not so fast," Dean says to him, grabbing him the shoulders to halt his descent. "Not that I wouldn't love it, but — your turn, angel. Get back up here." He hauls Cas up, ignoring Cas's inevitable protests ("But, Dean, you deserve—"), rolls toward him, and slides one knee between Cas's legs. Cas shuts up fast then, and there's an electrifying moment when Dean realizes Cas is hard too. Dean can feel it, against his own leg, and the half-formed plan Dean had been developing about how to get Cas's clothes off then has to be tabled for a bit, because all of a sudden it's imperative that Dean just yank him even closer and press even harder against him.

Though, there's a odd hesitation on Cas's part, just for a moment; Cas even makes the faintest move to pull away, but a second later he reverses direction and pushes right back against Dean, hard. Oh, yes, there it is, definitely, a hard rod of pressure nudging through Cas's sweats, pressing right against the side of Dean's cock.

Dean works his lower arm under Cas's waist (Cas helps, lifting up a little), wraps his upper arm around too, and now he's got both hands on Cas's ass. Perfect leverage, Dean thinks, perfect, perfect, pulling him closer, feeling that hard rod press even more firmly against his own stomach. Dean shifts around till their cocks are lined up perfectly, and pulls again. They both let out a gasp at the sensation, and Cas's hands are around Dean's shoulders now. Dean starts kissing him (forgetting all about the split lip, then remembering, then forgetting again), and now Cas seems to be doing genuine hip thrusts, soft rolling movements that seem to have just come over him instinctively. That tantalizing rod of pressure pushes, and pushes again, and it seems even warmer now, and definitely firmer, nudging hard into Dean's stomach. The damn sweatpants are still in the way though, and the more they press together the harder it's getting to get the sweats off. Cas is nibbling Dean's ear now as Dean tries to maneuver the waistband of the sweats down, but he doesn't make much progress, for Cas can't seem to stop his steady thrusting against Dean's stomach. Cas then starts clawing at the waistband too, and all of a sudden Cas's cockhead is free — just the cockhead, poking out above the waistband, but that's a start, and Dean gasps to feel it rubbing, velvety and hot, against the side of Dean's own naked cock.

"That's it, angel, there you go, that's it," Dean mutters, head down against Cas's shoulder. "Oh, man, do that some more. Just keep doing that..."

Cas wraps both arms around Dean's shoulders, buries his head in Dean's shoulder, nibbling at his neck now (Cas's kissing locations may be somewhat random, but wherever he does it, it feels wonderful). He just keeps thrusting, long, slow movements, and more and more of the shaft of his cock is sliding along Dean's. Back and forth, and back and forth. A line of dampness starts smearing along the skin of Dean's stomach; Cas's cockhead is dripping.

"Holy fuck," Dean mutters.
"Is that... a joke?" gasps Cas.

Dean has to laugh. "It wasn't, but— " Cas thrusts again, and Dean forgets what he'd been about to say. "Ah, *damn*, you feel so fucking *good*, Cas—"

"I should... be careful..." mutters Cas. "But... this... you..." He gives another long thrust, slower this time, like he's savoring it. "*Ugh,*" he gasps. "Ah. It's good. It's good, it's good. But, I need to be careful..."

"We'll be careful," Dean promises, not really sure what Cas's referring to, till he remembers: The surgical scars.

Scars on the abdomen. Recent surgeries.

And Dean's probably poking him *right there*, now.

"I'll be careful," Dean repeats, thinking, *get away from his belly*. Reluctantly, he pulls back. "Let me just, lemme get at you. Get these clothes off—"

"Careful— " Cas says again, but he seems to have mostly forgotten now what he was trying to be careful about, for as Dean fumbles at Cas's sweatpants, trying to get them off, Cas just grabs at Dean's dick again, pulling at it gently. Cas's sweats are not cooperating, and the bed's also getting way too hot (they didn't need that blanket *at all*), and Dean's getting so impatient that he finally just yanks Cas's waistband lower down, low enough that he can pull it down around the base of Cas's balls. It's a move that Dean's done many times himself, with his own sweats; the elastic-waistband-down-under-the-balls maneuver is a tried and true way to get quick access to *everything* without having to strip totally. (Not to mention it can almost act like a half-a-cockring if it's positioned just right.)

But as Dean pulls the waistband down, Cas hesitates. It's not quite a flinch, more a slightly apprehensive tensing-up, but Cas's thrusting stops. *He's not sure how it'll feel*, Dean thinks. Yet Cas is still hard, and Dean's pretty sure he's going to like this arrangement. And now it's getting a little hard to think about the details, because Dean's finally got his hand on Cas's cock.

There's an electrical shock at the skin-to-skin contact. Cas outright groans, and Dean almost does too, just at the feel of Cas's cock. It's thick and hot in Dean's hands, the dimensions slightly different from his own, both familiar and strange. Combined with the fact that *Cas's* hand is also on *Dean's* dick, there's a moment of upside-down sensory confusion, a mirror-world juxtaposition when the two sets of sensations seem fantastically superimposed on each other. Cas is stroking Dean's dick firmly, and Dean can't help but mimic the moves exactly on Cas's dick as well, and for a moment (till Dean gets far too excited to keep the rhythm steady) they're stroking each other with near perfect synchrony. Cas's hesitant moment of uncertainty seems to have passed; he's moving again now, and his breath is coming faster, in a steady series of gasps that are starting to turn into grunts. Dean feels Cas's cock throb in his hand and it seems the most exciting thing he's ever felt; Dean squeezes and pulls at Cas's cock, and it throbs again and Cas lets out a helpless whine, his whole body shifting, almost squirming. So now, going just on instinct, Dean does to Cas exactly what he always loves done to himself at about this stage: he starts jerking Cas's dick *very* fast and hard, with one hand, and simultaneously he reaches down to Cas's balls with the other, giving them a gentle squeeze, and pulling them down over the elastic of the sweatpants.

There's a split second where Cas seems to be loving this.

But something feels wrong—
Cas gasps. It's not a good gasp; it's a lurchy indrawn breath of shock. Something's definitely wrong, something's not right, and Dean freezes, but it's too late; Cas lets out a cry of unmistakable pain, and now he's scrabbling backwards, bat...
"Okay, I promise. I promise," says Dean. "But not till you tell me what the hell is going on, because, Cas, dammit, I don't want to hurt you like this!"

Cas sags a little, and he nods. Dean hands him a water bottle, and Cas takes in a mouthful and rinses his mouth, spits it out in the pan, and takes a long drink. He seems a bit steadier; and finally he shifts around little till he's leaning back on the side of the bed. Dean sits next to him, wrapping the blanket around them both.

Dean's almost got whiplash now from how fast things changed. Could that have gone ANY worse? he thinks, letting his head sink back against the bed. It's still not clear what happened exactly, but already Dean's kicking himself for doing anything at all tonight. It's only been THREE FRICKIN' DAYS since FRIGGIN' CHEMO, he chastises himself. You knew he was sick, you knew he has scars, you even knew something was off! He froze up, he even said that thing about needing to be careful, and you FRICKIN' PUSHED ANYWAY.

The next thought that floats through Dean's head is that instead of giving Cas pleasure, Dean seems merely to have tortured him instead.

What did I expect; I'm a demon, he's an angel.

I'm a torturer of Hell. (In one way, that was long ago, many long years ago. But in another way, it was an eternity that has never left Dean at all, not even for a single day.)

I'm a torturer of Hell. Of course my touch is going to hurt him. Dean knows he's getting a little bit illogical here, melodramatic even, but he's so shaken that the crazy thought somehow worms home, and finally Dean ends up curling up himself, wrapping both arms around his own knees, and wondering if he should just leave Cas's side entirely. But then Cas turns toward him, shifting closer till he's leaning right against Dean's side. He's still got his own knees tucked up too, but he shifts around till his knees are almost in Dean's lap, and his chin on Dean's shoulder.

They huddle together that way for a few moments.

"Holy fuck," Dean mutters, at last.

"I'm afraid not," says Cas. "Not yet, anyway." He begins stroking the side of Dean's face with one hand. There's a warmth in the air around them now, and Dean thinks, Wings.

Wings, wrapped around a demon....

"I'm so sorry, Dean," Cas says. "I'm so very sorry. This is my fault. I should have told you. It's testicular."

"What?" Dean says. He's still trying to shake off the demon thoughts, so much so that he almost doesn't hear what Cas said. He looks at Cas, who's still stroking Dean's head now, studying him with worried intensity — as if Dean's the one who's been hurt, as if Dean's the one who needs soothing. Cas runs his fingers through Dean's hair, slowly and gently, over and over, from Dean's temple back to the nape of his neck.

"They had to cut one away," says Cas, and it seems such a non sequitur that Dean can't figure out what he's talking about. "It's still not healed. It turns out it's such an incredibly sensitive area. Much more sensitive than I ever knew. I should have warned you but I didn't realize it was still so raw. The elastic band caught the stitches, I think...." He pauses, as Dean stares at him. Cas's eyes have gone a little unfocused; he's still stroking Dean's hair but he's thinking about something, and when he speaks again it's in an almost philosophical tone.
"It's strange, you know... " Castiel says. "Because, I already lost my wings. I already lost my feathers. This shouldn't matter. It shouldn't matter if I lose my hair too, or any other part; it should feel like it's just the vessel, that it's not really me. But it is me, now. Or at least, it certainly feels like it." He pauses a moment, and adds, "I think I was hoping that if I couldn't be an angel anymore, that at least I could learn to be a man. But I'm just... well, I suppose I'm nothing now, really. Half an angel, half a man.... " He's stroking Dean's hair now with infinite gentleness, his hand moving slower and slower, as he says, quiet and rueful, "I should have told you long ago, but I was ashamed. This was my fault, Dean."

"What are you talking about?" says Dean.

"It's testicular," Cas says. "It's testicular cancer. Stage 3B."

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A/N - Dammit....

And now you know why Cas has been so hesitant to explain what type of cancer he's got. In case it wasn't clear, Cas has had to have one testicle removed. (as well as other surgeries, which we'll learn about later.) This has gotten badly mixed up in his head about what it means to be a man, and to be an angel. Angels have wings, and feathers; men have testicles; humans have hair; and even though those are not really the defining features of angel-ness or manliness or humanity, Cas has lost most of those classic features and is really struggling with his sense of self, and it has all hit him in a bad way. (He knows it's illogical; but the illogical thoughts are sometimes the most powerful.)

A couple of you noticed his comment about the "Planes, Trains & Automobiles" movie about how any "healthy" man is already "sufficiently manly" - this was what was really at the root of that comment.

Poor Dean... poor Cas. I feel really bad that they should have such an awful U-turn right in the middle of what should have been a glorious encounter. But sometimes things go wrong; sometimes sex doesn't work out (especially if one partner is hiding something important!). The true test is, will they help each other through it? And you know they will.

More when I can. Hope to have another chapter up next weekend (but no promises - you know how crazy my life has gotten!) Hope you are enjoying this story. As always, please let me know if there is anything particular that you liked or that worked well for you. I love to hear from you.
A/N - Gahhh, sorry for the long delays. This time my excuse is that I was haranguing my 2 senators & state representative nonstop over email and phone calls about the 10,001 executive orders from our "So-Called" President (that guy who tweeted "see you in court" TO A COURT... omfg...). Not that my calls & emails did any good, but there is this sensation now that popular pressure is having a slow, cumulative effect, and there has been sort of a whirlwind in my mind about it all. I have never been a very political person but this is becoming one of those rare moments in life when you realize you are witnessing history, and when you further realize that you are not going to be able to look at yourself in the mirror any more unless you do everything you can to stand up for what you believe in. Anyway, some significant time got diverted to all that (all my free time last week, basically).

I did get a little bit of writing done this week though. This is just one scene - it follows immediately after the previous one, and it's really primarily a recovery scene as they both get their bearings again. But also, at last we start to hear some of Castiel's story. There's much more written that is almost ready, but I wanted to post at least something this weekend, so here's the 1 little scene. Hope you like it.

3B, Dean thinks.

Cas, beside him, has fallen quiet, but the echo of his voice still seems to be reverberating through the room. Testicular cancer, stage 3B. Testicular cancer, stage 3B.

Testicular's one of better ones, right? It's curable, isn't it? Dean's been reading up on types of cancer all week, of course. Cas's scars had been giving him a creeping worry that Castiel might have one of the really nasty abdominal cancers, like maybe stomach or pancreatic — the ones that never seem to get discovered till it's far too late — but testicular cancer hadn't even been on his radar. Dean's struggling now to remember anything specific about it.

Isn't it kinda like breast cancer? he thinks. Often curable? Celebrities get it and seem to bounce back from it... so, kinda curable? But, stage 3B. How bad is 3B? Four's the worst stage, right? Four's worst and one's best, I know that much. So stage 3 isn't the worst. But what's the B? Is there an A? Is A worse, or is A best? Three's better than four... but three's still pretty bad....

A potentially bad stage of a kinda-curable cancer: what does that average out to?

Dean's sitting against the bed as all these thoughts go running through his mind. His right knee's folded up to his chest, and his left leg's now stretched out straight along the floor, the blanket wrapped a little haphazardly around him. Cas is still leaning against Dean's left side; his shoulder's against Dean's, his folded legs slumped a little sideways so that his knees are almost in Dean's lap. A moment ago he'd been stroking Dean's hair with one hand; now he brings his arm down, pats Dean's thigh almost absent-mindedly, and wraps both arms around his own waist. With a little sigh, Cas tips his head back against the bed. Dean looks over at him and finds that Cas is gazing up at the ceiling, apparently lost in thought.

"Is B better than A?" Dean finally asks.
"B's worse than A," Cas says.

Right on cue Dean's stomach starts hurting.

Cas takes a breath, levers himself away from Dean, unfolds his legs and stands. He straightens up cautiously, in stages, as if uncertain how his groin will feel. But the pain seems to be truly gone now; after a moment he relaxes, takes another, deeper, breath and straightens up fully. He smooths out his t-shirt and adjusts the waistband of his sweatpants one last time, traces one hand over his stomach, and then he offers Dean a hand, apparently to help him up.

It seems rather backwards, after what just happened, to have Castiel reaching down to help Dean up, instead of the other way around. But when Dean takes his hand there's a solid firmness to Cas's grip, and he tugs Dean up to his feet with reassuring strength.

Dean's still naked. He keeps hold of the blanket as Cas pulls him to his feet, and then there's an odd moment where he and Cas are looking at each other — Cas fully clothed but Dean nude — with Dean hanging on uncertainly to a corner of the blanket, which is sort-of-but-not-really covering him up. Dean's entirely unsure what to do next. Cuddle together, with Dean still naked? Get dressed and cuddle clothed? Or... no cuddling at all? (Has that ship already sailed? Certainly the momentum's gone, the mood ruined, the red-hot excitement fizzled away, but... is everything really over? Dean's still almost in mourning about it.) Cas starts looking around at the floor and soon he reaches down to pick up Dean's sweatpants, which turn out to be in a crumpled heap almost directly at Cas's feet.

Cas smiles as he hands the sweatpants to Dean. But it's a warped and worried smile, only one corner of his mouth quirking up, and it somehow makes him look rather sad.

Mutely, Dean pulls on the sweats, and then finds his t-shirt and pulls that on too. Meanwhile Cas picks through the tumbled blankets and sheets and starts straightening them out. He extracts the top bedsheet from the messy pile of bedding on the floor, turns it around a few times to figure out which side is which, and shakes it out over the bed.

Dean's all dressed now; a little numbly, he moves around to the other side of the bed to help Cas arrange the bedclothes.

They straighten out the sheet. _B is worse than A_, thinks Dean, as he pulls the edge into position.

Cas flips the blanket up onto the bed; Dean grabs the far end and straightens that out too, evening out the edge carefully. _B is worse than A._

_B is worse than A. That means Stage 3B is almost Stage 4._

Everybody knows Stage 4 is bad. Everybody knows Stage 4 of a cancer means it's gotten everywhere, "metastasized" or whatever it's called, tumors all over the place. Everyone knows Stage 1 is the best and Stage 4 is the worst.

So what, then, what exactly, are Stage 2 and Stage 3? And what are the A and B?

_Almost stage 4_, Dean's thinking now. He closes his eyes, one hand pinching the bridge of his nose as if he can drive the thought away, drive the world away, if he just blocks it all out.

"Dean," says Cas, and Dean opens his eyes. Cas is looking at him from the other side of the bed, his expression soft.

"Come back to bed," Cas says, and as if to demonstrate he starts getting under the covers on his own side.
Cuddle with clothes on, okay, good, I can do that, thinks Dean. He discovers he's very relieved that at least they're not going to just go to the kitchen to sit in separate chairs and drink their coffee and pretend like nothing even happened.

Dean gets under the covers too, on his side. But he's feeling hesitant now; a stray echo of the "My touch will always hurt him" thoughts even go drifting through his mind again. Mentally he chastises himself for getting melodramatic, but it might, in fact, be literally true right now. Cas does seem to still have some real injuries; obviously, some kinds of touch really can hurt him. So Dean leans back on his own pillow cautiously, fingers knotting on the edge of the blanket; he's unsure whether he should even reach out to Cas at all. Cas, though, immediately wiggles closer, and a half-second later he seems to be looming right at Dean's side, warm and large, and then he's working his right arm insistently under the edge of Dean's pillow. "Lift your head," he orders, and soon he's got Dean's head cradled against his own shoulder.

Dean settles into the embrace uncertainly, letting the weight of his head sink by careful degrees onto Cas's shoulder and collarbone. There's so much here that's new that he can't even seem to settle on which emotion to be feeling — dread about the cancer, or joy and pleasure about getting to cuddle like this, or dismay about what just happened. It's so new even to have this kind of embrace at all with Castiel, this sort of gentle touch between them; it still seems shockingly strange, in fact. (But good. Definitely good.) It's new to be able to put his head on Cas's shoulder, it's new to feel Cas's arm wrapping around the back of Dean's neck, new to be able to curl toward him, to feel him breathing. Dean wants to be able to enjoy it, all of it, but now he can't seem to relax. At all. For one thing he's still far too worried about accidentally bumping Cas's crotch. Or anywhere near Cas's crotch. Or Cas's abdomen for that matter. (What about those scars? What are they?). Just to be on the safe side, Dean tries to leave a delicately careful space between his own hips and Cas's, a few safe inches of room, so that they're only really in contact from the waist up. It's frustrating, and a little depressing. He even has to resist an urge to put an arm around Cas's waist.

Finally Dean dares to rest one hand, very lightly, right on the center of Cas's chest.

Cas covers Dean's hand with his own. "I won't break," he says.

"You better not," mutters Dean.

Dean knows at once when Cas's wings fold around him. It seems so clear now, so obvious, that that's what it is. Cas rolls slightly toward Dean, that lovely faint warmth settles around Dean's shoulders, and simultaneously Cas tightens his hold a little on Dean's hand.

The wings immediately make everything feel a little better. It also begins to seem like Cas really isn't breaking (not yet, at least) and at last Dean lets himself close his eyes. There's a long moment of silence then, and despite all the stress and worry, an almost peaceful air of calm settles over the room. Dean keeps his eyes closed and finally he's able to focus on the sensations around him: the solidity of Cas's shoulder and collarbone under his cheek, the way Cas's arm is wrapped so securely around Dean's shoulders, the light warmth of the wings. Cas's heartbeat under his hand.

He's alive, Dean reminds himself.

He's alive. He doesn't seem like he's dying. His heartbeat's strong. He's doing okay. He's gonna be fine. Whatever happened just now must've been just superficial, just a yank on stitches in exactly the wrong place. But it's okay now; he seems totally recovered from it. He's fine.

He's gonna be fine.

Testicular cancer, Stage 3B....
It occurs to Dean, then, that this is why Cas has been keeping his clothes on.

_Tonight and last Sunday too_, he remembers. _He kept all his clothes on. Took mine off but kept his own on. He wouldn't really let me get at him, either; not really. He wouldn't let me look at him._

_and this is why he tried to hide in the shower last week...._ Another puzzle piece is slotting into place, a vivid memory of Castiel practically cowering in the Denver motel shower last week, and how he'd hurriedly wrapped that plastic shower curtain around his waist as soon as Dean had come into the room. How careful he'd been to cover up everything below the waist.

_Cas never gave a damn about nudity before. I should have realized there was something he didn't want me to see._

"I really didn't mean to hurt you," says Dean at last.

To his surprise, Cas actually laughs. The chuckling makes his chest shake.

"You don't have to explain that," says Cas. "It was quite clear what your intentions were. Dean, I meant it when I said it was my fault. I brought this on myself."

"You've _got_ to tell me about this stuff, you know," Dean says, a little surge of frustration rising up suddenly (and, with it, even a flicker of anger). "You've got to tell me _all_ of it."

"I know," says Cas. He sounds resigned, and even apologetic. "I see that now. I think I was hoping I could go as long as possible without you finding out."

"What would it even matter if I found out?" says Dean. He lifts his head a little to try to look Cas in the eyes, but Cas turns out to be gazing over Dean's shoulder toward the far wall. "Cas, I don't give a damn how many balls you've got, don't you know that? How many balls your vessel's got, I mean. Two, one, zero, who gives a damn? That kind of stuff just _doesn't matter_. You must know that. I mean, jeez, after all the shit we've been through — you actually thought something like that would _matter_? Seriously?"

Cas doesn't speak at first, but the arm under Dean's head shifts a little and soon Dean feels a soft touch on the side of his head; Cas has begun running his fingertips lightly through Dean's hair. "I should have told you," he murmurs.

"Damn straight you should've." The way Cas is threading his fingers through Dean's hair reminds him of something else, and Dean adds, "And it doesn't matter if you have any hair, either! Or any feathers for that matter. Or working wings, or any of that. It doesn't matter at all. Wings aren't what make an angel. Hell, _Lucifer's_ still got his wings, and he's not exactly the ideal angel, now, is he? You're worth ten times any of those cowardly dicks up in Heaven. And you're ten times most men, too. Feathers, and hair, and, and, balls and all that, none of that matters worth a damn. Cas, you gotta see that—" Dean's revving up into a big speech, an impassioned pep talk, but when he looks again at Cas it turns out Cas is still staring past Dean's ear to the far corner of the room, his eyes a little unfocused, as if lost in a memory.

"I found out when I woke up," Cas says.

Dean blinks at him.

"In Flagstaff," Cas adds. "I found out when I woke up in Flagstaff." He catches Dean's eye and adds, "You said to tell you all of it. You're right. So I will."

Dean falls silent, and waits.
At last Castiel begins to talk.

"They found me at the base of the Grand Canyon," Cas says. "While I was unconscious they did a number of tests to try to find out why I wasn't waking up. Of course, I was unconscious simply because of being hit by a banishing sigil while at minimal power, but they didn't know that. They thought I'd fallen, and that I might have head trauma, or internal injuries. So they performed several types of X-rays and then an MRI, I believe, and also one of those feline scans."

"A CAT scan?" suggests Dean, quietly.

"Yes, though I didn't get to meet the cat," says Cas. "I was still unconscious. There was also a full physical examination as well, of course. Head to toe."

Cas pauses, and takes a breath. "Of course they never figured out why I was unconscious. But when I awoke they told me that during all the tests they'd found an anomalous mass in one testicle. An anomalous mass. That's what they called it. And apparently the cat discovered a number of small areas in my abdomen as well, some small dense areas that they thought might be enlarged lymph nodes." Cas gives a little shrug. "I didn't pay it any mind, to be honest. It didn't seem to matter, for I had awoken thinking only one thing: Dean's dead...."

Cas voice falters here, and he pauses for a long moment. There's a soft pressure in the air; Dean's pretty sure the wings are tightening around his shoulders.

"I woke thinking, Dean's dead, and maybe Sam's dead too," Cas goes on, his voice calm again. "I thought, Dean saved us all, but I've failed him; I let him down. I was supposed to take care of Sam and I didn't."

"That crazy British chick wasn't your faul—"

"And if Sam's gone too," Cas goes on, talking right over Dean as if he's barely hearing him, "then, I thought, if they're both gone, then what's the point? The doctor explained it might be a tumor, or several tumors, and I knew those are almost always fatal to humans if left untreated. And therefore fatal to my vessel, obviously. Unless I could heal the vessel. And I knew already that I had almost no power left, especially after being blasted like that. Minimal power; very likely no ability to heal. The medical staff started explaining that some initial surgeries would be required, surgeries where they take some little pieces to inspect them—"

"Biopsies," murmurs Dean.

"Yes, biopsies. Those first, then maybe other surgeries, and rounds of chemotherapy and maybe radiation. And though they were only speaking hypothetically at that point, it became very clear that if indeed it was a tumor, the treatment would be... well, quite an unpleasant process. With no guarantee of success. And, I thought, what was the point? If you were both gone, what's the point, anyway? I realized there was really no need to undergo any sort of treatment at all."

Dean discovers at this point that his own hand, the one that's resting on Cas's chest, seems to be closing into a tight fist, all on its own. Folds of Cas's t-shirt end up bunched up between Dean's fingers. Cas just pats Dean's hand and keeps talking, while Dean tries to make himself relax.

"So I told the doctor no," Cas says. "No treatment, no tests. And I prepared to check out of the
hospital and just go search for Sam. I'll admit I didn't have all that much hope. But then you both showed up...."

Cas heaves a long, slow sigh, his hand pressing Dean's again, and for the first time in a while he takes his eyes off the distant wall, and meets Dean's gaze directly. "Such relief," he says, looking right at Dean. "Such relief, Dean. I can't even convey it. When you both arrived — such relief. And such surprise! So much so that I actually forgot about the anomalous mass entirely. For several hours, till dinner that night." His gaze drifts away to the far wall again. "Do you recall, you asked me, during that meal, 'What do you really want to do?' And suddenly I remembered about the anomalous mass. And I thought... do I want to treat this illness, or not? We went to a motel that night, you may remember, and I took a shower, in that little motel room, and I examined my vessel—" Cas pauses, closing his eyes, and corrects himself: "Myself. I examined myself, in the shower."

Dean's thinking back. That was the night when Dean had slept in the other twin bed, in the same room, wasn't it? Cas had, in fact, taken an unusually long shower that evening. Dean had even chuckled over it at the time, thinking Cas might be up to something in there. Something physical, maybe... Dean had even entertained a little fantasy that Cas might be... well, might be jerking off in there. He's mortified now to remember it, to recall how secretly delighted he'd been with that thought, and what an appealing little fantasy it had been.

It had been something physical, all right, but no fantasy at all: Cas had been checking out his cancer. Alone.

"There was definitely an anomalous mass," Cas says, "in the vessel's left — in my left — testicle. I couldn't figure out how long it had been there. I'd never noticed it before, but then I hadn't really looked, not recently at least. Not since before Lucifer. I don't know if Lucifer... or if Chuck..." Cas pauses here, and shakes his head, his eyes closing, as if he doesn't want to think about that part just yet.

Dean's got some thoughts of his own on that topic, the potential involvement of Lucifer or Chuck, but he stays silent. Cas has never really talked like this before, after all; Dean's becoming aware, listening to all this, that it's incredibly unusual for Castiel to talk this much about himself. In fact Dean can't think of a single other time when Cas had voluntarily offered so much backstory about one of his own problems. (Then again, Dean's never really asked before, has he?)

Dean's a little worried that if he interrupts too often, it'll break the spell. So he stays quiet. After a long moment Cas opens his eyes and continues.

"Well, anyway, I looked at myself in the mirror, trying to determine if there was anything else wrong with my vessel. Anything beyond the one anomalous mass, I mean. But I couldn't see deeper inside; I couldn't scan myself as I used to be able to do, and I couldn't heal myself. I kept trying anyway; I must have tried a dozen times to summon up some scrap of healing ability, and that's when I discovered how little power I really had left. I tried, and I tried... finally I managed to scrape the bottom of the barrel, as it were. I found one little quantum of Heavenly power still left to me, one tiny speck that was somehow still clinging to the blood-root of one of my alula feathers. It took all my concentration to scrape that up and pry it free and use it. But all I could do in the end was get one brief glimpse inside my abdomen, and I saw.... "

He hesitates.

"The cat did a better job than I could," he says. "It had discovered several spots, but I could only get a clear look at one of them. One of the lymph nodes, I suppose. It had a feeling of... of terrible wrongness to it. I could see it was diseased tissue and not healthy; it had something very wrong. It
had a... not a conscious malevolence exactly, but a destructiveness. A natural destructiveness. And a selfishness; it was simply... contrary to life. But I couldn't heal it at all. All I succeeded in doing was to wear myself out entirely. And that was the use of my very last scrap of grace. Rather a waste, in the end; I used up the last of my power only to confirm what the cat had already seen."

Dean remembers, now, how Cas had staggered out of that motel bathroom almost pole-axed with fatigue. He'd stumbled to bed and fallen asleep almost instantly, totally exhausted. Even in sleep he'd still had that worried look on his face, and his arms had been knotted so tightly around his pillow that Dean had actually watched him for a while, a little concerned that Cas might be worn out from some kind of after-effect of the banishing sigil.

I should've known there was something wrong....

"I woke in the middle of the night," Cas says quietly. "It was beginning to sink home: I was mortal, I was truly one now with this mortal vessel, and it — I — was dangerously ill. I couldn't sleep any more, so I got dressed and sat on the bed and considered my options. My original choice had been, I could continue to tell nobody and do nothing and let my life draw to a close. Or, the other option: I could fight it. I could try to survive; I could go back to the doctors, ask them to do their tests, their biopsies, all their treatments.... ask them to help me. And if I chose that course, I could either tell you and Sam, or I could do it alone."

Cas pauses for a long moment. "You were sleeping...." he says. "While I was thinking all this, you were sleeping, in the other bed; I realized you and Sam must have driven a long way that day, just to find me. I didn't want to disturb you, but I will admit, I sat and looked at you for a while."

He pauses again. Dean feels him shift; Cas is pulling back a little, turning to face Dean fully and backing away a few inches, as if he wants now to get a very clear look at Dean. They end up side-by-side, squared up and facing each other directly, both their heads on the same pillow. Cas is looking right at him. The little bedside lamp is the only illumination; it's behind Cas, casting his face into shadow, but Dean can still see his eyes. Cas looks at Dean very thoughtfully for a moment.

"I watched you sleeping," Cas says, "and I thought, I do want to live, I do want more time; I'm not done here yet. I thought, I want more time with Dean."

It takes Dean's breath away, that calm statement. And there's a certain look in Cas's eyes now, too, a soft, steady gaze as he studies Dean's face, and now it's getting a little hard for Dean to draw a full breath. A few seconds later Dean's having to blink quite a bit, just to clear his vision.

"In whatever capacity," Cas adds, watching as Dean steadies himself. "Even if just as a friend, or a guardian, or an ally of some sort. I wanted to be by your side a little longer, just a little longer — in whatever capacity." He hesitates; a look of slight embarrassment crosses his face, and he adds, "Though, maybe I should make clear, I didn't.... I wasn't planning.... I didn't have any idea that we might.... I wasn't planning all this, you understand."

"I know," whispers Dean.

"I mean, I didn't have a secret fellatio strategy," Cas explains.

Despite himself, Dean can't help laughing. It breaks through the tightness in his throat, and finally Dean can talk more-or-less normally again. He says, trying to joke about it, "But you're supposed to be such a master tactician."

"My experience is primarily with four-dimensional aerial battles, though, not fellatio exactly," says Cas. "I mean, not that the thought hadn't crossed my mind. I haven't always been in male vessels,
you know. I do see my vessel's memories, if the vessel is willing to share them; I see something of
the vessel's thoughts, and I have seen the possibilities that humans tend to gravitate to... so I'll admit
that I had considered.... Well, anyway, I had always assumed you wouldn't be interested. But, the
point is, regardless of the exact nature of our friendship, I just wanted to be here a little longer.

Cas takes a long breath and goes on with the story. "Anyway, I thought, when Dean wakes I'll tell
him about the anomalous mass. But it was still quite early — it was an hour yet till dawn — and
during that hour I got thinking about how you had looked the night before, at the diner. You and
Sam both, you were both so... so relaxed, Dean. So at ease, so comfortable. So happy. Your face
can change quite a bit, you know...." Cas is silent for a moment, studying Dean's face again. His
hand's now resting on the pillow right between their faces, and Cas lifts one finger and touches
Dean's lips. "You have a very different smile when you're truly at ease. It transforms your face; did
you know that?" (As he says this he's running his fingertip lightly over Dean's lips, as if tracing out
a smile.) "Your voice changes, too, and the things you say. You joke more. And the jokes are kinder.
At the diner you had been smiling like that, and joking with Sam and with me, and I thought, I've
never seen him so relaxed. I've never seen him smile so. Sam too, but you especially. And so... I
pictured the moment when I would tell you about the anomalous mass, and I could see, exactly, how
the smile would disappear." (Again Cas's fingers drift across Dean's lips.) "I saw it as clearly as if it
were actually happening; your smile vanishing. Your face changing. How all the weight of the world
would settle on you again. Dean.... I just couldn't do that to you."

"Dammit, Cas..." Dean whispers.

Cas's fingers are still on his lips, and Dean takes hold of Cas's hand and turns it and kisses the palm.

Cas draws in a quiet breath, and he caresses Dean's cheek with the tips of his fingers, while Dean
kisses his palm again. Dean pauses, afterwards, but Castiel seems to have reached some kind of
intermission in his story; a soft quiet settles over the room and all Cas's attention now seems to be
devoted to stroking Dean's cheek. So Dean leans in close and kisses him full on the mouth.

It's a gentle kiss this time, very soft and very slow, almost in slow motion, with every movement
drawn out. Dean soon puts both hands on Cas's cheeks and, gradually, he slides the palms of his
hands up under the monkey hat, up to Cas's temples, till his hands are wrapped right around both
sides of Cas's head.

In direct contact with the bare skin. Even the bald patches.

It's the first time, since the cancer, that Cas has let Dean touch his head directly.

The hair doesn't matter, Cas, see, the hair doesn't matter, Dean thinks, and it's true; it doesn't matter
at all. In fact, soon Dean actually forgets all about the hair issue, because Castiel is kissing him back.

Just as soft, just as gentle, mimicking Dean's pacing. He's getting the hang of this kissing thing, it
seems, more and more, with each and every kiss.

Eventually they break the kiss. Dean leans his forehead against Cas's and draws a slow breath.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you," says Cas. "I just couldn't. I couldn't."

"I get it," says Dean, nodding, for he really does get it. (How many times has he hid things from
Sam, so that Sam wouldn't worry? From Cas, too? The Mark of Cain immediately comes to mind,
for one thing.) "I get it, Cas, I do. But from here on, we're in this together."

Cas nods.
Then Dean feels Cas tense a little. Cas turns his head; he's listening to something. Dean listens too, and a moment later he hears it. The distant creak of the front door, footsteps coming down the stairs. They both listen quietly, as Sam walks down the hallway outside, heading to the bathroom for a shower after his run.

"Sam probably needs to hear all this too," Dean says — a little reluctantly, for he hates to end this private phase of the conversation, this cozy nestling together on the very same pillow. But Sam's involved too, and he definitely needs to know the details.

Cas nods. "I'll tell the rest to both of you," he says.

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A/N - Part 2 next, with the rest of Cas's story (and what exactly the "3B" means). Oh and - yes, for those who asked, Dean will remember about Schmidt-Nielsen's Chapter 6 very soon.

Hope you liked this! I fly to Brazil on Friday for a couple weeks so my schedule's about to go nuts again, but I've already got the next part written and just need to polish it. Look for something Friday night - I'll try to post something from the airport.
I'll fix you too, I swear

A/N - I should've remembered that Carnaval in Rio always means about a thousand commitments I didn't expect, always including an unbelievable amount of logistics picking up costumes and drums and tickets and moving them all around. Everything seems to perpetually need to be moved from one side of the city to the other, always crossing about five hundred parades that are clogging the streets everywhere. And all of a sudden I had to learn snare drum parts for 25+ different songs to play in shows here on Thurs and Sun that I wasn't anticipating being in.... Thursday night's show ended up pretty hilarious since it turned out none of the other snare drummers near me knew their parts either (though by about the 3rd time through each tune, we'd sort of homed in on a best guess of the snare pattern, kind of an on-the-fly telepathic community effort). Survived that show and then last night, Friday, I was up till dawn at the gigantic escola parades helping a couple friends carry costumes around (they seemed to be dressed as Portuguese bullfighters? Or fishmongers? It was a little hard to tell); running very short on sleep now and tonight at about 1am I'm parading myself, with the formidable escola Imperio Serrano, this time dressed as a gigantic stork (along with 99 other people in my group who will be dressed as identical gigantic storks. We are a whole flock of storks). I have to get the stork costume across town early tonight of course, and have also spent quite a while trying to memorize this song for Imperio's parade not to mention nail down those damn snare patterns for the Sunday show tomorrow.

Long story short, not much fic writing time! I've backslid right back to that every-two-weeks update schedule that seems to be the very best I can ever do these days. Sorry... business as usual, it seems. I guess this has really been an every-two-weeks fic for a while now and I probably just have to accept that every-two-weeks is the best I can do!

(On the plus side, I have had the coolest A/U idea involving Dean as a tourist in Rio who notices a certain parader who is dressed as an angel. But the wings seem oddly realistic...)

We now return you to our heroes. Setting: Kansas, in the Men of Letters bunker, and Castiel is about to continue his story.

Sam looks up from the coffeepot when Dean and Cas come into the kitchen, but his smile of greeting fades as he takes in how grim Dean looks. His eyes flick back and forth between Dean and Castiel, and Dean can almost see him bracing himself, as if Sam's waiting for some soap-opera development, maybe wondering if Dean and Cas have suddenly broken up.

But then Cas says "Sam, I've been telling Dean about my cancer, and he thought you should hear it too."

The uncertainty disappears from Sam's face. He still looks like he's bracing himself, but now for a different kind of news entirely.

Sam just nods. He grabs two more mugs from the shelf above the coffeepot, and quietly pours them all some coffee. Cas takes his mug with a nod back, and a small smile, but he says nothing; without comment he leads the brothers to the map-room, where he sits down at the very end of the table, gazing thoughtfully down at the map of the Pacific Ocean. Dean and Sam sit on either side of him. Sam's shooting Dean a series of quick worried looks, as if hoping Dean will somehow clue him in...
telepathically about what exactly is going on; but, Dean knows, it's Cas's story to tell.

They wait while Cas takes a slow swallow of his coffee, and finally he begins to speak.

"When I left you two in Flagstaff," Cas starts, glancing up at them both, "I walked two blocks in the wrong direction to throw you both off the trail, and then doubled around and went right back up the hill to that same hospital. Sam, I just told Dean how they'd already found an anomalous mass, when they examined me after the Grand Canyon incident. Also their cat discovered some small lumps in my abdomen—" (Dean mouths "CAT scan" to a slightly puzzled-looking Sam) "—and I'd decided.... Well, to be honest I just really didn't want to worry either of you about it. Anyway, I went back to the hospital on my own and they did more tests, and two days later they did the first surgery, just a little one, a biopsy of the primary anomalous mass."

Neither Sam nor Dean have touched their coffee, but Cas takes another sip of his own.

"The biopsy verified it was testicular cancer," Cas says. At this news, Sam shifts in his chair with a little intake of breath, and this time the look he darts at Dean is almost hopeful. Dean gives him a warped half-smile back, thinking, Yeah, Sam, but it's nearly stage 4.

"Also there's a blood measure," Cas is saying. "Something in the blood that can be indicative of that sort of cancer, and they measured that as well, and it's elevated. So... testicular cancer, definitely. There were a few days then where nothing happened... I went to the public library to learn more about it, and meanwhile the doctors had to consult about exactly how to remove the primary anomalous mass. How to, um, to remove the testicle. I gather there's some inadvisable methods that can sprinkle the cancer cells all around, so they were considering all the logistics and all the options. While they were deciding about all that, they scheduled a second surgery to assess the lumps in my abdomen that the cat had discovered."

(Sam's completely silent. He seems to have made the same snap decision that Dean had made earlier, to not interrupt Cas's story with a correction about the "cat" issue.)

Cas then says, rapidly, in one long breath, "That abdominal surgery was in the morning and I woke at mid-day and the doctor came to see me in the afternoon and he told me the cancer had spread to the lymph nodes, and that though it was a little difficult to classify they had decided it was testicular cancer Stage 3B, which means it's progressed quite far." He pauses a moment and adds, in a totally unconvincing tone of voice, staring down at his coffee, "Though.... it's not as bad as it could be... really, it could be worse... all things considered."

"Uh," breaks in Sam, "if I could just, uh, clarify about the B thing? I know stage 1's where it just stayed in one spot—"

Cas nods. "Stage 1 is still contained within the original source organ," he says, shifting gears into carefully formal phrasing, and he seems to settle himself as he goes through explaining all the terminology. "Stage 2 is larger and has gotten to nearby lymph nodes, but only the very nearest ones. Stage 3 has gotten to farther lymph nodes and sometimes to the lungs. You're aware that all blood always goes back to the lungs before it goes anywhere else?" (Sam nods confidently; Dean gives a "I totally knew that" sort of half-shrug.) Cas goes on, "So that's why the lungs are considered separately — they're essentially a waystation on the journey to the rest of the body. Stage 3 is distant lymph nodes and the lungs. And stage four's gone all the way through the lungs and beyond them, all the
way back out to the rest of the body again, into the systemic circulation, and has gotten to other organs. I'm told the classification details vary a little with different cancers, but the numbered stages are basically a series of distances from the source: source organ only, right near the source organ, a little farther still — and last of all, everywhere else."

"And the A and B..." says Sam. He glances at his phone, which is lying on the map-table in front of him; one of his hands actually twitches toward the phone, as if he's itching to pull up Google and read all about "Testicular Cancer Stage 3B" right then and there.

"3B is worse than 3A, but not as bad as 3C," says Cas calmly. "and not as bad as 4. The A and B and C are several different substages of how far it's gotten to the lungs. Basically 3B means several lymph nodes are affected. So anyway, they explained all this, that evening — they told me they were classing it as 3B, and explained what that meant and that I would need chemotherapy and probably radiation. And they explained about prognosis." Cas hesitates here, both his hands wrapping more firmly around his coffee mug. His lips press together for a moment, and he bows his head slightly, the tassels of the monkey hat swinging free of his shoulders. "The prognosis is fairly good actually. Five-year survival rate of approximately 70%, given the markers in my blood and the stage. So, about a two-out-of-three chance of survival."

And a one-in-three chance of death, thinks Dean. Cas sounds almost calm about it, but Dean's chilled as it sinks in. Fucking hell. One in three. That is way too fucking high.

"So it's really not that bad," says Cas, with a rather forced cheerfulness, "but it was at that point that I realized that mortality was a real possibility. And, you know...." He hesitates again. "I don't have a human soul, of course. So... well, if my vessel dies..." He gives a little sigh as the awful words echo through the room, and he concludes, "I believe I would simply end."

There's an eerily silent pause, Sam finally replies, in a low tone, "Don't say that." (Dean can't even talk.)

Sam swallows and adds, his voice a little stronger, "That's not gonna happen."

"I don't know what's gonna happen," is Cas's quiet reply. He takes a slow sip of coffee, and Dean and Sam just look at each other.

"I wish we'd known," says Sam at last. "I mean — I know that's in the past now, but we would've been happy to help, is what I mean. You could've told us, you know that, right?"

Cas gives him a small smile. "I almost did tell you," he says. He glances at Dean to add, "I texted you that night, Dean, remember? Right after they finished the first abdominal surgery and told me it was Stage 3B. You were both at that silver mine in Utah."

Dean and Sam look at each other.

The silver mine. That night when Cas had texted Dean out of the blue.

"I wrote a long message explaining it all," says Cas. "Asking for... advice, I suppose? Or just, I don't know, I suppose I just wanted to tell you about it. But then I thought I should ask what you were doing, and it turned out you were both preparing for a potentially dangerous evening. So of course the last thing you needed was a distraction, and I thought I shouldn't bother you right then." He pauses a moment, thinking. "Then it occurred to me that maybe I just shouldn't bother you at all. Because, I mean, you two are always preparing for a potentially dangerous evening."

Dean's thinking back. Cas is writing his novel, he'd joked to Sam, watching those blinking dots on
the phone. Cas had spent a very long time writing, and then the dots had disappeared; Cas had erased the whole message.

Then Dean remembers what had happened next.

"Wait," says Dean. "Wasn't that the night you stole a car and drove all the way to Utah? So, wait a sec, you were coming from Flagstaff?"

"You'd just had surgery?" asks Sam.

"You'd just had surgery that day?" asks Dean. "Earlier that same day?"

Sam adds, "Abdominal surgery?" Both brothers know very well, of course, that abdominal injuries of any kind tend to knock people out of commission for quite a while. All hunters learn fast that even a simple gut wound can kill. Even a relatively clean abdominal surgery still has a long recovery. Abdominal surgery means full anesthesia; it means cutting through some major torso muscles; it means serious risk of infection, and barely being able to move for weeks afterwards.

Cas just nods.

Dean's appalled, and Sam looks pretty horrified too. Sam says, "But that means you drove, like... eight hours to come see us! When we got out of the mine we had all these messages from you. You almost met us at a diner the next morning, didn't you?"

Cas nods again. "Neither of you were responding to my inquiries so I snuck out of the surgery-recovery ward in the middle of the night," he says. "There are fewer nurses at night; it was fairly easy. Then I stole a car from the hospital parking lot." He seems to misunderstand Dean's and Sam's frustrated looks, for he adds, "Don't worry, I returned the car the next day; I think the owner didn't even realize it had been borrowed. Anyway, it turned out you were both okay, and when you invited me to breakfast, Dean, I realized you'd both undoubtedly notice that I was only wearing hospital patient clothing, with several rather raw surgical wounds. I still even had that little identification bracelet on, and the IV port in one arm. I thought of trying to hide it all, but I knew I wasn't walking very well, and knew you'd both notice. So I turned around and drove back."

Dean and Sam stare at him. Cas takes another sip of coffee and says, with a little sigh. "The nurses gave me quite a lecture when I returned," he says. "I suppose they may have had a point, for I had a little bit of a relapse and... um... maybe a little bit of an infection after that."

"Cas—" Dean starts, gritting his teeth.

"It cleared up after just a few days in the ICU," Cas says blandly. "Anyway, by the time I got over that, they finally had a surgical plan and so then there was the third surgery, to remove the affected lymph nodes and... the... um... the testicle." He's staring down at the world map again as he says this. "They removed the left testicle," he adds, though he now seems to be speaking only to the map. "So now I only have one. They warned me it would probably be painful. It turns out they have to sever the testicular nerve. Which in retrospect is quite obvious, isn't it, but I hadn't fully realized that that implies some potential discomfort afterwards. In some people it heals rapidly but in others there can be these, um, these little stabs of pain for a while. I knew that's a sensitive nerve but I admit I didn't really appreciate just how sensitive it can be."

Dean finds he's hunching a bit in his chair, his knees even drawing together in an automatic sympathetic reaction. Cas's agonized reaction in the bedroom not long ago is starting to make a lot more sense. Must've felt like I'd kicked him right in the balls, Dean thinks. Full-on hammer blow, probably. Dammit....
"It was after that surgery that I came back to the bunker," Cas continues. "I was still very sore, but I was able to walk by then so I thought maybe the two of you wouldn't notice, if I were careful about how I carried myself. I had to be cautious to avoid physical contact, though; the abdominal wounds were still raw and... so was the other wound." Cas is quiet a moment. His eyes flick up to the front door, and around at the map-table, and he glances, briefly, at Dean, a rather rueful look on his face. They'd been standing right here in this very room, of course, on that day when Castiel had returned; that day when he'd come down the stairs walking so stiffly, and had cautiously sidled around the map-table to avoid Dean's welcome-home hug.

_I had to be cautious to avoid physical contact...._ 

Cas goes on, "One of the odd things about cancer treatment, you know, is that it turns out the doctors can really be quite uncertain about whether the treatment's even necessary. After the various surgeries there's an entire second phase of much more prolonged treatment, all the chemotherapy and radiation, that often is just _in case_ there are still some surviving cancer cells somewhere. But they often can't really tell for sure! In my case, even after all those surgeries they apparently aren't sure they removed all the little tumor cells. They're worried there may still be some very small problem spots somewhere that are still too small for the cat to detect. I gather it's something that's apparent from that blood measure; apparently it hasn't gone as far down as it should have. So they think there might be a few surviving tumor cells hiding out in another lymph node or in my lungs. A month later I began the chemotherapy, and next week they're going to decide about radiation."

"Wait, why a month later?" asks Sam. "Why didn't you start chemo right away?"

Cas sighs. "I had to get health insurance at that point. Those first surgeries were all covered -- I believe they somehow classed them as emergencies that had to be done immediately, and somehow, in Arizona at least, that made it possible to do it under some kind of emergency-care category, basically as part of the same event that involved rescuing me from the Grand Canyon. Not that they didn't charge me for it eventually, of course, but, as I'm sure you're aware, for emergency treatment they do the billing later. To a, um, I'll confess I may have given them a not entirely accurate address and I made up one of those 'social security' numbers. Anyway, the rest had to be scheduled differently and apparently it all goes under a different category of non-emergency treatment and can't even be scheduled at all if one doesn't have insurance. So I had to find employment. Of course I thought at once of the Gas-n-Sip possibility, since really that's my only relevant experience." He adds, with a sad little smile, "There's not much call in your society for angel-blade close combat instructional skills, I'm afraid, or aerial defensive strategies...." Just as Dean's thinking, _Wait, can he still fly?_, Cas's shoulders drop a little, as if he's just remembered that he can't.

"The Flagstaff doctors recommended a certain oncologist in Denver," Cas says, now apparently talking to his coffee mug. "Aaron Klein. That was how I met him. He does research on the most recent forms of chemotherapy for this stage of testicular cancer. And then I found that Gas-n-Sip does cover treatment in Denver, even for an employee in nearby states, but their health-care arrangements for employees don't begin till after thirty days of full-time employment. Also I knew by then that there'd be this cost called a deductible, an _enormous_ sum of money that one must be able to pay right at the beginning, and it has to be paid anew every year, so I was saving as much as I could for that. There will also be another deductible in January..." He sighs. "That's why I was working overtime wherever I could. Saving up for the deductibles and waiting to get past thirty days of employment. And..." (at last Cas looks up from his coffee mug) "... here we are. Or here I am, at least. There's one more chemo cycle left, which will take up most of December. After that they're going to recheck the markers in my blood and I gather the cat will re-assess everything — they say I could do that in Flagstaff again if I wish to use the same cat. And then they'll determine whether, um..." He hesitates. "Whether it's working."
"Why wouldn't it be working?" asks Sam, and Dean nearly kicks him under the table.

Cas hesitates only a moment. "Some drugs don't work on me as they would on a natural-born human," he says. "The anti-nausea drugs don't work, for example."

"But the chemo must be working or it wouldn't be making you nauseous in the first place, right?" asks Sam. "It's gotta be working. Right?"

Castiel just shrugs. "I don't know," he says. "Sometimes a drug may work in some ways but not in others."

Sam's silent a long moment. He then says, "I'm sure this isn't what's gonna happen, but, um, just out of curiosity, what's the prognosis for if chemo doesn't work? I mean... what's the prognosis for a regular patient who doesn't do chemo at all?"

It has to be asked. But Dean's almost cringing as he waits for the answer.

"Well..." says Cas thoughtfully? "They don't really calculate it that way, but I did ask what happens if the cancer is totally untreated. About five percent, as far as I can tell."

There's a short silence before Dean finally clears his throat and says, "Five percent... of what?"

"Five percent chance of survival," says Castiel.

They're both peppering Cas with questions for a while after that, trying to pin down the details of what drugs he's been taking for the chemo, what his treatment schedule's been, and what comes next. Sam's zeroing on the radiation possibility (and it seems clear why; if chemo might not work, does radiation have a better chance? Or are angels immune to radiation too?) Sam's also got about a thousand questions about the Gas-n-Sip health plan and where the Flagstaff medical records ended up. But soon Cas is almost sagging in his chair, his head beginning to droop a little and an all-too-familiar look of fatigue settling around his eyes.

Dean finally interrupts Sam in the middle of a long health-insurance question, breaking in with, "I think our angel here could maybe use a rest from the Spanish Inquisition." He checks his watch and adds, "Nine a.m. That's gotta be siesta time somewhere, right?"

"Oh," says Sam, taking a sharp look at Cas. "Yeah. Right. Of course. You wanna just chill for a bit, Cas?"

"I wouldn't mind," Cas confesses. He's looking downright exhausted all of a sudden. "Maybe I'll just head to the sofa for a little bit... maybe watch a little TV?" Dean and Sam both nod, and Sam stands to collect the coffee mugs and take them back to the kitchen, saying, "Dean, why don't you pick out a show for him to watch?" It's a move that's rather obviously calculated to give Dean and Cas a little bit of alone time. Not that it leads to anything; Dean's only just gotten Cas settled on the sofa and has just turned the TV on for him when Cas almost instantly falls asleep, before Dean even has a chance to ask him what he'd like to watch.

Dean sighs and clicks the TV back off. "Some start to the nice relaxing week off, huh, buddy," he murmurs, picking up a folded blanket from the easy chair nearby and gently draping it over Cas. Cas doesn't even stir. Dean watches him for a few moments, till he's sure Cas is breathing evenly and
Cas sleeps for hours there, on the sofa. "Probably needs it," comments Sam quietly, near eleven o'clock, when Dean comes back to the library after another quick Castiel-check. (The two brothers have both spent most of the morning burrowed deep into their laptops, reading up on testicular cancer, Stage 3B and all its various forms of treatment.) "He seems really wiped out. Just tired, you think?"

"He didn't really have that relaxing a morning," comments Dean, settling back down in his chair. Sam cocks an eyebrow at him, and Dean adds, "So, turns out that severed testicular nerve is still alive and kicking. And not in a good way."

"Oh, shit," says Sam. He ponders that for a moment, and then adds, "Does that mean... you two... uh...." He pauses again, fidgeting a little with his laptop, and he even starts to blush a little. "So, really not trying to pry here, but...."

"I kinda kicked him in the balls accidentally, if that's what you're asking," says Dean. "Or, in the ball, I guess. But, the one that's gone." He sighs and adds, "Let's just say things really didn't go as planned."

Sam looks like he can't decide whether he wants more details. He seems oddly calm about it, though — especially given that the whole coming-out thing has only been a couple hours ago. Then again, cancer sure does wonders to focus the mind. For Dean, it's certainly been blowing every other consideration aside (including certain mental blocks that have been firmly in place for decades). Maybe Sam's experiencing a similar clarity of perspective.

"I really wish you guys didn't have to be dealing with this shit," Sam finally says.

"Yeah, it really fucking sucks," Dean says, startling himself a little with how intense his voice sounds. But it's true, after all.

Sam just nods. He thinks a moment more and asks, "Is it just me or does he seem kind of... like... almost shy about it? I mean, about the type of cancer? That they had to cut off a nut? I wouldn't have thought he'd even care what body parts got removed. It's not really his body, y'know?"

"I think it kind of is now," Dean answers slowly. "You know... he said something about..." Dean glances toward the TV room. They've closed the door to that room and Cas is safely out of earshot, but just the same Dean drops his voice. "I don't think he'd mind if I tell you: he said something about, half a man, half an angel. Which in his head kinda adds up to nothing, I think."

"Okay now, that's complete bullshit," says Sam immediately, in a heated whisper. "That's bullshit—"

"You know that and I know that," Dean whispers back. "But he was still just learning how to be human, y'know? I mean, I know he's not really human — hell, he's not even really male I guess, not originally — but he's been in that vessel quite a while. And Chuck kinda... resurrected him right back into it a bunch of times now, and I think he's felt like that was a hint or something, like it's really his body now, I guess? And with his wings so messed up too...."

Sam's nodding. "Yeah. I guess I can see how it would rattle him." He adds firmly, "It's bullshit anyway, though. Balls sure as fuck don't make the man. And wings don't make an angel. I don't care.
what he says, he's a full-on man if that's what he wants to be. And definitely a full-on angel too. Whatever the wing situation."

"Oh. That reminds me," says Dean, and he stands and flips his laptop shut. Sam gives him a questioning look and Dean says, "I got a chapter I'm supposed to read."

Dean ends up fetching *The Physiology of Angels* from Cas's room and bringing it back to the TV room. He sits in the easy chair by the sofa where he can keep an eye on Cas as he sleeps, and after a little adjustment of the lights — pulling one of the vintage 1950s reading lamps a little closer, and carefully angling its green lampshade so it won't shine directly into Cas's face — he finally opens the book.

The black book's got a comfortable weight to it; it leans heavily against his knees as he flips it open. Chapter 6, "Wings, Feathers, and Flight," is his assignment today, but Dean finds himself flipping slowly through the preceding chapters, taking in some other information on his way to Chapter 6.

From the very first paragraph of Chapter 1, "The Variety of Angels," he immediately learns that "seraph" is not a title as he'd rather assumed, but a type of angel. "Seraph" turns out to be sort of subspecies or race, a genetic strain of angel that seems to have certain physical characteristics and abilities, and even some unique anatomical characteristics of the wings. Dean's long had a fuzzy notion that Castiel had once been promoted to seraph from some non-seraph position, but apparently Cas had been a seraph all along. The promotion hadn't altered Cas's inherent nature as a seraph.

There's more to that chapter that looks potentially interesting, but Dean flips on to Chapter 2, "The Angel's True Form," which also turns out to be far more interesting than Dean had expected. Cas's true form, it seems, is something truly vast and stunning to behold. And confusing to behold, apparently, for the chapter begins with a compendium of a variety of myths of large flying creatures from around the world, and a first glance the stories seem to completely contradict each other. There are descriptions of enormous birds of prey from the Middle East; of fire-breathing dragons from Asia whose bodies are a full mile long; there's accounts of "eyes of lightning" and shining halos on the head and "legs that gleam like chrome"; there's tales of griffins with the front half of an eagle and the back half of a lion. There's sphinxes and harpies, strange blends of feathered flying creatures with human faces. There are dizzying impressions of blinding light, and even of a multi-headed form bearing no less than four different faces: a human, an ox, a lion and an eagle.

*The Physiology of Angels* goes through each legend in detail and summarizes it all with:

*The truth, of course, is that a full-grown angel has traits reminiscent of each of these animals. Just as the intrepid travelers of the 17th and 18th centuries once described the elephants of Africa with a confusion of metaphors — ears like palm fronds, tusks like those of an immense hog, a magical snout like a monkey's tail, and so forth — with the result sounding like a dozen quite different things blended together — so too did the ancients attempt to describe angels, layering metaphor upon metaphor until later readers concluded that angels even might have several different faces or heads, all springing from one body. The description of Ezekiel is perhaps the most famous example of this assemblage of different traits, with elements of ox, lion, eagle and human described almost as different "faces" upon the same body.*

*The human "face" is easiest to explain. All references to angels occasionally having human faces — this occurs not only in Ezekiel but also the sphinx and harpy legends — are, of course, a reference to*
the simple fact that angels often can take human vessels, i.e. at times they literally do have human faces.

As for the odd blending of traits of ox, lion, and eagle, as well such oddities as "legs of chrome", these are at once resolved with a single clear look at a real angel. The author has recently had the privilege of viewing one angel at close proximity, a most accommodating seraph who generously (if somewhat reluctantly) permitted a glimpse of his true form. This viewing confirmed that this seraph, and presumably all seraphs, sports a lush mane of long plumes around the neck, rather like the mane of a lion (though composed of feathers and not fur); additionally it has a long tail that is again reminiscent of a lion's (though again, feathered and not furred). It is four-footed (like a lion) yet also two-winged (like an eagle). The front pair of feet are armed with an impressive set of talons that gleam like silver; there are additional two dewclaws partway up the front legs that also are of the same silver substance; hence "legs gleaming like chrome." These silver talons are, in fact, one of the two natural weapons that angels can employ against each other (the other being holy-fire) and indeed the "angel-blades" that angels typically carry while in human form are, in fact, carved from their own dewclaws, traditionally from the dewclaw of the left front leg.

The elder and larger angels are often horned (i.e. somewhat like an ox), with rather elegantly curved bilateral horns that are coated the same shining silver substance as their talons, hence the occasional reports of "lightning" about the head, and, of course, the famous halo. In overall form and shape, though, the head is rather like that of an eagle, i.e. bearing an impressively large raptorial beak and with large, keen eyes facing forwards, resulting in a piercing and rather eagle-like gaze (not to mention superb binocular vision).

Ox, lion, eagle, and human are thus are all just partial glimpses of the whole. It is the author's opinion that the angel's true form is best captured by the old legends of griffins: a large feathered creature, four-footed and winged, with a long neck and long tail, bearing two taloned feet in the front and two padded paws in the rear. In fact, the oldest legends of griffins consistently describe them as "guardians of the divine", an additional clue that griffin stories are very likely based upon angels.

One last strain of mythology that must be mentioned is that of the dragon, and the related myths of the basilisk and cockatrice. Angels use holy-fire as a weapon, and in their true form they can apparently generate holy-fire at will. Are the dragon legends, as well, based upon angels? A salient feature of the dragon legends is always their immense size; it may be relevant here that angels display indeterminate growth, i.e. they continue growing as they age (rather than stopping at a certain adult size as the mammals do) and the eldest angels are truly enormous, indeed dragon-like in overall body length.

One can thus imagine a lonely shepherd of distant times glimpsing an angel in the far distance as it winged its way along the distant horizon. Perhaps the shepherd might sight the four legs, the gleam of silver upon the feet, the great wings and tremendous size, the glint of the curved horns upon the head, the plumed mane around the neck; perhaps he would even be half-blinded by the ethereal energy if the angel materialized close by. Upon running home to his humble village to report the bewildering sighting, what name would our shepherd choose for this fantastical apparition? Whether the word chosen to describe the great creature be "griffin," "dragon," or simply "angel,", these immense creatures of flight seem to have been spotted in all eras, on all continents. And though many of the stories have become warped with the passage of time, certain common themes remain: two wings, four legs, silver upon the feet, fire and brightness, and very large size.

NB: An important note to any readers who might be inspired to try to sight an angel for themselves: the repeated descriptions of "lightning" and "brightness" also can refer to a decidedly hazardous bleed-through of ethereal energy that can enter our own mortal realm when an angel first reveals its
true form. Put bluntly, direct exposure to this energy can cause blindness and even death. Thus it is often unsafe to view an angels' true form directly in the mortal plane from close proximity, particularly if they have only recently transitioned from the etheric plane and are replete with Heavenly power, which can, at a full charge, leak back out through the shafts of the main flight feathers, with catastrophic results for any nearby humans. [See Chapters 3 and 5 for discussion of the relevant physics.] The author risked a direct viewing of a seraph only after taking into account some rather strongly worded advice from the seraph in question, with the viewing at last occurring only obliquely, via a shield of protective opaque-glass built in accordance with the techniques described by Galileo's pupil Benedetto Castelli in 1612 for the safe viewing of solar eclipses.

It's not till Sam pokes his head into the TV room, cautiously whispering a nearly inaudible question about whether Cas might want some soup or cheese toast for lunch, that Dean realizes it's past noon already. They both look over at Cas — he's now flopped on his side with one arm dangling off the sofa, snoring lightly. Dean whispers back, "Another half an hour, maybe? Honestly a bit more sleep time wouldn't hurt."

Sam nods and whispers back, "I'll just start cutting the cheese and just kinda prep everything. Half an hour, then."

After another long glance at Cas, Dean returns his attention to The Physiology of Angels. It's already clear he should probably read the whole thing, but it's taken so long to get through just Chapter 2 that he's realizing this book is probably a week-long project at a minimum. The next few chapters look pretty dense, too. A quick flip through Chapter 3 ("Dimensions, Wavelengths, and the Etheric Form") reveals several intimidating-looking pages of neatly numbered calculus equations, and Chapter 5 ("Grace and Power") seems to have a fair bit of math as well, along with a fold-out diagram of a wing that has a bewildering array of little arrows going in all directions up and down the various feathers. "Figure 5c. The Flow of Heavenly Power Through The Fully Feathered Wing," Dean reads in the figure legend below.

With a sigh, he carefully folds the wing diagram up again, tucking it back into the book. Time to skip to Chapter Six ("Wings, Feathers, and Flight"). The rest can be tackled later.

The first part of Chapter 6 is all about the different types of feathers. It turns out wings aren't just a random bunch of fluffy feathers stuck on the wing haphazardly. rather, there are rows of certain types of feathers that always grow in a certain order — the tremendous long "flight feathers", rooted right down into the bones of the wing (further divided into neat sections called primaries, secondaries and tertials), and rows of tidy little "coverts" covering the bases of the flight feathers. All the feathers seems to grow in a very precise sequence, forming a precision array of such predictable structure that it starts to seem that every single feather has a name and number.

"And probably an address and a zip code," Dean mutters to himself. It's certainly a lot of detail but Dean's a little surprised to find himself getting interested in even the nitty-gritty details. Partly this is because it's relevant to Castiel, of course. (Dean's already feeling determined to discover some way to heal up Cas's wings). But also, wing structure is starting to seem surprisingly like a type of
engineering. Force and power, acceleration and maneuverability — these are familiar concerns, and Dean is starting to get the odd impression that a seraph's wings might be something like the Heavenly equivalent of a fighter jet (or maybe, just maybe, a Chevrolet Impala): formidably engineered and built for blazing speed.

*A feathered Impala*, Dean thinks. He glances over at Castiel, who is not really looking very Impala-like at all at the moment, as he shifts in his sleep on the sofa, his feet tangling in the blanket. Even in his sleep he still looks tired and thin, and Dean's eyes linger on him for a long moment; the cancer's suddenly in the forefront of Dean's thoughts again.

But Dean also remembers the Impala being nearly destroyed, time and again. Smashed to pieces by a tractor-trailer, mangled in a dozen different crashes. Each time Dean had put it back together, piece by piece, till shone mirror-bright, and ran as smooth as silk again.

"I'll fix you too," Dean mutters to Cas. "I swear." He turns the page and keeps reading.

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*A/N* - I so wanted to post the next bit too but it's 8:21pm and I have to really run fast now with my stork costume to the Imperio parade which is (no surprise) all the way across the city. More as soon as I can. Please forgive the inevitable typos - they will be fixed as soon I ever get back to my laptop.

Thank you all so much for reading!

*PS*! I forgot to mention - I was pretty blown away yesterday to find that Galileo really did have a pupil named "Benedetto Castelli" who devised a safe method of looking at extremely bright Heavenly objects. "Benedetto" means "Blessed," and as for "Castelli", draw your own conclusions, but my headcanon in this fic is that Castelli was really Castiel, trying to quietly convey to the great Galileo a safe method of looking at angels.
I couldn't help noticing you've got this feather

A/N - Since last chapter: Been to Rio de Janeiro for another thrilling Carnaval, paraded as a giant stock with 99 other giant stocks, stayed up till dawn 5 days in a row, flew back, instantly got sick, put my house on the market (cue massive drama about whether the condo will approve the buyer's dog), met 10 horses including 2 mustangs who turn out to have the most adorable fuzzy winter ears right now, had another cancer scare (one of the reasons for this fic is that I've been dogged by weird symptom of my own recently) but then the symptoms just went poof and now it all seems fine; tried to get caught up at work - and through it all, tried to write Chapter 6 of The Physiology of Angels so that Dean could read it. At last I think the next bit's ready. I know this fic is proceeding only inch by inch, but I hope you are still enjoying it!

And get this. My grad student came running into my lab on Thursday all excited. I asked her what was up and she said "I just managed to score a real letter by Knut Schmidt-Nielsen! Signed by him!" I was like WTF?!!! and she explains, turns out the biology office for some reason had a bunch of letters from Schmidt-Nielsen and they were THROWING THEM AWAY if you can believe it. Yes, he was a real person and he is still one of the greats of physiology. She showed me her letter; it was a totally scathing review of an awful book, ha ha ha. And he has the most lovely signature. (I missed this whole drama while in Rio, but it turns out a bunch of grad students have rescued all the letters, thank goodness.) Oddly the student is Brazilian... while I was in Brazil writing about Knut Schmidt-Nielsen, my Brazilian student was rescuing letters by the actual Knut Schmidt-Nielsen. There is something oddly lovely about all this.

May I now re-introduce you to my (fictional) version of Knut Schmidt-Nielsen, and a newly found section of his little-known classic, The Physiology of Angels.

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Chapter 6.4 — Alulas

We have seen that an angel wing is essentially, in its bony structure, a feathered arm (refer back to Fig. 6.2). The great flight feathers — primaries, secondaries and tertials — are in a sense simply extensions of the hand, forearm, and upper arm, respectively. But there is another type of flight feather as well, one that is much smaller and that can easily be overlooked, but one that has a unique importance.

When an angel fully spreads its wings before a human observer — a quite overwhelming sight, it must be noted, especially since angels typically perform this display as a deliberate show of their (considerable) power — if the observer can keep his composure enough to note the smaller details, he may perceive that both the angel's wings bear a small bump or pointed extension on the leading edge, sometimes barely detectable, just at the bend of the wing (Fig. 6.2). Some observers, and not a few medieval artists, take this as just a disarrayed feather, but it is not; it is a consistent anatomical feature; it is the alula. Far from being a mere stray clump of feathers, it is a fully functional winglet that is supported by its own little bones — it is, in fact, a feathered thumb (Fig. 6.3). It can be considered almost a tiny second wing. It is a functional, albeit small, airfoil, and can even be moved independently, flared out from the main wing in flight for better control in turbulent air.

The alula is not unique to angels. Birds have alulas (cf. alulae) as well. The number can vary; the newer races of angels such as cherubim, and the modern birds too, all bear one alula per wing.
However, the elder races of angels (e.g., seraphs), and all ancient fossil birds yet discovered, have two alulas per wing. (See for example the excellent specimen of Archeopteryx that resides in the Natural History museum of Berlin, and which, thankfully, has survived the recent war intact). This additional alula is a feathered first finger, and it is longer than the thumb.

In seraphs, these double alulas provide the additional ability to hold and even manipulate objects. Woe betide the unwary demon who may be unaware that even if a seraph’s taloned forefeet are immobilized, it almost always has a spare angel-blade tucked under its alulas as well, ready to be deployed at a moment’s notice. The author has noted that seraphs retain this habit even when in human form, invariably tending to conceal their blades within the folds of their coat-sleeves, as if in the feathers of a wing — i.e., rather than securing the blade in a scabbard or an inner pocket as would seem to be far more practical.

Thus, in a sense, angels (and birds) have not just two wings but four (or in the case of seraphs and Archeopteryx, six); it is only that the additional "wings" are very small. This is undoubtedly the source of the ancient legend of seraphim having six wings.

The alulas are another example of a pattern that must by now be abundantly clear: the wings of birds and of angels are built on a very similar plan. Perhaps our Heavenly Father was so pleased with his first attempt at a feathered wing (the first such effort being the angels, presumably) that he re-used the blueprint later for the birds, possibly even steering their evolution deliberately toward feathered wings. It is likely no coincidence, as well, that He has shaped the wings of both creatures as such clearly aerodynamic surfaces; this implies further that the fundamental mathematics of lift, drag and thrust (see previous sections) must act in the ethereal atmosphere of Heaven much as they do upon the Earth. Angels, like the birds, are creatures of flight.

Alulas, unsurprisingly, have alula-feathers. Here we must pause for a moment to consider the rarity of the alula-feathers and the extraordinary lore that has built up around them. Many a thrilling folk tale has been told of the remarkable value of "angel feathers"; these "angel feathers" are usually named only vaguely, but a closer reading reveals that such stories are, in fact, referring to alula-feathers specifically. That such is the case is clear from the size and shape of the feathers described in the stories. The feathers in these tales are flight feathers, i.e. with a central shaft, yet are quite small, able to be held in one hand or hidden in a pocket. A angel's primary- or secondary-feather would be the size of a medieval broadsword; even a tertial is often the length of a garden-spade. (The coverts and down feathers, conversely, are too small and flimsy to match the descriptions in the stories, lacking the firm central shaft.) Only the alula-feather matches the story descriptions of a small flight feather, with the shaft just off of center, able to be held in one hand. With this in mind it is striking that such tales invariably describe the alula-feathers as being so very valuable. Wars have been fought over the possession of these feathers, whole cities and empires rising and falling in their wake. What, then, makes them so precious?

Alula-feathers do indeed have some unique traits. Firstly, their shape and pattern is characteristic to the class and subspecies of angel. The rounded and barred alula-feathers of the cherubim, for example, are easily distinguished from the characteristic slender, slightly curved, four-inch-long feather from the longer alula of a seraph (refer back to Fig. 6.1).

Secondly, the alula-feathers have an unusual growth pattern during molt: they are invariably the very first feathers to drop from the wing at the onset of molt, as well as the very first feathers to grow anew. In fact, it seems the alulas are always the first feathers to reflect the angel's current state — the first to dull if the angel ails, the first to brighten when the angel regains power, the first to change color at the next molt if an angel's character has significantly altered. Why is this so? Why should these feathers, more than the others, so closely reflect the angel's identity and current state of mind? The angels themselves seem uncertain of the answer, but the old saying "a bird is not an
ornithologist" comes to mind, i.e., the subject of interest does not always study itself. The author (who has had the good fortune of studying with many noted ornithologists, as well as physiologists) most humbly suggests a possible explanation. Recall from Chapter 5 that the angel's grace permeates the hollow centers of all the wing-bones (an arrangement similar to the air-sac system of the birds), and further recall that the flight feathers are so deeply rooted into the wing bones that the feather-roots can actually contact the outer surface of this grace, such that power can sometimes stream directly to (or from) the grace through the shafts of the feathers. Since the grace is one long interconnected system, extending uninterrupted through all the long bones, it follows that the grace must somehow cross through the wrist joint of the wing, i.e. on its way from the humerus to the ulna. This wrist joint is the main bend of the wing that is visible in flight. At this juncture, the grace cannot be shielded by the major bones and must, due to the basic anatomy of this narrow region, pass very near the surface of the skin. This is exactly the spot where the alula is connected. It therefore seems possible that the roots of alula-feathers do not just contact the very outermost surface of the grace as other feathers do, but may actually be rooted within it. The alula-feather may thus be in the most intimate contact with the angel's core essence, continually bathed in a direct flow of Heavenly power.

What we do know for sure is that a molted alula-feather often retains a tiny portion of that angel's grace (along with whatever power the grace may have been holding), in the form of a tiny tendril of power running within the feather-shaft. This is the only type of feather that contains its own store of power.

Dean's been reading along steadily, his feet now propped up on a nearby upholstered footstool and the book angled up against one knee. He's already feeling certain that the feather Cas has in his dresser-drawer must be an alula-feather. It matches the text description exactly, not to mention that it looks exactly like the seraph alula-feather in Figure 6.1 — four inches long, slender, and slightly curved. Dean's even been on the verge of bouncing up from the chair and running to Cas's room just to doublecheck the shape and size of the feather.

But when he reaches the paragraph about alula-feathers having a piece of grace, and their own store of power, Dean pauses. He puts his feet down and sits up a little more, tilting the book more toward the little lamp. He reads the paragraph again.

Grace.

Power.

With a glance at Cas (he's still asleep), Dean turns the page and reads on.

Alula-feathers do not always carry this small spark of power. If the angel was at low power during the start of the molt, the alula-feathers that drop from the wing may even have no power at all. But in most cases, the alula-feathers that drop during molt do retain a scrap of power, and when they do, they can fuel spells of considerable scope and complexity. They can even transfer life-force under special circumstances (though unfortunately at very low efficiency). Perhaps most famously, they
have the ability to heal. This, then, is why these feathers occur in the stories. This is why kings, sultans, and tsars alike have, for eons upon eons, scoured the Earth to find these invaluable feathers: even a partly charged alula-feather has power enough to restore the health of a dying man. A fully charged alula-feather can in some cases contain enough power to heal not just a man, but even an ailing angel.

... Dean finds he's risen to his feet without even realizing it. He's clutching the book in both hands now, his breath even coming faster as he re-reads the final sentence:

*A fully charged alula-feather can in some cases contain enough power to heal not just a man, but even an ailing angel.*

He reads the sentence a third time, and a fourth; and then he realizes he's pacing back and forth, restless, still clutching the book in both hands. He glances over toward Cas again, still asleep on the couch; he almost calls to Sam, who's finished his lunch prep and seems to have disappeared to the laundry room again.

But then it dawns on him: Cas must already know this.

Cas has to know this. Cas must. There must be some reason Cas hasn't already used the feather.

But... Cas doesn't always know everything about angels! *A bird is not an ornithologist,* Dean thinks; a bird doesn't know everything about bird biology, and maybe the book has a point, maybe an angel doesn't necessarily know absolutely everything about angels either. There's things Cas hadn't known about Lucifer, in fact. For that matter, there's lots of things he hadn't known about Chuck, and about Amara; about why Chuck has always treated the angels the way that he has, why angels are built the way they are, why Heaven is set up like it is. Cas has even mentioned something about Naomi messing with his memory. So... maybe he's forgotten a few things, or never knew them?

Maybe Cas *doesn't know* that alula-feathers can heal.

Dean knows this is unlikely, but now he can't help seeing the tantalizing vision in his mind of how it might play out: Dean waking Cas and telling him the news that alula-feathers have the power of healing, and Cas somehow not knowing this. He'd be skeptical, maybe, but he'd be hopeful too. He'd look up at Dean with his eyes wide. He'd scramble to his feet and they'd both run straight to Cas's bedroom, where Cas would scoop the feather out of his dresser-drawer and...

And what? Wave it around? Press it to his abdominal scars? Eat it? How does one use an alula-feather, exactly?

Well, anyway, Cas would do *something* with it. Dean skips over that part of the puzzle — surely Cas could figure out what to do. He'd come up with some Enochian chant or something. Dean goes on to picturing the next step: the feather would probably start to glow, and maybe then Cas would have one of those spectacular shiny silver glowy moments. And when the glow faded... magically he'd be healed.

The scars would be gone. The bruises would be gone. The gaunt look would be gone. The cancer would be gone.

A moment later, as the glow faded, Cas would straighten up slowly. He'd take off that monkey-hat, one hand slowly pulling it off, and he'd have a full head of hair again (perfectly tousled, of course, in Dean's mental picture). He'd pat his hair, disbelieving; maybe he'd look down at himself with that
slightly shocked look that he gets sometimes when something has really startled him. But he'd adjust rapidly (he always does, whatever happens); a moment later he'd probably glance over at Dean with that endearing little half-smile of his quirking up one corner of his mouth, and he'd say some dry comment like "I believe the left testicle may be back in place, should you wish to make use of it."

And Dean would laugh. And Dean would have to hug him then, and....

And Cas's wings....

Cas would bow his head and close his eyes, the monkey-hat dangling unneeded from one hand. With a crack of thunder there they'd be, both those glorious wings, back at last. He'd flare them out so beautiful and wide.... Sam would come running in to see what was going on, and they'd both gape to see Cas standing there with those huge wings raised, fully feathered, streaming with power and light....

Stop it, Dean orders himself. For this whole daydream is starting to feel even worse than the old Cas-and-Erin fantasies that he used to torment himself with. This one, somehow, hurts even more. Dean even closes his eyes and tips his face up toward the ceiling, just to force himself to look away from the book. Stop it. Just stop it, he thinks. Because, it's just a fantasy, of course. It's not going to happen, and that's because, Cas must know all this. A bird may not be an ornithologist, but Cas is no bird, and he's smart, and he can read — in fact he's even seen this book already! He had it in his hotel room just last week! He's been around a long time, and he's seen the book, and he knows a lot of stuff, and he must have molted about a thousand alula-feathers already. There's just no way he doesn't know all this.

But maybe....

Dean turns to set the book down on the upholstered footstool. He's going to head for Cas's room after all, to look in the dresser-drawer — he just can't help it; the feather almost seems to be calling him by now. But first he needs to glance back through the book to check the illustration of the alula-feather in Figure 6.1, that pretty little illustration at the front of the chapter with the rice-paper sheet, so that he can remind himself exactly what an alula-feather should look like compared to other kinds of feathers.

The pages make a soft ruffling sound as he flips hurriedly back through the chapter, and Cas stirs on the couch.

Dean abandons the book at a random page and turns, and there's Cas blinking sleepily at him. Cas gives Dean a little smile; he's been lying on his stomach, but he rolls over and sits up a little, one hand going to his monkey-hat to check that it's still in place. Then his gaze goes straight to the book, which is still lying open on the footstool right behind Dean.

Dean says, "Hey, bucko, you're finally awake," and finds he's trying to nonchalantly sidle in front of the book to hide it a little (for some reason, he's a little shy about it). But Cas has obviously caught sight of the book already and he sits up all the way now, craning his neck to try to get a better view around Dean's knees.

"Have you been reading Schmidt-Nielsen?" Cas asks.

It takes a moment for the name to slot into place: Schmidt-Nielsen is the author. "Knut" Schmidt-Nielsen, Dean remembers; it's stamped in little gold letters right on the front cover.

"Yeah," Dean says, with a casual wave of one hand back toward the book. "Um... Chapter Six. Good ol' Knut, huh?"
Cas gives a slow nod. He's still craning his head to peer around Dean's legs, frowning now as he catches a glimpse of the illustration. Cas must be getting only a partial view, but he says, "Figure 6.2, right?"

"Um," says Dean, glancing briefly back at the book. It has indeed ended up open to Figure 6.2. "Yeah, I guess. So, Cas, listen, I know you must know this already, but, there's this part in Chapter 6 about these certain feathers on this one part of the wing. Little winglets like thumbs. They're called, um—" Dean's suddenly unsure how to pronounce it. "A-loo-las?"

Cas just nods. "Or alulæ if you favor the Latin plural," he says, "Alula actually just means winglet, you know. Little ala; ala is the Latin for wing." He cocks his head, studying Dean for a moment. "How far did you read?"

Dean says, "Far enough to get to this part about how alulas can... um, apparently they can heal? Um, Cas, so, isn't that an alula-feather that you've got in your dresser? The book says —" Dean spins around and grabs the book and turns back to Cas, flipping rapidly to the crucial paragraph; despite all his caution earlier, he's filled again now with the desperate hope that maybe Cas doesn't know all this. Maybe Cas hasn't read the whole book (even though he apparently can recognize Figure 6.2 from a partial view, from across a room...). Maybe the feather can help, maybe Cas doesn't know about it! The vision of Castiel spreading his fully healed, fully feathered wings is painfully vivid in Dean's mind again as he says, almost stumbling over his words in his eagerness, "The, this book, this book here says they can heal, Cas! It says alula-feathers can sometimes heal an angel, and they can for sure heal a human, so they definitely oughta be able to heal a depowered angel in a human vessel, don't you think? And, Cas, I couldn't help noticing, you've got this feather that's about four inches long, don't you, and that's the size that—"

"Alula-feathers only can heal when they're powered," says Castiel gently.

Dean hesitates only for a moment, and plows on with, "Yeah but, the point is, they can heal even fatal disease, and they can even transfer life force, Cas, listen to this—"

But Cas says, "The ones I have are depowered."

Dean looks at him.

"I have two alula-feathers from my last molt," Cas says. "One's in the dresser-drawer, and the other I keep in my jacket pocket. But they're both completely depowered. They can't heal."

Dean takes a slow breath, and makes himself give Cas a very calm nod, like this isn't a big disappointment. "Right," Dean says, straightening up a little. He forces a casual tone into his voice. "Knew you must know all about it. Just thought I'd ask."

"Those two feathers have been depowered for years," says Cas. "And I've searched for other alula-feathers. I've tried contacting every angel I could think of." He's still sitting on the edge of the sofa, and now he hunches a little forward, stretching his arms out so that his forearms are propped on his knees, hands dangling loosely in mid-air. His head is hanging a little low now. Dean, watching him, slowly realizes that Cas has probably spent weeks, if not months, testing the two feathers that he has, and searching for others as well.

Dean shuts The Physiology of Angels, sets it down on the little embroidered footstool, and sits down next to Cas on the sofa.

They're quiet a moment, sitting side-by-side. Cas's thigh is warm against Dean's.
"You've been on a whole goddam quest, haven't you," Dean finally says. "On your own."

Cas nods. He looks tired again now, and his eyes drift again to the black leather cover of *The Physiology Of Angels* as he says, "I started by trying to contact every angel I could think of. Every single name I knew. The few angels I could still find on Earth — just three, by the way — have no powered alula-feathers. The ones they bore when they fell were destroyed, and nobody's molted since. I've sent out more prayers anyway, just in case anybody might have been carrying old feathers with them when they fell, but I've heard nothing. I've staked out that little sandbox and prayed there too, hoping the doorway to Heaven might re-open. I've tried angel-radio, even though that doesn't really work correctly when I'm depowered like this. I've tried every contact method I can think of. But...." He shakes his head. "Nothing. Nobody. It was completely fruitless. And I've searched for other relics, too, anything that might carry some Heavenly power — not just alula-feathers but anything else. But there's nothing." He even looks a little puzzled now, as he adds, "It's as if, when Chuck left he seemed to just... suck all his power away with him. It seems that many things that used to be holy aren't any more." He adds, quietly, "It's like everything's been sucked dry."

He looks so disheartened now that Dean puts an arm around him and squeezes his shoulder, hoping to cheer him up. "Yeah, but, you can't have searched everywhere." Dean points out. "You've been sick. And you were in the hospital too. And then busy at that Gas-n-Sip! You can't have gotten to all of North America, right? Let alone all the world."

Cas gives a grudging little half-nod, and glances at Dean. "Really just Colorado, Kansas and a bit of the Southwest," he confesses. "You're right. I wasn't really able to cover much ground."

"So, see, there's still lots we can do," Dean say confidently, squeezing Cas's shoulders again, and patting his knee for good measure. "Sam and I'll start looking. We were just starting some real research this morning, in fact, while you were sleeping, now that we know what we're dealing with. We'll find something. We always do, right?"

Cas only gives a faint smile in reply. Dean removes his arm, thinking maybe it's a good time to take Cas into the library and show him how the research is going. But then Dean can't help asking, "So... I just gotta check, are you totally sure your two feathers don't have any power?"

Cas give a tired sigh, and he stands. He turns around and studies the sofa where he'd been sleeping. As Dean watches, Cas straightens the pillows, thumps the sofa's cushions back into position and picks up the rumpled blanket.

Slowly Cas shakes the blanket out and starts folding it into neat quarters, and finally, into the silence, he says, "I have the longest alula-feather from both the left wing and the right. They're the only feathers I managed to save from Purgatory. That was my last molt, in Purgatory. I had to burn all the others from that molt; the alula-feathers were the only ones small enough to carry with me and I didn't dare leave the others where any of the Purgatory creatures might find them."

Dean blinks at him. Purgatory? Cas had molted in Purgatory?

Cas seems thoughtful now, as he gazes down at the blanket in his arms. He slowly folds it one more time, into a neat square which he drapes over one sofa-arm, and he adds, "That molt nearly did me in. It's why I had to leave you alone for a while, you know. The problem was, you see—" He's not quite looking at Dean; instead he's gazing down at the sofa. "I'd lost a lot of power when we were blasted there, and you may remember that place is not exactly imbued with Heavenly power. So the feathers were not well powered when I molted. Which meant those two alula-feathers didn't have much power at all. Far below normal."

"But they had some juice, then?" Dean protests. "A little, at least?"
To his surprise, Cas nods. He finally lifts his gaze to Dean's, and says, "Those two did, at first. Just those two. That's why they're the only two feathers I bothered to try to carry with me; there were some smaller alula-feathers as well, but those were completely useless. So I only tried to save the two bigger ones. But their power has been used."

"Wait, used how? When?" says Dean.

Cas doesn't answer immediately — he's gazing silently at Dean now — and Dean rises to his feet slowly, saying, "For what?"

Cas is still just looking at him. He doesn't speak.

Dean stares back at him, frowning now. And then he remembers a line from Schmidt-Nielsen:

Even a partly charged alula-feather has power enough to restore the life of a dying man.

A dying man.

There'd been a lot of battles in Purgatory.

A lot of battles. A lot of angry monsters, and quite a few of them deliberately seeking revenge. And there'd definitely been some times when Dean had been injured. A few times, the wounds had felt kind of bad... in fact, thinking back now, there'd been a couple times when Dean had passed out completely.

But each time he'd awoken to find his wounds to be much less serious than he'd remembered. As if... Well, as if they'd been partly healed, now that he thinks about it.

And both times when he'd awoken, Cas had been crouching over him, pale and intent. Both times, Benny had been unusually quiet too, and kind of reluctant to talk afterwards. As if something had happened that Dean didn't know about. At the time, Dean had just assumed there'd been some other fight, or maybe Cas and Benny had argued about something. But thinking back now on that couple of times....

A "couple" times. Two times exactly, to be precise.

"No," Dean says, shaking his head. "No... you didn't use them on... on me, did you? Cas, say you didn't."

"You would have died," Cas says. "You were dying."

Dean can only stare at him.

They'd had two magical healing feathers. Not one but two. Two feathers from straight out of the old stories. Kings, sultans and tsars had fought wars for feathers like these, and they'd both been wasted on Dean.

Cas takes a step closer to stand right in front of Dean, and he puts both hands on Dean's shoulders. He leans close, his blue eyes intent, and says, "I made Benny promise not to tell you. I knew you wouldn't like it. But Dean, I felt fortunate to be any use at all to you."

Dean shakes his head again, still dismayed, and now Cas actually gives him a rough little shake with both hands. "Dean," he says intently, "It was the best possible use of the feathers. I was just relieved that you only were injured that badly twice, because, of course, I only had the two."
Cas's eyes soften a little as he studies Dean's face. One of his hands is now sliding around to the back of Dean's neck, and Cas strokes Dean there for a moment. The touch is soothing, and Dean takes a deep, slightly ragged breath, as Cas says, "It would have been so inexpressibly awful to lose you there. And, besides, Dean, if I hadn't used them there, I would have used them any number of times since then. You and Sam both have an alarming habit of nearly dying just about every week, you know. You're really both so appalling bad at taking care of yourselves." Dean has to give a dry laugh at that (Cas definitely has a point) and Cas concludes, "Even if I'd gotten back from Purgatory with those two feathers still charged up, there's no way they would have gone unused till now."

He finally drops both hands from Dean's shoulders, and then Cas rolls his shoulders a little oddly, as if there's a kink in his neck. He glances at one shoulder, and then at the other; it's like he's thinking about his wings, unconsciously trying to move them, even automatically looking for them. But there are no visible wings, of course, and Cas says, looking back at Dean with a rueful grimace, "I'll admit I was hoping I would molt again. But my last plumage, the set of feathers I grew in that Purgatory molt... That was the plumage I still bore when Metatron flung me down here. I didn't have as bad a fall as the other angels, but it was still enough of a fall that my plumage was burned. I didn't even realize how badly till later...." Now he's hunching his shoulders, as if even the memory hurts, and for a moment he stops talking, his lips pressing together. "I haven't molted since," he finally says. "I'm not even sure why; I should have. Maybe because my power supply's been so erratic, and I kept losing my grace.... But Dean, my point is, even if those are the very last alula-feathers that I'll ever grow, I don't regret using them on you, not in the least, and I never will, whatever happens. I'm grateful that my feathers could have helped you." He looks at Dean solemnly. "That's actually why I've kept them since, you know. They're useless now; but they remind me that sometimes, at least now and then, I have been of some marginal use to you."

"Some marginal use?" Dean says, and now he has to laugh. "You've saved my life, what, a dozen times at least, and Sam's too. And a lot of other people. And, y'know, the world. You call that some marginal use?"

"Well..." says Cas doubtfully. "It always seems like I could have done better."

"Oh man, you are really not getting it," Dean says, and now it's his turn to take a step closer and grab both Cas's shoulders. "You really don't have any idea what you're worth, do you?"

Cas just looks confused by that, and he takes a breath to say something. But he pauses in mid-breath, and as Dean watches him, he sees Cas's expression change. A flicker of doubt runs over Cas's face first, and then a dawning hope, as if he might actually be realizing what Dean might really mean. And then another puzzled frown.

"You're such an idiot sometimes," says Dean, giving him a little shake to drive it home. And all of a sudden it seems like another great time for a kiss.

It starts out just a soft peck on the lips. It develops into something more.

About forty seconds later Cas breaks the kiss to say, "I just thought of some more ways I might be of use. Hopefully more than marginal," and at last there's that wonderful endearing half-smile on his face.

No shiny moments, not yet; no glowy wings. But just to see that little smile at all seems like a great triumph, and Dean grins back at him.

A very tentative knock at the door finally catches their attention. "So I really didn't mean to interrupt," says Sam from the door. He's beet-red as he adds, "This door is like, wide open, dudes, and I heard that Cas was up, and I really only wanted to say, soup's ready."
A/N - More next week. Hope you are enjoying this, and, as always, my perpetual apologies for falling behind on comment-replies. If there was anything you liked about this chapter, please let me know what it was! I love to hear from you!
As they follow Sam toward the kitchen, Cas slants a cautious look sideways at Dean. "Did you read any more of that chapter?" he asks. His tone is casual, but there's an alertness in his eyes as he adds, "Anything about, say... alula-feathers? Or, you know... other feathers?"

"Other feathers?" Dean asks, wondering what he's getting at. "What, like those primaries or something?"

"Oh, no, just...." Cas gives a casual wave of one hand as he sits down at the kitchen table. Sam sets down a bowl of soup in front of him as Cas adds, "The feathers of the head, maybe. Or the neck. Other feathers."

"Why, are there other feathers that can heal?" asks Dean.

Sam, who's back over at the microwave carefully lifting out another bowl of hot soup, almost drops the bowl as he hears this. He sets it down with a clunk on the counter and turns toward Dean and Cas with an incredulous, and all-too-hopeful, look. "Wait, feathers can heal?" he says.

"Don't get too excited," Dean cautions him, hoping to spare Sam the inevitable disappointment. "It's only some kinds of feathers, and they have to be charged up or something. Which they mostly aren't, apparently. Gotta have some grace in them, right, Cas?"

Cas nods as Dean adds glumly, "Cas has a couple, but they don't have any grace left." (He can't bring himself to explain why.)

"Oh," says Sam. He's quiet a moment, thinking. "So... angel feathers can have grace?"

"Certain types," Dean replies. "Alula-feathers can have this, like, thread of the angel's grace." At Sam's puzzled look, Dean adds, "Alulas are these little winglet dudes at the bend of the wing. Little fingers, sort of."

Cas actually lifts his left arm to demonstrate, holding it out a little sideways as if it's a wing and wagging his thumb and forefinger slightly. "These two digits," he explains to Sam. "They're feathered. On the wing, I mean. I have a couple of those feathers, from my last molt, but they lost their little bit of grace long ago."

They're all quiet as Cas lowers his hand, picks up his soup spoon and starts to eat.

Sam's frowning now. He takes a breath, as if to say something, but seems to think better of it, and then he stares at the microwave a little blankly, apparently deep in thought. Dean turns back to Cas to ask, "So, why were you asking what I'd read, anyway? Can any other kinds of feathers hold power?"
But Cas shakes his head. "Unfortunately not. I was just wondering how far you'd gotten in that book, that's all."

"Halfway through Chapter 6," Dean says. "Just to the part I asked you about. I'll read the rest later."

It's still a little unclear why Cas should be interested in exactly what page Dean's gotten to in *The Physiology of Angels*, and Dean's wondering if the book might have some other intel about angel feathers — something else besides healing powers, that is — that might be worth learning about. It's tempting to go right back to the book, in fact, but now that Cas is awake it's also seeming like a really great idea to spend some more time with him first. It's afternoon already, Cas has slept half the day away, and Dean is painfully aware that they've only got one good week in front of them, a scant handful of days really, before they'll all have to head back to the Chemo Motel for the next round of hell.

As they all start eating, though, Dean can't help glancing back toward the TV room, where *The Physiology of Angels* is presumably still sitting quietly on the little upholstered footstool.

"You've probably read that whole book already, right?" he asks Cas.

"Something like that," Cas replies. He's definitely evading Dean's gaze now, as he bends over his bowl of soup, downing spoonful after spoonful, while Dean gives him a narrow look. But it's such a relief to see him eating so steadily that Dean decides not to bother him with any more questions about it.

Not just yet, at least.

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Sam's beaming with delight as lunch wraps up — Cas has managed to put away a entire bowl of soup along with three-quarters of a grilled cheese sandwich. Maybe he's really feeling better, or maybe it's partly thanks to Sam's careful preparations; he's gone all-out on presentation again, setting attractive little parsley garnishes on the soup, and arranging the perfectly browned grilled-cheese sandwiches, each cut into tidy triangles, on a colorful little plate. For whatever reason, Cas's appetite seems to have definitely picked up; it's the most he's eaten in days. He even has enough energy to announce, as Dean's picking up the empty soup bowls, that he's going to go for a little walk outside.

Dean and Sam exchange a skeptical look. Sure, Cas is eating better, but it's only been a a few days since the chemo. Yesterday Cas was barely even able to stay on his feet without support. The bruises on his face aren't even totally faded yet, from when he pitched onto his face several nights ago in the motel; the split lip is barely healed.

Cas rolls his eyes when he sees the two brothers looking doubtfully at each other.

"I swear I'll be okay," he says. "Just a short walk. I just want to see the sun for a moment, maybe feel the wind..." He hesitates. "Just for a few minutes."

"Want me to come with?" offers Dean.

"No, no..." says Cas airily. "No, I'll be fine."

For a moment Dean's slightly hurt by this — that is, until he realizes that Cas has still got that classic evasive look of his. Not about the book anymore, it seems, but about something else. And after a few
moments’ thought, Dean's pretty sure he knows why.

Dean sets the empty soup bowls in the sink and turns back to Cas to say bluntly, "You're going to try another prayer again, aren't you?"

Cas looks away.

Dean adds, "Another broadcast to any angels in range? Calling up Crowley, even? Something like that? Firing up the relic quest again?"

Cas glances back at him uncomfortably. "Um, maybe," he says.

"Relic quest?" says Sam, looking back and forth between them.

Dean explains, "Turns out that in between all the chemo and the Gas-n-Sip slavery, in all his endless spare time, Cas has been trying to find anything that might have the power of healing. Any more of those alula-feathers, but also holy relics in general." He turns to Cas to say, "Take a walk if you want, but if you do I'm totally coming with you." Cas is already opening his mouth to protest, an all-too-familiar stubborn look coming over his face now, but Dean says, "I am coming with you and no you don't get a say about it because you have spent months hiding stuff from us and you are barely three days past chemo and you are not going to go broadcasting prayers all over Creation and calling down psycho angels and crazy demons on us — not yet anyway — for ONE day you are going to REST and let US do the legwork." Dean pauses to draw a breath (Sam's trying, not very successfully, to hide a grin), and adds, "Give Sam and me a chance here, okay? Give us a chance to see if we can help. You only just told us today what's really going on. Let us see if we can figure anything out."

"No working, either," Sam chimes in. "No Gas-n-Sip."

Dean nods, adding, "Also, while I'm at it, no checking yourself out of ICU's and driving yourself hundreds of miles in stolen cars."

Cas still has a bit of a mulish look, but he says, "So... what would you rather I do? Lie down and give up?"

"Lie down and rest up," orders Dean. "I mean, take a walk if you want — a little walk — but, seriously, look how much sleep you needed this morning. And I'll bet you're still not caught up. Just sack out some more. Watch Stargate or something."

"Stargate...." mutters Cas, shaking his head.

"Hey, don't knock it," says Dean. "Start with SG-1. It's the classic."

"Maybe something relaxing," suggests Sam. "Gilmore Girls?"

Dean snorts at the idea of Cas watching Gilmore Girls. "Hawaii 5-0," he suggests. "Baywatch."

Cas is rolling his eyes again. "Metatron already infused me with the complete knowledge of every book, movie and television show he ever knew about. Which includes all of those shows."

"New stuff then," says Dean, folding his arms. "Seriously, dude, you need to take it easy."

The stubborn look is fading a little more as Cas leans back in his chair, tapping one finger on the table. He finally says, "I'll admit it might be a little appealing to lie around in a state of complete sloth, but I do want to do something. I don't want to just give up."
Sam says, "Resting up after chemo is part of fighting, you know. Resting up is how you heal; it's not giving up. And Dean's right, you should let us worry about the research for once. At least for a couple days. Hey, Dean, speaking of research... " Sam hesitates. "Could you show me that chapter? The part about those finger-feathers?"

There's a casual tone in Sam's voice as he asks this, but Dean's a little surprised. Chapter 6 was supposed to be Dean's task today, while Sam was going to do all the legwork on testicular cancer — that is, now that they finally know what kind of cancer Cas is dealing with.

"Wasn't Chapter 6 supposed to be my job?" Dean ventures, giving Sam a puzzled look.

"Just got curious," says Sam, returning the look blandly. "Besides, I've finished most of my other reading."

Cas isn't paying much attention to this exchange; his attention seems to have been caught by the mention of new Netflix shows, and soon he's standing up, saying something about how maybe he'll go check out the Netflix menu after all. But now Dean's staring back at Sam. It seems like something's a little off about Sam's expression; his expression is too bland, too carefully innocent. But Sam just looks away, and soon he's turned to the sink to wash the dishes.

Dean just says, "I'll go grab the book for you." He doesn't say anything more to Sam, and he doesn't press for details (not now, not where Cas can overhear, not when they're trying to get Cas to take it easy).

But he's already sure: Sam's had an idea.

However, when Dean asks him about it quietly in the library a few minutes later, while handing over The Physiology of Angels, Sam just says, "Anything with the power of healing seems like we ought to learn more about it. If just to learn what types of things can even have that power."

He brushes off Dean's other questions and soon he's burrowed into Chapter 6, busily taking notes on his laptop.

Dean's still a little suspicious, but he's trying now not to get his hopes up unnecessarily. He switches over to reading more about testicular cancer. It's all stuff Sam's already read, but Dean knows he needs to learn the details himself, too.

At first it's fairly encouraging. Survival rates seem okay. There's helpful tips about post-chemo care, and radiation, and how to feed cancer patients.

But... it seems like Stage 3B is not good. Not good at all. And after reading through a truly depressing page with the horribly blunt title "When Chemotherapy Doesn't Work," it's not all that long till Dean's walking back to the TV room to check on Cas, mostly just to reassure himself that Cas is actually still alive.

Cas is not only alive, he seems to be completely riveted by some new Gilmore Girls sequel that has popped up on Netflix.

"There's a new episode!" he reports brightly to Dean. "Made very recently! Metatron never knew about it because it's so new, so I didn't know about it either." He looks up at Dean with that little
half-smile again. "I rather like the Dean character," Cas says. "He's got your name. And, he looks a little like Sam, don't you think?" He then adds, a little hesitantly, "Um... might you be interested in watching it with me?"

*I really should be doing more research*, Dean thinks. *Like about, 'When Chemotherapy Doesn't Work.'*

But... surely one Gilmore Girls episode won't hurt?

"I got it covered," says Sam, when Dean asks if Sam's okay with pursuing all the research on his own for a little while. "Sit with him. He probably needs it."

"You sure?" says Dean.

"He's been alone for months," points out Sam. "I know you were with him all morning, but he was conked out then. Go hang out with him some, now that he's awake. I got the research, really. Go watch Netflix and just hang out."

"Are you seriously telling me to Netflix-and-chill with Cas?" Dean asks, an eyebrow raised.

Sam snorts. "You said it, I didn't. Just keep that damn door closed, okay?"

By evening they've watched the entire Gilmore Girls sequel, along with an absurdly hokey show about some girl growing up on a Canadian horse ranch (the most recent seasons are so new that Metatron hadn't known about them either — and Cas turns out to be surprisingly invested in the soap-opera story of the plucky teenage horse-trainer). They've even checked out the pilots of Stranger Things and The OA, and Cas is currently making what seems to be a very difficult decision between Finding Dory and Guardians of the Galaxy, frowning intently as he flips back and forth between the synopses.

It's becoming clear that Cas takes a real pleasure in finding shows that were released after that weird, brain-invading moment he'd had with Metatron. Dean's getting the impression that by watching these new shows for himself, seeing the plots unfold in real time, Cas maybe is able to feel a little more independent of all the awful things that Metatron (and, by extension, the other angels) have done to him over the years.

By dinnertime they're well into Guardians Of The Galaxy. (Finding Dory's been postponed till later.) Dean's enjoying every second — not least because he's been able to convince Cas to do a fair amount of Netflix-grazing, including not only the usual popcorn but a whole assortment of healthy snacks that Dean keeps bringing over like offerings: bowls of blueberries, sliced-up apples with little cubes of cheese, little rolled-up turkey slices with tiny dots of mustard. As he hands over the latest offering (a mug of hot chicken soup), he notices that Cas has pulled over the upholstered footstool so that Cas can prop his legs up on it. Dean settles down next to Cas again and puts up his feet next to Cas's.

"A whole afternoon of Netflix-and-chill, huh, Cas?" Dean says. "See, I told you it wouldn't be so bad to just rest for a while."

"I'll admit you may have had a point," says Cas, tossing a blanket over both their legs. "It actually does feel quite good to relax for a day."
Who knew Netflix-and-chill could be so innocent? thinks Dean, as Cas un-pauses Guardians Of The Galaxy. It really is so nice just to be sitting here next to Cas at all, watching his reactions to the TV shows, seeing how much he's enjoying speculating about where the plot's going to go... snuggling a little closer....

They've been more or less leaning on each other all afternoon. Early on, there was a certain moment when Cas let his head tilt against Dean's shoulder; and there'd been another moment, not long after, when Dean let his head lean on Cas's in return. It had all still had that slight shock of strangeness, but as the hours have rolled by it's starting to feel incredibly comfortable to lie here leaning on Cas. By now Dean's even gotten into a habit of slouching down pretty far and using Cas as a pillow, his head propped against Cas's shoulder, and Cas, too, has gotten into his own habit of having one arm behind Dean's neck, his hand either stroking Dean's hair or tucked down under the blanket holding Dean's hand.

Nothing has happened beyond that (well, not yet, at least); neither of them has made a real move of any sort. Somehow it seems more than enough to just be here together.

Eventually Sam pokes his head in the door (this is preceded by an excessive amount of throat-clearing and some loud scraping of Sam's library chair, then some unusually heavy footsteps, and half a dozen carefully loud knocks). Sam takes in the sight of Dean slouched on Cas's shoulder without any apparent sign of surprise, and he announces, as Cas pauses the movie again, that he's "going out on some errands." A grocery run, apparently, and a drugstore run too, and "just a few other things".

Cas and Dean glance at each other, and Dean straightens up slightly. It seems a little late in the day for a grocery run, especially since that involves quite a long drive over the Nebraska state line, all the way up to the town of Hastings. It's usually a two-hour round trip at least. Which Sam takes some pains of making clear to both Dean and Cas — even though they both already know, and Sam knows that they both already know, exactly how far away the Hastings grocery store is.

"I'll be back in, like... two hours, minimum," says Sam carefully. "At the very earliest. Actually more like three now that I think about it. In fact, definitely three because I've got a few other errands. Maybe three and a half."

"So, just to be clear on what you're saying here," says Dean, who can't help smirking at him, "you're willing to swear in a court of law that you'll be gone for at least three hours?"

"Three minimum," confirms Sam, and he's already blushing again.

"Sam, you've been turning red a lot today," observes Cas. "Have you been feeling particularly humiliated or embarrassed?"

Of course Sam just blushes even more, and Cas frowns at him in concern, adding, "Or is it some kind of fluctuating sunburn? Or a epidermal issue? Rosacea, possibly? Maybe you should see a doctor."

Dean has to laugh as Sam mutters, "I'm fine, Cas. Dean, keys?" Dean manages to worm the Impala keys out of his pocket and tosses them in Sam's direction; Sam snatches them out of mid-air and makes a rapid escape.

Once he's gone, Cas turns to Dean with a worried look. "Is something wrong with Sam?" he asks.

"He's trying to give us some time alone," explains Dean.
"Time... alone?" says Cas, puzzled. This seems to be a brand-new idea. He considers it for a moment and then the light dawns. "Oh, for sex?" Cas says. "I see. In case we want to use some other room than our bedrooms, or make more noise, I suppose. But why the embarrassment? And why didn't he just say so?" Dean can only shrug; Cas shakes his head, with a barely-audible mutter of "Humans," under his breath.

Then Cas turns to Dean with a distinctly bright-eyed look.

"So, three hours," says Cas.

"Three hours," replies Dean.

"There's a lot we could do in three hours," Cas points out. "Should we wish to."

"Yeah," says Dean, "if we wanna do anything."

"We could have some dinner," Cas suggests. "If you're hungry."

"I'm not particularly hungry, actually," says Dean. "We've only had about a million blueberries."

"Or we could finish the movie," says Cas, picking up the remote and gesturing at the screen. He adds, with an unmistakable smirk on his face, "The climax is bound to be interesting."

Dean has to let out a bark of laughter at that. "I gotta say, you have really started to master the double-entendres there, dude," he says. "You been working on that in all your spare time?"

"I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about," Cas deadpans. "I've been fluent in English for years." He lifts the remote again, aiming at the TV. "Seriously though, do you want... to... finish...tonight, Dean?"

"Oh, you are getting downright dangerous," Dean says, kicking the blanket off. "Turn that damn thing off. We've been watching the boob tube all day. Let's do, y'know... something else."

Cas clicks the TV off. He's grinning as they both get to their feet.

But the moment the TV is off, the moment they're both on their feet, they both hesitate, and Dean realizes there's an odd tension in the air. Cas is watching Dean almost cautiously. Dean's assuming they'll head for Cas's bedroom, but neither of them moves.

At that point it starts to become clear why neither of them has made a real move all day long: The fiasco of this morning hasn't really disappeared at all.

Not twelve hours ago Dean would've jumped at the chance to get Cas in bed. They'd even been kissing earlier this afternoon, and that had felt fine. (It had felt great, in fact.) But now that there's an opportunity for something more, now that the "something more" seems downright imminent, all Dean can seem to think about is Cas's awful yelp of pain this morning.

How he'd scrambled away, literally falling to the floor. How he'd actually been sick to his stomach... and how he'd ended up huddled on the floor for that long awful moment, curled up in real agony. He'd recovered rapidly, of course, but....

*My touch will always hurt him*, thinks Dean. The thought is just as irrational now as it was this morning, and he's annoyed to find it back in his head. But he can't quite shake it, and he realizes, with some surprise, that he's feeling almost a little uncertain.
'Uneasy' might be a better word, actually

'Worried,' maybe.

Well... 'scared,' not to put too fine a point on it.

Cas is still watching him, and now he says, his voice gentle, "We can just watch the movie if you'd rather. I would enjoy that too." He seems to choosing his phrasing carefully, and Dean realizes he'd better come clean.

"Okay, so, the thing is," says Dean. He takes a breath and says, "I really don't want to hurt you again."

Cas nods, with a thoughtful look, and he says, "I'll confess I don't particularly want to be hurt, now that you bring it up. It has in fact been on my mind, a little bit... But I doubt that'll happen again. It wasn't your fault, and besides, you know about my injuries now." Then he adds, brightening a little, "Besides, I could just perform fellatio on you. That's completely safe, right? And you'd enjoy that?.... I hope?"

The thought of Cas always getting Dean off, and Dean never getting Cas off, seems completely wrong, and suddenly Dean's determined to find a way to do this in a way that'll work. A way that'll make sure Cas won't get hurt; a way that'll let Cas enjoy it all too.

Yet the irrational part of the worry - the part about I was a demon, a demon's touch will always hurt an angel - won't quite go away.

"How about," says Dean, thinking. "Could you just let me... see?"

"See what?"

Where the stitches are, Dean almost says.

But it's more than that — Where the bruises are, he adds mentally. And those abdominal scars. And what those scrape marks on your back are.

How hurt you are. Everywhere.

How I can touch you so it won't hurt.

"Everything?" Dean finally says.

Cas looks at him a long moment, and finally he gives a slow nod.

"So, um," says Dean. "Your place or mine?"

They end up in Dean's room (Dean's hoping a change of scenery might relax them both about the memories of this morning.) The bed's a queen-size, bigger than the one in Cas's room. It's always been bigger than Dean really needs, actually; in the Winchesters' first month here he'd replaced the little cot-size dorm mattress that had originally been in here with a nice new big one. At that point he'd still been thinking that surely some girl or other would be sharing it with him at some point.
But there's never been a girl here. He's always slept in this bed alone.

Till now, that is.

Even with the change of room, though, Cas is starting to look a little tense. For a moment he stands at the foot of the queen-size bed, looking around a little vaguely, like he's not sure what to do. Then he shucks off his blue sweater and starts unbuttoning the shirt that's underneath, which turns out to be a long-sleeved button-up, as if he's been trying to hide his arms with some extra layers. He's not looking at Dean now (he's staring at the floor) and there's a definite tightness in his mouth. Dean takes a step closer and reaches out to Cas's hands, stopping him.

"Allow me," says Dean.

Dean unbuttons the shirt one button at a time, and he keeps his eyes on Cas's face the whole time. Cas slowly relaxes, apparently realizing Dean isn't going to inspect — and judge — every inch of skin as soon as it's revealed. The shirtfront slowly comes open, but Dean still doesn't look at Cas's skin; instead he turns his attention to the shirtcuffs, unbuttoning them carefully; first the left, then the right. He moves slowly, giving Cas little smiles now and then, hoping to make it all seem something more like foreplay than like a medical exam.

Cas gives a slightly tense sigh.

"This is surprisingly unnerving," Cas says at last.

"It's cool, Cas," says Dean. "Just want to know where the safe areas area." He stops himself from adding *It's not a beauty contest*, realizing just in time that that'll probably come across like Dean doesn't think Cas looks good.

Which is not true at all.

The cuffs are unbuttoned, the shirtfront open; Dean stops there for a long moment, sliding his hands gently under the shirt and onto Cas's bare shoulders.

*He likes the back of the neck*, Dean remembers, and he strokes Cas there with one hand. This seems to have an almost immediate effect; Cas relaxes perceptibly, his head nodding forward a little and a long sigh escapes his mouth. He even closes his eyes for a moment.

As if somehow fortified by the back-of-the-neck stroking, Cas then slips his shirt off in one quick move. A moment later he's even unzipping his pants and getting his socks off. He's moving rather fast, as if trying to ride the brief wave of confidence for as long as he can. Once down to his boxers he hesitates again, though.

"Here, lemme join you," says Dean, stripping down to his boxers himself.

And then Dean strips even farther.

But the wave of confidence seems to have run its course; now Cas seems to be having an attack of shyness again. Even with Dean totally nude he can't seem to look at Dean at all, and he's not taking his own boxers off.
Dean sidles around behind him, thinking Cas might feel better about revealing the surgical sites if Dean's not staring directly at his crotch. Dean's got a thought in mind to sort of snuggle him from behind, but as soon as Dean's stepped around behind him, an odd line of bruises on Cas's back and shoulders catch his eye. Oh, right; the scrape marks, or claw marks almost, that had been visible that night back in the Chemo Motel, back when Cas had been cowering in the shower. Dean's not sure if it's safe to touch them; are they bruises? Tentatively he sets a hand high on Cas's shoulder, well above the dark marks, trying to see what they are exactly.

"I'm sorry I look so bad," Cas says, out of nowhere. He reaches up and yanks his monkey-hat off, almost roughly, as if he's trying to deliberately show how awful he looks (or how awful he thinks he looks, that is). He's almost bald now.

"What?" says Dean, startled more by Cas's words, and his tense tone of voice, than by the baldness or the weird claw marks. "No, no. It's not that. Really. I just don't want to hurt these bruises."

"Oh, those? They're not bruises," Cas says, craning his head over his shoulder. "That's just the bleomycin."

"The what?" Dean says.

"From the chemotherapy," Cas explains. He's talking a bit more freely now, as if being able to focus on just one issue is better than feeling completely exposed all over. He even turns his back toward the bedside lamp, so that the light falls fully onto the strange claw marks. "I'm getting three chemotherapy drugs," he says. "One is called bleomycin, and one of its side effects is these odd-looking dark lines on the skin. They're called scratch marks. Apparently it's one of the more unusual side effects, but it does happen to some people."

"Really? They do look like claw scratches," Dean says. For they really do; now that they're more clearly lit, he can see that the marks are grouped together in sets, clusters of three or four parallel lines a few inches long, all a dark bluish-red, like the color of an old bruises. The clusters are scattered in several places across Cas's shoulders and his lower back. "Do they hurt?" asks Dean.

Cas shakes his head. "Fortunately not."

Dean dares to trace a finger lightly over one set of scratch marks, but sure enough, Cas doesn't even flinch. "Will they go away?" asks Dean.

"I don't know," says Cas. He follows that with a casual little shrug, but he sounds a little concerned as he adds, "Apparently they're often permanent. I've been trying to conceal them... I mean, think about it, if I'm ever without my shirt and somebody sees them... well, it does rather look like I've been in a battle with a werewolf, doesn't it?" He's twisting around now to try to peer over his shoulder at his own shoulder-blade. "Not that there's anything wrong with having battled a werewolf, but sometimes I'd really rather just look... well, normal."

"If anyone asks, just tell 'em I'm a little kinky that way," Dean offers, with a chuckle. Cas twists around even farther then, apparently just to give Dean a squinty-eyed frown of puzzlement. "Kinky?" he asks.

"Everybody's got a kink, angel," says Dean, grinning at him. "It's just a matter of whether they've found it yet." Cas's squint just gets even squintier, but Dean adds, "Anyway, as long as these don't hurt, that's all I wanted to know. They actually look kind of cool, you know."

"They do?" says Cas. Now he looks skeptical.
"They do," says Dean, and he's not lying; they're almost like tattoos, or dramatic battle scars. To emphasize his point, he leans forward to give Cas a little kiss on the highest of the scratch marks, on his left shoulder-blade. Cas gives a little intake of breath, and Dean moves a little closer.

It's suddenly amazingly tempting to press right up against him. Press hard, even. Dean's startled to find himself fighting back an increasingly powerful urge to press right up against that ass...to rut right up against him....

But there still might be bruises he doesn't know about. Who knows, rough ass-handling could even yank at the stitches in front somehow, if Dean yanks on Cas's skin too hard. Dean sighs, forcing himself to hold back from a real embrace. It's frustrating; finally he does allow himself to at least lean close enough to kiss Cas square on the back of the neck.

It's turning out to be rather amazing how much this back-of-the-neck stuff seems to do for Cas's confidence. Again he closes his eyes; again his head nods down for a moment, with a slow sigh, and a moment later he's finally shucking off the boxers. And then he even angles the lamp toward the bed, steps around Dean, flips the covers back and lies down on the sheets, face-up, totally nude, as if finally ready for a full inspection.

He looks up at Dean, and there's such an open and trusting look in his eyes now that Dean's almost taken aback.

"These are from the abdominal surgeries for the lymph nodes," Cas says, gesturing to two angry-looking surgical scars on his abdomen. Dean sinks down on the edge of the bed next to him as Cas points out each scar. "I know they look bad," he says, "but they're really all right now. These bruises on my arms are from the IV's. The other bruises, on my legs here—" (Dean hadn't even noticed these yet, but Cas helpfully points to about six different bad bruises, mostly down on his shins) "— these apparently are just because chemotherapy reduces platelet counts body-wide. So bruises can occur all over. Every time I bump my leg on something I seem to end up with a huge bruise, see?" More helpful pointing, as Cas shows Dean one bruise after another. He reaches a point where he falters, though; Dean almost reaches out to rub him on the back of the neck again, just to give him another confidence-boost, but this time Cas manages to keep going on his own. He finally takes a breath, points to his groin and says, "And, um, well, they removed the left testicle, as you can see. The stitches are actually rather high, up here on the groin, here, see?" (He's pointing to a spot Dean had barely noticed, on the inside of his groin, almost up at dick level.) "It's interesting really," says Cas, "apparently they go in from above and pull the testicle right out of the scrotal sac before cutting it away. Though there's also this incision on the scrotal sac itself, here, see? That's mostly healed; but do you remember that I got that infection and had to go back to the ICU? Well, the infection was here, and it's better now but there's this stitch that still has to come out—"

He goes on for several minutes. There are dozens of different wounds and injuries that he's pointing out, and now that Cas is finally comfortable enough to talk about them, he's going through so much stuff all at once that Dean's actually getting a little overwhelmed. Soon he's having to hide his worry, just nodding and asking the occasional question.

But, Dean reminds himself, it's all manageable, or should be. Cas isn't totally covered with bruises, not a hundred percent, and some apparently don't hurt. The leg bruises are mostly on the lower legs; the arm bruises mostly on the forearms; the back "bruises" apparently don't hurt him. The abdominal scars have apparently healed pretty well. He's even saying now that the scrotal-sac issues don't usually cause problems any more, that the stitches will be out soon. But it's really starting to seem like navigating a minefield, and though Dean's trying to act optimistic and positive, he can't help thinking, once again, My touch will always hurt him.
But then he remembers Cas's plea, earlier this morning. *Promise me you will not let this stop you,* he'd said.

*Promise.*

*I couldn't bear it if you give up on me.*

And Dean had promised.

But how do you touch a partner who's covered with wounds?

Especially when you can't get the stupid idea out of your head that a direct touch of yours might always hurt him?

*Maybe this is too much, too soon,* worries Dean. *Maybe I should've stuck with the research today.... Maybe I should've just kept reading about feathers after all.*

This reminds him of Cas's oh-so-casual interest in how far Dean had gotten in Chapter 6. The chapter about feathers.

And then Dean has an idea.

"What are you doing?" Cas says, propping himself up on his elbows. Dean's rummaging around in a dresser-drawer. It's pretty clear from the way Cas is craning his head that he can't quite see what's in the drawer. And Dean's keeping it that way on purpose, till he finds what he's looking for.

"You're not the only one with stuff hidden away in a dresser, you know," says Dean. "Bottom drawer of the dresser is the Extra-Fun Drawer." He shoves aside some sheepskin-lined cuffs and a stack of old Penthouses (originally found, interestingly enough, in a back filing cabinet of the Men of Letters library.)

"Extra-Fun?"

"Condoms, you know. Stuff like that..." Dean explains, pushing a bottle of lube aside (though he makes a careful mental note of where he puts it). "Um, maybe some cock rings, you know, the usual —"

"Cock... what?"

"Rings. Cock rings. What else we got here... nipple clamps, huh, forgot about those. Silk ties. And butt plugs—"

"Butt what?"

"Sam calls it a 'disturbing' number of sex toys but I consider it more a 'healthy' number," says Dean offhandedly. "Ah, here we are." He's grinning to himself as he unearths a long, skinny box in the back of the dresser drawer. "I always used to keep a few of these around. You never know what a girl might be into. Or a guy, I guess."

Dean's actually feeling a little uncertain about this idea now, but it seems worth a try. He cracks the lid off, and spends a moment considering which feather exactly to try on Cas.
It's just a box of bird feathers, of course, not angel feathers. There'd been a girl one time who had loved that kind of thing, and Dean had ended up incorporating the feathers into his sex-toy collection later. They'd come in handy quite a few times, actually, whenever he wanted a fun change of pace. There's a decent selection, all different types, from fluffy soft ostrich plumes and long wavy pheasant tail-feathers to a few peacock-eyes and some simple, classic white feathers that are probably from some kind of domestic barnyard fowl. Dean's not even sure what birds they're all from; he'd picked them all up at a costume supply store originally, and he's even bought fresh ones now and then to replenish the collection.

"So, if this isn't cool or something, just tell me," says Dean, and he picks up a new white feather at random and turns around, twirling it in the air to show Cas.

Cas's eyes go round.

"Got a bunch of these," Dean says, "They're so soft, thought it might be a nice way to start out, you think? Gentle. I thought it might work well to test out where it's safe to touch you. That okay?"

Cas is dead silent. He's still propped up on his elbows, and he's staring at the feather.

Finally he nods (a little jerkily), so Dean sits back down on the side of the bed and reaches out with the feather, dangling the tip in mid-air above Cas's stomach.

Cas's eyes are tracking the feather intently. Dean's starting to feel a little unsure about this — Cas seems to be getting tense again, and only now does it cross Dean's mind to wonder whether the sight of feathers might remind Cas of his damaged wings. But Cas nods again, so Dean cautiously lowers the feather-tip to Cas's chest and traces it, very delicately, over one of the surgical scars.

Cas gives a little body-wide jerk, almost like a tiny electric shock is running through him.

Dean stops immediately, pulling the feather back up into the air. "Did that hurt?"

"It didn't hurt," says Cas, hastily. "It doesn't hurt at all. Not at all. It's fine. Try it again." He slowly lowers himself back down off his elbows, but then, interestingly, he wedges a pillow under his head, apparently just so he can keep looking down at the feather. In fact he can't seem to take his eyes off it, as Dean traces the feather-tip over Cas's skin again, this time moving back up Cas's stomach, to his chest.

"You have a feather," Cas remarks. His voice has gone a little deeper than usual.

"Yeah, it's just from a costume store," Dean says. "Actually I don't even know what bird it's from—"

"It's the fifth primary from the left wing of an adult domestic duck," says Cas. He swallows. "But it's... um... it's your feather, really, now, right? I mean... you consider it yours?"

It's at this point that Dean realizes Cas is starting to get a bit of hard-on.

Dean had been so focused on the abdominal scars that he hadn't even been thinking along those lines, and he even blinks at Cas's cock stupidly for a moment before it clicks.

Oh.

"Yeah, it's my feather," says Dean casually. "Definitely my feather. I've had it for a while now."

"Is that so," says Cas, and when Dean strokes the feather along his chest again, Cas swallows, and shifts his feet. Dean draws the feather slowly around his chest, even daring to run the feather-tip over
one of Cas's nipples. A quick check down south reveals the hard-on is progressing nicely, and Cas says, with an air of forced casualness, "Have you ever used this, this particular feather on... ah... on anyone else?"

"Nope," says Dean, who is by now totally unable to restrain a grin. "Clean new feather. Been saving it for the right person. You're the first."

"Oh, okay," says Cas. His eyes are still glued to the feather, and he swallows.

"Why'd you ask?" Dean says.

"No reason," Cas says. "Just wondering." But his voice still has that husky tone (husky even for Castiel, that is) and when Dean glances a little farther down, the hard-on is really coming along quite well. It's now in that tantalizing in-between phase where it's not quite erect but is definitely starting to lift itself up, almost magically, like gravity is slowly disappearing from the room.

"Mind if I go lower down?" asks Dean.

"Not at all," says Cas.

Dean's been thinking all the last hour, of course, all day really, of how he might be able to successfully jerk Cas off without... well, without actually "jerking" anything at all. With no rough moves, in other words. There'd been an amorphous plan forming in his mind involving a sort of a hyper-gentle blow job — staying strictly on the dick, with absolutely zero action in the ballsack area. But Cas's reaction to the feather is suddenly opening up another whole set of possibilities, and so Dean trails the feather tip down Cas's chest, over those abdominal scars (which indeed seem to be no problem at all), and toward the cock. Slowly; very slowly, Dean drags it closer, and closer, ever closer, to the cock.

And with every inch closer, Cas's cock gets harder. His breathing is getting deeper, too. Curious to see his reaction, Dean finally lifts the feather off Cas's stomach entirely, and deliberately brushes the feather-tip right across Cas's cockhead. Cas actually moans.

"You like that, huh?" Dean whispers.

"Yes," Cas mutters, eyes flickering closed for a moment.

"Feels okay?" asks Dean. Cas nods. Dean draws the tip of the feather all the way down the side of Cas's shaft, and all the way back up. Cas's cock is almost fully erect now, and Dean repeats the move a few times, fascinated by the way Cas's cock seems to somehow keep stiffening further with every soft stroke of the feather.

"You ever do this with your own feathers?" Dean asks. (He's truly curious about the answer. After all, Cas has had those two feathers of his for years, right?)

But Cas shakes his head. "It's not allowed," he says briefly.

"Not allowed..." Dean repeats, thinking. It's starting to make sense now, and Dean asks, "Not allowed like... taboo?"

"Not... exactly," Cas says, closing his eyes again. "Well... sort of."

"Let me get this straight," says Dean, twirling the feather-tip slowly over Cas's cockhead. He's actually thinking to himself, with an absolutely delighted glee, I found a kink, I found a kink! But he keeps his voice casual as he says, "While I just brush my feather back and forth across your dick here
"— (Cas lets out a soft gasp) "—maybe you can tell me, what exactly is not allowed?"

"Well, it's... it's not a rule exactly...." says Cas. "Just... custom, really. It's considered... unseemly....
to.... to touch one's.... well... unseemly for there to be... uh... direct contact between the feathers of
one's wings, and, um... one's...

"Dick?" suggests Dean. "Cock? Penis?" With each word he flicks the feather across Cas's cockhead.

"Ah," Cas gasps. "Um, yes.... even if it's one's own vessel, like my case... even if it's an empty
vessel... it's just... unseemly...."

"Unseemly," Dean echoes. "Right. It just wouldn't be right to do something unseemly with your
feathers, huh?"

"The feather is of Heaven,"Cas explains doggedly. "But the, um, the thing is, the penis is.... is
mortal... and flesh, and it's.... it's symbolic of...." Dean draws the feather in a long lazy, stroke up
Cas's shaft, from base to tip, a very firm stroke this time, the feather bending with the pressure. Cas
gives a sharp gasp as the tip of the feather springs past the ridge just under his cockhead; Dean hadn't
exactly planned this, but the feather almost whips out as it straightens, and it flicks Cas's cockhead
sharply. He lets out a grunt, and Dean's fascinated to see his cock actually throb.

Cas somehow manages to mutter, "The penis is... symbolic of... hedonism."

"Oh, hedonism," Dean says, repeating the feather-springing move a few times as he adds, while Cas
starts to squirm, "Yeah, I get it. Unseemly hedonism. So, tell me, Cas, you really never touched your
own wings to your cock? Not even once?"

Cas doesn't answer at first.

"Maybe accidentally?" Dean prods.

Cas finally says, "Accidentally, yes, the first time was accidental—"

"Oh, the first time?" says Dean, unable to hide his grin. "How many times were there?"

"Really, just— two—" gasps Cas. "Only after the vessel was fully mine, you understand... No other
host. But I never— I never fully — I was just curious—"

"Just experimenting," suggests Dean.

"Exactly," says Cas. "Just experimenting — And I didn't... I didn't complete... I managed to stop
before—" He's gasping now, as Dean keeps flicking the feather over his cockhead, and he seems to
be having some real difficulty getting full sentences out.

"You stopped before you came?" Dean asks, and Cas nods, squirming even more now, his hands
clutching at the sheets. The feather-flicking move has done wonders; his cock is rock-hard, and the
color's changed too; it's darkening, first to a ruddy red and then deeper still. And every time Dean
brushes Cas's cock with the feather, it twitches, and Cas gasps.

"But did you like how it felt?" says Dean.

"Y-yes...." says Cas, gritting his teeth. "But it was... contrary to my mission—"

"You're not on a mission now," Dean points out, dragging the feather-tip right up the shaft of Cas's
cock, right over the rim to the head, where he swirls the feather-tip in a little circle, and brushes it
over the hole. The feather-tip flicks over the hole Cas moans, and his whole cock seems to flex, bobbing slightly. Cas groans.

"You want to come this time?" whispers Dean.

"Yes," Cas hisses. There's a round dot of pre-cum welling at the tip of Cas's cock now. Dean drags the feather-tip right over it, swirling the very tip of the feather right into the drop, right around the hole, and Cas actually shouts, "AH! UH—" his torso bucking right up off the bed.

It's such an abrupt shout that Dean's suddenly worried he might have tripped that terrible pain trigger again. "This okay?" he asks, dropping the teasing tone. "That didn't hurt, does it?"

"It didn't hurt no it's good it doesn't hurt at all," Cas gasps, all in one quick rush of words. He flops back down on to the bed, grabs Dean's arm with one hand and practically shoves Dean's arm back into place, till the feather's right back onto his dick. (Dean's a little fascinated to notice that Cas hadn't just grabbed the feather himself; instead, he'd grabbed Dean's arm. As if he wants Dean, not himself, to be the one controlling the feather.) "Don't stop," Cas gasps, "It's good it's good it's good, don't worry, I'll tell you if it hurts, I swear — would you do that again please?"

Dean's getting more than a little turned on himself by now — but tonight is about Cas, not about Dean. (Not to mention which, it's turning out to be an intense turn-on just to discover he can turn Cas on so much. With just a feather!) Dean does it again; he drags the feather-tip across the little hole at the tip of Cas's cock. Another drop of pre-cum wells out as if on cue, and Cas groans. It's clear he's getting close now. The whole tip of the feather is wet with pre-cum; it's becoming almost like a paintbrush, in fact, so Dean starts painting pre-cum around and around in circles, drawing thin shining damp lines of pre-cum all around the cockhead, till it's slick all over. Then Dean paints pre-cum up and down Cas's shaft. When the now-damp feather flicks back and forth once more on that sensitive spot just under the cockhead, Cas shouts again, a hoarse, "AHH!" and after that every single touch seems to draw another grunting shout from him. Dean flicks the feather back and forth, harder now, till the whole wet feather's bending with each stroke, back and forth across Cas's shaft. "Uh, uh, uh —" Cas is grunting now. His breath's starting to heave, his feet thrashing in the sheets.

Dean can't resist one more thing. He knows how intense it can feel to add something new just at the right moment, so he leans in, bending down low, to add his tongue. He licks straight up the side of Cas's shaft, while swirling the feather around the tip. Cas groans and twists so sharply that he almost bucks Dean off.

"Oh yes," grunts Cas. "That's good that's good don't stop—"

"Careful, you might come all over my feather," says Dean. Cas nearly bucks off the bed at this comment, his whole torso twisting. He's clawing at Dean's arm now. Dean's almost at the breaking point himself now, his own cock nearly dripping. But he's determined, absolutely determined, to focus completely on Cas.

"You ever want to come on someone else's feathers?" Dean asks.

"I told you.... that's.... discouraged," Cas grunts.

"I asked, did you ever want to?"

"Yes," Cas gasps. His chest is heaving now, his voice thinning to a tight whine, "Ah, Dean, yes—" His cock's visibly throbbing now; Dean does another long lick up the shaft, and swirls the feather tip around Cas's cockhead again.
"Whose?" Dean asks. His own voice is getting throaty now.

"Uh—"

"Whose feathers? Say it, Cas—"

"Yours," Cas gasps. "Yours, your feathers, but you don't have any—"

"Oh yes I do," says Dean. "I've got feathers— I got one right here— I got my feather right on your dick, Cas—" Cas almost squeaks. Dean can feel it cresting through him; Cas stiffens, and goes almost frozen.

Dean asks him, "You wanna come all over my feather, Cas? You gonna shoot jizz all over my feather?"

"Uh, uh, yes, Dean, yes, uh, YES, YES—" Cas's cock twitches one time; his hips buck once, hard, and the first shot of sticky white semen squirts out. The feather's smeared with white immediately, and Cas, who's staring down at the feather almost desperately, groans, "AHHH, AH, YES—" through a second shot, a third, a fourth, his cock twitching.

The last shots of semen go trickling down the side of his cock and Dean, somewhat to his surprise, finds himself licking it right off the side of Cas's dick. It's salty; it's a weird taste, a little bitter, but not bad at all. Cas is panting for air, recovering now, and he's still watching Dean intently. Inspired, Dean holds the semen-dampened feather up high, studies it a moment, sticks his tongue out as far as he can. Then he licks Cas's white sticky come right off the feather.

The sight sets Cas off all over again; he groans, his cock gives another amazingly hard twitch and somehow he's shooting again, several more hard shots of semen summoned up out of nowhere.

The challenge of keeping Cas going like this has Dean thrilled almost beyond belief. He's barely even aware that his own hips are pumping slowly against the edge of the mattress; all his attention is on Cas, as he slowly sets the feather right back on Cas's cock and whispers hoarsely to Cas, "Come on my feather, angel, squirt that jizz all over my feather, more, more, I want you to — yes, that's it, yes, there you go, I knew you could!" Cas is almost whimpering as Dean coaxes him through several last squirts.

It seems like more than a minute before Cas is finally done. He ends up curled on his side, half-wrapped around Dean. And he's still clinging to Dean's arm, forcing him to keep the feather pressed to the side Cas's cock even as the cock finally softens.

At last Cas lets go. He's actually shaking, his breath coming in long heavy sighs; he's also covered in sweat. Dean finally sits up, grabs a Kleenex from the bedside table and wipes the feather carefully clean. (He's actually got a little case of blue balls himself right now, but that can wait.)

"I gotta wash this thing for next time," Dean says brightly, turning the feather over and wiping both sides. "Gotta keep one's feathers bright and shiny and pristine, ain't that right?"

"I don't... understand..." mutters Cas, who's still catching his breath, "how that could feel... so incredibly good, Dean...."

"Taboos are a gift straight from God, my friend," says Dean, grinning at him. "Or straight from Chuck, I mean." And the more he thinks about it, the more he's convinced it's true.
A/N - Ah, at last Cas really gets to feel good. And he deserves it, doesn't he? I've been working on this chapter for a while - I just loved the idea of Cas turning out to have a kind of thing for Dean putting his own feathers on Cas! (It makes sense, doesn't it, that he might have that kind of a kink? Or it made sense to me at least!)

Next chapter is probably a couple weeks away since this one's almost double-length and I've been working on nothing else. Hope it was worth it. :D

Thank you for reading! Please let me know if you liked this!
Dean makes a quick dash to the bathroom to wash the feather more properly. It only takes half a minute, but by the time he gets back into the bedroom Cas is already starting to drift off. He's sprawled out limply on the bed now, with a distinctly hazy look in his eyes. And though he mutters, "Come here, Dean... your turn....", waving one hand sleepily in the air in a vague come-here gesture, his eyelids are actually drifting shut.

"You know what," says Dean, clambering into bed next to him and turning off the light, "Act Two can wait for tomorrow."

Not that Dean wouldn't enjoy an Act Two right now, of course. But there are certain evenings when letting a partner go straight to sleep seems like the very best gift one can give. And this definitely seems like one of those moments, given all the hellish stuff Cas has been through and how exhausted he still must be. (In fact, even aside from all the cancer stuff, has Cas ever even had a chance to experience the blissful sensation of being able to slide straight from orgasm to sleep? It occurs to Dean that this might be one — of many — of the pleasures-of-being-human that Cas still doesn't really know about.) "You just take it easy," Dean tells him.

"But it's your turn...." Cas mutters, still awake enough to roll over toward Dean and start groping, a little clumsily, toward Dean's crotch. But he accidentally slides his hand between the blanket and the sheet, and only succeeds in getting his hand tangled up in a fold of bedsheets.

"Actually we're still on your turn," Dean says. "Falling asleep right after is part of the turn, didn't you know?"

Cas barely seems to hear him. "Your feather," he says, still fumbling one hand under the covers.

"Yeah? What about it?" says Dean.

"I like your feather," says Castiel (quite unnecessarily).

"I've got more," Dean tells him.
"Good...." mutters Cas. He gets his arm free of the sheet and finally manages to get his hand on Dean's dick — at the exact moment when Dean slides his own arm around Cas's shoulders to start stroking the back of Cas's neck. Dean almost laughs at Cas's blissed-out sigh of response, and at how Cas's hand actually goes loose on Dean's dick, as if now he can't even summon up the energy to close his fingers.

"I like your feathers too," Dean says quietly to him, still stroking his neck.

"Really want my wings on you," Cas mutters. "I mean.... in this... dimension.... not just... etheric... shadows....."

Three seconds later he's asleep.

Cas's hand is still cupping Dean's cock and balls, and despite the fact that Cas is obviously in a near-coma by now, Dean's somehow gone half-erect anyway. Cas's fingers twitch a few times as he falls deeper into sleep, and Dean almost laughs at himself about how nice that feels, and how much he wants to start moving against Cas's hand — even when Cas himself is completely out of it! But Dean manages to stay still. He finds himself almost perfectly balanced now between desire and relaxation. The steaming-hot vision of Castiel earlier, nearly out of his mind from that crazy feather kink, won't quite leave Dean's mind — and yet at the same time it also feels so very comfortable to just be lying here quietly, with Cas's hand in such cozy intimate contact. Cas's hand is totally limp now but even so it's still draped around Dean's cock and balls almost possessively (or protectively, maybe). It rouses, in Dean, a keen feeling of long-time familiarity. Like there's no urgency; like they've had their hands on each other like this every night for years.

Like maybe they will every night for years still.

If they're lucky.

Dean knows he could fall asleep now too; his thoughts seem to be getting slower, and he can feel half-formed dream images starting to creep in at the corners of his mind, ready to take him away. But he doesn't let himself slip into sleep. Quite deliberately he forces himself to stay awake, for a very long time, deep into the night, just so he can keep stroking the back of Cas's neck. And keep feeling Cas's head leaning heavily on Dean's chest; and cherish that sweet sensation of Cas's hand, so warm and protective, cupped right around Dean's cock.

Some time later Dean wakes in the dark. Cas is still right next to him, though they've both shifted position; Cas is now spooning Dean, his arm draped heavily over Dean's waist.

An odd thing about waking up in this bunker bedroom is that it's never clear whether it's day or night.Dean's never quite gotten used it. After a lifetime in motel rooms it still seems odd to have no windows at all — no beam of bright sunlight sneaking past the blinds, no shaft of moonlight, no slow sweep of night-time car headlights moving across the curtains of a motel window. And no clues about how many hours might have passed.

Dean gently slides Cas's arm aside and inches to the edge of the bed to reach for his phone.

It's four in the morning. Dean sets the phone back down as quietly as he can, and lets his head flop down on the pillow with a sigh.
Four a.m., he thinks. I could go back to sleep. But he knows already that he won't be able to fall back asleep again. Despite the coziness earlier, despite how late he kept himself up, somehow now he's completely awake. It's like there's a cord of tension running right down the middle of his spine, and a watchful alertness sitting in the back of his mind.

Insomnia, dammit, he diagnoses. It's a familiar pattern. There've been quite a few times before in Dean's life when he's had trouble sleeping. The worst times tend to include this early-morning awakening, hours before dawn. If he tries to stay in bed he just ends up lying there for a few pointless hours, thinking endlessly through half-formed plans and untested strategies, mentally debating one uncertain option after another. Trying to solve the problem.

Because, there's always a problem when this sort of insomnia strikes. It happens when there's some imminent catastrophe looming — Sam dying or cursed or missing, or some all-powerful villain haunting their lives, or the world about to end in one way or another. Apparently when there's an apocalypse looming, some part of his sleeping mind feels compelled to awaken just in order to worry unproductively for a few hours before the day begins.

And apparently Cas's cancer qualifies as an apocalypse.

Dean knows he should just get dressed and go make some coffee. But he's reluctant to leave Cas alone, so instead he lies awake in bed, and he thinks.

Chemo, he thinks. Radiation.

Chemo. Radiation. How can we figure out if the drugs are even working? It'd be really good if he didn't have to do the next cycle at all.... Crowley, Rowena. Demons, witches, angels, pagan gods... Is it time to start in on all that, on the calls and summonings and bargaining? It is, isn't it?

The past day off, with its lazy Netflix binge, was allowable — Cas really did need a quiet day, and he really did deserve someone by his side, not to mention a good moment in bed. (Several good moments, even.) Hopefully Sam made some progress yesterday, but Dean's already feeling the pressure to get back to work himself.

Because, thing is, every passing day might be critical.

And it's not just to spare Cas the ordeal of the next round of chemo. There's another reason to hurry, isn't there?

Dean pictures the tumor cells, living their thoughtlessly evil little lives in the lymph nodes in Cas's abdomen. One of those cells could float free at any time, couldn't it? One little cell, breaking free, drifting around... that's all it takes, right? One little cell. Sailing merrily around on its little deadly tour through the bloodstream, through Cas's body, picking what organ to land in, what critical organ to destroy....

Has it already started?

"Stop worrying," murmurs Cas behind him in the dark, so quietly that at first Dean assumes Cas must be talking in his sleep. But no; Cas is awake. He shifts his arm around Dean's waist, and lifts his head a little to whisper into Dean's ear, almost sternly, like a very quiet command: "Stop thinking about it."

Dean twists toward him a little. "How would you know what I'm even thinking about?"

"You're rather transparent sometimes," says Cas. There's a hint of a dry laugh in his voice, and Dean turns toward him a little more, rolling onto his back. It's too dark to see Cas's expression, but even so
it seems he can feel Cas's eyes on him.

"Just trying to plan a little," Dean says. "Just was thinking through some ideas for tomorrow."

"I know," says Cas. "It can wait till morning. Go back to sleep."

Dean shakes his head. "Can't sleep," he says. "No big deal, though; you sleep, I'm gonna go make some coffee—" but suddenly Cas's hand is on Dean's stomach, sliding down, and this time Cas's hand doesn't get caught up in any sheets; this time it goes unerringly where he wants it. The next moment his hand's on Dean's dick again, warm and firm, his fingers start stroking Dean gently and firmly, and all the four-in-the-morning worries go sailing away.

Two minutes later Cas is crawling under the covers to swallow down Dean's dick. Somehow his mouth feels even hotter than last week, even wetter, even softer, his moves more confident and sure. He does a few head-bobs up and down, each time taking in another inch of Dean's cockshaft, till he's got it fully buried in his throat, and he holds still there, his nose and lips pressed right down against Dean's pubic bone. Dean almost groans at the exquisite feel of it, and has to remind himself to keep quiet (after all, Sam's very likely in his own bedroom not far away).

Then he realizes that he's actually bumping the back of Cas's throat a bit. Which feels really just fine, for Dean at least, but Dean manages to whisper, "You sure this is okay for you? No nausea or anything?"

Cas pulls off Dean's dick just long enough to whisper back, "My appetite seems to have returned in full. And then some." He adds, "My appetite for everything," and he dives back down.

Dean remembers, then, that last time Cas hadn't dared swallow. But now there's no chemo next morning. There's a whole perfect week stretching out ahead, seven long wonderful days and nights with no chemo at all. And suddenly it's seeming like a really good idea not to spend the whole week on research absolutely 24/7, but to take just a few minutes a day for this sort of thing. They can spare a minute or two, right?

Cas swallows Dean's cock down again. Yes, just a minute or two, decides Dean, Or ten maybe. He can't help meeting Cas's move with a gentle upward thrust of his own. Then once Dean's started thrusting, he can't stop, rolling his hips back and forth as he pumps slowly in and out of Cas's mouth.

Blissful thrust after blissful thrust, each rippling sensation getting more and more heated. Finally Dean has to flip the covers back, and stretch one arm over to the light and flick it on, just so he can get a clearer look at Cas. Cas's monkey hat is still off; the sight of his baldness (and all the bruises and those "bleomycin" scratch marks) is a slight jolt, but not too much of a jolt actually; after last night, even a bald-and-bruised Castiel is starting to look like himself, like it's really Cas. And the feel of what he's doing is soon overwhelming every other consideration. Dean watches his dick disappearing into Cas's mouth with every thrust, and sees that the sides of his dick shining with Cas's spit, and he lets out a hiss. Then he finds himself whispering, heatedly, "Someday, Cas...."

Cas shoots him a sidelong, questioning look, but he doesn't remove Dean's dick from his mouth, and his steady up-and-down rhythm doesn't pause. The way his blue eyes lock on Dean's even while Dean's dick is actually sliding in and out of Cas's mouth suddenly seems the hottest thing Dean's ever seen in his entire life. It's getting too much to bear.

"Someday..." Dean whispers again, hoarsely, and again he can't stop pumping his hips up to meet Cas's motions, "Someday, when you're... feeling better... I'm gonna.... pump— your— ass —just — like— this— too!" (Actually Dean hadn't exactly planned on saying this out loud, but it's getting difficult to hold back. It's all he can do to keep the volume down.)
Cas's rhythm stalls for a second, as if he's processing what Dean's said. Then his eyes seem to darken, his pupils going as wide as a cat's, as he dives down on Dean's dick again with renewed energy. He swallows Dean's cock all the way down in one smooth move, and then he's maneuvering between Dean's legs, crawling around to shove Dean's legs apart, and licking a finger and sliding it up Dean's ass. And though he's moving maybe a little fast with all this, and maybe a wee bit of lube would be a smart idea for next time, it's good. It's really good. It's incomparably good.

Cas does something with his finger, and Dean nearly yells. Cas does it again; at the same time his whole mouth tightens, his lips tightening down, teeth carefully covered. His tongue somehow seems to be wrapping around Dean's cock from all sides at once. Dean thinks, *If his mouth feels this good what'll his ass feel like?* and then Dean's coming. And this time, Cas doesn't have to pull away; this time he swallows Dean's cock down all the way, hungrily, and takes in every pulsing spurt.

Dean has to literally bite his lip to muffle the groans. Cas swallows every drop.

"You said, someday when I'm feeling better," Castiel remarks a minute later, as he slides back up to pillow level. "Just so you know, I happen to be feeling better."

Dean lets out a hoarse laugh and gasps, "Okay, just, uh, just gimmie a sec here to catch my breath—um, pretty sure I can get going again, gimmie a minute—"

Cas gives a dry chuckle. "Relax," he says. "Falling asleep is part of your turn."

"Yeah, but, this, um, this ass idea, honestly, it's a great idea, isn't it?" says Dean.

"It is indeed. But you still need to sleep too. You're not the only one who needed a day of rest. And we've got all week." Castiel pulls Dean closer, maneuvering one arm around Dean's shoulders and the other pressing his head down, till Dean's head is tucked down against Cas's shoulder. He's exactly reversed their positions from earlier in the evening, and now it's Cas who's stroking the back of Dean's neck. It's so soothing, and soon there's a warmth in the air too, that faint pressure closing around Dean's shoulders. His wings, thinks Dean. His feathers. His wings are on me....

*His wings are on me....*

All the rest of the world fades away. For once Dean gets back to sleep after all.

They both wake late. Dean's astonished to find he slept several more hours. And Cas looks miles better too, sitting up brightly in bed like he's full of energy.

It's tempting to lounge around in bed all day, of course, and see if they could get to that tempting next option on the sex menu, but Dean's phone is now saying it's 9:30am, and suddenly all the research pressure is back in a flash. Schmidt-Nielsen is calling, and there's the Crowley/Rowena/demons/angels/pagan-gods options to puzzle through, and once again Dean is keenly aware that the seven days are going to zip by like nothing at all. *That cure for cancer ain't gonna find itself*, Dean tells himself as he heads to the shower. It's time to get back to work, and figure out who to call first.

*And it's gotta be me who make those calls*, thinks Dean. *Not Sam, not Cas. I'll call Crowley and Rowena myself.*
Dean showers and dresses first. Cas seems momentarily occupied with checking on the little houseplant, which is still back in his room (he then even carries it off to the shower with him, apparently convinced that it may want a morning shower too). With Cas busy with plant care, Dean heads off to the kitchen, planning to make a batch of coffee, but as he nears the kitchen he catches the aroma of some coffee that's already brewing. Sam must have been up for a couple hours already; probably he's heard them showering and made a fresh pot.

Sure enough, when Dean rounds the corner into the kitchen there's Sam standing over the coffeepot. In fact Sam's scowling at the coffeepot like it's done something wrong, and his phone's at his ear, and Sam's saying sharply, "No, we're not trying that till we exhaust every other option. If you so much as —"

He pauses in mid-sentence as Dean comes in.

"Hey, I gotta go," says Sam brightly, into the phone. "Catch you later, huh? Bye." He ends the call, clicks the phone off and sets it down by the coffeepot, next to a battered little brown notebook. "Morning," says Sam, turning to Dean as if he's just noticed him there. "You guys sure slept in. Nice night?"

Dean doesn't take the bait. "Who was that?" he asks.

"Oh, uh," says Sam. He busies himself with selecting a couple coffee mugs from the dish drainer. "Nobody. I mean, that was... uh, Sarah."

_Holy cow, he's a bad liar sometimes_, thinks Dean, but he just asks nonchalantly, "Sarah?" The name rings only a faint bell.

"Sarah, the night nurse? Remember I called her a few times about Cas?"

And all of a sudden Sam's going red again.

Dean almost laughs at him. "So you're calling the night nurse at nine-thirty in the morning now? And you're arguing with her about, what, Cas's chemo schedule? So, remind me, when exactly did you get your medical degree?"

Sam scowls at him and starts pouring some more coffee. "Just was talking over some options," Sam says. He fills a mug and slides it along the counter toward Dean, who doesn't pick it up (he's too busy studying Sam's expression. Sam is embarrassed... but he's also got that slightly evasive look of his again, like he's hiding something. _Who were you really talking to?_ thinks Dean). "Sarah's a nurse practitioner, you know," says Sam. "Did you know there's this category that's kind of in-between nurse and doctor? Nurse practitioners can see patients and make diagnoses and even prescribe stuff. They have master's degrees, so they're like, almost equivalent to an M.D. really. They only refer patients to MD's when it's something obscure or complex or some specialty. So, she does the night-nurse shift for some extra cash so that she can—"

The chattering is totally unconvincing, and then Sam makes the critical error of turning away from the coffeepot to go grab his own mug off the table for a refill. Dean dives in to snatch up Sam's phone, which is still by the coffeepot. Too late, Sam sees his move, and he spins to make a wild grab for the phone, his leftover coffee sloshing onto the floor. But it's too late; Dean's got the phone in his hands.

"It's locked!" says Sam triumphantly. "Now give it back. Privacy, dude."

"Let's see, how about... one-one-three-eight," says Dean, tapping it out on the phone's lock screen
— 1138 is an old Star Wars reference, and it works. "Seriously, Sammy?" says Dean, swiping quickly to Recent Calls. "You were using that code in middle school, you know."

"Gimme that—" says Sam, swiping for the phone with a sudden, impressively fast lunge, but Dean manages to scurry around the kitchen table to get away from him. Castiel happens to stroll into the kitchen in the middle of this and stops dead in the doorway, eyeing the two brothers silently with his eyebrows raised as Dean dashes back and forth around the table, while Sam now tries to grab the phone from right across the table, without much success. Dean's almost chortling as he finally gets a look at the Recent Calls list.

Where, it turns out, there is indeed a number labeled "Sarah," surprisingly enough. (Hmm, Dean thinks. So Sam has been calling her. The blushing's starting to make a little sense.) But she's not the most recent call. She's well down the list, at six or seven calls ago. The most recent call, the one Sam cut short when Dean first entered the kitchen, was to—

"Rowena?" Dean says, glaring up at Sam. Cas walks up behind Dean and peers at the phone over Dean's shoulder as Dean glares at Sam (who's now given up his chasing, letting his arms drop to his sides with a defeated sigh). "You called Rowena without telling me?" demands Dean. "Haven't we been down this road like a thousand times?"

"Okay, listen," says Sam, hands spread wide in a placating gesture. "I came across some info in the books yesterday, some spells that might be useful, and I got almost all the ingredients last night but I know there's some pieces missing. The truth is, we gotta ask her some stuff. I didn't tell her why. I just told her someone was sick, but I didn't say who—"

Dean's drawing breath to argue about it when Cas, who's still peering at the phone, breaks in with "You called Claire too?" He plucks the phone out from Dean's hand as Dean does a doubletake at the Recent Calls list. Sure enough, before the call to Rowena there was a call to Claire. Several calls, in fact. There were two last night, and then a third quick call earlier this morning. There's also been a call to Crowley. Dean can only roll his eyes; Sam's been busy.

Cas says, "You called Claire three times?" He looks up suspiciously at Sam. "Why?"

Sam sighs. "Okay. Sit down, both of you. I got an idea yesterday and I think we really need to try it out."

"Not if it involves Rowena," says Dean.

"Not if it involves Claire," adds Cas. "And also not if involves—"

"—Crowley!" Dean and Castiel finish in unison.

"Well, we have to," says Sam stubbornly. "We all know we may have to talk to all of them. Cures for cancer don't exactly grow on trees, you know."

Dean points out, "But it would've been nice if you'd TOLD us."

"You guys seemed busy," Sam says blandly. (Dean and Cas exchange a slightly guilty look.) "I was gonna tell you later today. Still was just pinning down some details, that's all. And besides, I haven't seen you two all morning anyway."

"But what could Claire possibly do?" protests Cas. "Why does she have to be involved?"

Sam's quiet a moment, looking at him. "I had an idea about your feathers, Cas," he finally says.
Cas frowns at him. "What? What about my feathers?"

Sam pulls out a chair and sits down. Dean sits down too, and Cas, after a slightly puzzled pause, brings both of them their mugs of coffee (re-filling Sam's carefully), pours himself a third mug and sits down too.

"So, I did a lot of reading yesterday," says Sam. "And a lot of poking around in the back of the bunker. And I found some stuff. And then when you two said alula-feathers can heal, see, I had an idea—"

"Only if they're powered, Sam," Castiel says carefully. "I told you, my two feathers are depowered."

"They're depowered now," Sam says, "but, see, the Men of Letters used to have a whole box of angel feathers here at one point. They were trying to get some grace out of the feathers, to use to track angels."

Cas nods. "I heard something about that, back when they were collecting the feathers."

"But we've never found those feathers here since," says Dean. "I mean, not now, not in the present."

"Not any more," Sam says, nodding. "I did finally find the box they were in, but it's empty now. All that's left was that little notebook of experimental results."

At that point Sam gestures toward the little book that's been sitting on the kitchen counter, and they all turn to look at it. "Most of the notes are pretty dull actually," Sam says, standing to fetch it and bringing it over to the table. "Pages of measurements of the amount of grace in all these specific little feathers. How fast the grace drains over time."

Cas picks up the tattered notebook and flips through it curiously; it seems to mostly be tables of numbers.

"Look, they had a way to quantify the grace and power content of a single feather," says Cas. "Interesting... Ah, see, though, they bled the grace out while they were studying it. And... " He flips to the last entry in the little book. "As I thought; the last note is about the fact that the feathers were stolen in the end. A contingent of angels was sent to retrieve them, in fact, though the Men of Letters wouldn't have known that that's who took them." He looks at the notebook for a few more moments, but then flips it shut. "Most interesting from a historical perspective, Sam, but I'm not seeing the utility exactly."

"There's not much utility," says Sam, "except there's this one place in where they mention putting grace back into a feather." Cas gives him a very doubtful look, and Sam takes the book, flips it back open to a certain page, and slides it back over the table toward Castiel, jabbing his finger at a certain entry. Cas peers at the page while Sam says, "And they say it worked. Putting grace back into a feather. Look at the numbers — they went up. Though that didn't help any with their angel-tracking goal so they kinda just moved on from that little discovery. But it caught my eye, and I went back and checked Schmidt-Nielsen and sure enough, he says that grace can be put back into a feather. It just has to be that same angel's grace. Same angel whose feather it is. So... point is, feathers can be powered back up. Right, Cas?"

There's a little pause. Cas is still staring at the page that Sam has pointed out.

"So, Feather Boy, you ever heard of that?" says Dean tentatively to Cas.

"Actually..." says Cas, a little slowly, "I... um... assumed Schmidt-Nielsen was mistaken about that particular detail. I've never seen a feather repowered, myself." He's peering closely at the little
scrawled notes. "So Knut was right...." he murmurs.

A bird is not an ornithologist, thinks Dean.

"Get it?" says Sam, brightening. "Do you get it?" He's got an air of suppressed excitement now, and he leans forward and he says, "Cas, if we can transfer some of your grace back into one of those two feathers you've got, then the feather's re-powered!" Sam pauses. "Well, partly powered at least."

But Castiel is shaking his head. "Sam, I'm grateful you should have gone to all this trouble, but, the problem is, there's none of my grace left to transfer. Besides, if I had any grace nearby I could just inhale it; I wouldn't need the feather."

"Schmidt-Nielsen says the feather amplifies the effect of the grace, actually, if the grace and the feather are from the same angel," says Sam. "So you get more bang for your buck if the grace is in an alula-feather rather than inhaling it straight."

"Assuming ol' Knut was right about that too," puts in Dean.

"Well, it's seems a fairly safe assumption that he was," says Cas. "But, Sam, my grace is gone."

"Not all gone," says Sam, and now he's giving Cas what seems to be a significant stare.

Cas frowns at him. "My grace was torn completely out," he objects. "During the fight with Amara. Torn out when Lucifer departed. It was... rather painful. Are you suggesting.... wait.... are you suggesting Lucifer might have it? Wherever he is, if he's even alive?"

Sam shrugs. "Maybe, but, that's not what I'm getting at. Remember that time you pulled some grace out of me? Gadreel's grace?"

Cas's expression darkens. He doesn't say anything, but he stiffens a little in his chair.

It takes a moment for Dean to realize what they're talking about. He hadn't been around for that particular moment, but he's heard the tale from both Sam and Cas: how angels sometimes leave a scrap of grace behind when they vacate a vessel; how Castiel had once tried to recover some Gadreel's grace from Sam with some kind of gigantic hypodermic grace-syringe. Apparently the syringe hadn't collected quite enough grace to do the job. (Depending on who's telling the story, it was either a case of "Cas totally chickening out last-minute, when really I would've been totally fine," — Sam's version — or "Sam recklessly risking his own life without any conception of how important he is, and I'll never forgive myself for even considering it" — Cas's version.)

Cas is shaking his head again. "No, Sam," he says, softly. "I already put that possibility out of my head, years ago. I won't risk her."

"Wait, wait, Claire?" says Dean, finally realizing Claire's role in all this. "Wait — oh, right! Cas, you possessed her!"

It's amazing how far away and distant it seems now. Dean had almost completely forgotten that there was one brief moment once, years and years ago, when Castiel had not been in Jimmy at all. He'd jumped into Claire. She'd been much younger then, just a kid.

"But that was just for a hot minute," says Dean. "And it was ages ago. Would she still have any of your grace?"

Sam looks questioningly at Castiel — apparently Sam hasn't been sure about this detail either. But Cas nods, reluctantly. "She does have some," says Cas. "How much, I'm not totally sure, but I've
been aware for some time that she still carries a small fragment of my grace. I think it's a very small fragment." His voice deepens as he adds, intensely, "But I won't risk her, Sam — have you forgotten that I nearly killed you trying to get that bit of Gadreel's grace out? I realized in the end that I absolutely couldn't do that to you — it was a mistake even to try! And I certainly won't do it to Claire either."

"But... " Dean says slowly. "Wait, Sam, so, you're saying, get that piece of Cas's grace back and put it back in Cas's feather? And then... " His voice falters as he fully realizes where this is going. "Then bingo, we've got a powered-up alula-feather, just like that? A healing feather? Is that your plan?"

Sam nods. "That's my plan."

Dean's a little stunned. "That's... not a bad plan, Sam." He looks at Cas, trying to read his reaction. "That might even be a good plan."

Cas sets his coffee mug down. He looks now like he's going well past reluctant and is headed toward angry, as he says in almost a growl, "I said I won't risk her, and I mean it."

Dean's mouth is going dry as it sinks in. If grace extraction can kill the former vessel....

No. They can't risk Claire. They can't. They just can't.

"But we don't have to risk her!" says Sam. "We don't need that needle thing to get the grace out of her, Cas. There's a safer way to do the transfer. Remember, alula-feathers have the ability to transfer life force, like Schmidt-Nielsen says. There's a spell so that we can like... zing the grace right out of her, smoothly, without hurting her, and put it in the feather. And she's willing. In fact she's on her way."

"She's... what?" says Dean.

"She'll be here tomorrow morning," says Sam. "She wants to do it."

"No, Sam," says Cas softly. "I do know something about transference of grace. The spell to remove grace safely from living vessels has long been lost. It's one of those legendary tricks that everybody has heard about but nobody can ever seem to accomplish in reality. Nobody knows how to do it. The leading theory is that the spell was lost during the fall of Babylon."

"Rowena has the spell," says Sam, and they both stare at him.

A/N - Hopefully more next week. My birthday's coming up this weekend and honestly the most fun present I could give to myself would be to get this fic really cranking again.

I hope you are still enjoying this story despite all the delays!
**It's your grace, it's your feather**

*A/N - In Florence, Italy, now after a wonderful time at jibcon. I finally got caught up on S12... which is another whole story, but I'll keep this spoiler-free for now. And I quite accidentally got Jensen and Misha to pose for what turns out to be the ideal cover image for this fic, though I swear that really wasn't what I was planning! (actually I am not even thinking of it as a "Destiel photo" or even a Cockles photo exactly, but more just exactly what I asked them for: Give that guy a hug "like you got your best friend back." That there is a photo of a guy who just wants his friend by his side, alive and well.)*

I've had a very difficult time recently getting any time to write, what with huge long 1500-mile road trips, moving out of my house, 2 science manuscripts to submit, jibcon, fieldwork, a total computer failure (finally had to invest in a new laptop - yes, the A and S thing really happened). But layered on top of all that has been a problem, happening all along now, that this fic is just a really difficult one to work on. Those of you noticing that this fic is moving WAY SLOWER than any of my other fics ever did - this is the reason. Other fics in the past, if I had an hour free I could just sit down and write. This fic... I have to be in exactly the right mood, on exactly the right day, I have to have already been thinking it over for several days in a row, like training for a marathon. This is easily the most difficult thing I've ever written, and I am including my PhD in that. I don't know why. It just is.

But I had the whole week free and I've been thinking about the next 2 chapters every day for weeks now; all through jibcon and all through my travels. I started writing it down this week, in bits and pieces. Today I got in a really good chunk of time, and finally here's the next chapter. Thanks for your patience.

The rest of the day is a blur of research and preparation, trying to be as ready as they can for the potential grace-transfer experiment. It's not clear exactly when it might happen, of course, but the sooner the better, and Dean wants to be ready. He starts by devoting much of the afternoon to re-reading the information Sam's found about grace-transfer spell, while Cas spends hours leafing his way carefully through the entire Men Of Letters experimental logbook, apparently studying each column of numbers one by one. He's soon making tiny notes in a pad of paper, baffling little citations about "Match" and "No Match" along with mysterious little percentages. He's got the alula-feather itself in his left hand (he's picked the left one), and he keeps twirling it slowly while he works, as if feeling it in his hand is a comfort.

Just before dinner Cas suddenly announces, "We ought to be able to do this part too." Dean and Sam look up at him from across the table, Dean rubbing his eyes blearily while Sam pauses his endless tapping at his laptop. Cas claps his little logbook shut — apparently he's reached the end; and he's inspecting his pad of paper, still twirling the feather unconsciously with his other hand. He explains, "I mean, not just getting the grace out of Claire — we already know Rowena's spell should do that — but also then putting it into the feather. As you know that's a step I've been unsure about. I've been spending most of the last two hours trying to identify the original owners of each feather that the Men Of Letters used in their experiments, based on feather color and where and when they collected it. They didn't know the sources of the feathers themselves, but I have some information they didn't, about which angel molted where, certain times feathers have been lost and so on. And
I've been matching that information, as best I can, to the sources of the graces as well." He taps the little logbook. "I think I've managed to identify a few cases in these experiments where both feather and grace were from the same angel. The Men Of Letters didn't realize this. But in all four of those cases the grace entered the feather quite readily; the feather was merely placed near the grace and the grace just moved right in on its own. In all four cases the experimental notes have some notations about how easy it was; it seems it was mostly just a matter of positioning the feather where the grace would naturally encounter it, and then it moved right in." Cas pauses, now looking at the feather thoughtfully. "Mind you, I've never tried recharging a feather myself. And certainly not with a scrap of grace that's been in a vessel for so long. But if I'm right... "

Dean finishes the sentence for him. "... If Rowena's spell can get the grace out of Claire, it should just move into the feather? Like, zip, done?"

Cas nods slowly. But he's looking a little doubtful now. So Dean says, faking a confidence he doesn't feel, "It'll work, Cas."

Cas raises his eyes to Dean's. "I certainly hope so." He's still twirling the feather slowly in his hand, and they all look at it.

"I got a good feeling about this whole feather idea," Dean insists.

"Definitely worth a shot," Sam agrees. "So, by the way, got another text from Claire. She's halfway here, stopped in a motel for the night, and she'll finish the drive tomorrow. Should turn up around ten or so. And then we can explain the whole deal to her and make sure she still wants to go through with it. I mean, I explained it all, but..."

Cas nods. "She can decide. When she gets here." He seems remarkably unconcerned with the idea that Claire might decide not to do it.

"It's your grace," Dean points out. "It's your feather."

"It's her life," Cas replies.

Dean can only nod.

Sam says, "Well, assuming she goes for it, I'll call Rowena tomorrow morning and see if I can worm the spell details out of her."

"No, I'll call her," states Dean.

"Oh, come on, I can do it—" Sam starts, but Dean says, almost shaking a finger at him, "Not you, Sam, you're not gonna call her again. She already knows too much. I don't want her figuring out that it's Cas who's sick. I just need to get the spell words from her and then we can do it ourselves, and I wanna handle it." Sam's looking reluctant, but Dean says, "Let me do it. Please. Last thing we need is Rowena, or even worse Crowley, nosing their way into this more than absolutely necessary. I really want to be careful about this."

"And you don't think I'll be careful?" says Sam.

Dean gives a conciliatory nod. "Actually, I think you would. But humor me. I just want to have my own finger on the trigger, is all. Then if it all goes south, there's only me to blame."

Sam flicks a glance between Dean and Castiel, like he understands why Dean wants to be so involved. With a little smile, he nods.
Dean adds, glancing around the bunker, "Come to think of it, I better add some more anti-witch wards to the bunker. And demon wards too." He's eyeing the walls now. How many of the Men Of Letters wards are even still functional? Time to spruce them up.

After dinner they start assembling the little pile of ingredients that will be needed for the spell — it turns out Rowena's already given Sam a list. There's a collection of herbs along with two dozen beeswax candles, all of which Sam has already purchased, and all of which Castiel insists have to purified via what sounds like a long and tedious series of rituals.

Cas explains, as they're looking over the pile of herbs and candles, "Purifying all these will help coax the grace to linger in the vicinity longer. That gives it a better chance to find the feather. Otherwise the grace will tend to want to escape to the sky — that's the path of least resistance when surrounded by unpurified mortal beings. A ring of purified objects will calm it and give it a chance to find the feather. All the Men Of Letters experiments used the same principle. I think we should purify the candles, and at least some of the herbs..." He hesitates. "This will work best if the person doing the ritual is also fairly pure. It's not necessary to be one hundred percent pure, but the purer the better. And it occurs to me I might not be... totally pure myself at the moment."

Sam frowns, puzzled. "What, do you mean because of the chemo?"

"No..." says Cas, hesitating. His glance slides briefly to Dean. "No, not that. Um... more just... uh... well, you see, Sam, certain physical encounters tend to, well, un-purify oneself."

"Oh," says Sam, with such an appalled look that Dean bursts out laughing.

Cas is thinking out loud now. He says, with a total lack of any apparent self-consciousness, "Though come to think of it I'm not sure if fellatio counts? Sam, have you had any fellatio recently? Or given any? If not, maybe you should be the one to do the rituals."

"Whoa whoa whoa," says Sam, jumping to his feet. "So, first, no, nothing in a few months, been a pretty dry spell lately. Second, do not tell me anything else. Third, I'm gonna go make dinner. You guys figure out who does the ritual and just tell me later who you picked and, just in case this wasn't clear, I repeat, do not tell me anything else." He disappears at near-light-speed into the kitchen.

It takes a while for Dean to stop laughing. Cas just looks puzzled.

They're all up well past midnight, Castiel talking Sam through a long series of chants and other rituals (Sam, of course, ends up being the one to do the candle-purification rituals). Dean stays up too, mostly just to keep them company, though he does occupy himself with some of the warding and a few other anti-witch protections.

It's very late, past two, before Cas is satisfied with the "purification state" of the twenty-four beeswax candles (though as far as Dean can tell, the candles all look exactly the same as they did before). They all stagger to bed exhausted. Dean's a little regretful that there likely won't be time for one more interlude in bed; maybe another blow job, maybe the next option on the menu? But, the purer the
better, apparently. And Cas has pushed himself hard today; the chemo fatigue seems to be catching up with him again anyway. He's asleep almost instantly, nuzzled against Dean's shoulder.

It's a pity there won't be more sex, of course. But on the other hand, it's also really nice to just have Cas asleep at his side. Even in his sleep Cas has an arm draped across Dean's waist. *You just keep holding on,* thinks Dean. He rolls a little toward Cas and manages to snake an arm across Cas's shoulders without waking him up, and allows himself a moment to grip on tight.

Cas sighs in his sleep and his hand tightens slightly on Dean's waist.

*Keep holding on,* Dean thinks again, no longer sure whether he's thinking it to Cas or to himself.

There's a knock at the outer door the next morning, and when Dean trots up the spiral iron stairs and opens up the door (angel-blade and pistol both ready, as always, just in case), there's Claire, as promised, standing on the stoop. There's frost on the ground outside and she looks cold; she's only in a cotton hoodie, her head hunched against the bitter December wind, and she's got her arms wrapped tightly around herself. Behind her is a truly pathetic-looking beater of a car that's been parked on the muddy shoulder of the bunker's rutted driveway.

She's got her usual overdone makeup and her trademark sullen look, but a half-smile flickers onto her face when she sees Dean. Dean gives her a big back-thumping hug, which she accepts willingly enough, and then Dean gets a look at the car.

"You drove here in *that*?" Dean says, glancing over her shoulder at the beater. "You're braver than I thought."

She rolls her eyes, with a snort. "So does your entire vocabulary consist of quoting *Star Wars*?" She pushes past him through the doorway and pauses at the top of the stairs, looking down into the map-room. "C'mon, let's get this over with. Ain't got all day."

"I see the sarcastic edgy-teen act is still in style," Dean comments. "You gonna trade it in for an upgrade once you pass 20?"

"Nice to see you too," she tosses back over her shoulder. But she's laughing a little. Dean shoos her down the stairs, laughing at her, and then steps outside for a moment, wanting to take a quick look at her beater car. The car really looks like a wreck. He pauses in front of it, already cataloguing its safety faults — the tires look way too bare, and he's willing to bet it hasn't had a tune-up in some time. He's thinking maybe he'll pull it into the garage and give it a once-over to make sure the thing doesn't totally blow up on poor Claire.

This also means he's left the door unattended for all of three seconds, which he deeply regrets when all of a sudden Crowley and Rowena pop into existence right on the stoop and stride right inside, Crowley calling back to him, "Mornin' Dean! Thanks for the leaving the door wide open! We were thinking of just blasting past your wards and taking the walls down, but, well, didn't want to seem un-neighborly."

Dean swears, pelting after them to the door (at least they don't slam it in his face). They're already halfway down the stairs, and Dean dashes down after them. Claire's spun to face them near the map-table, and Sam and Cas are there too now, everybody pulling blades and maneuvering into battle positions.
But no battle happens. Instead Rowena lets out a warbling cry when she sees Castiel. "Ohh you POOR THING!" she cries, walking over to him. She's wearing a skin-tight, calf-length sheath dress entirely covered in red sequins, with matching heels, and it seems she can barely move her legs, but she glides over to him with rapid tiny steps, saying, "The poor wee tyke! I just knew the poor ailing friend must be YOU!" Then she's putting both hands on Cas's cheeks and is making actual cooing noises at him, as if he's a half-drowned stray kitten. Surprisingly, Cas doesn't flinch away, but he gives her his very most narrow-eyed scowl and quietly he raises his angel-blade, lightly touching the tip of it to her throat. She doesn't even budge; she's still cooing. "Ooooo, he's positively wasting away, Fergus my boy, just look at him! Absolutely skeletal!" Now she's fingering one of the tassels of Cas's monkey-hat. "Have you lost your hair, sweetums? Fergus, he always had such lovely hair, such a nice tousle to it—"

"All right, that's enough," snaps Dean, yanking her back by one shoulder. Then he can't help positioning himself in front of Cas and even finds himself herding Cas backwards a few steps. It's an obvious move, but he can't help trying to create some kind of a buffer zone, some empty space between Rowena and Crowley by the steps, and Sam, Cas and Claire, who are all bunched up now by the map-table. Sam, he's glad to see, is shielding Claire similarly.

Sam says, "What are you doing here? I just called you guys to talk — I told you Dean was gonna call today. I didn't tell you to show up!"

Crowley shrugs. "There was an implied invitation."

Rowena nods, with a sickly-sweet smile. "It was clear you were about to invite me. Not that we really need Fergus here at all—" (She shoots an irritated glance over her shoulder at Crowley) "— but obviously I'm essential. And I thought maybe it would be instructional for him; I do like to give the boy a chance to improve himself, where possible, so I invited him along purely to observe—"

"Meaning," says Crowley drily, "She couldn't get past the wards on your walls. Most of them are burned out but there's apparently some new ones, and she got stuck."

"Well, so did you!" snaps Rowena at him. "I swear, you call yourself the King of Hell, and some piddling little Men of Letters wards absolutely stop you in your tracks, it's downright embarrassing—"

"You couldn't get past them either, dear Mum—"

"I was about to, I was just enjoying watching you fail so hopelessly—"

Dean breaks in with, "I SAID THAT'S ENOUGH." They both fall silent, looking at him, and Dean adds, "You're already making my head hurt. I swear, if Sam weren't convinced we needed this spell, we'd be kicking you both out so fast it'd make your head spin. But... yeah, so, we are actually looking for this, um, certain spell that can extract a bit of grace from a... " (Dean hesitates, realizing he's unsure how much they know. Do they know about the feather?) "We're trying to get some grace from a vessel, without hurting the vessel, and put it in... another container. Sam says you might know a spell that can do that?"

"Of course I do," says Rowena, and she adds, gesturing at Claire and Castiel, "So if I've got the picture right, this girl with the terrible eyeliner here — oh, don't look at me that way, sweetie, we all have to start somewhere, even Marie Antoinette didn't get it right the first time — I'll show you some tips later. As I once told dear doomed Marie —"

"Mother," growls Crowley.
Rowena sighs and continues. "Anyway, this girl here has a bit of Castiel's grace, doesn't she, it's quite obvious, I can practically smell it, and Castiel here's dying—" 

Dean can't help flinching at the blunt word, but Crowley puts in a calm, "Also obvious."

"— and," Rowena goes on, "You obviously need me to transfer the bit of grace from the girl to an alula-feather. Most likely Castiel's own alula-feather. After which your darling little angel, or ex-angel, here can use the feather to heal himself from whatever awful ailment he's picked up. Have I got it right?"

Sam and Dean look at each other. Dean's almost twitching with tension; how did this go so wrong so fast? It's all his fault — Rowena and Crowley right here in the bunker, both of them knowing Cas is so sick, both of them knowing about Claire....

But what choice do they really have?

There's a hand on his arm; it's Cas, and he's pushing Dean gently to the side. He steps forward and says, "Do you know the spell? To extract grace from a human vessel, with no harm to the vessel?"

"Of course I do," says Rowena primly. "Got it from a Persian witch who got it directly from the genie who used to be enslaved to water the fig trees in the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, where the kings, and their wizards and witches, used to meet and talk. He overheard quite a lot of useful things, it turns out. So we should be able to get that grace right out of that girl. And into that alula-feather, hopefully, though I'm not as sure about that step."

Cas adds, eyes narrowed, "And how did you know I have an alula-feather?"

Crowley actually laughs. "Well, she didn't know, you ninny, she was guessing and you just confirmed it. Oldest trick in the book. Dean, haven't you taught him anything?"

Cas just sighs, and Dean decides it's time to just go for it. "Okay. Yes, you've got the picture. So will you help us?"

Rowena and Crowley look at each other silently. There's an alarmingly smug look on Crowley's face, like everything's going exactly according to some secret plan that he — or they — have.

Rowena looks back at Dean and says, "Oh, I don't know, it's quite a tiring spell to be honest. What'll you offer to make it worth my while?"

Dean grits his teeth. "We'll owe you one, is what we'll offer. We'll owe you one."

There's a small silence — Crowley and Rowena are looking at each other doubtfully again — and Castiel suddenly adds, "No contracts, Crowley, no hellhounds; no soul deals." With a glance at Dean he adds, "Don't even try. I'd refuse the grace if it came down to that. Sorry."

Dean nods. The option had of course come to mind; but they've all been down that road before (or roads like it) and it's very clear that it's a road that leads nowhere good. Cas's reaction is pretty much what he'd expected. "Yeah, okay, no soul-selling," he agrees with Cas, and he turns back to Crowley and Rowena. "No soul-selling. But we will do you a favor someday if we can."

Neither Crowley nor Rowena look too pleased. Crowley crosses his arms across his chest with a tired sigh. Rowena plants one hand on a hip and starts stroking her chin with the other, looking up at the ceiling in a laughably melodramatic I'm-not-very-sure-about-this pose.

Sam points out, "C'mon, you know we're good for it. And you both do need help sometimes, don't
try and pretend you don't."

Rowena raises one eyebrow and turns to glance at Crowley again. Crowley gives a little shrug, and Rowena turns back to Dean and says sweetly, "You're on. We help you return the grace to the poor dear angel here, and you'll owe us each a favor someday." She adds, her voice hardening, "A real favor."

Crowley adds, "The life-saving sort of favor. Can't just pay my parking ticket or something."

"Yeah, but one more thing," Sam says. "No tricks and no double-crossing. Or no deal."

Rowena looks insulted. "Please," she says. "I am a lady of my word. Well, most of the time."

"Well then!" says Crowley, clapping his hands and rubbing them together. "Let's get started. You got a vivisection table or anything? For the girl? Oh, relax — I just meant, something for her to lie down on."

After inspecting various cots and tables, Rowena decides to have Claire lie down on one of the library tables — apparently those tables are just the right height and have "ideal sympathetic energy," whatever that means. Rowena's thrilled with the purified state of the candles ("Why, they're positively virginal!"). Soon Crowley and Rowena are puttering around setting things up (under Sam's and Cas's watchful eyes), which mostly seems to involve an endless series of irritated arguments about how exactly to arrange the candles.

After a whispered request from Cas, Dean pulls Claire into the kitchen for a quick chat.

"Cas wanted me to check with you," Dean says. "You sure you want to go through with this? Cas says you'll be fine, and he says it shouldn't hurt, but... I can't sugarcoat it, Rowena and Crowley are really nasty business. It's my fault they got in here — I shouldn't have left the door open, not even for a sec, and honestly things don't always go that great when they're involved. We'll try our best to protect you, I swear, but...."

Dean hesitates. Claire's looking at him solemnly. It's a little hard to say the next words, because it might mean depriving Castiel of his best chance. But Dean forces it out: "If you're at all uncertain, you can back out right now. We'll understand."

But, to his relief, Claire shakes her head. "I'll do it," she says. Then she adds, lowering her voice to a whisper as she glances toward the library, "Dean, he looks terrible. It's bad, isn't it?"

Dean can't help glancing toward the library too. "Hard to say. He's in the middle of chemo, and I guess that always makes you look terrible no matter what. It's really hard to tell if chemo's working. Maybe it's working? We don't know.... He was trying to hide it for months...."

Dean trails off into silence.

Claire is still looking at him, but now Dean finds he can't meet her eyes. Instead he has to turn his back, so he strides over to the sink pretending he's getting a glass of water. He fills a glass carefully and then he forgets to drink it.

Claire's now watching him staring at the glass of water, and she blurts out, "If I can do anything to
help him, I will."

Dean turns to look at her; she actually flushes a little, as if she's a little embarrassed.

"Didn't think you were exactly best buds," Dean says. "You and Cas."

She shrugs, and then she walks over to Dean, grabs the glass of water out of his hand (though he hasn't really offered it to her) and chugs it down. "I don't know why..." she confesses. "Maybe because it's still kind of my dad's body, you know? Like, if I could heal my dad, I would, even if it's not really him. And also... I don't know, I just kinda want him to be okay." She pauses, thinking. "Dean, you remember when Castiel gave me that dopey stuffed cat for my birthday once?"

Dean smiles at the memory. "Yeah. He looked at everything in the damn store, you know."

"Huh," says Claire. She's silent a moment. "Well, I kept it," she adds. She doesn't say anything else, just sets the glass on the counter, turns and walks back to the library.

Once Crowley and Rowena have finally finished arguing about candle positioning, the ceremony doesn't take very long. Claire clambers up cautiously onto the wooden library table. Cas has provided his soft blue sweater, folded up neatly, for Claire to use as a pillow (and instead he's now wearing his old trenchcoat, apparently still not wanting his bruised arms exposed to view). There are candles positioned strategically by Claire's head, shoulders, hands and feet, almost outlining her body, and she wiggles into position very carefully, tucking her hair under her shoulders. She lies very still while Sam and Cas light all the candles, Rowena looking on regally from the head of the table and Crowley leaning against a bookshelf stifling a yawn.

Once the candles are all lit, Cas reaches over to touch Claire's hand, and when she glances at him he whispers, "Thank you, Claire."

"Oh yeah, sure," she says, obviously trying to act casual. "No biggie." But her voice is tense, and she takes a nervous breath as she stares up at the ceiling. Then she says, "I'm ready," and she closes her eyes.

Rowena says, "Feather on her neck, now, Dean."

Dean's been given charge of the alula-feather. He's been clutching it with one hand in his pocket for nearly the whole last half-hour, afraid to take his fingers off of it. He pulls it out now and sets it carefully on Claire's throat. Cas and Rowena have already explained how to align it; Dean tries to remember exactly what they both said and places it delicately along the midline of Claire's throat, a little low, so that the bare shaft of the feather is on the very uppermost part of her breastbone, the soft black vane pointing towards her chin. A glance at Cas confirms he's positioned it correctly.

"Grace is always closest to the surface here, Cas had said. It's easiest to access from the throat."

Dean gives the feather one last careful look — the positioning looks good — and it occurs to him now, Damn good place to kill somebody, too, and now he's getting nervous. What if this is all a ruse? What if Crowley and Rowena have something else planned, some trick, something awful involving poor Claire. What if...

He steps back, now cursing to himself silently. Something's gonna go wrong, he thinks. Something
always goes wrong... It's my fault they got in... But Cas, standing at his side, brushes one hand over Dean's, and when Dean glances over at him it's oddly reassuring to see the familiar tan color of the trenchcoat again. It's been a while since Cas had that coat on, and even though it's only the Lesser Trenchcoat, it reminds Dean of old days, back when Cas was a powerful angel, an unstoppable warrior; and it reminds him that Cas is still a fighter. And Cas isn't going to let anything happen to Claire.

Cas gives him a calm look, and Dean steadies himself. Dean catches Sam's eye next, and Sam gives him a reassuring nod back.

We're ready, Dean thinks. Whatever's coming, we're ready.

"Here goes nothing," he whispers to Cas.

Rowena starts chanting.

It's not a very long spell. There's a solid minute or so of the mysterious chanting — which actually sounds pretty impressive now that Rowena's got her Mysterious Witch Voice going in full flow, throaty and confident, complete with dramatic arm gestures. She goes into a crescendo and is fairly shouting by the time she finishes. On her last word the candles all flare up at once, and then, oddly, they all start changing colors — all the flames go a deep red simultaneously, then they all brighten to orange, yellow, green, gliding through all the colors of the rainbow in perfect synchrony till they all reach a beautiful indigo. The indigo seems piercingly beautiful, so much so that soon Dean's thinking How have I never noticed before how pretty that color is? The indigo brightens, and brightens, and the color starts to bleach out, until all the candle-flames are shining white.

The white flames become so steady that they look almost solid, as if they're actually made out of metallic silver. It's almost like Claire is encircled by a ring of angel-blades. Dean's watching the candles, a bit concerned, when he hears Sam give a little gasp. He looks back at Claire to find there's a slender silver thread of light reaching up out of her throat, looking remarkably like another one of the candle flames.

Claire's eyes have been closed but she opens them now. The line of silver light is lifting high enough that she must be able to see it. Dean wants to call "Don't move!" to her in warning, but she seems to already have the idea; she's frozen absolutely still, her eyes wide, watching the upper end of the little silver flame of light. It first stretches high up, till it's stretched out into a two-foot-long narrow shining thread, stretching straight up as if to dart up and away. But it slows and hesitates; it also still seems to be attached to Claire's throat at its lower end, like it hasn't fully let go of her, and it starts to curl around back toward her. Then the feather seems to draw its attention, and soon the silver flame has bent around in a neat loop so that its free end is touching the feather. It seems to prod at the little black feather several times (it's hard to escape the impression that the thread of silver light might even be alive, or sentient, in some way). It noses along the feather till it finds the very end of the feather-shaft — it's curled now in an almost perfect circle — and then it dives inside.

There's a sound like a rushing river as the rest of the silver thread (which turns out to be surprisingly long, though very thin) whips up out of Claire's throat and loops inside the feather. For a moment the entire feather glows silver, so brightly they all have to shade their eyes.

The candles all extinguish at once. The feather shines a moment longer and the glow fades slowly,
the radiant silver light dimming bit by bit. Slowly the feathervane darkens to its usual black. For one more long moment the feather shaft still shines, a bright line against the glossy black of the feather vanes; then even that slender line of light goes out.

It's just a little black feather again.

It seems to be over. Dean shoots a worried glance at Claire’s face; looks like she's still awake, and she seems fine (though still very tense). There’s a hushed silence.

"You can move now, dearie," says Rowena in a conversational tone. "We're done."

"Well! That went fine!" says Crowley brightly. "I was expecting her to explode." Dean scowls at him, and Crowley shrugs and adds, "Seemed like a possibility, didn't it?"

At last Claire moves, pushing herself slowly up to her elbows. One hand goes to the feather.

“Yeah, you can all stop staring at my chest now,” she says — an attempt at a joke that's a little undermined by the wavery tone of her voice.

“Do you feel all right?” says Cas. She sits up farther, clutching the feather safely in one hand; Cas takes a step closer to brace her arm.

“I’m fine,” she says. Indeed she seems okay, though rather rattled. Sam clears some of the burned-out candles out of the way, and Claire swings her feet down off the side of the table, sitting up fully, and stares down at the little black feather in her hand. It looks completely inert. “Was that really… from me?” she asks. "The silver? Was that the grace? Was that what was in me?"

“You’ve been carrying it for a long time,” Cas says gently.

She brushes back a stray piece of blonde hair, tucking it behind her ear. Her hand lingers on her hair a moment and drifts down to her throat, and she pats the skin of her neck exactly where the grace emerged. She's still looking at the feather.

Dean asks, “Do you feel any different?”

Claire looks up at him. “A little bit, yes,” she said. “I didn’t ever realize I was carrying it, but now something’s…. different. Quieter, I guess.” She hesitates, thinking. “It’s sort of like… there was, like, a little faint hum before. Like a tiny little... well, this'll sound dumb but it was like a tiny little choir singing in the distance or something. Like someone had left the radio on in another room? I guess I never really noticed it, but now that it’s gone….“ She looks almost regretful.

Cas is nodding. “That makes sense. Each angel's grace has a certain frequency; you may be attuned to that frequency, after all this time.”

Claire gives Cas a long look. Then, slowly she holds out the feather toward him.

Cas takes it with delicate care. His head's tilting a little as he examines it, turning it around slowly. Dean finds he's holding his breath, almost wondering if Cas might get healed instantly, even though it's been very clear that there'll have to be a second step later, another whole spell, for transferring the grace from the feather to a new vessel.

Nothing happens... except that Cas’s expression changes. Dean sees his whole body stiffen. Very slightly, infinitesimally, but it's as if he goes on alert.

*He feels the grace,* thinks Dean.
But Cas doesn't say anything. The feather disappears from view as Cas's fingers close around it. He turns, then, feather securely hidden in his hand, and looks at Rowena, who's still standing at the head of the table.

"Thank you," says Cas, with a very solemn air. "Your assistance has been essential." He adds to Crowley, "Yours, too. Thank you both."

“Oh, think nothing of it!” said Rowena brightly, tossing her hair back with a graceful move of her hand. "My pleasure! You know me, always tickled pink to use my considerable powers—" (a simpering smile to Crowley here (who just gives a very half-hearted eye-roll, as if he's so used to Rowena's boasting that he can't even be bothered to fully roll his eyes anymore.) "So nice to use my powers for good. It's rather a weakness of mine, you know, I'm far too generous to those less powerful than little wee moi, and, oh, by the way—" She's gliding around the table now, inching closer to Cas with mincing steps of her sequinned red shoes. Crowley, who's at the other side of the table, seems now taking a casual step sideways too, yawning elaborately and rolling his head around as if he's really just getting a crick out of his neck and like it's sheer coincidence that he also happens to be inching around the table. Cas does a tiny shift of weight, rocking back slightly on his heels. *They're both approaching Cas.* Dean, just behind Cas, glances at Sam, and Sam gives him a dark look back; he sees it too.

Rowena says, extending one hand to Cas with her palm up, “Could I just give it a wee bit of a look-see, just make sure everything’s shipshape, and—“

“I'll just give a quick inspection first actually,” said Crowley, with a bright smile, “Wouldn’t want our dear friend Cas here to get burned if it’s overcharged, now, would we, what with him in this weakened state and all—“ There's a sudden blur of motion as Rowena and Crowley both lunge for Cas at once, Rowena making an alarmingly magical-looking gesture with both hands and starting in on some ominous-sounding chant, while Crowley’s nearly flinging himself across the library table, right over Claire, toward Cas. Poor Claire's bowled over and actually falls off the table, and Crowley's actually ON the table now, on his knees, reaching toward Cas, one hand slamming out with his palm forward. A sensation of crackling static fills the room. In the next moment a blast of power slaps Cas's hand open (it's not clear whether it's from Rowena or Crowley) and Cas staggers back a few steps, almost falling over. He manages to keep his feet but he's staring down now at his empty hand.

Of course Sam and Dean are already in motion too. Dean's already got an angel-blade in his hand and he's stepping in front of Cas to shield him; meanwhile Sam's whipped a long sigil-marked scarf out of his pocket. (Dean made several of these late last night, drawing anti-magic sigils on a set of long scarves. This had been partly just to kill time after the first hour of watching Cas talk Sam through purification spells, and partly it had just seemed like a good idea.). With one long step Sam slides behind Rowena and practically lassos her with the sigil-marked scarf, tossing it right over her head and yanking it tight. It wraps around her mouth like a muzzle. Her chant stops at once and the sensation of crackling static fades; her spell's been muted. Rowena's eyes go wide with fury and the scarf actually starts to smoke, but she seems immobilized (and, maybe more important, silenced). That only leaves Crowley, and Dean's next move is going to be to turn the angel-blade on him.

Or not. It turns out Claire's "fall" off the table was actually just part one of a surprisingly nimble roll. She's already back on her feet, she somehow seems to have an angel-blade of her own, and she's holding it to Crowley's throat.

They're all at a standstill again. Dean's still trying to shield Cas (though it's getting pretty difficult what with Cas pushing back around him, his own angel-blade in his right hand, clearly wanting a piece of the battle for himself). Claire's standing right in Crowley's face glaring at him — he's frozen
on the table on his knees in a rather awkward crouch, with the tip of Claire's shining angel-blade pressed defiantly to his throat. Sam's still holding the scarf around Rowena's mouth, and though the scarf's smoking pretty badly now it seems to be holding.

Dean risks a glance down at Cas’s open hand, the one that had the feather.

It's empty.

"Where—“ Dean mutters to him; but Cas quietly shakes his head, and Dean falls silent.

There's a hissing sound and Sam's scarf explodes into glowing fragments of ash.

“I NEVER,” sputters Rowena, wiping some ash-fragments off her mouth. She tosses a ferocious glare at Sam over her shoulder and he gives an almost bashful shrug. Rowena spits at him, “That was — that was ungentlemanlike! Why, muzzling a lady, I’ve never been treated so rudely— well, hardly ever— only a few hundred times have I been treated so terribly!”

"So just so you know," says Sam, dropping the ruined scarf and pulling another one out of his pocket. "I've got a bunch more of those."

"Where did you get that?!" cries Rowena.

"Made it," says Dean. "I don't know, I guess I had this idea you might show up."

Crowley starts to laugh. They all turn to look at him; he's clambering off the table now. Claire's following his every move with the tip of the blade pressed to his throat, and she's still glaring at him from just a few inches away (with all the considerable force of her fiercest Claire-scowl), but he's ignoring her completely. He straightens up, brushes off his coat-sleeves and says, "Well, THAT was a sight for sore eyes!" He then glances down at Claire, and at the blade. "Oh, put that away, girl. The feather's gone, you ninny, there's no point in me fighting any more. You won, congratulations, and can we go now?"

Claire slowly lowers the blade and backs toward Dean, still glaring at Crowley suspiciously. As soon as she's within arm's-reach Dean grabs her and shoves her behind him, whispering, "Where'd you get that blade?"

"I gave it to her a few hours ago," says Castiel. Dean glances at him, and Cas adds, "Seemed like she might need some extra protection."

"Don't look at him that way, Dean," says Claire. "You're the one who gave me a gun for my birthday, remember? Even if you did take it back later." Dean sighs, and Claire adds, "But...who's got the feather?"

They all stare at Cas's open — and empty— and, and he looks at it too, with a slightly surprised look. "I don't know," he says. "It was knocked out of my hand."

“Where IS the blasted thing?” says Rowena. She still seems in a fury, looking all around the room in frustration and still trying to wipe the ash off her lips. "What did you do with it? A pocket-dimension? A transport spell? Invisibility shield? Etheric warding?"

“It’s safe,” says Dean confidently (though he can only hope this is true — he has no idea where it is. Hopefully it’s just ended up under one of the bookshelves). “No thanks to you. Nice plan you had there, but it failed. So, thanks and goodbye.”

Sam adds, "And you might remember, 'no double-crossing' was one of the rules."
“That wasn't at all a double-cross!” argues Rowena. "You asked me to put the grace in the feather and I did. But I never said what I'd do next."

Cas says drily, "It was an implied double-cross. And that's good enough."

"That feather's worth a hundred times its weight in gold!" Rowena complains. "A thousand! You've got no idea what you've got there. You're going to utterly waste it. Also, I've got to fix my makeup now. Of all the...." She subsides into irritated mutters, patting her hair and dabbing uncertainly at her lips, muttering "Ungrateful little... why, I never....". Dean's a little startled when she then slides one well-manicured hand right down into her cleavage and extracts a jewel-encrusted tube of lipstick, along with a surprisingly large mirror and a whole pack of tissues. She holds the mirror up with one hand, wipes the last bits of scarf-ash off her lips with one of the tissues and re-applies a new coat of lipstick. It only takes her a moment (she's clearly had to freshen up her makeup, post-battle, more than a few times before) and soon she's eyeing the results critically in the mirror, dabbing minutely at one corner of her lip. As she inspects herself she comments, “Spending a feather like that on a half-dead former angel is a complete waste, you know. I could have put it to much better use. Why, just think of all the poor wee orphans wasting away of consumption—"

"Oh, I'm sure you were going to use it on poor wee orphans," says Crowley, who this time goes for a full eye-roll. "And nobody wastes away from consumption anymore. Keep up with the times, mum. Ebola. Mad Cow. Zika."

"All those poor wee orphans wasting away from Ebola," says Rowena, correcting herself seamlessly; now she seems virtually heartbroken, all at once, over the idea of the poor wee orphans, her eyelashes fluttering tragically as she mutters, "Poor little tykes!" The jeweled lipstick tube, then the pack of tissues and then the large mirror all somehow disappear down her bra. Dean's trying very hard not to stare but he can't figure out how the mirror in particular is fitting down there. Everyone else is staring too, and Rowena catches Claire's eye and winks. "Pocket-dimension, sewn right into the bra lining," she whispers theatrically. "Did it myself. I could make you one. You'll wonder how you ever got on without it, believe you me. Perhaps a little trade?"

Dean breaks in with a loud, "NO MORE DEALS. No... multi-dimensional bras or whatever; just get out of here. I mean, thanks for your help and all, but, you did try to steal it."

“And that is the last time I help you cure an angel, you mark my words." she says, "And I didn't have the least thought of stealing it—"

"I did," says Crowley. "A guy's gotta make a living, you know? But actually it was worth the price of admission just to see that scarf trick of yours, Sam. You'll have to show that to me someday."

Rowena turns coolly toward him, lips pursed. “Have I ever mentioned that the day I birthed you was the worst day of my entire li—"

"Been there, heard that," says Crowley. He turns back to Dean and Cas and adds, "Good luck, boys. Been a pleasure. Any time you want to muzzle my dear mother into silence again and send her into another smoking fury, just give me a ring. Can't even begin to describe how much I enjoyed the sight.” He waves one hand, and he and Rowena disappear from the room so suddenly that Sam, Dean, Castiel and Claire all jump in surprise.
“You really okay, Claire?” says Dean. She’s looking a little unsteady now, but she nods. She then glances down at the angel-blade in her hand, hesitates, and then holds it out to Castiel.

"Keep it," Cas tells her. "You might need it."

Claire nods, but once again she pats her throat a little uncertainly. “That whole thing felt…. weird.” She looks over at Cas, her forehead creased with concern. “But what happened to the feather?”

And now Cas has a faint smile on his face. They all look at him; he straightens his elbow slightly and twitches his hand, and the little black feather slides right down into his palm. He holds it up for them all to see.

“The old blade-up-the-sleeve trick!” said Dean, vastly relieved. “Or, feather-up-the-sleeve. Good one. That why you wore the coat?”

Cas nods, looking at the feather. "Seemed I might need a way to hide it," he explained, "and I've had a fair bit of practice at concealing items in the sleeves of this coat."

"So... it worked?" said Sam. "The grace really is in the feather?"

Cas opens his hand so that the little alula-feather lies in his palm. It looks totally ordinary, but Cas strokes it slowly with his other hand, running one finger along it from base to tip.

He says softly, "It's charged. I can feel it."

"But is it charged enough?" says Sam.

At that, Cas’s expression darkens.

But he just shrugs. "Hard to tell. We'll just have to try."

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_A/N - Thanks again, a thousand-fold, for your patience!_

_Hope to have the next chapter up next week - it's half drafted. In a few days I fly to Alaska though, and I don't know what my internet situation will be there but I'll try to post something from Anchorage before I head up to the tundra._
You wouldn't be you

A/N - Just wrapped up 2 weeks of intensive fieldwork in northern Alaska under 24 hr sun. (Been tweeting from there if anybody cares - @NorthernSprw. There was no cell service and very slow internet so I could barely manage tweets, but soon I'll be back on tumblr too).

I've been trying to finish this chapter but it's been difficult, partly due to inherent difficulty of this entire fic, and partly due to jibcon and Italy and then Alaska and the nonstop 12hr field days - there were no days off. But I finally have it done. This is a much longer chapter than usual, double-length actually, but I wanted to post it all at once. I left the tundra early this morning on the 1st of 3 flights, and am on the 3rd and longest flight now. Failed to get the chapter fully done while still in the airport so I have just paid $4.95 for a half hour of in-flight wifi just to be able to post this for you all. I do hope you like it. 30 minutes is not going to be enough time to catch all the typos, though, so, sorry in advance for those - I'll fix those later (with the help of my trusty beta!).

We now return to Dean, Sam, Castiel, and Claire too, all in the bunker, with Cas now in possession of a powered-up alula-feather. Or, partly powered-up, at least.

"Why not do it right now?" Dean's been saying for about ten minutes now. "Just do it. Let's try it. Just try it now."

They're all back in the kitchen, where Cas seems intently focused on making a new pot of coffee. He shakes his head at Dean, while carefully measuring out a few tablespoons of coffee grounds. "This has to be done in a certain way," he says. Dean's not sure whether he's even talking about the feather anymore, or just the coffee.

Cas pours in the water and presses Start. It occurs to Dean to wonder not just why Cas won't use the feather immediately, but also why he's making a whole new pot of coffee. What do they even need more coffee for? It's past noon, after all. Cas is giving no clues; he's just staring at the coffeepot now, his arms folded over his chest. A few minutes ago he'd handed the feather to Dean, apparently because making coffee was suddenly much more important, and Dean looks at the feather now in his hand.

*Why won't he just try it?* Dean thinks again.

There's an obvious answer.

Sam's figured it out too, for he speaks up with a gentle, "Cas, are you worried it's not charged enough?" Exactly what Dean's been thinking.

"I *know* it's not charged enough," Cas replies. He's taking off his trenchcoat now, and the sight is oddly unsettling. It's like the angel is disappearing before their eyes — and the cancer patient reappearing. His thinness is all too apparent now, and some of his arm bruises are visible too. Claire even asks, with a worried frown, "What happened to your arms?"

"Oh, nothing. Just minor injuries," says Cas, and he subtly tries to turn away from her as he sets the
folded trenchcoat on the kitchen table. Claire's frown just deepens.

"IV's," Dean says to her. There's no point hiding it.

"Oh," she says, in a small voice. After a little moment of silence, she disappears to the library and comes back a moment later carrying the blue sweater that Cas had loaned her earlier to use as a pillow. She offers the sweater to Cas; he takes it, a little slowly, and he looks around at all of them, asking, "The bruises don't look that bad, do they?"

"No, no, no," says Claire immediately. "No, no, of course not! No, I, uh... I just want you to be warm, is all."

Dean's been watching this whole exchange while still holding the little feather in his hand, and he finds he's stroking it almost constantly with his thumb, over and over, feeling the cool smoothness of the feather vane against his skin. Is it his imagination or does it feel a little different? Is there a vibration to it, maybe, a slight warmth? Something?

"Even a little grace will help," says Dean. "Won't it?"

Cas pulls the sweater on and adjusts the sleeves, pulling the cuffs down fastidiously till his arms are totally covered. "It's only got a very small speck of grace," he says.

"It looked pretty bright to me," says Dean.

This earns Dean a downright patronizing look. "It was fully uncoiled, and even then was barely a millimeter wide," says Cas. "And it wasn't enough to make us even squint. It was... very little." But at least he does finally look at the feather. In fact it almost seems to catch his eye all of a sudden, like he's been itching to look at it and hasn't been letting himself do so, and in the next moment he takes a few rapid steps closer and plucks the feather from Dean's hand. Cas looks at it with an unmistakably hungry look, and then, quite slowly, raises it to his face and holds it under his nose. Everybody's watching this curious feather-inspection routine; Cas's eyes even drift shut, and for a moment he almost has the look of a wine connoisseur or a gourmet chef, as if he's focusing intently on some delicate, delicious, barely detectable odor.

His face relaxes. For the briefest moment a look of relief comes over his face. It's like he's found something that he's long been missing.

But a moment later his eyes snap open and he shoves the feather back toward Dean, his arm outstretched stiffly till Dean takes the feather back. Cas turns his attention back to the coffeemaker, folding his arms resolutely over his chest.

"It's weak," he declares. "It's very weak."

Claire's looking a little crestfallen by all this, and she finally says, "Did it... decay in me, or something?"

But Cas gives her a smile. "Oh, no, Claire. No, it was always small." The coffee's almost done; Cas looks up at the nearest kitchen cupboard and cracks it open, peering around inside. There are a couple dozen coffee mugs right there on the first shelf, but apparently none of them are suitable, for Cas frowns at all of them, closes the door and moves to another cupboard. "It's not you, Claire," he adds as he investigates another cupboard. "When I left you, you know, I was trying my best to leave you unharmed. Minimizing any damage, you see, any effects. Or that was the goal, anyway."

Dean's a little nonplussed to realize that Cas isn't talking about some time recently when he "left" Claire on the side of the road or something, but a time much earlier: he's referring to the moment he
left Claire's body, long ago. Removing himself, after possessing her as a vessel.

It's odd now to remember that day. How different Castiel had seemed then... still a ferocious warrior-angel, not quite an ally, possibly an adversary; only just starting his first uncertain steps toward humanity. He'd seemed so cold and efficient. And so powerful... terrifying, even, at times.

*I serve Heaven,* he'd said that day. It had been just after he'd been "corrected" by his Heavenly superiors, whatever that had involved. *I serve Heaven. I don't serve man. And I certainly don't serve you.*

But remembering the moment now, Dean realizes, *That only lasted about two weeks, huh?*

*Even after whatever they did to him, whatever miserable torture or brainwashing they put him through, he was right back with us two weeks later.*

In fact, come to think of it, Cas had actually *died* two weeks later. He'd rebelled completely; he'd slipped Dean the demon-knife, he'd broken Dean out of that spooky doorless green-room that Zachariah had trapped Dean in, and he'd ended up defending Chuck from a furious archangel, all while trying to buy Dean some precious time.

And Cas had died. Gotten exploded, if memory served.

That had been just his first death, of course.

It's jolting to think of it now — now that Dean knows who Chuck really was all along, that is. Had Chuck just been laughing at them the whole time? Had he *enjoyed* it, even? Enjoyed the show of the lone, overmatched rebel angel, trying hopelessly to make his last stand? And trying to defend a lowly prophet (really a disguised God) from a terrifyingly powerful adversary against whom Cas had had *no chance at all?*

Had Chuck enjoyed watching Cas go through all that?

What had been the frickin' point?

The monkey-hat tassels sway as Cas leans over to check a lower cupboard; the blue sweater drapes in long hollow folds over his gaunt frame. He's moving a little slowly, a little stiffly. It seems he's always a little tired and sore now, even on his "good days."

*Some reward you got for picking humanity,* thinks Dean. *Thanks for your sacrifice, I'll let you get blown up a few times, oh and here's some cancer. Now get lost.*

*What the hell, Chuck?*

Cas is still saying something about the time he "left" Claire, about how he hadn't wanted Claire to suffer any "effects", and Claire finally says, "Wait, you didn't want me to have 'effects'? Are you serious?"

"Well, obviously there were going to be effects," he concedes, giving her a rather abashed look over his shoulder. "Bad ones. Most of those, I couldn't prevent. But... I know it may not have been apparent, but I did have a goal in mind of at least leaving as little physical impact on you as possible, and so I made an effort to retrieve as much of my grace as I could. Also, you see, I had promised your father.... " Cas stops abruptly, suddenly looking even more uneasy. He finally says, "I tried the best I could. I know I did a poor job. But I tried."

He turns to the next cupboard. Claire's just blinking at him now.
Something deep in the next cupboard catches Cas's eye. "Ah," he says. "There it is." He reaches into the depths of the cupboard and pulls out a big thermos, a classic old red plaid model that looks like it'd fit in perfectly in a 1950s Mad Men episode, complete with a big metal handle on the side and a little chrome top that unscrews to serve as a cup. Cas opens it, takes it over to the coffeepot and pours the entire pot of coffee into it. He screws the chrome cup back on the top, looks up and says, "Thought we might want some coffee for the road. Let's go."

"What?" says Dean.

"Where?" asks Sam.

"Let's go use the feather," Cas says. They all stare at him. Cas takes a step closer and hands the thermos to Sam. He's got a disturbingly evasive look now; he's not quite meeting Dean's eyes, or Sam's or Claire's either for that matter, but he says, "I do want to use the feather today, yes. But there's a certain place I want to use it. I think it'll be more efficient. Give me a minute first to call the, um, to call the medical team to tell them I'm coming. Uh... would you all like to come along? Claire, you too, I hope?"

Despite all Dean's worries, he almost laughs at how uncertain Cas sounds about whether they might want to come.

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Dean and Sam are in for sure, of course, and Claire announces right away that not only is she coming too, but she's going to bring her little car and is planning to follow along behind the Impala. But after one more look at the car — it's an old boxy Subaru Leone wagon, not a bad car at all really, but the brakes and tires are in awful shape — Dean vetoes that plan and makes her pull the Leone into the garage instead. "Impala," he orders, adding, "Back seat." His plan is to put Sam and Claire in the back, while Cas rides shotgun next to Dean. (This is partly so that Cas will have more room to stretch out. And partly so that Cas will be next to Dean.) Dean holds the back door open for Claire and adds, "Get in. And gimme your bag." She sighs, hands over her little pack and clambers into the back.

While Dean walks back to the Impala's trunk to stuff her pack in with their other gear, he casts a slightly worried look at the door that leads to the rest of the bunker. Cas is still in there somewhere. Still talking to his "medical team" — Dr. Klein & Co., presumably.

Where are they going exactly? And why does Cas need to talk to his doctor?

Is using grace dangerous?

Could the grace influx, as little as it is, be something too physically overwhelming for Castiel in his weakened state? Sure, he's getting around okay, today anyway, but he's obviously still weak — he's thin, he gets tired easily, he gets cold, and Sam's also been saying how Cas's immune system must be pretty weak too.

Is this a hazardous procedure for him?

Or maybe he's planning on going to some church or some other kind of holy site, some place where grace might have a little extra oomph. More efficient, he'd said. But what does that mean? And why won't he volunteer any details?
While Dean's puzzling over all this, Sam shows up carrying both his own overnight bag and Cas's, with the Mad Men coffee thermos tucked under his arm. He says to Dean, "He's still talking to his team, said to just load his bag into the car. So, Dean... he still won't say where we're going."

Dean gives a curt nod, grabbing the two bags and tossing them in the trunk — a little more roughly than necessary. "I've about had it with the mysterious act," he says.

"Well, at least he's taking us along," points out Sam. "That's something, anyway." Sam sets the thermos on the hood and then actually unscrews it, pours himself a cup and takes a sip. He's watching Dean while he does this. "Coffee?" Sam offers.

Dean shakes his head. He's still standing at the open trunk, spinning the car keys around in his hand, staring back at the door to the bunker.

Sam suggests, "He probably just wants to be checked out right afterward to see if it worked. Get scanned or whatever. Another CAT scan, maybe."

"Then why aren't we going to Denver?" Dean points out. "Or Flagstaff? Someplace where they've scanned him before?"

Sam shrugs; he clearly doesn't have any answers, and in fact he looks a little worried too.

"I just don't like it," says Dean. "Something's off." He slams the trunk a little harder than necessary. *Chill, dude,* he orders himself, and he says to Sam, "Even if it doesn't have much grace, it's gotta help at least some, right? Maybe it's not enough power for a full healing, sure. Might not show on a scan, even. But if it stops even one cancer cell, it's worth it, right?"

"I hope so," is Sam's not-totally-encouraging reply.

Finally Cas appears, but before Dean can steer him to the front seat, Cas spots Claire in the back, clambers right in next to her and almost immediately he's peppering her with questions about how her life's been going.

Dean's now hovering near Cas's door while Sam finishes his little cup of coffee and screws the lid back on the thermos. Dean's really trying to think of how to smoothly get Castiel out of the back seat and into the front seat (next to Dean, where he belongs), but then Sam whispers, "Nice for them to get a chance to talk." And then Sam walks right past Dean and gets in his usual spot, the shotgun seat where Cas was supposed to go. Sam hadn't known about Dean's secret seating plan, of course.

*Chill, dammit,* Dean tells himself again, as he stalks around the back of the car to the driver's seat. He tries not to sigh too audibly as he fires up the engine. Now Sam's shooting Dean a few cautious puzzled glances, but Dean ignores him and manages, instead, to focus on driving. He pulls the Impala out of the garage, down the long rutted driveway.

When Dean reaches the intersection with the main road, Cas pauses his conversation with Claire just long enough to say "Turn right, Dean."

"Where are we going?" asks Dean.

"South," is all Cas says — and now Dean's gritting his teeth. Cas finally adds an unhelpfully vague
"Towards Kansas City" (which is not much more informative than "south") and then he just turns back to Claire and says, "Now, Claire, what do you mean you 'totally' know how to defend yourself? What methods of defense do you mean, specifically?"

Don't be selfish, Dean chides himself as Claire starts in on her reply. Cas and Claire probably need to talk. Let them have their time.

And stop freaking out about why Cas wants to go somewhere else to use the damn feather. He must have his reasons.

We'll get wherever he's taking us, we'll see what it is and then we'll talk.

You gotta trust him, Dean lectures himself. You gotta.

Cas is soon quizzing Claire about how things are going with Jody and Alex, and then he asks about whether Claire's going to school, and where she's been going in the car, and how she got the car, and where she's driven it, and then there's further questioning about her "methods of defense." Dean, despite himself, starts getting interested, and soon he's even craning his head a little to make sure he catches all of Claire's replies.

It's not two minutes before Cas has uncovered the alarming fact that Claire seems to have actually been trying to hunt on her own.

This disturbing discovery temporarily pushes the feather-worries to the back burner, and a large part of the next hour consists of Dean arguing over his shoulder with Claire about how she should definitely not be hunting on her own at such a young age — while Sam pipes up unhelpfully now and then with comments like "You started hunting when you were even younger, Dean." And Cas, equally unhelpfully, starts chiming in with dozens of practical tips for Claire — how to handle an angel-blade, how to wrestle a werewolf, how to draw a banishing-sigil, and all sorts of info about little-known vulnerable points of certain monsters. (Some of Cas's tips are a surprise to Dean and Sam as well — apparently cinnamon works like catnip on werewolves.) One thing leads to another and soon Cas and Claire have somehow gotten into an impromptu grappling-moves lesson in the back seat, accompanied with a nonstop running string of instructional commentary from Cas. Which at one point includes: "Now, Claire, imagine this pencil is an angel-blade and I come at you suddenly from the side, like this. What would you do— well, yes, I suppose stabbing my groin with your car keys is one option, but suppose I was armored there—"

"STOP, Claire!" Dean barks. "Don't stab him there! I'm serious!" He yanks the Impala over to the shoulder, braking so fast that everybody's jolted. Sam's gone to red alert too and he's already nearly climbing over the seat trying to separate them, saying, "Stop, Claire, he's had surgery! He's still healing!"

The car slews to a crooked stop on the shoulder, and Dean twists around in his seat to glare at Castiel. "Cas, what the hell are you thinking? Claire, you can't wrestle him, I'm serious. No matter how dumb he is about it."

"Sorry!" says Claire, who's almost huddling in the far corner of her seat now, looking horrified. "Sorry. Really! I didn't know, I swear!"

"But, Dean, she needs to know how to defend herself," complains Cas. "She didn't really stab me, she just made a gesture—"

"Let us train her, Cas," says Dean. "Not you. Jesus effin' christ, now would you both just SIT STILL." He turns back to the wheel and pulls the Impala back onto the road, still fuming.
"I just want to be sure Claire can protect herself," argues Cas. "I should have thought of all this long ago, all the training she might need, but I didn't realize she was hunting. Claire, don't worry, I'm fine. Oh and, I meant to say before, remember that if you stab me, or any angel, you'll have to shield your eyes with your other hand, your non-dominant hand in other words, as you stab—" And now Cas is going on with another whole list of instructions about how to kill angels. Dean and Sam exchange a frustrated look.

Claire apologizes several more times for nearly stabbing Cas in the groin with her car keys (he keeps brushing off the apology) and soon their conversation circles around to stabbings in general, and then angel-blades, and then specifically the angel-blade that he'd given her earlier.

"Make sure you don't lose that," Cas says to her. "It's a good blade."

"It's in my bag in the back," she says. "But, Cas, you sure you don't need it yourself? I mean, I'd love to have it, but don't you need it?"

Cas replies, "I have another. And Dean and Sam already have their own ones too. But you should have one as well, I think. As I said, it's a good blade; it should serve you well. I've had that one quite a while, actually. Made it during the flood, from my own—"

He stops abruptly, cutting himself off in mid-sentence.

"Flood?" asks Claire. "What flood? Like... Katrina?"

"No..." says Cas. "No, an... older flood. Longer ago."

"Wait, the Flood?" says Sam, twisting around in the back seat to look at him. "The... six thousand years ago flood? You don't mean, like, Noah's Ark and all that? That flood?"

"Well, actually, it was twelve thousand years ago," says Cas, quite casually. "and it wasn't quite as global as the stories say. The one I'm speaking of was when the Mediterranean broke through the Bosporus and flooded the entire Black Sea coastline. There were a lot of similar floods around that time, because of the glaciers melting. So there wasn't exactly a single global flood, more just a lot of little local regional ones." He considers for a moment and adds, "Though I'm sure it felt quite global enough to the tribes who were there at the time. Anyway, the Black Sea one was the flood that's recounted in the epic of Gilgamesh, which was the basis for the Old Testament version, so, yes, Noah's flood."

Into a rather stunned silence he adds, "I went down for a while to try to correct a few design flaws in the Ark before the rains really hit. It was really more a raft, to be honest. Barely enough room for the livestock. They didn't have the faintest idea how to make a proper keel. That's why I decided I needed a new blade, to carve a keel—"

"What do you mean, the livestock?" Sam asks. "Didn't the ark have every species on Earth?"

"A dozen goats, two cows, about six sheep and three donkeys," says Castiel blandly. "And a few chickens. Oh and, the little daughter had two pet cats. Forgot about those. They'd just been domesticated a few generations before, of course, so 'pet' is rather stretching the term, but they did come along too."

There's a moment of silence while they all take that in.

"That's not exactly every species on Earth," Claire points out.

Castiel shrugs. "Metatron always had a bit of a tendency to exaggerate, as I'm sure you've noticed."
He wrote down much of the Old Testament, you know."

Dean's now thinking, *I always forget how old he is... How much he's seen.*

Sam and Claire are both soon quizzing Castiel with more questions about the Ark, and about what Gilgamesh was like (quite a lech, apparently). And for once Cas actually answers. He's usually dodged questions like this before — questions about the deep past, that is. About biblical times. But today for some reason he seems very talkative, and soon he's telling story after story of the past (most of which either aren't in the Bible at all, or directly contradict the biblical versions).

As they approach Kansas City there's another surprise. By now Cas is explaining to Claire how the angel-blade that he's given to her was apparently carved from a single silver "dragon claw," and as he talks a little more about it, they slowly all realize that he seems to mean it literally. He seems to actually be talking about a huge animal that has enormous silver talons.

Sam says, "Do you mean dragons in... giant? Flying? Fire-breathing?"

Cas hesitates. "Um... Well, yes," he says. "Dragons, yes."

Dean points out, "The ones we've met looked nothing like that."

"The ones you met weren't true dragons," says Castiel. "Or not the original dragons, I mean. They've just adopted that name. They're more just gold-hoarders, and they don't have true wings. We, um, what I mean is, real dragons do fly, and, um, anyway, to make these blades, we — ah — the dragon donates the claw voluntarily. The claws can get too long sometimes, you see, and then you have to trim them, and then the trimmed-off part can be carved into a blade. An angel-blade."

"Can you get another?" Claire asks. "Another dragon-claw, I mean?"

Cas is silent for a long moment. Dean glances at him in the rearview mirror and finds that Cas is looking at his hand for some reason, fingers spread wide.

"I don't think so," Cas finally says, lowering his hand. "Not any more."

It occurs to Dean, then, that Castiel has apparently just given Claire not any old angel-blade, but an incredibly rare one.

He's given her an angel-blade from Biblical times, one that he carved himself from the claw of some long-gone dragon.

Not to mention Cas has been telling stories from his past that he's never told before. Along with doing all the Claire-bonding he can possibly cram into a single car drive, practically barraging her with every single piece of advice he can think of, all at once.

As if he's not sure he'll get another chance.

Cas is going on now about how to carve an angel-blade from a dragon claw, when Dean interrupts him with "The feather'll work, Cas."

Cas falls silent. He's looking at Dean in the mirror, his gaze unreadable.

"Even if it's only partly charged, it'll still help, right?" adds Sam.

"Even a little bit has gotta help," says Dean.

Cas looks away. He doesn't reply.
As they enter the outskirts of Kansas City, Sam asks Cas for the street address of their mysterious destination. But instead of telling Sam the address, or even a name of whatever they're headed towards, instead Cas leans a little forward, propping his elbows against the seatback, to give Dean a personalized series of turn-by-turn instructions: "Turn right here... Left at the next light... " he says, leaning forward so far that he's talking almost directly into Dean's ear. He even starts pointing over Dean's shoulder, squinting into the late-afternoon sun as he tries to show Dean where to go. "Now we go a quarter mile... That's the street, up ahead, turn there...."

It becomes clear he's memorized exact directions to wherever they're going. Probably so he can hide where we're going till the last possible second, thinks Dean sourly. Cas is even acting like he didn't quite hear Sam's request for the address. And when Dean finally asks, bluntly, "Where exactly are we going, Cas?", there's just silence.

Sam prods a little more. "A church? A clinic? What is it?"

"Take a left, here, Dean," says Cas. Dean scowls at him in the mirror; at least Cas does meet his eyes, but only reluctantly and briefly, and Dean's sure now that he sees something worried in Cas's expression.

"Here," Cas says. "Pull in here. This is it. On the right. The yellow building." The Impala jounces up over a curbside ramp to a little parking lot, and they all peer at the building just beyond. It's a tidy, low, two-story structure, painted a cheerful yellow with white trim. It doesn't look like a church; there's no steeple, and no cross. It doesn't look like a hospital, either. In fact it looks about as nondescript as possible; it doesn't look like much of anything. It's got a sign out front but that's not much help either — just the unhelpfully vague name of "Carousel," along with a little logo of a sun peeking out from behind a cloud, with a shaft of sunlight falling onto a little prancing painted pony on a merry-go-round.

"What the hell is this place?" Dean mutters. (Cas, unsurprisingly, doesn't answer.) Dean finds a spot to park while Sam taps away busily on his phone, and the second Dean cuts the engine Cas zips out of the car. Cas doesn't even have his coat or scarf on, just the ever-present blue sweater and the monkey-hat; his shoulders are hunched against the December chill, the tassels of the monkey hat blowing over his shoulders in an icy breeze, as he walks fast toward the front door of the little building.

"Oh, no," Sam says, a half-second later. He turns the phone toward Dean, adding, "I googled the name and address on the sign." Claire peers over the back seat and Dean leans close too, all of them looking at Sam's top Google result:

Carousel - Pediatric Hospice and Palliative Care - Serving Kansas City area children

"Fuck," Dean says, and he scrambles out the door after Cas.

As Dean hurries up to Cas's side, he has to force himself to keep his voice calm. "Cas?" he asks. Cas pauses with one hand on the handle of the front door and looks over at Dean with a distinctly wary
Dean asks, in a carefully even voice, "Why are we at a pediatric hospice center?"

Cas is very still a moment, one hand on the door handle. He holds out his hand; Dean knows what he means, and pulls the feather out of his pocket for Cas to see. Cas plucks it out of Dean's hand. The end of the feather is shuddering in the wind, and Dean's suddenly paranoid it's going to blow away, but Cas keeps a firm hold on it, studying it for a long moment. In fact Cas is gripping it so tightly his fingertips start going white, his hand clamped down like iron on the little feather-shaft. Again there's that sense that he's been wanting to hold it, and look at it, all along, but has been deliberately denying himself.

He finally looks at Dean again, and he says, nodding at the feather, "This could be valuable. For the right person."

All those poor wee orphans, Dean thinks.

That comment of Rowena's. All those poor wee orphans, dying of consumption...

Keep up with the times, Mother. Nobody dies of consumption anymore.

But children do still die of other things, don't they?

Sam and Claire have caught up now. "Castiel?" asks Claire. "What's going on? Why are we here?"

"The feather's not fully charged," Cas tells her.

Dean's rapidly losing patience. "Yeah, we know that, you said that already. But it could help, right? At least a little."

Cas gives a slow, thoughtful nod. "It could help. My thoughts exactly." He pulls open the door.

Dean adds, "I meant, it could help you," but Cas is already inside and striding down the hall.

Dean and Sam exchange a slightly desperate glance. Claire, behind them, is whispering, "Dean? Dean, is this what I think? What the fuck is he doing?"

"Exactly what we all think he's doing," Dean says back, in a quiet voice. "Damn that Rowena. And I mean, really damn her. I don't know if he'd have thought of it otherwise. C'mon—" He breaks into a trot to catch up with Cas, who's in the lobby at a front desk now signing them all in.

The whole lobby is covered in Christmas decorations, which is mildly confusing till Dean slowly remembers that it's December, and that December means Christmas. (He'd almost forgotten.) There's a huge decorated tree in the corner covered with cheerful little silver lights, and every possible surface is cluttered with wreaths and fake snow and presents and toys (many of them real toys) and whole armies of little plastic snowmen. Suspended from the ceiling there's even an elaborate scale-model Santa sleigh complete with a full nine reindeer (Rudolph's in front, of course, with a battery-powered blinking red nose). In another corner there's a Jewish display with a menorah. Dean's thinking it's all a little over-the-top until Sam leans close and whispers, "Guess for some of the kids, this'll be their last Christmas, huh?"

Damn that Rowena, Dean thinks again. Dying kids at Christmas — what angel could resist that?

Well, lots of angels could resist that, actually. But apparently not Cas.
Cas finishes signing in and says over his shoulder to Dean, "They're expecting us. Down the hall on the left." And he's off again, striding down a long hall.

"Would you just hold up a sec —" says Dean, but once again Cas has gotten away, and once again Dean has to break into a jog just to catch up with him. It's clear now that Cas is deliberately walking very fast to avoid any questions, and Dean finally lunges at him, grabs his elbow and jerks him to a halt.

"Wait," says Dean. Cas still has that wary look, but he stops, with a sigh, staring at the floor. "Talk to me," Dean says. "Talk to us," he amends, as Sam and Claire catch up too.

Cas finally looks up at him, and now he's got that stoic look, calm and solemn and sad. Something about the look of quiet acceptance in his eyes makes Dean's blood run cold.

Castiel says to Dean, keeping his voice soft, "The grace isn't enough for me."

Dean says back, keeping his voice very quiet too, "You keep saying that. But you don't know that. You don't."

"I do," Cas replies. Sam and Claire are politely hanging back a foot or two, and Cas finally turns to them and says, "Sam — Claire. I can't thank you enough for doing all this. For all the research, Sam; and the idea, which was ingenious; and the risk in contacting Rowena and Crowley. And, Claire, I want to thank you too, for coming all this way, and being willing to go through the grace extraction. That was brave, and generous. I can't even convey how much I appreciate it." He looks at them each in turn: Claire, then Sam, and last of all Dean, and he says, "But it turns out the piece of grace is just too small for me."

Sam protests, "But we haven't even really properly examined it!" Like Dean and Cas, he's trying to keep his voice down (there's presumably sick kids in all the rooms nearby—dying kids, in fact—and it doesn't seem right to get too loud), so it's all turning into a hushed, whispered argument that seems all the more intense for being so quiet. Sam edges a little closer to say, in a passionate whisper, "Maybe we can measure the power content! With one of those Men of Letters methods that they described in that little book. Let's at least measure how much grace it's got, Cas. We can check out the feather before you decide—"

"If there's one thing I'm still able to do, it's assess an alula-feather," says Cas, a little sharply. "Especially my own." He raises the feather again, and they all look at it. "This truly isn't enough to do much for me," he says. "I'm sorry." As he looks around at them all again, he seems to take in, maybe for the first time, how dismayed they all are, and he adds, "Don't you get it? This is not a bad thing! So it's not enough for me — it could still help somebody else! Especially, somebody smaller. A small piece of grace will have only a minor impact on me, but could have a major impact on a small human. A human about a quarter my size could really be significantly helped. Likely a complete cure, if I'm not mistaken." He pauses, looking around at all of them. "And honestly, we all know I'm not the best use of this feather. Especially since I'm almost certain it won't help me."

Dean could argue the "best use" point, but it's that "almost certain" that's especially excruciating. Almost certain is NOT the same thing as entirely certain, thinks Dean. And really — it might stop that one little cell! That one cell Dean keeps thinking about, night after night; the one evil cell that gets loose in the bloodstream, drifting loose, sailing free...

So the feather's not going to totally heal him. Okay. But what if it stopped that one cell?

Then Cas says, "Emily took a turn for the worse last week," and Dean wants to groan out loud.
Emily. Of course.

The little girl in the princess dress. The one who'd been so protective of Castiel.

The girl who'd been so worried about Cas being alone in the chemo ward, and who had gone out of her way to befriend him. The one who'd been so suspicious of Dean, demanding to know why Dean hadn't been by Cas's side all along.

Claire says, almost in despair, "I don't understand... Castiel, what are you doing?"

Cas tells her, almost gently, "There's a friend of mine here, in room 103. A little girl. She lives in Kansas City, but she'd been getting treatment in Denver, like me, and I met her at the clinic there. She has cancer too. A different form, more advanced. Several of her organs began failing last week — Dean, it's kidney failure now, and very severe anemia; she has very few blood cells left. She's suffocating, essentially, and I believe she has some respiratory problem as well. Her mother contacted me to let me know. This feather might help her."

"Cas—" Dean starts.

"She's eight years old," Cas says.

Nobody has any response to that.

"I've been alive for millennia," Castiel says, quietly. "She's lived only a few years — barely enough to experience anything of life. She deserves a life. Doesn't she?"

Dean finds himself turning away from Cas, circling away toward a nearby window that has a little view of the parking lot and its cheerful little sign. *Carousel*, he reads again, and he looks at the logo with the prancing painted pony and the sun coming out from behind the little cloud. *Is that supposed to cheer us up?* Dean thinks. *Cheer up the parents of dying children? Is a carousel supposed to make them think about the goddamn circle of goddamn life or something? Because the circle of life is a fucking sham. It isn't a circle. The pony never comes back around.*

*The pony just ends up in a grave. It's a one-way trip.*

Dean's vaguely aware that he's raised both hands to his head, but it's not till he hears a worried "Dean?" (from Cas, behind him) that he realizes he's actually clutching at his head with both hands while he scowls at the painted pony. Dean takes a breath, makes himself lower both hands, and turns back around.

"Could you give us a moment?" Dean says to Sam and Claire. Sam looks completely deflated and Claire looks like she's actually about to cry, but they nod, and together they retreat back to the lobby. Cas watches till they're out of earshot, and then he looks at Dean.

*I can talk him out of this*, Dean's thinking. What he really wants to do is just grab Cas by the shoulders and shake him, literally shake him, and then simply force him (somehow) to use the feather on himself. (The thought of poor little Emily, just eight years old, suffocating away in her hospice room through no fault of her own, is something Dean's trying very hard to stuff to the back corners of his mind.)

But of course "force him to do it" never really works well with Castiel; they've all learned long ago that the more one pushes Castiel, the more he digs in his heels. The better approach is to get Cas himself to think it all through; to coax him into looking at it from a different angle. Dean can even feel a logical argument shaping up in his head that might work, something about how Castiel is simply much more important than any eight-year-old girl could ever be. As tragic as Emily's death
will be, the plain truth is Castiel is a major player in the Heavenly battles that have raged over the earth in recent years. A major player. He's a skilled fighter and strategist, he's got connections, he's played a pivotal role, he's got a lot of knowledge... he matters. He can have a real impact on the world.

A kid dying is really sad, sure; it's downright tragic, obviously, sure, they can all agree on that. But is averting that particular tragedy really the best strategic choice here?

Not to mention that other people need Cas. Sam needs Cas, for one thing. And Claire needs Cas too. The whole frickin' world needs Cas.

And... Dean needs Cas.

_I can't lose him_, Dean realizes, and it seems like it's only hitting home right now, as if for the very first time, just how very desperately he needs Cas to stay alive. _I can't lose him. I can't. I can't. I just can't._

Dean's planning out the speech now; he's thinking how to phrase it and what buttons to press, what psychological levers he can pull, how best to convince Cas, or even just plain _guilt_ Cas, into changing his mind. But the words die on his lips when Cas, who's been gazing quietly at Dean with an increasingly worried look on his face, takes a half step closer and whispers, his voice so very soft now that Dean has to strain to hear him, "It's the right thing to do, isn't it?"

What's so startling about this is that Cas actually looks uncertain.

Some kind of barrier has come down, some mask Cas has been wearing all afternoon, and now Dean can see — Cas is _letting_ Dean see — that he's unsure.

"Isn't it?" he asks Dean. "It is the right thing to do, isn't it? I wanted to ask your opinion."

For a long moment Dean just stares at him.

_He's checking with me_, Dean thinks, and he's astonished. _For the first goddam time. He's actually checking with me about one of his batshit crazy decisions, BEFORE he does it. I've asked him a million times to check with me about stuff like this. He's finally doing it._

This means Dean _really_ might be able to make Cas change his mind! The buttons to press, the levers to pull — it's going to _work_; Dean can feel it!

Dean could probably even just sorta...

...lie to him...

...trick...him...

...into thinking that the selfish thing is the right thing.

So Dean opens his mouth to say, "No, it's the wrong thing to do. You should use the feather on yourself."

But the words won't come.

Cas takes another half-step closer. He's only about a foot away now. The late-afternoon light from the hallway window catches his face, and for a moment his eyes seem to glow an almost unearthly blue. In a flash Dean's swept back to the old days, to that terrible year he'd been thinking about
earlier, when Cas had first developed that habit of inching so close like this and fixing Dean with that unearthly stare.

That eerie blue, that solemn stare... it's always made Dean a little rattled. Partly from feeling so intensely studied.

Partly because it always felt weirdly like Cas was opening a door the other direction, too, allowing Dean to study him right back.

Partly for other reasons....

What is so worth saving? Cas had asked once, on a pivotal night back then. What is so worth saving? I see nothing but pain here.

Dean had replied, There is a right and there is a wrong here, Cas, and you know it.

Now Cas asks, "Dean? It is the right thing, isn't it?" He's waiting for Dean's response.

Dean's completely tongue-tied.

"Yes..." Dean finally says weakly. "Yeah... I guess so... " He tries to regain his lost footing with, "But, Cas, have you considered... uh... maybe you're just more important...."

"Not really, no," says Cas, much more firmly, shaking his head. "I thought about that. At first glance one would think an angel, or even a former angel, could have more impact on things than a little girl. But if you really think through the specifics, mostly I've just made mistakes. Big dramatic mistakes, mistakes that had an impact, but mistakes. I think my one moment of really making a difference was years ago." He adds, a little sadly, "That time is over." He pauses a moment, thinking, and all Dean can seem to do now is gaze at him. At his thin frame, his ridiculous monkey hat, the soft blue sweater; at the way the slanting light is throwing half his face into shadow; at the way it makes his blue eyes shine as if lit from within. And most of all, Dean's watching the play of expression across Cas's features — the intelligence, the thoughtfulness, and the concern.

Dean remembers him silhouetted against that motel window, back in Denver, caring for the little plant. Angel, Tending To Tiny Houseplant, he'd thought at the time.

Angel, Tending To Dying Child.

Cas takes a long, slow breath and says, pacing his words slowly, "I've come to understand that there's such a thing as a life cut too short. As brief as your lives may seem to us — to the angels, I mean — there is, nonetheless, such a thing as too brief a mortal life. I see now that there is value in the mortal life, value in the experience here. I mean, it's not just a stepping-stone on the way to Heaven. It has its own value, and it needs to have a certain... a fullness, a richness... enough room to flower. Enough time. It's a concept we were never trained in, you see; it's something I've learned on my own, during my time here. With you." He pauses, looking at Dean. "It's something I learned from you, to be honest. So I wanted to doublecheck."

That close-up steady stare is turned up to full intensity now, as Cas adds, "And, Dean, you'll be fine, won't you? You'd be fine either way, right?"

Again Dean can't seem to come up with anything to say.

I could play that card, he thinks. The thoughts are trundling very slowly through his head (it's become oddly difficult to think). I could play that card; I could say I'll be heartbroken; I could make him use the feather on himself just so that I don't get hurt.
He'd probably do it. But if he's right about the feather, it won't even save him.

And a little girl dies.

And it'll hang over us forever. However long he has left.

Cas is shifting gears now. He says, thoughtfully, like he's going through all the last pieces, "I was thinking, there's still the rest of the chemo; and also the radiation option. I think there's also another form of chemotherapy entirely, something the doctors have mentioned that I could probably be shifted to, as well. Also I have another feather; maybe we can find some other angel's grace, or one of the holy relics. There's some possibilities." He looks at Dean again. "Right?"

Some possibilities.

"R-right..." whispers Dean. His voice is so unsteady that he almost stutters. "Right."

Cas whispers back, "Thank you." He raises one hand and pats Dean's shoulder, and then his hand slides to the nape of Dean's neck and he strokes the short hairs there for a moment. It's one of those odd little neck-scratches that Cas has started to do now and then, and though it's brief, it's such a soft and gentle touch that Dean almost loses it right there.

Before Dean can say anything else Cas raises his voice a bit and calls, "Sam. Claire." They come walking back over. They both look somewhat numb; Claire's eyes are a little red. Cas turns to a nearby door, and Dean realizes now that the entire time they've been talking, they've been standing right outside door 103. Cas puts his hand up to knock on the door.

"You sure?" Dean manages to get out. "You absolutely sure? This is what you want to do?"

Cas nods, and he knocks.

A nurse opens the door. "Ah. Castiel Winchester, right?" she says. Cas nods, and she says, "So good of you all to come all this way to see Emily." She adds, with the briefest possible glance at Cas's monkey-hat (and, it seems, his lack of hair), "Especially on your off-week." She slips outside the door and pulls it shut behind her. "And you're all Emily's friends as well?" she asks.

"Yes," says Cas, before any of the rest of them can answer.

"Let me fill you all in," says the nurse. "I think you know all this already, but just to make sure we're all on the same page here, I should warn you all that Emily is in very poor condition. She's not in good shape, I'm afraid, and she doesn't have much time. To be honest, she probably won't know you're here; she's very weak and hasn't been fully alert or awake in several days. We're mostly just trying to keep her comfortable at this point. We've been discouraging casual visitors, since she's really quite out of it now, but when I told her mother that you were coming to visit, Mr. Winchester, she said, definitely come in." She looks around at all of them. "Forgive me for being blunt, but I need to be sure you all understand: if there are any goodbyes you want to say, now's the time to say them."

"We understand," says Cas. She opens the door.
At first Dean's sure they're in the wrong room. The child in the bed isn't Emily at all; it's not even clear if it's a boy or a girl, just some poor wasted-away tyke who can't be any more than five or six, a skeletal shape that's all thin bones and bruised pale skin. The kid's totally bald. There's oxygen tubes and IV's and wires everywhere; the bed seems to contain more tubes than child. A trace of a foul smell is in the air — a hint of sourness and stale breath and bodily fluids, mixed with those miserable hospital smells of alcohol and iodine. Dean knows that smell; it's the stink of nearby death. The poor kid already looks completely comatose. In fact the kid's lying so limp on the bed that Dean briefly wonders if he, or she, might already have died without anybody noticing yet, but there's a faint rasping sound that seems to be something to do with the kid's breathing, along with an erratic fast beeping coming from a machine nearby — probably a heart monitor.

This child is obviously not Emily. And the parent slouched in a nearby chair isn't Emily's mother Sharon, either. She looks at least a decade older, worn and lined. She's dressed only in jeans and a baggy t-shirt, with no trace on her face at all of the subtly elegant makeup that Sharon had used. Her hair's pulled back in a rough, snarled ponytail that looks like it hasn't even been washed or combed in a couple days. Oddly, there's almost no expression on her face at all; she's just slumped in the chair staring at the wall.

The woman's eyes drift over to them (Cas and Dean are in front, Sam and Claire trailing behind). She seems to not even fully notice that four new people have trooped into the room, and just looks blankly at them.

_thousand-yard stare if I ever saw one_, thinks Dean, and he's about to apologize for entering the wrong room when the woman hauls herself to her feet and says, "Castiel. It's so kind of you to come. And, Dean, was that your name?"

It is Sharon.

Which means the skeletal thing in the bed is little Emily.

"Hello, Sharon," said Cas. They all drift into positions around the bed, Cas at Emily's side, Sharon on the other side, and Dean, Sam and Claire bunching together automatically in a clump at the foot of the bed. Cas looks down at Emily for a long moment and then says to her mother, "I was so sorry to hear that Emily's condition has deteriorated."

"Couple days more at most, they tell me," says Sharon, with a weirdly nonchalant shrug. "Any sec now really, I guess." Sam glances over at Dean with a quiet look, and Dean knows what he means. They've both seen this sort of casually blank numbness before — in victims, that is. Especially victims who've had a very long ordeal.

"Hello, Emily..." says Cas. He reaches down to gently touch Emily's hand. She doesn't react at all. Cas looks up at Sharon and says, "Would you mind if I say a little..." He hesitates, as if unsure how to word his request. "To be honest it's sort of a ritual, actually," he finally says. "A healing ritual from..." He pauses again. "It's something I learned from my... family. From my old family, I mean, the family I grew up with. If you wouldn't mind. It'll just take a moment."

"What is this, some hippie crystal bullshit?" says Sharon, folding her arms and narrowing her eyes. "Because we've been through all that already. Crystals, probiotics, vitamins, every diet under the sun, you name it. And every single goddam person I meet, and I mean every SINGLE ONE, has some bullshit new thing they want to try. They think about it for all of ten seconds and they're sure they have some genius idea that I've never considered in the past entire year and a half."
Her sudden vehemence is a little surprising, and a hush falls over everyone. Cas looks down at Emily again. Claire's gone unnaturally quiet, clutching on to the end of her blonde braid with one hand. Sam and Dean just look at each other again.

But Cas just raises his eyes again and says, calmly, "It's just a few words. She won't even notice."

Sharon's shoulders drop a little. She says, her tone now apologetic, "Sorry. I just really don't want her bothered. It's been such a completely crappy month to be honest. Crappy six months. Well, a whole crappy year and a half really. Her entire last year has been such shit... and she's finally down so far she can't feel anything anymore, and I just don't want her to... feel *any* of the rest of this. *Any* of it."

Cas pulls the feather out of his pocket and shows it to her. "She won't feel anything, I promise. I would just put this feather on her throat and then speak some words. That's all."

They're all taken by surprise when Sharon starts laughing. She looks at the feather and right away she's actually *giggling*, a throaty chuckle that goes on and on. Cas frowns at her, still holding the feather up; he looks a little confused. *Foxhole humor,* thinks Dean, watching Sharon's choked laughter.

"I'm sorry," Sharon says, trying to catch herself. "It just struck me funny, because, you know what, Cas, it's the oddest thing really, she was convinced you were an angel! Isn't that ridiculous? She said she could see your wings sometimes. Especially the last time she saw you. She was like, Mom, you really need to get your eyes checked if you can't see those wings of his by now — they're so clear now."

Cas blinks at her, slowly lowering his hand. Dean, Sam and Claire all go completely still.

Sharon goes on, "After the last time she saw you, she even was telling me about your, get this, your *feather pattern!* The colors, how your feathers had flecks of gold here and there, and how you'd lost the longest feathers but that your wings were still really pretty anyway. She was asking me if you'd lost the feathers because of the chemo, and if they would grow back. Isn't that funny? I checked with the docs and they were like, well, chemo can sometimes cause hallucinations, you know, chemo-brain and all that; but I couldn't bear to tell her it was just hallucinations so I just... went with it. I was like, oh yeah, absolutely, Em, that Castiel sure has such gorgeous wings, doesn't he!" She's laughing again now. "And now you turn up with a frickin' *feather*. For a *healing ritual*, you know? She would love this, so, you see, what's really funny is that she's *not gonna ever know*. They say she probably won't wake up again, so, see, *she's not gonna know* that you turned up here with a feather for her—" And now she's wiping her eyes, and sniffling and even choking back a sob. The transition from laughter to tears is bizarrely sudden, but without missing a beat she yanks a Kleenex packet out of her pocket, pulls out a tissue and blows her nose. "Sorry, sorry, I'm pretty strung out in case you hadn't noticed... so... anyway...." She balls up the Kleenex, tosses it unerringly into the trash, and looks at the rest of the Kleenex packet. The packet's empty; she's just used the last one. She mutters, "Really should've bought the eight-pack."

"Here, here, I've got some—" says Claire unexpectedly, digging into her jacket pocket.

Dean takes the opportunity to whisper to Cas, "She saw your wings?"

Cas murmurs back, "Happens sometimes with people close to death."

Sharon accepts Claire's Kleenex offer with thanks, tosses her own empty packet in the trash and turns back toward Castiel, saying, "Anyway, Em would love that you brought her a feather."
"Ah," said Cas. "That's... amusing, yes. Quite a coincidence."

The laughter's totally gone, as fast as it arrived, and now Sharon just looks very tired. She leans closer to Emily, reaching out one hand to caress Emily's forehead. "You hear that, Em?" Sharon says, and it's actually painful to hear her shift into her motherly voice. All the bitterness and exhaustion seem gone all at once as soon as she speaks to Emily, replaced by a velvety soft encouraging tone. "Em, Castiel's here," Sharon cheerfully tells her comatose dying daughter. "Your friend Cas, remember him? He brought you a feather, Em! A genuine angel feather. Isn't that the nicest thing?"

Sharon takes a couple steps away, backing to the foot of the bed, and she says to Cas, "Okay. Go ahead and do your feather thing."

Cas moves a little closer, and he gently shifts Emily's hand so that he can sit on the edge of the bed right next to her. He perches there on the side of the bed, looks back over his shoulder at Sharon and adds, "Oh, there may be some light. Don't worry about it — you don't need to cover your eyes."

Sharon looks a little puzzled by that, but she doesn't say anything. Cas reaches out with the feather and sets it delicately on Emily's neck (in exactly the same spot it had been on Claire's neck earlier during the Rowena ritual). Though he then seems to keep hold of the end of the feather for a rather long moment, as if he can't quite let it go.

Dean wants to ask, *Are you sure about this, Cas? Are you sure?* But Emily's terrible condition, and the nearness of her death (not to mention the gutwrenching rawness of Sharon's despair) seem to have made the decision inevitable. As much as Dean aches for Cas, now he's aching for Emily too (and, maybe even more, for Sharon). There now seems to be no other possible path.

For a long breathless pause everything seems suspended in time. Dean still can't help thinking, *I could force him to change his mind — I could force him —*

Dean stays quiet.

Though Sam at least asks, "Cas?"

Cas replies, "I'm ready." He removes his hand, leaving the feather balanced on Emily's neck.

Castiel speaks seven or eight slow, measured words. It must be Enochian; it's that sort of stately series of syllables, delivered with almost Shakespearean gravity. Cas pauses, then repeats whatever it was he just said. One more pause, one more long repetition, and then Cas rises from the bed and steps back.

"It'll take a moment to find its way in," he says.

Nothing happens at first. It's not clear if the result will even be something visible anyway. But then the feather begins to glow.

"What is— What is that?" said Sharon. "It's on fire!" She makes a sharp move toward the bed as if to knock the feather away. But Sam grabs her arm. "I wouldn't interrupt it if I were you," he says. She gives him a startled glance. Sam loosens his hold on her arm, turning it into more just a supportive friendly pat, but he doesn't quite let go. She doesn't protest; she just stares again at Cas, and then
looks at little Emily.

The light only lasts a moment, and then the glow sinks straight down into Emily's throat, spreading out slightly as it does so. It's as if the light is dissolving into Emily's skin. It diffuses out through her neck, and up over her head and down towards her torso. Then it's gone, and — oddly — the feather is gone too, as if it's been vaporized, or maybe turned right into grace.

Emily doesn't awaken. But something seems to ease, and over the next few moments the awful faint rasping sound fades from her breathing. As they all stand watching, Emily's color even begins to improve. Her pale, greyish skin starts to redden a little, a healthier flush coming back to her face. The bruises on her arms are even fading. The rhythm of the beeping from the heart monitor changes; it's soon more even, and its nervous rapid pace begins to steady. Sharon pulls away from Sam, takes an uncertain step closer to the bed and rests one hand on Emily's head.

"She's... cooler?" says Sharon. "She's had a fever all week. Did the fever break? Wait — what?"
She's just caught sight of Emily's arms; the bruises are completely gone now. Sharon grabs one of Emily's hands and gently turns her arm over, looking at the top and bottom of Emily's thin forearm. She looks again, and again, turning Emily's arm back and forth several times, and then Sharon spins and stares at Cas. "What did you do?" she demands. She sounds torn between suspicion and disbelief.

"She may still feel sick for a few days," Cas says. "But I hope the worst may be over." At the stunned look on Sharon's face, Cas adds, unprompted, "No, I'm not an angel." (Technically it might even be true, since he doesn't have a grace anymore.) "But that was indeed an angel-feather. It didn't have a lot of power; not enough for me. But I believe it should be enough to help a little girl. You'll have to have the doctors assess whether it's a complete cure, but at the very least it should put her into remission for quite some time."

Sharon's staring open-mouthed at Castiel now.

"Merry Christmas," says Dean softly, and Sharon gapes at him too. Then Emily stirs, and Sharon spins back toward the bed.

"Mom?" whispers Emily. She's blinking. One hand comes up; she rubs her eyes, and then she seems wide awake suddenly, batting at the oxygen tubes in her nose. "What's going on?" she asks.

"Emily?" her mother says in disbelief, "Are you— how do you feel, sweetie, you know, on that one-to-ten scale—"

"Zero, zero, I'm fine," mumbles Emily, who now seems a little disoriented, her eyes darting around at the whole room like she's not sure how she ended up here. Soon she's yanking at the tubes. "Get this off me— I wanna go home, Mom— where—" She runs a hand over her head, and only then does Dean — and everybody — realize that her hair's back. It's very short and fine, like a little crewcut, but it's back.

Then Emily's eyes land on Cas. "Castiel?" Emily says. "Where'd your wings go?"

A second later Sharon's got Emily wrapped so tight in her arms that Emily protests, "Mom, you're squishing me!" Sharon's actually shaking now, as she rocks Emily back and forth, saying, "Oh my god, Em, Em, Em, sweetie — no, don't pull those out, stay quiet, honey — everything's okay— oh my god, Em—"

A nurse comes rushing in; apparently the change in the heart rate monitor has tripped some alarm. There's a flurry of activity then, more nurses piling into the room, an on-call doctor showing up. In
middle of the commotion Cas plucks at Dean's sleeve, catches Sam's and Claire's eyes and nods toward the door. Everybody's so focused on Emily that they all quietly make their escape without anybody even noticing.

They walk out to the Impala. There's an oddly stiff silence, as if nobody's sure whether to feel celebratory or depressed. The walk across the parking lot seems very long; the sun is setting now, bathing the painted-pony sign in shafts of amber light, and the wintry breeze is strengthening into what promises to become a very bitter night wind. When they reach the Impala, Cas turns around and faces them all, as if he's prepared a little speech.

"I know this isn't what any of you were expecting," he says. "But I wanted you to see it. I wanted you to be here, so that you could see that today was a good day, that we did a good thing." His eyes go to Dean. "Right?" he asks.

"Right," Dean says, trying to make his voice firm.

Cas nods and says to Claire, "I especially wanted you to be here, Claire. You carried that piece of grace all this time, and you took a real risk letting Rowena work on you to get it out. It might not save me, but a little girl was saved today, and that's thanks to you. You need to know that." Claire nods mutely. She's clinging to the end of her braid again, and she seems rather stunned. Cas looks at Sam and Dean, too, and adds, "You too, both of you. We saved a little girl's life. That's..." He hesitates. "That's what you do, right? Saving people?"

"The family business...." Sam murmurs.

Cas echoes slowly, a puzzled look on his face, "The family business?"

"Saving people, hunting things," Dean explains, realizing Cas has probably never actually heard this phrase. "Minus the hunting, I guess, today at least."

Sam adds, with a little smile, "I guess you're really part of the family, dude."

Claire finally speaks up to say what they're all thinking, bursting out with, "I'm glad the little girl's alive. I mean, really glad — that was kind of amazing, honestly. But I wanted to save you too."

"We will," says Dean, trying to make himself believe it. "Cas'll be fine."

"He better," says Claire, who's now actually scowling at Cas.

It seems there's nothing much else to do now except head on home. Dean's trying his very hardest to make himself be happy about Emily, for Claire's right, the magical-healing scene certainly was heartwarming (more than that, even). But it's a little difficult to ignore the awful sensation of having all his hope for Castiel snatched away yet again. Dean has to force a smile and then he even goes into a sort of fake-happy overdrive, saying to everybody, "Okay, cowboys! And cowgirl." He opens Claire's car door for her. "Looks like our work here is done. Time to ride off into the sunset. Get on in, amigos."

But then Sam says, "Oh, actually, I'm gonna grab some snacks. There were some vending machines in the lobby. Claire, come and see if there's anything you want too, okay?"

Claire looks puzzled at that (she'd been in mid-step toward the car) but Sam practically yanks her away by the elbow. It's a pretty transparent excuse to give Dean and Cas a minute alone before the drive starts, but Claire doesn't get why. As she's gently hauled away by Sam, Dean can hear her saying "But I don't want anything, Sam — what are you — let go of my elbow, why do we have to go look at snacks — Dean and Cas aren't gonna want to just wait around outside here staring at each
They disappear back into the building, and Dean's left standing in the empty parking lot next to Castiel.

"You did a good thing," Dean finally says. He's trying to focus on the practical. Keep looking forward, is the routine, right? Keep putting one foot after the other, keep thinking what to do next. Cas looks cold, he decides, assessing the wind critically. He needs a jacket. We forgot to bring his jacket.

"Dean, it almost definitely wouldn't have worked on me," said Cas. "Like I told you."

Almost definitely. Almost.

"I know, I know," Dean says, shucking his own coat off. "I know. Yeah. Giving it to the kid was the best thing."

"You're not disappointed?" asks Cas.

"Disappointed? What? No, no, no, I'm not disappointed, I'm— " and Dean has every intention of saying. "I'm really happy Emily's okay," but what comes out, as he starts to hand the coat to Cas, is "I'm fucking pissed."

Cas blinks. A blast of icy wind happens to snatch the end of the coat then and Dean has to virtually fling the coat over Castiel. He finally manages to get it over Cas's shoulders only by twirling it over Cas's head in a big showy move, using both hands to sail it over him almost like it's a bullfighting cape. Cas ends up perfectly wrapped up in Dean's coat, which settles exactly in place on his shoulders — and Dean ends up with both his hands on Cas's shoulders, and the natural next move then is to grab hold of him and pull him close, and then Dean's tucking Cas's head down on his shoulder, wrapping both arms around him, trying to protect him from the wind. "I get it. I get it. It was the right thing," says Dean. "And I'm also pissed. I'm happy for Emily, I really am, don't get me wrong; but I'm, I don't know, a little disappointed too I guess, yeah. But I totally get it, Cas, I get it."

"You do?"

"It's just such a goddam.... Castiel thing to do," says Dean. "And, thing is..." It's coming clear to him now, what this all means. "You wouldn't be you otherwise, Cas. You wouldn't be you."

Cas's arms have come up around Dean now. For a long moment they stand there together, Cas's head bowed against Dean's shoulder, and Dean with both arms wrapped around him, trying to hold the coat tight against the wind. At last Dean shifts one hand to the back of Cas's neck, to give him one of those weird neck-scratches that Cas always seems to like. Cas lets out a very ragged breath.

"I'm so proud of you," Dean finally says, and it's true. Cas slides both hands up the nape of Dean's neck then, till he has both hands running through Dean's hair. The sunset is spread across the sky before Dean, dramatic swaths of crimson and gold above a low, dark bank of clouds. "I'm so proud of you," Dean repeats, though his eyes are stinging as he watches the golden disc of the sun sinking into darkness.

A/N - At least one of you saw exactly what was coming, btw. Ah, Cas, you had to go and try to do
the right thing, didn't you?

But there are more options. Don't give up hope.

I really hope you liked this! If there was anything particular thing you liked, a scene or a moment of dialogue or whatever, do let me know. I love to hear from you.

And now here comes the beverage cart, and my Alaskan Amber (and I believe it's now time for my 2nd Annual Semi-Drunk End-Of-Fieldwork Fan Letter to Misha). Next up I am playing in a parade in Seattle (day after tomorrow), then possibly another parade in Portland (day after that), then 3 days' drive back to Arizona, moving into my new apartment there and then a week later I go to the Indian Ocean for two weeks for work. But somewhere in there I will get the next chapter done. My modest goal now give my awful chapter-posting delays is simply to wrap this up before the next season starts.

Once I get a better idea of my schedule over the next week, I will post writing progress on twitter for anybody who wants to know when to expect the next installment.

Thanks as always for your patience & your feedback and support! It means the world to me.
A/N - Sorry for yet another huge multi-week delay. I was still moving! Sooo much stuff to move. Though, my Indian Ocean trip actually got cancelled at the last second. To my surprise it was SUCH A RELIEF. Two whole weeks at home in a row! I went grocery shopping! I did laundry! I mostly finished moving into my apartment! I unpacked my pots and pans! It was so exciting. Anyway I now have an actual table to put my laptop on and I even made a dinner (2 dinners!) for the first time since April, and have finally gotten rolling on the fic again. Now that I am somewhat settled and have a table and food, it seems amazing how much more I can get written.

Next chapter needed a major rework last night though (one of those moments where you have it all done but then wake up thinking out of the blue, "oh no wait, it has to be this other way, it has to") So what I'm doing is splitting it in two so that I can at least get something posted today while I rework the 2nd part. Here's the first bit, which ended up being full chapter length with 2 full scenes, the 2nd of which was entirely unexpected. Not a huge plotty chapter this time but more just, they all get a little more time to talk. Hope you enjoy.

Cas is oddly talkative during the drive back to the bunker, just as he had been for the drive down. Everybody else is sitting in silence. The mood in the car isn't depressed exactly, but Sam and Claire seem quiet and thoughtful, while Dean, for his part, is simply having trouble thinking of anything to say. The Impala's purring away under him, the steering wheel smooth under his hands; it's a lovely night to be driving, the moon rising serenely in the east. Things should feel fine, really. Or should at least feel familiar, because in a way nothing's actually changed. They're just back to where they'd been a day or two ago — before they'd ever thought of the feather idea, that is.

It shouldn't feel like such a setback; it really shouldn't. And it had truly been wonderful to see little Emily bounce back to life.

But Dean's hands are clenched a little too tight on the wheel, his stomach's started to ache again, and his thoughts seem to be circling repeatedly around the same helpless ideas over and over. Ideas like "He's still got one feather left; could we power it up somehow?" and "Maybe talk to Crowley again? Maybe Rowena might have another idea?" And "The chemo's gotta be working on him. It has to be...."

And one more thought: What had Sam been talking about with Rowena on the phone yesterday?

When Dean had first walked in on that conversation, Sam had been in the middle of a tense-sounding comment to Rowena, something about not trying something "till we've exhausted every option." What had that been about?

Because we're really getting pretty far down the list of every-other-option, thinks Dean.

Into the silence Cas recounts more stories about events from the long-ago past. He seems to not even notice that nobody else is contributing to the conversation, and as soon as they're out of Kansas City he gets going on what he seems to think is a side-splitting story about the domestication of the guinea
pig. On any other night Dean probably would've paid more attention, for it's actually a rather interesting tale, involving a long-lost pre-Incan civilization of the Andes, a rather excitable water demi-god, and a great deal of guinea pigs scampering about on floating reed-islands that were somehow set adrift during a local flood in a high mountain lake. The guinea pigs had been none too sure about the domestication idea, and apparently it took some angelic diplomatic efforts (courtesy of Castiel, it turns out) to bring everybody around.

The punchline of the story, though, is a little lost on everybody: "And so then they domesticated the potato too!" says Castiel. He adds a chortle of laughter but no further details, like this is so obviously hilarious that it doesn't need any explanation.

Claire and Sam both offer up confused chuckles in return. Dean realizes he's totally missed the point but he smiles dutifully at Cas in the mirror — and then he sees how Cas is looking both at Claire and Sam, giving them each a rather searching look. Cas trades smiles with Claire, he leans forward and peers at Sam as if to inspect Sam's expression, and then his eyes zero in on Dean's in the mirror. He even reaches forward to give Dean a little pat on the shoulder, and settles back into place with a bright, "That reminds me of another story—"

He's trying to cheer us up, Dean realizes.

He knows we're all a little bummed. He's doing his best to lighten the mood.

Lightening of moods is not always Castiel's strong suit, of course, and it's a little strange to hear him trying so hard at it. Cas soldiers on into the silence with, "So the domestication of the potato was a rather interesting moment too. The local shamans got involved and things went a bit astray, and the older varieties of potato have had some minor magical attributes ever since. As you may know, a good-quality Peruvian potato is still useful as a means of amplifying certain magical spells, and it's actually for that reason that the potato blight later spread so rapidly —"

And he's off on another tale, this one involving an Irish fiddler and an unfortunate encounter with a local witch who accidentally set off the great potato famine. Cas zips right past the million resulting deaths to another cryptic punchline ("And a year later I heard the fiddler had switched to bagpipes!"). There are some more confused chuckles from Sam and Claire, and another round of searching glances from Cas, like he's checking again about whether they might need yet another funny story.

It's starting to seem like Cas might completely exhaust himself with an endless stream of chipper, funny tales from the past (or what passes as "funny" to Castiel, at least), so Dean finally speaks up with, "You did a good thing today, Cas."

The slightly artificial smile on Cas's face slowly fades, like he's finally letting himself step off the story-telling stage. He leans back in his seat and watches Dean in the mirror for a long moment, and his expression gradually settles into a much more familiar solemn look.

Dean says, "I mean it. That was something to see. Emily waking up, I mean. You did a good thing."

"Dean's right," puts in Sam, and Claire nods too.

Cas turns to gaze out his passenger-side window at the rising moon.

After a moment of quiet he says, dropping his story-telling tone entirely, "I just wish I had more feathers." With a little sigh he adds, "Charged feathers."

Dean's about to say "We'll find some way to charge up that other feather for you," when Cas clarifies, "For all the other children, I mean. There were so many others in that hospice center.... Not
to mention all the adults, too, in Denver...." He falls silent.

Sam slants a quiet look at Dean, and Dean's heart grows heavy as the implication sinks in: Any cure that they find, Cas is always going to try to share it with someone else, isn't he? If not give it away entirely.

It's sweet, but it's frustrating too — alarming even, for it's a whole potential roadblock. One that Dean hadn't really factored in to all his hopeful daydreams about finding the perfect magical cure for Cas. Any cure they find, is Cas just going to give it away?

But the discouragement is mixed with a wave of warm feeling that's so powerful it starts to make Dean's eyes sting. Well, that's Cas, isn't it, Dean thinks, watching Cas's profile in the mirror. That's the Cas I know.

The thought suddenly rewords itself in Dean's head:

*That's the Cas I love.*

Dean's suddenly choked up. The next couple breaths come out a little uneven, and out of the corner of his eye he sees Sam's head turn a little; Sam's looking at him again. Dean just stares at the road, swallows, shifts in his seat, and drives on.

Cas is still staring out his window, lost in thought now. He adds, "But... I wonder, did I do a minor injustice in my choice of child? Emily's my friend. I chose her for that reason, really, merely because I know her, and because she's always been so friendly and kind to me. And I can't say I regret that choice in the least, not in the least, but... there were so many other children there just like Emily, and so many parents like Sharon. Did Emily deserve that feather more than some other child? Maybe I should have tried to assess them all, or select someone randomly, or looked at their medical charts—"

"Yeah, so, stop right there," says Dean, holding up a hand. "Don't go down that path, about who deserves your help more. Been there, done that, it's pointless."

Sam's nodding. He even twists around so that he can look Cas right in the eye, and he says, "We all help friends and family first, Cas. We have to."

"It's normal," puts in Claire.

"It's good," adds Dean. "We all do it."

Cas gives one of his warped little half-smiles. "I know," he says. "I know you do. And I've done it before—" (His eyes flick back and forth between Dean and Sam) "— and I'll do it again. But I can't seem to help thinking about it, because it does go against my training, you see, to favor a specific individual, so—"

Dean breaks in with, "Yeah, but your training was to not give a shit." Cas gives him a sharp look in the mirror, and Dean tells him, "If you can only help one person, then you can only help one person. Don't beat yourself up about it. And why not have it be somebody you love? I mean, somebody's gotta be first, so why not? And besides, if we didn't want to help the ones we love, then we've got no heart at all, no soul at all, and then what kind of world are we actually saving?"

Sam flinches a tiny bit at this statement, and only then does Dean remember Cas doesn't have a soul.

But Cas is nodding. "I know," he says, "I do understand that now." But, predictably, he still adds, "I just wish I could help all the others too."
There's a dry laugh from Sam. "Welcome to the hunter life," he says, twisting around again to look at Cas. "Save one person while a hundred others die — that's, like, literally every day of our lives. And sometimes we don't even manage to save the one. You do what you can. That's all you can do."

Claire speaks up unexpectedly to add, "Jody says, you can't help every starfish on the beach, but that's okay, because even if you can only help the one that's right near you, that still counts."

The mention of starfish seems to catch Cas's attention, and he turns to her with a bit of a squinty-eyed look. She tries to explain with, "It's this old story about, there's a little girl walking along the beach picking up stranded starfish and throwing them back into the sea. An old guy sees the girl and he tells her, 'There's too many stranded starfish, you can't help them all. What you're doing won't make any difference.' But the girl looks down at the starfish in her hand, and she says, 'It makes a difference to this one.' And she tosses the starfish back into the water."

Cas is just looking at her.

Claire says, "Don't you see? She still saved one starfish. It mattered to that starfish. That makes it worth doing."

Cas asks, his brow furrowed like he's a little puzzled, "Do you find this echinoderm rescue story to be... helpful?"

Dean has to chuckle— the starfish parable is well-worn, and it's incredibly cheesy, of course. But there's always been something a little touching about it, too, about the idea of the kid saving that one lucky starfish. Dean says, "It's just one of those classic pep-talk stories, Cas — like, 70's inspirational-poster crap. But it's got a point: better to save one than to save none. Maybe they don't talk about starfish in Heaven so much, but down here we seem to need the occasional 'echinoderm rescue story' to keep going. Cause, all we can do really is one starfish at a time, you know?"

But Cas has a rather far-away look on his face now. He leans forward a little, and he says slowly, his voice dropping into a rather majestic, carefully paced tone:

"Perhaps far outward on the rim of space,

A genuine star was similarly seized and flung.

For a moment, we cast stars on an infinite beach

Beside an unknown hurler of suns."

He leans back.

There's a blank pause, everybody trying to figure out what he means. It seems clear he was quoting from something, and finally Cas says, "That's the text from the original story about the starfish-thrower. It was originally meant to be a parable about God; about why God might have put the Earth, and its Sun, into such a randomly lucky spot in the galaxy. A place where life could grow. If this little planet had been much closer to the galactic core, you know, or even just closer or farther from the Sun, life would've been doomed the moment it got started. The Earth happened to land in quite a fortunate spot."

They're all a little startled. Sam says, "I thought it was just, like, a motivational-speaker story? I mean, a recent one? I swear I've seen it online."

Cas says, "They're the words of a prophet of the last century, and it was actually recited to him by one of my colleagues, some fifty years ago now. My colleague intended the story to spread, here on
Earth. The story did spread, as intended; but, quite unanticipated, it changed as it spread. In the version that you've heard, the starfish-thrower shrank into a child, and the child's motivations became purely altruistic, which is... rather interesting, actually. But in the original tale, the starfish-thrower was an older and mysterious figure, and he was throwing starfish only because, as the original version states, 'they throw well'. He merely liked the way they skip over the water. He wasn't really concerned with trying to help the starfish — he just enjoyed the act of throwing them." Cas pauses a moment while they all take that in. "I have wondered, and apparently my colleague wondered too, if Chuck's actions with our planet were something of the sort. We often assume there is a grand plan — we angels have been trained to assume that there is a grand plan— but maybe he just liked the way the starfish skip over the water." He's silent a long moment, gazing again out his window, at the night sky, at the moon and the stars.

Dean almost feels a chill up his spine as he pictures it: God (Chuck, that is) casually tossing stars and planets and moons into position just for his own entertainment. Just as a hobby, maybe; or a haphazard art project, thrown together on the spur of the moment.

Sam asks, "But... why'd Heaven want that story to spread down here?"

"Oh, they didn't," says Castiel. "My colleague wasn't supposed to tell that story at all, not to anybody, and certainly not to a prophet. I'm still not sure of his motivations. He was disciplined afterwards. Disciplined rather severely."

Cas falls silent, still looking at the moon as it rises over the snowy Kansas fields. He doesn't elaborate any further.

If the mood had been slightly somber earlier, it's downright grim now. For a long moment everybody's just peering out the nearest window at the stars. But then Cas seems to come to a decision; he looks back over at Claire and says, "I think I like your version better. The human version. Even if all we can do is try to help the one starfish that's nearby, that still counts for something, right?"

"It counts for everything," says Claire. And she adds, "Especially if the starfish is a friend."

As they draw closer to home, Dean's still trying to fight back an illogical feeling that there's very little to show for the last two days' efforts. This is completely silly because they've saved a little girl's life, which is obviously a major win. But there's little to show in terms of curing Castiel, and the approaching cycle of next week's chemo is starting to weigh heavily on Dean's mind.

By the time the Impala's bouncing up the bunker's rutted driveway, thoughts about next week are looming over everything else, like a bank of black storm clouds that's rolling in over the whole world. Soon Dean's trying to think of other things they could do to occupy time this weekend, something to get everybody's mind off what's coming. There'll be more research, of course, more searching for cures, and maybe something will work out. But it's starting to seem like another round of chemo is inevitable, and it'd be nice to have something else to do, to take everybody's mind off it.

Car upkeep is always a safe bet for keeping one's hands busy when there's something unpleasant to avoid thinking about, so Dean starts running through a familiar mental list of things the Impala might need. Definitely a nice sudsy wash after the road trip — Cas might even enjoy helping with that, wouldn't he? (The more Dean thinks about introducing Castiel to the joys of lots of soap suds and a
garden hose, the more this seems like a brilliant idea. Especially with an indoor heated garage.) Is it also time for a tuneup? Oil change, maybe? Would Cas be interested in learning a little about maintaining those random old cars and trucks that he seems to keep picking up? Maybe Cas might like just hanging out in the garage, keeping Dean company while Dean works? Maybe they could even set up a little sofa or something, a hang-out spot in the garage where Cas could camp out while Dean tells him all about cars....

Dean's soon getting a little lost in some unlikely daydreams involving Castiel and the Impala. (The chemo thoughts have been successfully banished, for now at least.) But when he pulls to a stop in the garage, Claire's boxy Subaru Leone catches his eye. It's parked in the nearest garage bay, so that Claire can pull it out easily when she heads home tomorrow morning, and now Dean remembers the state of its brakes and tires.

He shuts off the Impala and twists around to look at Claire. "Take a loaner car for a few days," he says. She's already started to open her door, and she pauses and blinks at him, not understanding. Dean gets out and swings her door open the rest of the way, and as she climbs out slowly, looking up at him with a puzzled frown, Dean gestures over to the Leone and explains, "Leave your Subaru with me for a few days. Those brakes really aren't safe, you know, and neither are the tires, and I'm gonna bet it needs an oil change and almost definitely some new hoses and belts. And who knows what else. Let me get it fixed up for you, and you can swing back here next week and pick it up."

"My car's fine," she says, going almost reflexively into her stubborn-teenager act. "It's a great car. I bought it myself. It's fine."

"It's got good bones," Dean agrees, "But, have you ever heard of this thing called 'maintenance?' You might want to look into it." Claire rolls her eyes as Dean adds, "Actually, I'm surprised Jody let you out on the road with it like it is now."

At that Claire immediately gets a much more evasive look on her face. Soon she's jammed both hands in her pockets, her shoulders a little hunched. Sam and Cas have gotten out by now and are watching them both from across the Impala's hood, and Sam lets out a quiet laugh.

Dean narrows his eyes and crosses his arms over his chest, studying Claire. Her head's down; she's avoiding Dean's gaze and is peeking sideways at the Leone. Dean says, "So Jody hasn't seen it, huh?"

Claire lets out an aggrieved huff of air and tosses her hair over one shoulder. But then she starts looking sheepish and finally she confesses, a bit reluctantly, "So she might've been led to think that I took it to her mechanic." At Dean's exasperated look she adds, "I'm going to. Look, I can take care of myself."

But then Cas comes walking around the front of the Impala to stand at Dean's side, and he says, "A hunter needs a reliable vehicle, Claire." Claire looks at him, and he adds, "Personally, I'd like to know that your vehicle is functional and safe."

Claire holds Cas's gaze for a long moment.

Then, rather to Dean's surprise, somehow the balky-teenager act just fades away; her resistant look vanishes, her shoulders drop, her head comes up a little, and she nods to Cas, like she's ceding his point. (It's actually odd to see this happen; it almost seems un-Claire-like at first. Dean has a moment of thinking, _I just saw the adult Claire, for a sec there._)

Claire turns back to Dean with a sigh and says, "Okay, I do know it needs some work. But you gotta understand, I bought it myself. It was a big frickin' deal for me, I got a job and I saved for months,
and also, I'm careful! I don't drive in heavy rain or snow or anything, I don't take it too fast — I mean, I'm not an idiot. I do know the tires are iffy, I know I'm on the road alone and I know I gotta be careful. But I just didn't have the money yet to do all the stuff it needs; I was saving up. I wanted to learn how to do all that myself. Oil changes and all that. I want to do that myself...." She's glancing back and forth now between all three of them — Dean, Cas, and Sam — like she's hoping to find an ally, or at least some understanding. "I gotta be able to take care of myself," she says. "I... just gotta. Don't you understand?"

This is something Dean does understand, actually.

And, he realizes, it's something he can help with.

"Okay, how about this," he says, thinking. "You take a loaner for a few days, I'll swing to the auto shop for parts and some tires, you come back in a few, and THEN we do the work. Together. If you really want, you can do literally all the work and I'll just kick back with a beer and, quote, supervise. My favorite job."

Claire's looking hopeful at this idea, but then her face falls and she says, "I can't really, um, afford the parts. I know Jody'd pay but honestly, I was trying not to have to ask her. She's already done so much, and I know money's tighter than she pretends—"

But Dean overrides her, saying to Sam, "We still got a few pieces of that dragon gold, right?" (They don't, actually; it's all been cashed in years ago.) But Sam nods, saying, "Yep, I was just gonna sell off a few more pieces."

"So it's settled," says Dean. Claire's grinning now as Dean says, "C'mon, let's pick you out a loaner." He starts leading them all over to the back bays of the bunker garage where the other cars are lined up neatly. The obvious choice is a dinged-up (but perfectly roadworthy) '96 Toyota that Sam picked up somewhere and has had parked in the back for some months now — not an exciting car by any stretch of the imagination, and one that Dean originally wanted to get rid of, but Sam's managed to convince Dean that there's the occasional time when they need a less conspicuous car. And it's safe and reliable. Perfect to loan to a kid like Claire.

Dean and Sam are both veering over to the Toyota already, but Cas, who of course has no idea about cars, is headed right for an ancient 1930s Chrysler that looks like it was designed to be pulled by a pair of Dust-Bowl-era mules. Claire glances after him. And then Castiel veers over to the car next to the old Chrysler, and he calls to Dean, "What about this one?"

"Oh my god," says Claire as she moves closer and gets a clear look at it. "What is it? It's so cute!"

A second later Cas and Claire are standing side-by-side admiring a gleaming, mint condition, first-generation 1956 Ford Thunderbird, in pale sage-green with a cream-colored convertible top.

"This one's awesome," breathes Claire. She calls over her shoulder, "Dean, what is it?"

The infatuated tone in her voice sends up all sorts of red flags, and Dean says as nonchalantly as he can, "Oh, just a '56 T-bird." (He's also struggling a little with the concept of not recognizing a vintage Thunderbird.)

"Seriously?" says Claire, who at least seems to recognize the name even if she hasn't recognized the car itself. She spins to give Dean an alarmingly effective pleading look. "Could I really borrow it?"

The answer, of course, is A mint '56 T-Bird? Are you out of your frickin' mind? but Dean bites back that comment and says, "Bit conspicuous for a hunter, don't you think?"
"Like your Chevy isn't," retorts Claire.

She does have a point. But not enough of a point. Sam's already laughing, saying, "I really doubt Dean's gonna let you drive off with our only T-bird."

But by now Cas is looking in the windows. "It does have some useful warding," he reports. He peers around a little more, his nose right up against the windows, and declares, "The whole interior's warded. Very well done, too." When he steps back to study the exterior again, he adds, "And there's some subtle warding on the tires, there—" (he points to some almost invisible marks in fine white paint on the white sidewalls) "—protection from elements, a charm for wholeness — and there, above the engine, look, a sigil to protect against tampering. Hard to see; it's been cleverly hidden." (Dean's done some work on the car and has been washing it regularly, and he's startled to realize he hadn't noticed most of these wards.) "Those will help protect her," adds Cas as he straightens up.

There's no way Dean can let a teenager just drive off with a vintage '56 T-bird, of course. Just no way. But Cas turns to Dean and says, "She can take this one, right? You never use it. And the other little car over there—" (he points to the Toyota) "—isn't warded as well."

"Oh, please?" says Claire, who's actually bouncing on her toes now, hands clasped in front of her. "Just for a week? I promise I'll switch back to my Subie. I do love my Subie, I swear, but, c'mon, just one week in this would be so fun! I told you I'm a safe driver, I really am!"

Dean's got a million objections lined up ready to go. With Cas's help they could probably ward the Toyota pretty well... the Toyota's got much better safety features... it gets better mileage.... But now Cas and Claire are both looking at him with almost identical hopeful looks on their faces, and as Dean looks back and forth between the two of them, all of his objections seem to evaporate away.

"Goddammit," mutters Dean, his shoulders sagging.

"You're kidding me," says Sam, with a bark of laughter. "Claire, you better grab it and scoot before he changes his mind."

"One week," says Dean, shaking a finger at Claire in warning. "Without a scratch. And no speeding and I seriously mean that. But yeah, Cas has a point about the warding. So... I can't believe I'm doing this..." He plucks the Thunderbird keys off a hook on the wall and tosses them to her. It actually feels good to see how eagerly Claire snatches the keys from the air, and she even lets out an actual whoop. She then casts a slightly guilty look over at her Subaru and adds, "I mean, I love the Subaru too."

"Good girl, gotta be loyal to your main car," says Dean, who can't help laughing now. "But it's okay to enjoy a real gem like this one too. And you better treat it nice. I'm serious. Not a single scratch, remember. And bear in mind you'll draw attention — cops'll notice you, random weirdos will notice you—"

"And cute guys," says Claire.

"Possibly," says Dean, scowling at her (but of course this is a large part of why he loves driving the Impala). "But you'll probably start wanting the Subaru back once the initial fun wears off."

"Pretty sure the initial fun is gonna last at least a week," says Claire, who's now walking around the T-bird, running an appreciative hand over the gleaming green finish.

Dean snorts. "Maybe. But seriously, it's a gas-guzzler actually, so since you're on a budget, bear that in mind. And it's kind of like steering a boat. And remember it does not have three-point seat belts, or air bags, or snow tires, and it also doesn't have all-wheel drive like your Subaru. So trust me, as soon
as it starts really snowing you'll want that Subaru back. I wouldn't even be giving it to you if there were any snowstorms in the forecast, but I think you're all clear for next week. Tell you what, if you don't wreck it immediately, and if you let me show you how to take care of it, and how to take care of the Subaru too, I might even let you borrow it again next spring."

Claire's absolutely beaming. "Thanks, Dean!" she says, and she runs over to give a tight hug to Dean, and then gives one to Cas, and then even doles out one to Sam too for good measure. When she's done with her excited round of hugs, she says "So, if I can crash for the night, I guess I'll take off tomorrow morning then? I told Jody I'd be back tomorrow. And I promise I'll bring it back, Dean! Actually, when should I come back to work on the Subaru, like, when next week exactly? Maybe Wednesday?"

"Sure, Wednesday'll work—" Dean starts, but Cas says, "Well, but..." He pauses, glancing over at Dean.

Too late, Dean remembers that Wednesday doesn't work at all.

Next week Cas has chemo.

And it's not just any week of chemo; it's gonna be week 1 of the cycle, the worst week, the week when Cas gets three treatments in a row. Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday.

"Right," Dean mutters. He's instantly swamped with guilt that he's somehow managed to forget, even for a split second, what's going to be happening next week. (The car-related distractions have worked a little too well.) He rubs his forehead ruefully and gives an embarrassed grin to Cas. "I'd almost managed to convince myself it wasn't happening."

Cas just shrugs, with a little smile. "I often have the same problem," he says.

"So, Claire, um, we'll all be in Denver," Dean says. "Cas has got, um, some... stuff to do."

"Stuff?" asks Claire, looking over at Cas curiously.

"I have my next round of chemotherapy in Denver next week," says Cas. Everybody falls silent as Cas says, with perfect calm, like this is all a totally normal plan for a totally normal week, "Monday'll be a three-hour infusion of bleomycin, etoposide and cisplatin; and then I get the etoposide and cisplatin again on Tuesday and again on Wednesday." To Dean and Sam, he adds, "Weeks two and three are just the one day of bleomycin. You haven't seen the etoposide or cisplatin yet."

"Oh, they sound fun," says Dean helplessly.

"Not really," replies Cas.

And just like that the air of solemnity has settled over everybody again.

"So... when do you all get back here from that?" Claire asks, glancing around at all three of them. Dean and Sam automatically look at Cas, and he says, "Monday night they'll likely want me in-patient, sometimes Tuesday as well depending how dehydrated I get, and then often by Wednesday they release me. Though Wednesday and even Thursday are still quite tiring. Usually I'm okay to travel on Thursday night. When I was on my own I used to try to get as far as the Gas-n-Sip on Thursday night, and then I'd sleep in the stockroom — you know, with the mop bucket next to me, for the nausea — and then I'd do a work shift on Friday. But I still had to sit down quite a lot. It's always hard to deal with the hot dogs; the odor really makes me ill now. I never can do any of the re-stocking, either - usually I can't really lift any of the boxes, not till Saturday."
Everybody's quiet, looking at him.

Cas ventures, "Though I guess this time maybe I can come straight back here?"

Dean turns to Claire. "Sounds like we'll be back Thursday night. So, maybe return the car the next week after that?"

Claire jiggles the keys in her hand, eyeing the Thunderbird. She seems to be thinking about something, and Dean slowly realizes he's just given her an opening to propose that she should get to keep the T-bird for two weeks instead of one. He's soon bracing for her to say something like "You know what, why don't I just keep the Thunderbird right through the holidays, till January."

But instead she says, still looking at the car, "I'll be back Thursday." She turns to look at them all. "I can be here mid-day. I'll be here waiting for you all when you get back."

"Oh, Claire, um," Cas says, "I may not have been clear. I'm afraid I won't be good company at all, not till Saturday at least."

Dean clarifies, "And there's not gonna be time for the Subaru work next week."

But Claire just nods. She says, "I know. I meant, I'll be here to help. You don't have to show me the car stuff, Dean, we can do that the week after. Or some other time." To Cas she adds, "Don't worry, you don't have to be social or tell me stories or give me battle tips or anything. I just meant, I'll have your beds made up, I can help with laundry, and I can run to the drugstore and stuff like that, and shopping, and, you know, I could make some meals. I'm not a bad cook— Jody's awesome at that and she's been showing me all her best recipes. Maybe, um..." She's looking at Cas again. "Maybe you can give me some tips on stuff you might wanna eat? I know chemo's tricky that way."

Adult-Claire again, Dean thinks. (There's even a twinge of pride. Not that he's had that much to do with how she's turned out. But still.) Yet he's also feeling like he maybe should decline the offer. It's very thoughtful of her, but having Claire around might actually just cause more emotional strain for Castiel. Still... the mention of home-cooked food is incredibly tempting. Jody's meals are wonderful, and if Jody's been giving Claire her recipes... and Cas does seem to eat a little better when the food is home-made and top-notch....

Next week will have not one but three nights of exhausted hell. Last time, even with Sam's help it had been difficult, and all three of them had been wiped out. Truth is, it'd be fantastic to have another set of hands around. Especially if it's somebody Cas already knows, and trusts.

"That'd actually be kinda great," says Dean. "But you don't have to, you know."

"I know," she replies. "Now don't get ideas, I'm not normally gonna be you guys' maid or anything. But this time I'll make an exception. I mean, Cas... if you want?"

The smile that Cas gives her in return is strangely flickering, and very lopsided; he looks almost confused at her offer, like he can't figure out why she would go to such trouble. "I'd like that," he says, his voice much throatier than usual.

Then Cas adds, with dawnning understanding, "I'm the echinoderm, aren't I?"

Claire just laughs.
A/N - I wasn't actually planning on Claire sticking around. Nor on Dean worrying so much about the Subaru's tires, nor on him giving her the Thunderbird (that came about when I was looking at photos of the bunker cars, solely to add some visual detail as they walked to the Toyota. But then Cas noticed the T-bird on his own and Claire insisted on stopping next to him...). Nor had I planned on Claire offering to come back.

She was supposed to just get in the Subaru and drive away, and stay away. But she refused to do what I planned!

Still reworking the next part but I hope to have it up tomorrow. Wish me luck. Thanks very much for reading, and as always, if there was anything in the chapter that worked for you, that caught your eye or that you liked, please let me know!

PS - The four lines from the old starfish story are indeed from the original source of the story, the short story "The Star Thrower" by Loren Eiseley, published in 1969. Indeed the story changed as it spread; Eiseley's original story has a stranger and more alien feel. I liked the idea that he might have been inspired to write it by a renegade angel.
Friday evening passes peacefully, with a little test drive in the Thunderbird followed by a low-key pizza dinner. The test drive goes surprisingly well; it's just Dean and Claire in the car (while Cas and Sam get the pizza ready). After Dean's shown her a few details about the old-fashioned Ford controls, they do a circuit of sleepy night-time Lebanon. Dean's a little amused to see that Claire seems to have suddenly turned into the world's most cautious driver. The entire time they're cruising around Lebanon, she drives at precisely 35 miles per hour (the local speed limit), sitting bolt upright in the driver's seat, her hands at a picture-perfect 10-and-2 position on the wheel. She flips on the turn signal for each and every turn, even though the road's completely deserted. By the end Dean's forced to admit that she is, in fact, a safe driver — or at least can fake being one, when it matters enough.

When they get back Sam's slicing up two nicely-done pizzas and Cas has even opened a few beers. (Cas isn't supposed to have any beer himself — something about the chemo and his liver — but he seems to take some pleasure in having a nice cold brew ready for Dean.) It's a nice dinner, Claire still bubbly with enthusiasm about the Thunderbird. She even calls Jody and Alex to tell them about it, and there's a pretty cheerful conversation between all of them on the speakerphone.

Without really planning it, they all end up avoiding telling Jody and Alex about Castiel's situation. It just seems like too nice a meal together to bring the mood down. But once Claire finally ends the call, she says quietly, "I'll tell them later, okay? I'll tell them tomorrow."

Everybody's a little worn out from the events of the day, and they all start heading to bed. As Dean's brushing his teeth in the front bathroom, though, he realizes he's not sure where to sleep tonight. Could it possibly work out to sleep with Cas, in Cas's room — even with Claire nearby? Claire happens to have taken the room right next to Cas's, and she seems to be popping in and out of her room constantly, trotting back and forth to the bathroom or the kitchen on a whole series of little bedtime errands, and she goes right past Cas's door every time.

Dean's not even planning much in the way of sex, actually; he's suddenly feeling exhausted, and Cas is looking tired too. But it'd be nice to at least be in the same room together. (And if anything did happen, Dean's confident he could keep it all pretty silent.) It shouldn't be a big deal, of course; it shouldn't matter. It even seems possible that Claire's already figured out something about Cas and Dean, and it even seems likely she'll be okay with it. But it also seems like it might be a little much to heap on her plate right now. (Especially with Cas having her dad's face and all.... It just seems that
might add a certain layer of confusion.) But mostly, Dean's just feeling shy; it's still a new relationship, after all. He can't even seem to figure out how to alert Cas about tonight's sleeping situation, or even just how to *get* to Cas to ask about it.

After a series of good-night's with Claire, somehow Cas ends up in his own room alone, Sam's gone to bed too, and now Dean's hovering awkwardly at the far end of the hallway. For a few minutes he even pretends to be checking his phone, but really he's trying to figure out when, and how, he can sneak to Cas.

"Night, Dean!" Claire calls at last, as she finally heads past what Dean dearly hopes is her last trip down the hall to her room.

"Night," Dean says, giving her a wave without looking up from his phone, as if he's deeply involved in an important e-mail. (He's actually just gazing at a few photos from the evening meal; one with Cas studying a piece of pepperoni with a look of deep skepticism, while Claire laughs at him; and the next one with Cas catching sight of the phone out of the corner of his eye and giving Dean a quiet smile.)

At last Claire's door closes.

Is it finally safe?

Dean's just started to inch cautiously down the hall when Claire's door pops open. "Forgot a second towel," she says, as Dean immediately stares at his phone again. "Whenever I wash my hair last thing at night I always need a second towel, you know, to put over the pillow— sorry, but, do you guys have any other towels?"

"Right, sure, they're down here," says Dean and then he has to lead her to the linen closet. Then after that she's dashing to the kitchen for a glass of water. Dean finally gives up and heads to his own room.

*One night without Cas won't kill me*, Dean's thinking as he lies awake in bed. *I've been sleeping alone in this room for months. Years, actually. Should be totally fine. It's totally fine.*

He waits a long time to drop off. But sleep doesn't come.

Instead he's seeing Cas putting the feather on Emily's neck.

And Cas asking, *It's the right thing, isn't it?*

And Castiel standing in the chilly breeze in the hospice parking lot, the sunset spread out behind him, looking at Dean.

There's a quiet *click*; the door's opening. "It's just me," whispers Castiel. "I couldn't figure out how to get to you, earlier."

It's really a little ridiculous how much Dean's heart lifts, and how fast he moves over on the bed to make some room, and how quickly he flips the covers back. Castiel is moving just as fast; he shuts the door softly behind him, crosses to the bed in just a couple strides, clammers right on in and scoots over, as if he's mere seconds from freezing to death and needs to get right next to Dean immediately.

"I hope I didn't wake you," says Cas a moment later, now from just two inches away. He's right next to Dean, facing him in the dark, and already has one arm curled around Dean's shoulders. Dean's a little overwhelmed at how intensely pleasant it is to have Cas so close; it feels like Dean's skin is just drinking up Cas's nearness, like Dean's been terribly deprived of some essential vitamin till this very
moment.

"I know you don't exactly need me here or anything—" Cas goes on (Probably should set him straight on that, thinks Dean) "— but the other bed was seeming awfully empty. Also I wanted to thank you."

"Thank me?" says Dean. "For what?"

Dean can barely even see Cas's face in the dark, but he hears a little snort of amusement.

Cas doesn't answer. Instead he starts running his hands through Dean's hair. He does it for quite a while, sliding his fingers slowly along Dean's scalp, over and over.

Dean closes his eyes; it's wonderful to feel all the tension draining away. For the first time since leaving Kansas City, his stomach begins to un-knot.

"Also, I need to tell you something," says Castiel. His hand slows, he takes a breath, and he says, "I'm afraid I have some bad news."

Dean stiffens. "Okay," he says slowly. "What about?"

"I talked to Dr. Klein's office after dinner," begins Cas, and right away Dean's stomach starts hurting again. Cas's hand goes still on Dean's head; Dean raises his own hand to Cas's, holds it tight, and leans his forehead against Cas's, waiting.

For a long moment Cas is silent.

"Tell me," says Dean, his voice thick.

"I'm really sorry to have to tell you this," says Cas. He lets out a long sigh, and goes on with, "But, unfortunately, I consulted with my oncology team about sexual activity and though they gave me the go-ahead on almost everything, they said, no anal penetration just yet. Unfortunately."

Dean's frozen. He blinks at Cas in the dark.

"That's your bad news?" Dean says at last. "That's the bad news from your oncologist?"

"Yes," says Cas. "I'm sorry, Dean, I know it's something you wanted to do, but apparently the rectal epithelium is quite fragile during chemotherapy. It's related to that bleeding I get from the mouth, remember? Apparently there can be bleeding and tears elsewhere as well, not just the mouth, and not just the day after chemotherapy but all month long. They said I should probably wait till well after the next cycle. I'm really sorry."

Dean lets out a long, slow breath of air.

"I know you don't exactly need to do that with me," says Cas. "Or need to do anything with me, really, but, you did mention it, so I thought I should just let you know. I hope it's not too much of a disappointment."

"I'll survive," Dean manages to say. He's actually having to bite back a laugh.

"I thought maybe I could give you fellatio again, instead," says Cas. "I'd like to. If you don't mind?"

"Oh, I really don't mind at all," says Dean.

It's a little difficult to remember to keep the volume down, but Dean does his very best.
The next morning Claire heads off in the Thunderbird. Dean has to admit that it rather suits her. Even though it's absolutely frigid out she's insisted on putting the convertible top down anyway ("if just for the first minute"), and as she settles into place behind the wheel, her blonde hair looks perfect with the cream-colored top and the green finish.

"You look like a teenybopper headed to an Elvis show," says Dean, and Claire laughs, waves goodbye one last time, and drives away.

Sam, Cas and Dean stand together watching the Thunderbird disappear down the tree-lined driveway. The turn signal comes on well in advance of the turn to the main road — looks like she's flipped it on precisely fifty yards before the turn, still following the law of the road to the tiniest letter (at least while Dean's in sight). The car sails smoothly around the turn and heads sedately down the main road. They all stand for a few moments longer, listening as the calm purr of the Thunderbird's motor recedes into the distance.

Sam comments, "The second we're out of earshot she's gonna floor that thing."

"The millisecond," agrees Dean. "But you know, I think she'll be okay. She'll be pedal-to-the-metal for like two minutes, but then she'll settle down."

"She's growing up," comments Sam. As the three of them turn and head back inside, he adds, "It'll be nice to have her back next week."

"Yeah," says Dean. "So, speaking of next week, and the chemo and all..." He hesitates, looking at Cas. "It'd sure be nice if you didn't have to do it at all."

"Well, obviously," says Sam.

Castiel says, as they head down the stairs, "I fear it's inevitable. Every month I look for other options but nothing ever pans out."

Dean looks at Sam.

And Sam blinks, and looks away.

Cas is almost all the way down the stairs by now; Dean and Sam are still halfway up. For a moment Dean's about to come up with some excuse to talk to Sam in private; some way to get Cas to go on to the kitchen, so that Sam and Dean can discuss this without Cas hearing.

But the time for hiding things is long over, isn't it?

Dean takes a breath, and asks, "Sam, what were you talking to Rowena about, the other day? When I walked into the kitchen?"

Sam's face grows guarded. Cas turns at the bottom of the stairs and looks back up at them, looking very alert now, as Dean presses, "There's another option, isn't there?"
"Wait wait wait," says Dean. They're all in the kitchen now, sitting around the table. "What the hell did she mean? She said Crowley can remove the cancer? Like, totally?"

"Don't forget, the dude's got high-level powers," Sam points out. "She said he could, like, basically snap his fingers and like... just pull the cancer out, I guess? But, the thing is, she also said there might be 'unpleasant outcomes', is how she put it. But she wouldn't tell me exactly what! She actually sounded really kind of reluctant about it. And what kind of 'unpleasant outcome' makes somebody like Rowena think twice? I just... I didn't like the sound of it. I didn't want to start dragging Crowley into it till we were certain we'd tried everything else."

"And in exchange for what exactly?" Dean demands. "A crossroads deal, right? Standard ten years? Gotta be, right?"

Cas shakes his head. He's been oddly silent till now, sitting quietly next to Dean with his arms crossed over his chest, frowning at the table-top, but now he speaks up. "He can't do a crossroads deal with me," Cas says, "because I don't have a soul to deal. And I won't let him do a deal with either of you. But this..." He hesitates, eyes flicking up to Dean's. "This isn't a crossroads deal anyway." With a slow breath he adds, "My cancer cells could be valuable to him. And they might have... well, an affinity to Crowley. Which means he may be able to just pull them out. He's got some healing abilities anyway — he's really got some substantial power, you know — but cancer's always very tricky because it's so scattered. But in this case, the cancer cells may have an actual affinity for him, which would make the whole thing easier."

"You knew about this?" Dean asks. Cas gives him a reluctant nod, and Dean says, "And you didn't tell us?"

"I ruled it out," says Cas quietly. "Early on. I decided other options were preferable."

"Why are other options preferable?" asks Sam.

"It would give him too much power," Cas says.

"Whoa, okay, wait," says Dean, putting a hand on Cas's arm. "Explain. How exactly would Crowley do this? I mean, why would these cells have an 'affinity' for him or whatever? And why would it give Crowley power instead of just using his power?"

Cas gives a long sigh. But he unfolds his arms, laces his hands on the table and finally starts to talk.

"I'm not sure about this," Cas says. "I mean, I'm not sure it'll work. I'm sure Rowena isn't sure either, nor Crowley. It's just a guess. But think about this: where does the King of Hell, ultimately, get his power from?"

Dean blinks at him. "Oh, damn," he says.

"Exactly," says Cas.

Sam says, in almost a whisper, "Lucifer."

The name seems to ring through the room.

They haven't seen Lucifer since he'd been blasted out of Castiel's vessel, months ago now. But the rumors of his escapades have filtered back; it's clear that Lucifer's still alive, out there somewhere, and he's still causing real harm.

Cas says, "Ultimately all the power of Hell derives from Lucifer as the original source. And he is an
archangel, remember; which means, archangel-level power. He delegated some of his power to the foundation of Hell, originally, when he first constructed Hell, and ever since then, all the power that the King of Hell wields is fundamentally Luciferan power in its core nature — though, wielded somewhat independently of him now. And the question I keep thinking about is.... where did my cancer really come from?"

Dean can feel his shoulders sag. Sam gives a long sigh, and he says, quietly, "You mean... when Lucifer possessed you..."

Cas gives an uncertain shrug. "I'm not sure, of course. It may just be a natural cancer; most cancers are just that, a natural flaw in Creation. But sometimes the flaw in Creation can be triggered by deliberate exertion of a powerful entity. Archangels have that ability." He gives Dean a steady look and says, "You may remember Zachariah doing something of the sort, once, with you. That was power on loan from Michael."

Dean nods. The memory is still frightening.

"Archangels can cause cancers," says Cas. "They can reshape bodies completely. So... I've been wondering all along if my cancer may be from Lucifer himself. He may have cursed me with it for revenge, or even just for his personal amusement, really. Or his essence may simply have corrupted my vessel. I don't know. But if is from Lucifer...then, in that case, the cancer cells will have a natural affinity for Crowley, you see? Crowley's already imbued with Luciferan power, so any Lucifer-tainted cells will naturally tend to be drawn toward him. He'll likely be able to... well, filter them right out of me, with a touch, essentially."

"And what's the downside?" asks Dean. "Why was Rowena so unsure about this? And why would Crowley be willing to do it at all?"

"Because it'll strengthen Crowley," says the cells themselves will strengthen Crowley."

Sam leans back in his chair, his cheeks puffing out with air as he considers this.

Cas nods. "If my cancer was caused by Lucifer, then Crowley can remove it, but in the act I'm essentially handing Crowley these... thousand tiny evil cells, all imbued with Lucifer's own particular brand of evil."

"A mini Pandora's box," muses Dean.

"Well put," agrees Cas. "As I said, back when I first was diagnosed, I thought about it, but the idea of potentially handing Crowley this little gift from Lucifer, a drink of pure evil, essentially.... It didn't sit right. I decided against it. I decided to try the chemotherapy instead, and to search for holy relics and talk to any angels I could find."

There's a long silence.

And then Dean pulls out his phone. He swipes to the Contacts list and is scrolling through it to the S's (for "Son of a Bitch", aka Crowley). Sam and Cas just watch blankly for a long moment before Sam finally says "What are you doing?"

"Calling Crowley," says Dean. He looks up from the phone and meets Cas's warning look head-on. "You were worried Crowley would get more power, right?" Dean says to him. "That's the main reason you didn't take this road?" When Cas nods, Dean says, "That was the right decision then. Back then, we all thought Lucifer was dead. And that Crowley was unopposed. And in that case a little stray scrap of Lucifer-power might be a really rare thing. And you had a lot of other options to
try. But now, Cas, think about it: now, we know something new: Lucifer's still alive."

Dean pauses, watching him take that in.

"Lucifer's still alive," Dean repeats, "and we're still gonna have to face him someday, and he's got way, way more Lucifer-power than your little teeny cells. Your little cancer is no longer a precious last relic; Lucifer himself is still around! And also, say Crowley ends up powered up a little more. You know what? We need him powered up a little more. Just for him to have a better shot of being able to keep Lucifer from taking over Hell again." Dean looks Cas straight in the eyes, holds up his phone and says, "You looked for the holy relics, you talked to all the angels you could find, you're trying the chemo, we tried the grace, we tried the feather. It's time to call Crowley. Don't you think?"

Dean offers the phone to Cas.

Slowly, Cas takes it.

A/N - Next week: Rowena's had her chance... now Crowley gets his chance. Will he be willing to help? And CAN he help?

I hope to have something up by Saturday. I think I'm finally back on track for wrapping this up by end of summer.

Thanks for reading! I do hope you're enjoying this. If you have a moment please do write and tell me if you liked this; I always love to hear from you, and it's the only reason that I write. :}
What the hell did that bastard do?

A/N - I'm across the country again on another trip, this time to Maine. Unexpectedly had to go whitewater rafting today so you get one of my internationally famous, or infamous, split-chapters this weekend. Here's the first half - a bit short but it'll at least give you something to read tonight.

"Well, look who just happens to need the help of the King of Hell!" says Crowley. "If it isn't Dean Winchester! Who'd ever have imagined this shocking twist!"

Crowley's standing on the threshold just outside the front door, where he's been ringing the doorbell nonstop for the past two minutes. He gives a wide grin at Dean, who has finally (and slowly) swung the door open to let him in. Rowena's standing just behind Crowley, her arms crossed and her mouth set. It's not clear why Crowley's brought her along — probably just to gloat about the failure with the feather. Or maybe just to annoy her; it looks like she's plenty annoyed already.

Crowley saunters across the threshold with irritating casualness. "I wasn't waiting for your call, mind you," Crowley comments, pausing right in front of Dean. "I mean, it's not like I was hovering by the phone. I wasn't sitting near it or anything." He puts one hand up to his mouth and leans close to add, in a loudly whispered aside, "And, Dean, I'll just say, not really a surprise to hear Cas's voice instead of yours, but using your phone, ha ha!" Crowley starts trotting down the stairs, still talking over his shoulder up to Dean. "You know, I almost didn't pick up when the phone rang—"

"You picked up on the first ring," Dean points out.

"— because I had so many other important things going on," Crowley goes on, loftily ignoring Dean's comment. "Lots of other stuff. Quite busy these days, you know, running a major realm of Creation and all that. Not to mention, picking up all the pieces you left all scattered about, when Chuck and his darling sister finally got lost, in fact! Always cleaning up after you lot, aren't I! Somebody's got to take care of things! But I thought, oh, what the hey, I'll see what poor ol' Dean needs help with this time." Rowena's slowly entering the door now with a tired sigh, trailing a good six feet behind Crowley, and she gives Dean an eloquent eye roll as she glides past.

Dean follows them both down the stairs and to the map-room, where Crowley pauses for a dramatic entrance to the library, where Cas and Sam are waiting at the farthest library-table. "Ah! The unfortunate angel awaits!" Crowley crows, arms spread wide. "Still not healed, I see!" The gloating in Crowley's voice already has Dean grinding his teeth. Cas and Sam make no comment; Cas just rises from his seat with a resigned look as Crowley approaches. Sam's already standing, and he looks poised for potential battle, one hand gripping the demon-blade. But Crowley seems perfectly cheerful as he saunters closer.

"As I was saying, Dean," Crowley says over his shoulder, "not a surprise to hear Cas's voice on your phone. See, I've been thinking, it could only be a matter of time before little Castiel here—" (Cas's eyes narrow at the "little") "—would come to his senses and realize that I am clearly the one who's needed here. Because, really, it was obvious."

"Obvious that the grace wasn't enough?" Cas asks.
"Obvious that I am the one who can help," says Crowley solemnly, and his voice begins to take on a positively Shakespearean tone, low and dramatic. "Obvious that I, the actual King of Hell, would certainly have far more of the relevant natural powers than, oh, just for example... a mere... witch." He pronounces the last word softly, yet somehow manages to imbue it with withering scorn.

Rowena, standing off to the side with her arms still crossed, somehow manages to remain diplomatically silent, though she does allow herself another eye-roll (such an exaggerated one that Dean begins to wonder if it's possible for her to permanently strain her eyeroll muscles). With a sigh that seems carefully calibrated to convey a long-suffering patience, she strolls over to one of the leather library chairs and settles herself in it, fastidiously adjusting the hem of her dress (another form-fitting sheath dress, this one a deep royal-blue velvet embroidered with silver sequins on the edges).

She crosses her legs neatly at the ankle, and begins tapping her long red fingernails on the chair's upholstered arm. "Can't think why you’re taking this unnecessary risk," she says at last, pointedly addressing Dean only, not looking at Crowley at all. "Giving Fergus a free gift of such positively delectable power, I mean. It's extraordinarily unwise, you know. Not to mention quite unnecessary. I'm certain that if I had just the merest moment's opportunity to devise an appropriate spell, or just a wee speck of time to refine the feather approach, I could—"

Crowley interrupts her loudly with an irritated, "You can't do a single damned thing about this sort of illness, Mother, and you damn well know it. You're always going on about how you're a 'natural' witch—" (he adds exaggerated finger quotes) "—how you're sooo superior to the lesser witches who borrow their power from demons, right?" (Rowena has started inspecting her nails.) "Well lo and behold, guess what the demons can do that you can't?" says Crowley. "Call upon Luciferan artifactual power, that's what!" He turns to Castiel with a beaming smile. "And if I'm not mistaken, this illness that little Cas here has got—" (Cas frowns again at the "little") "—this tiny little illness that poor little Castiel has somehow come down with, must have been seeded via Luciferan artifacts. Particles of Luciferan power, that is. Which is to say, particles that only I can draw out. Am I right?"

He glances around at all of them, so puffed up with pride now that he's actually rocking back on his heels, chin held high. "You lot need me! Don't you?"

Cas, Dean and Sam all exchange a glance.

The really annoying thing is that Crowley's right. They do need him.

And this brings to mind a rather agonizing thought: Could Crowley have cured Castiel at any time? All the long months Cas has suffered through, all the terrible chemo treatments, all the nausea and fatigue and fear and suffering.... could Crowley have cured him right at the start? Months ago? Was Crowley just biding his time, waiting till Dean would beg him for help?

Dean has to ask. "Did you know all along you could cure him?" he says to Crowley. It's hard not to let the frustration seep into his voice.

But Crowley just shrugs. "Didn't know till three days ago that he was sick, did I? And I didn't know till today, when poor little Cas here called, that my dear mum's piece-of-grace trick didn't work out. Can't help if I don't know there's a problem, can I?"

It's a fair point, though Dean's irritation subsides only slightly. Crowley then adds to Cas, "Castiel, ol' buddy, you really gotta add me to your Facebook. I just feel so out of touch whenever you're dying of some mysterious fatal ailment — you know, like, every other month — and I never see your posts about it." He leans a little toward Dean to add in a stage whisper, "Sent him a friend request two years ago and he's never approved it. Not that I mind at all, it's just, you know, a bit rude, so, if he wanted me to help him, he could, y'know, ask nicely —"
"Oh, drop the act," says Rowena. (She's buffing her nails now, with a tiny jeweled emory board that she seems to have extracted from her multi-dimensional bra.) "Everybody can see you're positively basking in the attention, not to mention it's perfectly clear that you're only doing this for the free power. Doesn't matter if he asks nicely or not, you'll do it anyway." She adds in a mutter, "If you're actually capable."

"Of course I'm capable," snaps Crowley, glaring at her. "Unlike certain people I could name."

"Why, I've got more capability in my little finger than you've got in your entire vessel," snaps Rowena right back, finally meeting his gaze with a sharp glare of her own. "The only reason why we're here at all is just because you have the entirely unfair, and no doubt temporary, advantage of briefly being the King of Hell, and I'm sure that won't last long what with the extraordinary rate of rebellions and revolts and utter incompetence that has always characterized your reign! Why, it seems like just yesterday that a certain somebody was licking a certain floor, with his very own tongue, while—"

"Well, let's get started, shall we!" says Crowley, spinning on his heel away from Rowena and turning back toward Cas, pasting a bright smile on his face. "Now, Castiel, ol' pal ol' chum, why don't you just sit back down and get comfy — anywhere will do, just pick a chair, I don't need any silly amateur props like candles and such. Just get yourself settled, and take that ridiculous coat off, and your shirt too— I'll just need a hand or two in contact with your skin. No need for any unnecessary intimacy, of course, I don't need to touch the original location of the tumor, and I think we're both thankful about that, ha ha! It's surely all scattered through your entire vessel by now, so any two points of contact will do. When you feel ready give me the nod. I'll just need a moment to center myself, y'know, collect my considerable power, won't take but a moment, and then I'll do the deed."

Sam drags over a sturdier wooden chair for Cas to sit in, while Cas, moving with obvious reluctance, slowly sheds his trenchcoat, and then the soft blue sweater. He slows more when he reaches his undershirt, a soft cotton t-shirt that Dean's loaned him, but finally he shucks it off too. He folds up each up in turn and hands them to Sam, who takes them solemnly.

While Sam's folding the clothes and discussing chair placement with Cas, Dean takes a moment to walk up to Crowley and hiss right into his ear, "If you do anything to him — mess him up in any way, plant another tumor, anything— I. Will. Destroy. You. If I have to hunt you to the end of time."

"Not to put too fine a point on it," Crowley whispers back, "but with Lucifer out and about in the world I'm gonna need every scrap of power I can get. And you'll need me in top form. And as for planting another tumor, I'm not about to use up any of my own power unnecessarily just to spite one useless little fallen angel, am I?" Then Crowley adds, letting his voice ring out a little louder, "And, you know, sometimes he goes possessed or insane or whatever and he can be surprisingly handy then, isn't that right, Cas? I don't mind admitting I guess I still have hopes of a partnership someday, next time you end up evil or something. Hope springs eternal! Okay, ol' partner, let's get started."

Cas is seated in the sturdy wooden chair now, stripped to the waist. He's kept the monkey-hat on, but now that he's shirtless he looks terribly thin and exposed. He's sitting a little stiffly, too, with his hands braced on his knees, looking up quite warily at Crowley as if steeling himself for a very unpleasant ordeal. Dean and Sam instinctively inch closer to him on either side, flanking him as if they can protect him somehow.

To Dean's relief (and somewhat to his surprise), Crowley doesn't even comment on Castiel's weakened physical state. Instead he starts going through a stagey warm-up routine. Crowley closes his eyes, rolls his head from side to side, stretches his arms over his head, and cracks his fingers.
Then, eyes still closed, his head tilts slightly downwards, his arms spreading out slightly with his palms up. He's very still for a moment, as if entering a meditative trance.

"Good grief, would you drop the act," says Rowena from her chair. "We all know you're not exactly a Buddhist monk, or whatever it is you're pretending to be. Just get on with it."

Crowley's eyes snap open and he growls at her, glaring at her out of the corner of his eye, "I must prepare appropriately. One doesn't extract bits of Luciferan power any old day now, does one? Or, you don't, anyway. I've got to center myself. But of course, only beings of my level of power would understand the need for proper preparation." He shuts his eyes again and goes right back into what's almost certainly a fake-trance. There's a moment of stillness, everybody silent, watching him.

Crowley starts mumbling something in an archaic tongue, his voice dramatically lowered.

"Is there some reason you're reciting a grocery list in ancient Aramaic?" asks Castiel. "Six chickens, two heads of garlic, and a bushel of apples, is what I'm hearing."

Crowley's eyes flick open again; now he's scowling. "You people have no sense of occasion. Gotta set the mood, don't I?"

Dean says, hands on his hips, "I think we've all set our own moods, thanks very much."

"All right, all right," says Crowley, dropping his arms to his sides and abandoning the faux-trance stance in a flash. "Do you have to suck all the fun out of everything?" Without further ado he strides over to Cas, whisks the monkey-hat right off Cas's head, and flips it through the air at Sam (who barely manages to catch it). Cas flinches, hunching his shoulders a little. But again Crowley doesn't comment on Cas's physical state, not even mentioning the baldness; he just slaps one hand to the top of Cas's head and the other hand to Cas's bare chest. Cas flinches again with each touch, but Crowley just barks, "Hold still." Cas is gritting his teeth now, but he somehow manages to tolerate Crowley's touch enough to keep himself motionless for a moment.

And then, for the first time, Crowley seems to truly be concentrating. He's silent now — no joking or sarcastic comments, no boasting, and no fake-staginess in his actions. He keeps both hands on Cas, staring off into the middle distance, and his eyes go a little glassy, unfocusing slightly. His eyelids slide half-shut.

They wait.

After a long minute of silence, Crowley mutters, "Now, come here." He's silent for another few moments and then they hear him murmur, "I said come here. To me. Come to papa."

He frowns.

Crowley's eyelids slide all the way shut. "C'mon, you bloody little buggers," he mutters. Then he adds, with a deepening frown, "Castiel, stop blocking me."

"I'm not," Cas says quietly.

"You are," says Crowley. He opens his eyes, removes his hands and steps back, frowning at Cas. "You're deliberately blocking me. You've got some barrier up, haven't you? You've done something —"

"I haven't done anything," says Cas, a puzzled look creeping onto his face. "Well, I mean, besides the chemo. Does chemotherapy affect this process?"
Crowley shakes his head. "Chemicals are irrelevant. I'm looking right at the source of your illness, the seed of it. I can see it, but I can't seem to grab hold of it."

Rowena, still seated in the leather chair by the bookcases, starts chuckling. "Dearie me, what happened to that natural affinity, Fergus? That kingly power? Lost our regal touch, have we?"

Crowley reddens, and Rowena's tone goes sharp as she adds, "Not quite at Lucifer level after all? Still in nursery school, are we, snookums? You always were a bit of a slow learner."

"I haven't really tried yet," Crowley growls at her. "I was just warming up. I'll get through this time. Now, stay still, Cas—" In a quick move that looks a little rushed, like he's forcing himself to act before he loses his nerve, Crowley steps back to Cas and almost slaps his hands back into place. Cas jumps at the suddenness, his eyes a little wide now, and as he glances at Dean there's something alarmed in his expression.

Dean's a half step forward, arm out, already reaching out to pull Crowley back from Cas, when everything goes dark.

Dean's ears are ringing, and there's something hard and cold and flat pressing to his face. He puts a hand out and feels some very sharp small things. Idly he feels at them; they prick painfully at his palm, waking him a little more, and after a few more long confused moments he realizes that he's lying on the cold floor of the library, and that there's broken glass all over the floor.

He has to push himself slowly and uncertainly to a sitting position before he's even sure which way is up. Shaking his head, brushing glass and blood off his face, he looks around and finds that the room has gone very dim; the library's lights have blown out. And that must be why there's broken glass all over the floor — it's glass from the light bulbs. A dim flickering glow from one remaining bulb in the kitchen seems to be the only illumination. A cloud of smoke's hanging in the air; most of the chairs are upended, and half the books have been blasted out of the bookcases. The whole library's a jumble of overturned furniture and scattered books. Dean blinks, gazing around at the mess, his mind almost vacant. Explosion, he finally understands. There was some kind of explosion. Sam's on Dean's right side, getting to his hands and knees — he looks shaken, but he gives Dean a quick thumbs-up. Rowena and Crowley are nowhere in sight. And, Dean finally sees, Castiel is sprawled flat on his back nearby, apparently having been blown right out of his chair.

Cas is alarmingly still.

Dean scrambles over to Cas on all fours, yelling, "Cas? Cas!" Even his own voice sounds distant, but Dean keeps calling Cas's name as he grabs Cas's shoulders, heart pounding, fearing the worst.

But Cas stirs and opens his eyes. With Dean's help he sits up. "I'm okay," he says to Dean, who's finally now wide awake (and almost wobbly with relief to see Cas looking at him). "I'm okay." Dean doesn't believe it, and he starts patting Cas all over, checking him obsessively for any wounds, while Sam hurries close. Sam shakes out Cas's t-shirt (Sam seems to have hung onto it somehow during the explosion, along with the monkey-hat) and uses it to brush Cas free of some pieces of broken glass. Cas does have a few new scrapes and cuts, but the wounds turn out to be quite superficial, and indeed he seems mostly okay. "Really, I'm fine," Cas assures them. "Just got a little stunned, I think."

"What the hell did that bastard do?" Dean growls, still looking Cas over, front and back. He grabs
the monkey-hat from Sam and slides it carefully back on Cas's head, still feeling far more shaken than he wants to admit. "What was that?"

"I don't think it was intentional—" Cas is starting to say when a howl of "WHAT THE BLOODY HELLS WAS THAT?!" thunders through the library.

They all look over to the map-room to see Crowley staggering to his feet. He seems to have been blown clear through the library (and all the way over the map-table) to the very farthest wall. He looks like a refugee from a forest fire now — his clothes are actually smoking, his hair's literally standing on end, and his face and hands are black with soot. He stagers back toward them, his steps unsteady. Meanwhile Rowena's head slowly emerges from behind the toppled-over leather chair. She starts laughing.

"What in the BLOODY hell WAS that?" Crowley repeats. Finally regaining his balance, he leans on one of the library tables, breathing heavily.

"I thought you did it?" Dean asks. Crowley shakes his head.

"Whatever that illness is, it's not from Lucifer!" says Rowena. She's still chuckling. "Dear Fergus. I'm afraid this is beyond your abilities after all. My my, this almost makes up for the scarf incident."

For once Crowley has no retort. For once he doesn't bluster, and doesn't boast, and doesn't bluff. Instead he just nods, and he actually sounds regretful as he says to Castiel, slowly. "She's right. What you have isn't from Lucifer." Cas is nodding too, one hand on his own chest, like he can feel the truth of what Crowley's saying.

Crowley adds, to Dean and Sam, "It's not from Lucifer. It's not archangel power at all. That's God-level." A hush falls over them all as Crowley says, directly to Castiel, "I can't help you."

Crowley and Rowena leave pretty soon. Dean follows them back up the stairs, pacing behind them like a guard dog. He's accompanying them mostly to make sure they really do leave and don't try something sneaky, but Crowley and Rowena both seem like they truly can't wait to get away. They're uncharacteristically quiet as they scurry up the stairs.

As soon as they get outside Rowena turns to Crowley and says, "The farther I can get from here, the better. Though I'll always cherish the memory of seeing you covered in soot, honestly there's nothing sets my teeth on edge like truly divine power. Makes my skin go all creepy-crawly! And really, I don't mind admitting, one of the main reasons I've survived so long is that I'm smart enough to know when it's time to leave. And, it's time to leave."

"To run away, you mean?" says Dean.

She gives him a smirk. "Call it what you will. Still alive, aren't I? And I intend on staying that way."

She snaps a finger, and disappears without another word.

Crowley only raises an eyebrow as she vanishes. "She must really be rattled," he remarks, "She didn't even bother to insult me again." He's looking a little more normal now; he seems to have magically cleaned up most of the soot from his face and hair, though his clothes are still a bit of a mess. He pats ineffectively at the lapels of his jacket and brushes off his sleeves, sending up a small
cloud of soot that soon has Dean coughing. Crowley hesitates then, glancing at Dean for a long moment. His eyes turn back toward the doorway of the bunker, where Sam and Cas are waiting down below.

Crowley says, "Sorry about your boyfriend, Dean."

Dean's fists tighten. He doesn't try to deny it, but he's bracing for the inevitable sarcastic follow-up, the vicious slur that's surely about to come, and he's already trying to decide between lashing out with a few biting comebacks of his own, or maybe just socking Crowley in the jaw.

But Crowley says nothing more. His eyes linger on Dean's for a long moment; his expression's unreadable. His gaze drops to the ground, and he's gone.

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A/N -

*Dammit, Chuck.*

*And now they have to face the worst: how can they even hope to fight a divinely inspired cancer?*

*Second half is all done - just still being proofed - I almost got it all posted tonight but family pressure requires that I go back into the main room and be social for a little bit. Hope to post the 2nd half tomorrow - keep checking in. And thanks for reading.*
Sam and Cas are both methodically cleaning up the library when Dean gets back downstairs, Cas wiping down the long tables with a damp rag while Sam dusts all the books off. Nobody says much; without any discussion they all simply turn to the task of putting their little home back to rights.

It takes more than an hour to sweep up all the glass, and sort the fallen books out and get them back on the shelves, and then there's the paintings, and weapons, and sound equipment, and chairs, all of which need to be cleaned and put back where they belong. And finally, the floor needs to be swept and mopped, several times. Cas starts coughing from the soot that they're kicking up, and Dean soon banishes him to take a shower and rest up. Dean gives him a quick, fierce hug before sending him off, whispering, "It'll be all right. I swear." Cas returns the hug with one arm, but won't meet Dean's eyes.

Sam and Dean finish cleaning in silence.

"So...." says Sam, slowly, as they're rinsing out their mops in a shared mop bucket. "A divinely inspired cancer."

"Looks that way," says Dean shortly. He plunks his mop in the wringer, leans on the handle heavily to press the grey water out, yanks the mop back out and flops it on the floor with a splat. Then he starts in on the library floor one last time. The mop's a big old-fashioned one from the Men of Letters' broom-closet, the kind that's like a big unruly head of thick gray hair, and it takes a little work to swing it around. The floor's already in fairly good shape now, actually (though the books probably need some more work) but Dean can't seem to stop mopping.

He's a little annoyed to realize that Sam's not helping; Sam's just standing still, hands crossed on his own mop, watching Dean.

Sam finally says, "So what do we do now?"

Dean pauses his mop in mid-swirl. He lifts his eyes to regard the library. The floor's shining; everything's clean.

He's almost managed to distract himself from the fact that, once again, they've completely failed.

Cas still has cancer.

And not just any cancer, they now know. Witches can't help with this cancer. Demons can't help — not even the King of Hell can help. Not archangel power at all, Dean thinks, Crowley's words echoing in his ears. God-level.

And that probably means none of the other angels can help either. Even holy relics, if they ever could find any, probably won't be any use. In fact, come to think of it, holy relics might conceivably...
just strengthen the cancer.

"We keep trying," says Dean, his voice clipped. He returns to the mopping.

"Trying what?"


"You think those'll help against a cancer from *God*?"

Dean shrugs. "Maybe. Who knows. Worth a shot." He doesn't look at Sam.

By the time Dean finally finishes up with the mop and gets back to the kitchen, Cas has started heaping a little pile of objects in the middle of the kitchen table, where they often put gear while they're packing. Dean eyes the pile: the bagged sweatshirts, an extra case of water bottles, a large plastic bag of the "ground sloth" herbs and teas, a couple of books from the library. (Oz books, looks like.) The monkey-hat has been carefully washed to remove any soot or specks of glass; it's draped over a chair nearby to dry off. Cas hasn't bothered to put on another hat.

"Just some things for Denver," Cas says, his manner off-handed and casual, like everything's right back to normal. "We'll leave tomorrow, right?"

Of course. It's already Saturday night. They'll need to drive to Denver on Sunday, tomorrow, for the chemo that will be starting Monday. Somehow Dean hadn't processed that they leave tomorrow. The chemo treatment suddenly seems to crowd very close, as if it's rising overhead invisibly, a huge, slowly gathering tidal wave that's just about to hit.

The very air seems heavy; Dean has to make a conscious effort to act cheerful. "Yep, but not till midday tomorrow," he points out. "We can relax a bit tonight. Let's make some dinner, huh?"

Cas just nods, and he says, "We still have leftover pizza from last night."

"Do you want something else?"

"Pizza's fine."

"I could make something else if you want," Dean offers.

"I said pizza's fine," Cas says, a little shortly. He's still adding things to his little Denver-packing pile — the coffee thermos, a couple of extra hats — but he slows when Dean looks at him, and eventually he straightens up and meets Dean's gaze, with a little sigh. "Pizza really *is* fine," he insists. "Actually, I do enjoy pizza. I particularly liked that pepperoni one; I've been sort of wanting a little more. And I won't be able to eat it later, so let's eat it now." He's quiet a moment, staring down at the hats now, and finally he says, "Dean, this wasn't really a surprise. All along I've felt that something was... I don't know, different. About this illness. As if this were fated."

"Doesn't mean it's not curable," Dean says. "Doesn't mean you're supposed to..." But he can't say the word 'die,' so he has to let the sentence hang unfinished. "Doesn't mean it's not curable," he repeats lamely.
"Oh, certainly," Cas agrees, nodding. "Crowley only identified the source of the original tumor, the nature of its origin, but I think you're right — that doesn't determine its fate. Nor, I believe, its responsiveness to chemotherapy. It may well have been designed to behave as an ordinary cancer. The chemo might still work."

"And the radiation," says Dean (who really still has only a vague idea what's even involved in radiation.) "Don't forget the radiation."

"The radiation might work too," Cas agrees. "Everything might work. The bleomycin might work, the etoposide, the cisplatin — they all might work. And there's other things to try too, other drugs. And it's only Stage 3. If Chuck had wanted to knock me dead instantly, he could've given me Stage 4." Cas pauses, considering. "For that matter, he just could have struck me dead right away. Maybe he wants me to go through this... for some reason?" But his voice has gone a little quiet, and he's got a lost look in his eyes now as he gazes at his sad little pile of chemotherapy supplies.

He doesn't even have to say it. Dean can easily read the question on his face: Why did God do this to me?

It's the question that every cancer patient must wonder, of course; the question that has haunted humanity since time immemorial. Why do good people suffer? Why did God allow this? Why did God do this to me? But for Castiel it must be a much more piercing question than for most; much more personal, much more close to heart, and much more painful.

What the hell, Chuck? Dean thinks. (It seems it has to have been Chuck; Amara might be his match power-wise, but there's no reason she would've gone after Cas specifically.) It doesn't make any sense. Sure, Chuck must have a wider view of things; sure, maybe there's a grand plan, a secret strategy that only Chuck knows. But... the one and only angel who'd tried to do the right thing? The only one who had fought the Apocalypse, the only one who'd really tried to think through what right and wrong really means? Chuck had resurrected Cas so many times, and for what? Just to give up on him and shoot him down so brutally in the end?

It occurs to Dean now that Chuck never even really talked to Cas, not even at the end. Dean and Sam, at least, had had some sort of chance to say their piece with Chuck, to have a heart-to-heart of a sort. Castiel never even got that much. Had Chuck just finally had enough of his stray lost angel and decided to take him out at last? With one last brutal taste of mortality?

Was it some kind of joke? An exceptionally poor piece of judgement?

Could it even have been just an accident?

It doesn't make any sense.

Cas looks up at Dean. "Why?" is all he says.

At the expression on his face, all Dean can do is take a step closer and gather him close.

Cas leans on him for a long moment, letting his head dip forward onto Dean's shoulder.

"Don't give up," Dean says to him intensely, and then idiotically he adds, "Keep the faith." He's appalled when he hears the words come out of his mouth — faith? Of all the words he could have picked, faith? Dean's telling an angel, an angel who has been given a cancer by God himself, not to give up faith? But Castiel starts laughing.

He's actually laughing. A laugh that's maybe a little choked and sorrowful at first, as Dean stutters, "I meant — I really didn't mean that, I meant— Okay, I don't know what the hell I meant." Cas's
laughing just gets stronger, till Dean starts laughing too, and Sam even pokes his head in the door just to see what's going on.

It clears the air, at least, and soon Dean remembers that it's getting to be dinnertime. Cas had mentioned pepperoni pizza, and since any food craving that Cas gets these days seems like a golden opportunity to shove some calories into him, Dean fires up the old gas oven and heats up the leftover slices from last night. He can't resist poking at them obsessively till he's satisfied that they'll really seem appealing enough for Castiel (crusts crispy enough, evenly heated through, just the right amount of gooiness to the cheese). Cas, meanwhile, opens two beers for Dean and Sam, while Sam gets involved with trying to create some sort of fun fizzy nonalcoholic drink just for Cas (after some taste-testing, the winner is a mix of carbonated water with orange juice, lime juice and a tiny dash of sugar).

They all are cheered by each other's various offerings of food and drink, and then somehow Dean gets involved with telling Castiel about particularly good pizza toppings that he should also try. Then that reminds Dean of a story about how Bobby used to warm up slices of pizza, wrapped in aluminum foil, on the engine block of his old truck while he was driving. Of course that reminds Sam of another Bobby story, this one about Bobby's infamous Seven-Engine Chili, and on they go into a long string of Bobby stories. It's all a way to avoid talking about Chuck, of course; but it's also sweet to remember Bobby. And then, as Dean's wrapping up maybe the fifth Bobby story, Cas says, "You still miss him. Both of you."

Dean falls silent. He looks at Sam; they both nod.

"Yeah. Always will," says Sam, taking a slow pull of his beer.

"But you've gotten over the grief?" Cas asks, looking back and forth now between Dean and Sam. He's watching both their faces very closely. "The worst of it, at least? It no longer eats at you? You're able to be happy again?"

Sam and Dean can only look at each other. This really doesn't seem the safest topic... but Cas wants to know, and (especially given the day's events) it seems he may need — and deserve — a truly honest answer.

"It gets better," says Dean at last. "But it never really goes away."

Sam adds thoughtfully, "It becomes this sort of... this numb thing in the back of your head."

"You adapt, though?" persists Cas.

Dean's starting to hope that Cas won't follow this line of questioning for too much longer, but Sam seems to be in a particularly sharing mood. Sam sets his beer down and says, "Sure, you adapt — how can you not? But it doesn't go away. It's always with you. It's like, you find a way to carry it. I mean, you have to. You have to find a way to pack it smaller." He pauses, thinking. "Almost like you're folding it up, or packing it into... kind of a mental suitcase, I guess. But even then you still have to keep lugging the suitcase around anyway. You never get to put it down."

Sam's described it exactly right, thinks Dean; the way the pain compresses smaller over time but still is always with you. A constant weight, a perpetual presence. Manageable, eventually, but always there, always. And now Dean's gotten a mental image of all the suitcases that they're both lugging
"Around by now."

"Suitcases piled a mile high," Dean mutters. They both glance at him.

After a short pause Sam turns back to Cas to add, "After Bobby we did find a new place, too." He gestures around at the bunker with his beer bottle. "A new hidey-hole, right? New places, new cases, a whole new routine — that always helps."

Cas is still looking concerned. "So... you're all right now?"

Sam gives a half-hearted shrug, "Well, we go on." But then, brightening, he adds, "And at least now we know that Bobby still exists. He's up there in Heaven. He's still Bobby; he still remembers us. That's huge to know — gigantic, really. I mean, maybe we'll even see him again."

"We might see him again," Dean clarifies. "If we ever get back to Heaven, that is."

Cas narrows his eyes, giving Dean a sharp glance. "What do you mean?" he asks. "You two are virtually guaranteed a path to Heaven. How could you not end up there?"

Dean winces, suddenly realizing they've never discussed certain recent developments with Castiel. Certain developments with certain reapers.

"Um," says Sam, "Actually..." Dean scowls at him, with a tiny shake of the head, and Sam falls silent. But Castiel's gone on alert now, looking back and forth between them.

"What are you not telling me?" demands Cas.

Sam sighs. Ignoring Dean's increasingly urgent little head-shake signals, he says, "Dean and me are apparently just gonna get tossed into the Empty, whatever that is. So guess we'll just... end. No Heaven."

"What?" says Cas. He puts his glass down with a little thunk. "The Empty? Who told you that?"

"A reaper," says Dean, finally giving in. "Guess they're pissed at us for breaking the rules. And, you know, killing Death. That didn't go over too well in certain circles."

Cas looks stunned. "They can't do that to you! They can't... they can't! You two need to end up in a Heaven. After all you've done... You two both deserve to end up in Heaven!" He's building up steam now; he sounds truly outraged. "You both must go to Heaven!" he says. "It would be a crime if you didn't! You should go to Heaven with your soulmates, too! With each other and also with whatever romantic partners you end up with — with your friends, too, with Bobby maybe — there's precedent, in rare situations, for family groups sometimes ending up together. And I can't even think of a better case. I can't imagine there's ever been a better case. Heaven all together, with your whole family. That's what you deserve!"

Dean takes an uneven breath and looks down at his plate. Even assuming Sam and Dean could somehow get to Heaven, Cas still couldn't join them anyway.

"Won't be the whole family without him," Dean thinks.

"Won't be any kind of Heaven at all. Just a jail."

Sam says, "Thought we already established that people don't get what they deserve."
With some effort Dean finally manages to drag the conversation back toward more manageable topics. They get back on the topic of pizza toppings, and then cars, and then movies and music. But it's a slow, limping conversation by now, like they're all just going through the motions. Dinner doesn't last too much longer.

"Long day. I'm beat," Sam announces with a yawn. "I'm gonna go crash. Hey, you know what though, you guys feel free to watch some TV or whatever — and you can turn the sound up, I'll put in some earplugs, it won't bother me."

"TV or whatever," Dean echoes. "Earplugs. Very thoughtful, Sam."

"Just wanna get some sleep," Sam says innocently. "Purely selfish motives, I swear." He yawns again and stretches, stands from his chair, and says, "And, Cas, I'll get back on the research tomorrow bright and early. Don't worry, we'll get you through the week, and we'll find something before the next cycle."

Cas gives him an unconvinced smile, and Sam leans over to give him a somewhat lopsided good-night hug, complete with an affectionate pat on the head. Dean then gets his own lopsided Sam-hug too, this one with back-thumps, and Sam winks at Dean and whispers, "Earplugs. Got the Bose noise-cancelling kind. They're all charged up and ready to cancel everything."

"All right, all right, we get the point," says Dean, waving him away. "Go crash."

But it's not actually feeling very likely that anything'll happen tonight — the whole Crowley episode had turned into a serious downer, the dinner conversation had gotten pretty dark too, and Dean's feeling drained. He's really hoping, though, to at least get some time in bed just cuddling, if nothing else.

Of course, he has to take a shower first, no matter what. Dean's got to be sure he's really gotten every speck of soot and glass off. He and Sam had both shaken themselves off pretty well and had washed their faces and hands, but he hasn't really had time yet for a full shower, and the last thing Cas needs right now is to get cut up even more by some stray pieces of library-light-bulb glass that might've gotten stuck in Dean's hair.

"I gotta go take a shower," Dean tells Cas, who's stacking up the dinner plates.

Cas nods, saying, "You do have a smoky odor. Go on ahead and shower. I'll do the pizza dishes."

The shower's also a good opportunity to get a few more hygiene details taken care of as well. Like the Boy Scouts say, Dean instructs himself, be prepared. So he takes a few minutes to do some strategic hair-trimming, and then it occurs to him to do a just-in-case prep job of some other details as well. Though even as Dean's going through this process he still knows it's probably all unnecessary. It's been such a grim evening... Crowley... Chuck... what the hell had Chuck been thinking? What had been the point? Why?

And poor Cas afterwards, asking all those questions about how long grief lasts! Asking how long it tends to take after a death for Dean (and Sam, too) to recover.

Dean's shampooing his hair when he remembers that wasn't even the first time Cas has asked questions along those lines. The other day at the clinic, just outside little Emily's room, Cas had asked if Dean would "be all right either way."

'Either way' clearly meaning, whether Cas lives or dies.
Dean's hands slow on his head as he realizes, too, that he hasn't fully set Cas straight about the answer to this question. The answer, of course, is obviously a big fat NO. No, Dean definitely won't be "all right." It's a little bizarre to consider that Cas doesn't seem to already know this. Why, Cas had even been talking about Dean going to Heaven with "whatever romantic partner you end up with" — as if Dean could conceivably end up with some soulmate who isn't Castiel.

Is Cas really thinking that Dean will "be all right", that he'll "adapt"? That Dean'll somehow be able to pack that unfathomable grief into some little mental backpack and just carry right on?

The idea of a life without Cas....

Snap out of it, Dean orders himself, leaning forward into the shower spray and running his fingers roughly through his hair one last time. Carpe diem. And keep the faith, bucko.

The shower's taken much longer than he planned, but when Dean finally walks back down the hallway, Cas is waiting by Dean's bedroom door. He's clad in a pair of soft blue pajama bottoms with a black t-shirt, leaning with his back against the wall, arms crossed, gazing patiently at the opposite wall. He looks as if he's prepared to wait here for Dean forever.

Dean pauses at the sight, almost unbalanced by the sudden swell of warmth that runs through him. Cas turns his head, and their eyes meet. A soft smile slides onto Cas's face, but he doesn't say anything (and neither does Dean). Cas just reaches out a hand, and Dean walks closer and takes it.

Cas opens Dean's door, and leads Dean inside. It turns out Cas has put an extra pillow on the bed, and he's turned down the covers, and he's even put a soft nightlight on in the corner so that he doesn't have to flick on the glaring light overhead. Dean's about to crack a joke about how romantic it all looks, and how maybe they should run out and get some scented candles and rose petals just to complete the decor. But when he turns to Cas with the joke ready on his lips, the look in Cas's eyes draws him into silence.

Cas moves closer, very close, till their faces are just inches away. He pauses there a long moment, eyes flicking over Dean's face as if he's scrutinizing every inch, and then he leans in with his head slightly cocked to one side, and he kisses Dean, slowly, almost delicately. Then he kisses both Dean's cheeks, and his forehead, and even the tip of Dean's nose. And then both his ears. And his chin. It's like he's practicing kissing, testing it out on part of Dean's face separately.

"What are you doing?" says Dean, half-laughing now. "Checking for soot?"

"Just enjoying the taste," says Cas. "Monday is a long way away. It occurred to me, tonight I can still taste whatever I want to." He brings both hands up to cradle Dean's face, and kisses him full on the mouth, a long, slow, languorous kiss.

"Taste whatever you want to, eh?" says Dean, playing along. "Anything else you'd like to taste?"

Cas doesn't answer, but he smiles, and he takes a step back and begins to strip. He shucks off his pajama bottoms and pulls his t-shirt off by the collar. He seems increasingly easy and confident about stripping in front of Dean; there's none of the tense hesitation he'd shown about taking his t-shirt off for Crowley earlier. It seems like a gift, to know that Cas would unveil his wounded body so readily for Dean.
Though it's still not clear precisely what he has in mind, or whether either of them really has the energy for sex tonight. Dean's not in the least hard yet (it's been a really stressful day, after all), and a quick glance at Cas's crotch reveals nothing going on there either.

But even so there's a hunger in Cas's eyes as he strips, all the way, underwear too. He dumps his clothes on the floor without a second glance.

When Dean makes a move to start to take his own clothes off, Cas stops him, reaching out to block Dean's hands. It seems he wants to disrobe Dean himself.

Cas gently pulls Dean's t-shirt off. Dean lets him take the lead, obediently ducking his head and lifting his arms to help the shirt come off. Cas then shakes out the t-shirt and folds it meticulously, like it's a precious relic (even though he's just dropped his own t-shirt in a messy heap on the floor). He sets it neatly on a chair. There's a slight smile on his face now as he takes a step closer, sets both hands on the elastic waistband of Dean's sweatpants, and slowly inches them downward.

Very slowly. Millimeter by millimeter. In fact Cas seems to be going for the world record of how slowly sweatpants can possibly be lowered. He's standing all of four inches away as he does this, eye to eye with Dean, watching Dean's face like a hawk as the elastic waistband gradually tugs lower on Dean's abs. And somehow Dean forgets about everything else. Crowley, Rowena, the revelation about Chuck, the next chemo cycle — it all disappears. There's only Castiel standing before him, tantalizingly nude, and his hands on Dean's hips, and that look in his eyes, and the elastic band inching lower, and lower. The elastic waistband pulls gently over Dean's hipbones, and lowers further still. And now it turns out that Dean is, in fact, getting an erection, enough so that the waistband won't go any farther down. Cas's smile broadens, but he still says nothing, and he still just keeps staring Dean right in the eyes.

Slowly both Cas's hands slide to the front of the waistband. Slowly both hands slide under it, and he pulls the elastic waistband out, extending it so far toward himself that Dean's tugged over toward him and has to take a step closer to keep his balance. This puts them closer still, so close Dean can feel the warmth coming off of Cas's skin. And as Dean settles his hands on Cas's shoulders and leans his forehead against Cas's, both Cas's hands wrap around Dean's cock. He gives it a gentle, warm, long squeeze, and three or four tantalizing, slow tugs. But he still doesn't lower the sweatpants; instead he returns the elastic waistband right back where it had been before (just above Dean's cock), steps back a few inches, raises both hands to his face, and slowly, slowly licks each of his palms, with what seems excessive use of tongue. He holds Dean's eyes the whole time.

"That... really oughta be illegal," Dean finally manages to get out.

"I'm just investigating a clothing problem," says Cas calmly, sliding both hands under the elastic waistband again. He's still not making any progress at all at the sweatpants, though; instead one saliva-slick palm is now sliding around Dean's cockhead, and the other hand is wrapping along the shaft. Cas works at Dean's cock for a long, sweet moment like that; both hands moving and sliding around, slick and wet, with a hot, even, steady pressure. Cas just keeps at it, still just a couple inches away. He's still watching Dean's face.

Dean's getting to the point where he has to start kissing Cas again — it seems like this kiss just starts up on its own, like it simply has to happen. But Dean has to break the kiss a second later to catch his breath.

"So, the sweatpants are still on," he points out to Cas.

"I know," says Cas. "There's something in the way."
"Is there," says Dean, who's starting to have a bit of trouble keeping his breathing steady. "And what are we gonna do about that?"

"I don't know," says Cas. He frowns, his mouth twisting thoughtfully, like he's considering a question of some strategic interest. "I'd better investigate more closely." Abruptly he kneels, and he finally lifts the waistband over Dean's cock and shucks the sweatpants all the way down to Dean's feet. Cas says, eye-level with Dean's erect cock, "I've identified the problem."

"Oh, really?"

"Yes. And I have an idea." Cas grabs Dean's hips in both hands, and swallows Dean's cock right down, all the way down, in a smooth long motion that's so unexpected that Dean gasps. Cas's earlier blowjobs had been good, yes, but of course there had been that slight clumsiness and uncertainty (understandably). Now, his moves are gaining a surety, a strength, a confidence. Apparently he's been noticing what Dean likes — and it seems he isn't at all shy about putting his new knowledge to practice. He shifts his hands to Dean's ass and pulls hard, lips and tongue wrapped around him, deep-throating him. His nose bumps into Dean's belly. He's engulfed Dean's cock right down to the root, fingers gripping firmly into Dean's ass cheeks.

It feels amazing, and Dean can't help letting out a soft "Ohh...", followed immediately by a moan when he looks down and takes in at the phenomenal sight of his cock buried deep in Cas's mouth, with Cas's lips wrapped right around the base. Whatever tiny depressing thoughts had still been circling around in Dean's mind go flitting away completely then, for now there really is nothing else in the world but this, nowhere else but here. Cas starts bobbing his head up and down, stopping every now and then to swirl his tongue around. Dean can't help grabbing at Cas's head as he works away.

It's not even thirty seconds before Dean's panting hard, curling over Cas's head, knees already going weak.

"Wait, wait," Dean gasps. "Getting too close. Wait a sec, I want this to last—"

Cas pulls off Dean's cock and looks up, his eyes searching Dean's face. "What do you want?" he asks. The teasing's gone now; his blue eyes are shining and intense as he looks up at Dean. He wraps one slick hand around Dean's cockshaft and slowly sticks his tongue out, licking across the tip of Dean's cock in a lavish, broad-tongued stroke (Dean groans again), and again Cas asks, his voice very husky, "Tell me what you want. Anything you want. What do you want?"

"Everything—" Dean gasps, wrapping his hand around Cas's, pressing Cas's fingers even more tightly onto his cock. "That. More. Anything. I mean, everything." 

"In what order?" Cas asks, still kneeling and looking up at Dean. "More fellatio? Rim job? Edging? Bondage? Frottage?" Dean blinks down at him and Cas reports, "I've been looking up the possibilities. We've got at least ten hours, and I estimate we could get through at least fifteen of them —"

Dean's half-laughing as he pulls Cas to his feet, and then Cas is all over Dean's mouth, kissing him hungrily, tasting him everywhere. In mid-kiss Dean starts backing him up toward the bed. Cas seems so entranced by the kissing that he doesn't quite seem to notice where Dean is guiding him, and he loses his balance and tumbles back on the bed, where he lies panting up eagerly at Dean. That's when Dean sees that Cas has a hard-on now, and this is such a wonderful new development that Dean simply has to get right on top of Cas immediately. Without thinking Dean's crawling right over him on all fours, till he's straddling Cas's thighs, reaching for Cas's cock and starting to stroke it. Cas hisses at the touch and he flops back limp on the bed. Dean spits on his palm and starts to really go at
it, savoring the magical feel of Cas's warm, solid cock, how it's stiffening and straightening, how Cas is squirming and shifting under him — and then Dean remembers.

*Wait*. Cas has injuries.

But after everything else that's happened, this doesn't seem like such a huge deal anymore. It's just a minor obstacle that surely they can detour around, right? Dean softens his grip, and slows the pumping. Cas whines under him, squirming with frustration, and soon he's grabbing at Dean's hand and trying to speed up Dean's tempo, even thrusting up at Dean's hand. But Dean slows further still, till he's just pulsing his hand on Cas's cock, squeezing it rhythmically. Cas is clutching onto Dean's arm with both hands now.

"Would you *go* faster," Cas growls.

But Dean's had an idea. He leans close and whispers into Cas's ear, "You asked what I want."

"And?"

"I want you to fuck me."

Cas goes absolutely still, staring up at Dean.

"I bet you only asked your doc about *being* fucked, didn't you?" Dean says, straight into Cas's ear, his voice low, his hand still pulsing gently on Cas's cock. "How about you fucking *me*? Did you ask about that?"

"I didn't," Cas whispers, and he sounds stunned at the possibility. "I didn't think you would want that — it didn't occur to me—"

"That's exactly what I want," whispers Dean in his ear.

It's amazing to see how fast Castiel can move when he's given proper motivation. In just a trice he's flipped their positions around and has gotten Dean on his hands and knees, yanking Dean's limbs here and there to reposition him. Dean's a little stunned at how fast he's moving. And then Cas is crouching over Dean, mounting him in a hurried, somewhat messy scramble from behind. The inexperience is showing again — Cas hasn't done any prep at all and he's just shoving his cock bluntly at one of Dean's asscheeks, not even close to aiming right, but the heated scramble of it, Cas's obvious excitement, is taking Dean's breath away. On Cas's next uncoordinated thrust, his cock happens to slide up along Dean's asscrack, which isn't really quite the right idea but it'll do for the moment, for now Cas is doing a whole series of quick little thrusts there (which feels weirdly nice), and he's nibbling at Dean's neck. And then Dean feels unmistakable heat along his sides. Cas's wings, from their strange wing-dimension, must be trying to wrap down around Dean's sides. Cas is crouched over Dean's shoulders now, his hands sliding over Dean's skin, along his spine, over his hair, down his arms, and all the while those invisible bands of heat shift restlessly along Dean's sides. Dean starts jerking his own cock slowly, drinking in the sensations.

Only gradually does he realize that Cas still isn't exactly progressing very much. He's still just thrusting along Dean's asscrack, and then his cock slips down between Dean's thighs. Cas shudders and lets out a frustrated-sounding moan.

"Wait, wait, we gotta prep," Dean tells him, realizing there's gonna need to be some instruction. "And we gotta use a ton of lube." Dean extracts himself momentarily to go grab some lube. "And I mean a TON of lube," Dean adds, returning to the bed, where Cas is crouched watching him with dark eyes. "I cleaned up in the shower, we should be mostly okay, but don't be surprised if things get
a bit messy. Hey, could you hand me that towel—" (the towel is flung at Dean in a microsecond) "Okay, lemme get turned around here — back up a bit — back up, I SWEAR this'll be worth it — whoa there cowboy, not yet! A finger first, just ONE finger, go super slow, you gotta give me some time to adjust—"

A little more explanation and Cas soon has the idea. It's not Dean's first time in this particular rodeo, fortunately, though till tonight it's been all in the form of pegging (girls with strap-ons, that is). No real live penises, in other words, not until now. But it helps having had even that little bit of experience; Dean knows how to make himself relax, and he knows how to talk Cas through it.

One finger. Two. Three. Cas turns out to be very careful once he understands the need to go slow; he's cautious now, alert, trying out one finger at a time and studying Dean with incredibly focused attention. It's unbelievably intense to be under his scrutiny like this, let alone from such a vulnerable and awkward position. With girls it's different, with girls it's just the usual, but this time it's Cas, and it's strange and thrilling to be sprawled here before him (Dean's ended up crouched on his chest, ass in the air, knees sprawled, laid bare). It seems far more intimate than even the blow jobs, and Dean's amazed how safe it feels, and how easy it is to give himself over. Not to mention how indescribably hot it is: looking back and seeing Cas's face, seeing his eagerness, sensing his struggle to stay under control, his nearly desperate need somehow held in check, and all the while feeling his fingers moving so gently inside, while his other hand grips Dean's shoulder like iron...

It's like being under the eye of a laser. One that's slowly igniting Dean from head to toe.

It's a little painful at first, as it usually is for Dean, but Cas is exceptionally slow, and he's adding copious amounts of lube. By the third finger Dean has passed that tipping point where it stops feeling weird and starts feeling good... and then really good. Dean knows now he's ready. "Go for it," Dean tells him. "No more fingers. Your cock. Guide it with your hand at first." There's a quick flurry of repositioning behind him, Cas scrambling back into position on his knees, and about a millisecond later Cas's cock is pressing slowly in. There's a sensation of impossible fullness, of stretching and stretching and stretching, then there's the moment when Cas's cockhead gets in, slipping past Dean's sphincter.

Cas lets out a groan and stops right there. His hands are trembling on Dean's shoulders. "Oh, Dean," he whispers, and his voice is ragged.

"You can move," Dean tells him, and Cas pushes in, slowly.

It turns out Cas's cock is nothing at all like a strap-on, it's a million times better, it's softer, it's harder, it's lava-hot, it's so smooth and hard as iron and yet so alive it's actually twitching. And it's Cas, Cas is in Dean now, actually penetrating him, actually goddam fucking him, and that's such a mindblowing realization that Dean's almost on the point of orgasm already just from the very thought of it. Cas is still pushing in, still doing one long infinitely-slow thrust, both of them panting. Then at last Cas hits the magical spot and Dean cries out, his own cock so hard now it's leaking. Dean's started jerking his own cock; he buckles slowly down onto the bed, unable to hold himself up anymore. This makes Cas lose his angle, and his cock slips out, and they both groan in dismay. Cas scrambles off the bed again, and this time he pulls Dean to the edge of the bed, grabbing his hips and simply hauling him back in one urgently powerful move; Dean feels himself dragged backwards on the towel that is laid out under them, both Dean and the towel skidding over the sheets as Cas drags Dean bodily across the bed. Something about being manhandled like this is weirdly thrilling, and when Cas starts pressing his cock in again, Dean wedges one arm completely under his body just so that he can keep tugging at his own cock constantly. He murmurs "yes" when he feels Cas's cockhead pop in again, "yes, yes" as Cas pushes in further, "YEAHH" as Cas finally bottoms out. Dean's cock is heavy and hard in his hand now and he gasps to Cas, "Again, again, c'mon." Cas
pulls outs slightly, and pushes in again, his thrusts slow and gentle like he's testing the waters. All the way in. Cas squirms against Dean, his fingers digging into Dean's shoulders almost painfully. Dean can feel Cas's ballsack swinging against Dean's skin. "Stitches, your stitches," Dean manages to warn him. Cas seems to hear; he pulls back slightly and starts doing slightly shallower strokes. With this positioning his cockhead's rubbing back and forth in just the right spot and it's absolutely electric; Dean's cock is really throbbing now, and his whole body's breaking out in a sweat. Dean's jerking his own cock hard now, legs spread wide, now up on his knees a little, gasping out, "yeah, Cas, yeah, that's the spot, yeah, yeah, yeah—" Dean turns his face into the pillow, trying to muffle his groans. Cas does one careful, long, slow exquisite thrust and Dean's whole cock twitches; he grunts "yes, YES, AGAIN, AGAIN" at Cas; another long thrust and Dean's so close, it's gathering up all around him, his cock going rock-hard. Dean's completely lost in it now, panting hard. Each thrust wrings another flash of intense electric sensation and another grunt from him, and Dean's flying higher and higher. He feels Cas snake a hand underneath; Cas knocks Dean's hand away and wraps his own fist around Dean's cockhead, squeezes, and simultaneously thrusts hard into Dean's ass. "AH!" Deans grunts, hoarse, into his pillow, "YES — AH—" Cas does it again; Cas's cock thrusts, he squeezes, Dean squirms helplessly under his hands, moaning, and then Dean's coming, spasming hard, his cock shooting spurt after spurt onto the towel. His cock is jumping in Cas's hand, his asshole's tightening spasmodically on Cas's cock, and Cas goes crazy. His free hand tightens brutally on Dean's shoulder, he bites Dean's neck and there's an intense blaze of heat along Dean's ribs from the wings. It's like Dean's held in a vise for a long moment, Cas clamped down all around him with electrifying strength. A throaty animalistic groan rips out of Cas's throat, his feet scrabble for purchase, there's one last hard thrust that's so forceful it drives Dean forward several inches. And then Cas's cock is twitching inside Dean as he comes, hot spurts of semen gushing deep into Dean. Cas shudders over Dean for an ageless time, pulsing inside him. Dean cries out into the pillow again, his own cock twitching several more times, and Cas groans again, pressing even deeper as his own spasms ripple through him.

Gradually the pulses slow, and stop. Dean finally collapses all the way down. Cas slumps heavily on top of him, almost boneless, both of them quivering as the last aftershocks go rippling through them. Cas's cock finally softens enough that Dean's body suddenly squeezes it out entirely, all at once. It's a weirdly pleasurable sensation and they both yelp at it, and then they lie together, Cas still panting, sprawled over Dean.

They're both drenched in sweat. Cas's weight is reassuringly heavy and warm; Dean can feel his chest moving with every breath, and can feel Cas's head start to turn, and his arms shift, as he comes back to himself.

It's no surprise when Cas's first move is to kiss the back of Dean's neck. Dean grins; there's some "angel things" that are definitely starting to come into focus. And each one seems an intensely wonderful discovery. They lie there for so long, and Cas goes so limp, his breathing so slow, that Dean starts to wonder if he's fallen asleep. But then Cas murmurs into Dean's ear, "I suppose I should get off you at some point." A soft sigh. "But I really don't want to."

"You can just stay there, actually," says Dean.

"No, I should clean up...." Cas says, with an air of deep regret.

"Yeah," says Dean, equally sad at the mere thought of moving. "Me too. That is the problem with anal, you know. For those of us mere mortals who don't have magical cleaning abilities, at least."
"Sometimes I really miss being an angel," says Cas.

He finally stirs, and heaves himself off Dean and pulls his pajama bottoms on.

"You know the real problem with this bunker?" Dean remarks, sitting up. "The shower stalls aren't big enough for two."

Cas blinks at him. "I never realized it before," he says, "but it's a terrible design flaw."

Cas heads off to the front bathroom and Dean to the back one. The shower stall design is a terrible design flaw; it seems all wrong to have to be separated right now, and Dean's soon hatching plans of running some plumbing pipes to one of the bedrooms so that they can shower together in a private little en-suite bathroom right in the room. He finishes showering, and he's wiping the condensation off the mirror with one hand, about to head back down the hall to Cas, when his hand slows.

_Do you grieve for very long?

_We adapt._

During the last hour, every other concern has blessedly disappeared. There had been only Dean, and Cas, and the bed, and nothing else. But now in a rush it's all back, and a dreadful vision comes to mind of what it'll truly be like if Cas... leaves.

If he dies.

Dean's hand has paused on the mirror and it's started to steam up again, his own reflection going blurry as he sees the bleak months and years stretch out before him. He knows already how it'll be, the crushing despair of those initial months. He knows how hard Sam will try to help, and Claire too probably, and Jody. But nobody will be able to help at all, will they? Nothing will be able to lighten that terrible empty loss, and this time it's going to devour Dean alive.

Dean can even picture how it'll unfold after that; he sees himself years and years later, older, graying. Still hunting, probably. Maybe there'll be some random girls again. The usual barflies and waitresses, most likely. He'll even manage to get his rocks off now and then, probably. But none of it'll mean a damn thing. Day after day will pass, and year after year, and Dean will keep hunting, and killing, and eating, and sleeping. Sam will be there, at least; Dean will survive, he'll go on. But his beloved angel will never be with him again, never by his side again, not ever, not in this life or the next. Never again that unreal intensity of Castiel crouched over him in bed, driving Dean mad with desire; never, even, that mellow (but just as precious) comfort of lying next to him in the night. Never that sight of Cas waking up next to him, or eating a slice of pizza, or laughing with Sam, or watching Dean in a parking lot in the sunset light, or placing a feather on a little girl's throat.

Never again the companion in the night, the warmth to turn to, the steady support from the only one who knows Dean inside and out, in every conceivable way — all of Dean's horrors, all of Dean's flaws, all of Dean's earthiest and basest desires, all accepted, all cherished.

Life will limp on, sure. But never with Castiel, never again.

Dean's got both hands over his eyes now, and he's shaking, chest heaving, as he tries to drive the horrifying vision from his mind.
He manages to keep it to a few gulping breaths, just a few long panicky seconds, and then he gets back under control. He's determined for Cas not to have to see this — determined not to ruin what has somehow managed to turn into a totally awesome evening after all. So he blows his nose, and splashes cold water on his face. Dean's just at the point of inspecting his eyes critically in the mirror — they're still a little bloodshot — when there's a tentative knock on the door.

"Dean?" says Cas, from outside. Dean hesitates, unsure if his voice is going to sound normal enough. The door opens.

"Sorry, I got worried—" says Cas, and then he's staring at Dean's face. "Dean?" Cas asks again, his voice sharp now with concern.

"I can't lose you," Dean blurts out. His voice is so rough it's almost a growl. "I can't, Cas, I can't. I'm not going to get over it, I never will." Cas's eyes widen; he looks stricken, and Dean's hating himself for laying this on him, but he can't seem to stop himself as he stammers out, "I can't, I can't lose you now — we only just got started! — I can't lose you, you've got to live, Cas, you can't die, please—"

"I'm trying," Cas replies, taking a quick step closer. His voice is desperate and ferocious as he says, "I'm trying so hard, Dean, I've been trying so hard, all along — I found the Denver hospital, I've been doing all the chemo, the job, everything, for months, every day, months, months of it, it's all for you, Dean, I'm trying so hard to stay alive, to stay with you— I don't want to die. I don't want to leave you!"

Cas is stepping closer still, into the steamy bathroom. Dean is reaching out with both hands. They grab on, and they hold on.

A/N - Took hours and hours to get this shaped right - too tired to leave any kind of coherent note tonight but I hope it ended up flowing well. Please let me know what you think. I love to hear from you.

Next chapter in 2 wks I believe. We are not too far from the end now. Keep the faith.
I'm definitely not worth this

A/N - Sorry again for the huge delay - I ended up having to do another two 800-mile drives by myself and boy does that eat up a couple weekends. To and from a music camp in the California redwoods, but that's another story. Suffice to say that when Hermeto Pascoal grabbed the nearest thing to write an original composition on, it turned out to be our caipirinha lime-cutting board (he wrote the most amazing music all over it with a Sharpie) which caused a temporary caipirinha crisis, but we survived and I'm now a lifetime member of the caipirinha crew. Anyway, the entire time at camp, every night when drifting off to sleep, to the sounds of the distant Jazz Tent down the river and the Boulder acoustic tent and the Portland disco tent, I was thinking about this fic, and I spent every morning before Advanced Bateria blocking out all the remaining chapters. The end's in sight; all remaining chapters are now at least in skeletal form and most have their key scenes written. Here's today's chapter... there will be another Sunday.

Thanks again for your boundless patience on what has turned out to be the most difficult fic I've ever written.

Cas is kept as an in-patient for all of Monday and Tuesday. Which ought to feel kind of scary, Dean thinks, as he sits there in the clinic next to Cas on Monday morning. He watches Cas get the little i.d. bracelet on his wrist; he holds Cas's duffel bag while Cas changes into a weirdly cheery-looking flowered hospital gown; he cringes when a nurse starts stabbing Cas with needles to take blood for a few routine admission tests. Cas tolerates the needles stoically, ignoring the new bruises that are slowly blossoming on his arm, but there's a telltale tightness around his eyes. Dean knows it's hurting him. And the chemo hasn't even started yet.

All Dean can think to do to distract him is tell Cas some pointless stories about a few dumb silly things he and Sam used to do in hospitals when they were kids (whenever Dad was being fixed up after some hunt, that is). Soon Dean's going on about how he and Sam used to build little pyramids of plastic forks in the cafeteria, and about the battles they used to have about who got to eat Dad's jello, and the time they stole some dry ice from a hospital lab cooler and tried to make a fog machine in the bathroom with the shower fixture and got caught. Sam chimes in, too, with a story about when he'd broken his arm once as a kid, and a teenaged Dean had drawn x-rated pictures all over the cast, and Dad had to cover it all up with duct tape.

Cas doesn't laugh exactly, but he listens with focused attention, eyes fixed on their faces as they talk, while the nurse finishes up with all the needles and all the stabbing. He seems glued to their stories, whether or not he finds them amusing. It's like Sam and Dean are his only anchors.

Finally Cas is gowned and wired up and IV'd. He's in a classic hospital bed this time, side rails and all, in a different wing of the chemo floor — the in-patient wing. He's transformed into a genuine hospital patient right before their eyes. And Dean feels, obscurely, that he ought to be hating it more. All the funny stories aside, Dean's always hated hospitals. I ought to be totally hating being here, he thinks, and totally hating seeing Cas stuck here. But the truth is that it's a relief. This Week 1 ordeal that's rolling down upon Cas, this "three days of chemo in a row" thing, is a frightening unknown. It's been making Dean's stomach hurt all over again even just to think of it, and it's a genuine relief to know the medical team'll be right here.
They'll keep their eyes on him, Dean thinks, watching the nurse bustling around Cas again, re-checking his blood pressure for at least the fourth time that morning. They'll have their eyes on Cas constantly. Cas'll have heartbeat monitors and he's already got one of the finger-clip things and they're clearly monitoring his vitals closely. "There's two IVs this time, by the way," the nurse remarks to Dean as she's rigging up some bags of fluid. "One arm will get the chemo and also some fluids, but the other arm just gets fluids. We'll leave the fluids running nonstop, straight through the night."

"How long'll he have it?" asks Sam. "The IV, I mean?"

Cas is the one who answers. "First forty-eight hours, usually," he answers. "Sometimes longer. It helps quite a lot with the dehydration."

And that's a whole layer of worry gone right there.

It becomes clear that a lot of the messy logistics are going to be smoother here too. There's a little tower of crescent-shaped stainless steel pans stacked neatly on a table at the side of the room. Vomit pans, it looks like. All clean and shiny and ready to go. There's also a pile of tidily folded towels and fresh linens. All those motel-room logistics that had taken Sam so much trouble last time, magically taken care of here in the hospital. Another layer of worry gone.

Even the mysterious Aaron Klein at last makes an appearance. He turns out to be a short and compact gray-haired physician, with a calm and reassuring air of matter-of-fact expertise. With Cas's permission, Dean and Sam stay in the room to listen to Dr. Klein's brief discussion with Cas about some kind of "follow-up tests" and "re-evaluation" that are apparently scheduled to happen around New Year's. Dr. Klein explains to them that after this new chemo cycle concludes (Week 1, and then the milder Week 2 and Week 3), Castiel is scheduled to have a whole new round of tests and scans, and then the two of them are supposed to meet to discuss the results. That seems to be when they'll all finally learn whether the chemo has actually been working.

"That'll determine the next course of treatment," Dr. Klein says. "Possibilities include more chemo, or radiation. Sometimes both."

"Any more surgery?" Dean can't help asking. (He knows he should be focused purely on Cas's health, but certain new possible intimate positions — prevented so far by certain surgical wounds — have suddenly jumped to mind.)

Dr. Klein gives him a reassuring smile, but it's accompanied by a noncommittal tilt of the head that seems a little evasive. "We'll see what seems best," he says vaguely. "You know what, I advise not trying to anticipate too closely what the course of treatment will be." He looks around at them all and says, with just the faintest air of reading from a very well-rehearsed script, "I know it's frustrating not to know precisely what the plan is, but we like to stay flexible, so that we can adjust according to what's best for each and every patient individually. We find we get excellent results with that sort of flexible approach. So we'll wait and see how his tests look, shall we?"

It's phrased cheerfully enough, but it has a distinct undercurrent of "I can't promise anything," and Dean can only manage a somewhat glassy smile back. Then Dr. Klein adds brightly, "And remember to enjoy the holidays! We've scheduled things so that he should have Christmas and New Year's free. Make the most of them!"

"You better believe we will," says Dean, and he's forcing himself to view this optimistically, as just This holiday will be great. First real Christmas with all three of us together. It'll be great!

And he's definitely NOT going to view it as, It better be great, because it might be his last.
Dean's also trying very hard not to let himself think about the fact that he's completely out of ideas. They've tried everything, and absolutely nothing's worked... and all there is to do now is wait. Wait, and "enjoy the holidays," and wait some more. And Dean hates, absolutely hates, to just meekly sit and wait.

But what else can they do?

*Christmas'll be great*, he repeats to himself mechanically.

Dr. Klein discusses a few last things with Cas, and finally he tells Cas he'll be back later, and he stands to shake Sam's and Dean's hands in farewell. As Dean's thanking him, it occurs to him that gray-haired Dr. Klein really doesn't seem at all the secret gay lover type. He almost laughs at the thought. It's bizarre now to remember how this had all begun. How convinced he'd once been that Cas was about to run away with the mythical boyfriend "Aaron."

The memory ought to be embarrassing, but, oddly, what Dean feels now, remembering how it had all unfolded, is mostly gratitude. *I'm so glad I got so crazy-obsessed trying to figure out who "Aaron" was*, he thinks, as he watches Dr. Klein head out the door. *I'm so glad I found Dr. Klein's name in that calendar. So glad I acted like such a total nut and ran out and bought that little plant. So glad I drove to Denver.*

*So glad I got so stupidly obsessed with that totally nonexistent boyfriend "Aaron."* (Not to mention the previous obsession with the slender, dark-haired and equally nonexistent "Erin" before that.)

Because otherwise Cas would still be going through all this on his own.

Dean turns back to Cas, and finds Cas looking at him with a gentle smile. Their eyes meet.

Cas looks so fragile sitting there, so thin and battered and bruised in that incongruous flowered hospital gown. He's got a soft gray hat on his head now, and it sets off his blue eyes almost magically. (He's given the monkey-hat to Sam for safekeeping so that it won't "get messed up.") He seems practically wreathed in IV tubes and heart monitor wires and hospital gear, every inch the patient now, and yet somehow he also looks so strong, and so stoic, and his eyes are so... lovely, that's really the only word, isn't it? Such lovely eyes, such a pure blue and so clear and, most of all, with such an amazingly soft look to them as he's sitting there gazing at Dean; and his smile seems so fond, and so.... so....

All Dean can see now is Cas; there is nothing else in the room. And that look on Cas's face brings a wave of warmth that seems to pour all over Dean, a river of warm tingles that run from the top of his head right down to his feet.

Dean thinks, once more, *I can't lose you. I can't.*

He doesn't say it out loud this time. But it seems he can see Cas's reply right there in his eyes: *I'm trying so hard. I don't want to leave you.* And it feels like Dean's heart is going to burst.

He walks over and pulls a chair close and takes Cas's hand. (Sam has diplomatically turned aside and is fiddling with the room's little TV, as if he's utterly fascinated by the selection of channels.)

*He said he was doing all this for me...*

Dean whispers to Cas, "I'm not sure I'm worth all this."

"You're worth it," says Cas, and his voice is low, and calm, and quiet, and absolutely sure.
Cas's chemo infusion has been underway for several hours when there's a knock on the door and a slender, dark-haired woman pokes her head in. She's attractive, in an appealingly tomboy-ish, no-nonsense way. Weirdly, she looks rather like Dean's original mental image of the mythical Erin, and for a confused moment he even wonders if "Erin" has somehow come to life. But it's just the new nurse, here for the 3pm shift change; she's taking over Cas's case from the day-shift nurse and has popped in to say hi.

She first checks Cas (so far he's doing surprisingly well; he's already explained that the chemo doesn't usually "hit him" till a bit later in the day, around four or five o'clock). But she's got a slightly puzzled and inquisitive look, and once she's verified that Cas is doing well, her eyes keep darting alertly between Sam and Dean. A broad smile blossoms on her face when at last Sam happens to speak up, and it then turns out that this is Sarah, the very same night nurse who Sam has spoken to several times about Cas. It turns out it wasn't coincidence that she'd been the one who'd picked up Dr. Klein's office calls on that first awful night in the Chemo Motel. Sarah explains that she regularly fields the late-evening calls from the patients who've just had treatment earlier that day. And it seems like she's been looking forward to the opportunity to finally meet "the nice brother" who's already called her several times about Castiel.

She soon asks Cas if she can speak to his "family" for a few minutes, and then she pulls Sam and Dean out to the hall for a quick discussion.

"It's so good that his family's here," she whispers, out in the hallway. "You've got no idea what a difference it can make to have family support. I was so relieved, Sam, when I first started getting those calls from you — it was so good to know he had some help on the home front. I should warn you both, though, since this is your first time here, that there are times when we'll encourage you to leave his room. Like, if we need to do a little clean-up from this or that. Things may get a little messy soon— " She glances down the hallway, toward a clock that's mounted on the wall above the nurse's station. "Usually right around now, actually—"

"We know," says Sam.

"We're fine with messy," adds Dean, nodding. "We've done messy."

She gives them an understanding smile. "I imagine so. And as long as Castiel approves your staying, you can stay as long as you wish. But what I really mean..." She takes a breath. "Well, first, the day nurse told me that Castiel had been hiding his condition from you both. Is that correct?"

Sam and Dean look at each other.

"Yep," Dean confirms, nodding. "And we weren't too happy about that."

"Well, it's wonderful that you're available to help now," Sarah says. "It's been clear from your phone calls, Sam, that the two of you care very much about him. But since this is a new development for you both, I'll make a guess that since you found out, you've been running yourselves a little ragged the past few weeks?" She pauses, with an inquiring look.

Sam glances at Dean again, but this time Dean doesn't meet his eyes. "We're fine," says Dean.

"I just wanted to check how you're both holding up," Sarah presses. "Has it been difficult? Even just things like, for example, did you have a long drive here? Or... any problems sleeping, anything like
that?" She's looking back and forth between them. "Any tiredness right now? Have either of you been feeling the strain?"

Dean shakes his head.

Well, maybe it had been a bit of a long drive, sure, but that's normal, right? And maybe Dean had woken up a few times last night, just a half dozen times or so, feeling a little bit worried about whether Cas was still breathing or not; and maybe it had taken a few minutes to verify that Cas was really still breathing, and then a few more minutes to shake free of the despair about the recent string of failures (no wait, not 'despair' exactly, just a little bit of disappointment maybe, and not 'failures', just a bit of an adjustment in tactics). And maybe that awful, heartbreaking vision of a Cas-less future had then haunted him all through the dark hours of the morning until he'd ended up spending the entire rest of the long night curled around Cas, cradling his head while he slept. Sure, maybe Dean had woken up this morning a tiny bit tired, with his jaw aching a little tiny bit, and his back hurting a little bit and his shoulders and neck knotted up like iron and his stomach so cramped up that he couldn't eat, and generally feeling like he'd been run over by a truck.

But that's all normal now.

"I'm fine," says Dean. "We're totally fine. Ready to go all night." Sam nods dutifully.

Sarah's been watching Dean's face. "You two need to monitor yourselves," she says. "Caretaking is its own burden, and it can really wear you down. Sam, you should consider one of your jobs to be watching not just Castiel, but also your brother Dean here, to make sure he's not burning out, that he's getting enough sleep, remembering to eat and all that. Dean, similarly, your job is to watch Sam. You should think of it like being in a battle together where you alternate being on watch. I mean, I know you don't literally battle together, but—"

Sam and Dean both let out a chuckle, and Sarah pauses, raising an eyebrow.

Sam explains, "Dean and me make a pretty decent battle team, actually."

"And Cas," adds Dean. "Used to be just me and Sam, but Cas has been part of the team for a while now. And now—" He glances over Sarah's shoulder toward Cas's room. He can just see Cas's feet from here, and even at just that little glimpse, some of the fatigue drops away.

"Cas is the battle," finishes Dean. "He's what matters now."

She nods. "Obviously, or you wouldn't be here. But it's like the oxygen masks in the airplanes: you have to put on your own mask before you can help anybody else. You'll be little help to Castiel if you're both burned out and exhausted and not thinking straight. Especially when he's not feeling himself. It's tremendous pressure on a family. Just... if nothing else, be sure you get some sleep. So don't be surprised later on when I suggest it's time to head to your motel for the rest of the night. All right?"

They nod, and she escorts them back to Cas's room, where she exchanges a few more pleasantries with Cas, checks his vitals and quizzes him about any nausea (none yet, apparently) and starts typing in some notes on a little wall-mounted computer. Dean gives Cas a close look; he's still looking pretty good. He even seems engrossed in the TV show that Sam's found.

Then Dean notices an odd expression come over Cas's face. First he seems puzzled; then there's a flash of understanding; then he gets a contemplative expression. Dean glances across the room to see what the TV show is, but Cas isn't watching the TV at all; Cas is watching Sam, who's sitting by the TV but is also not watching it all. Instead, Sam is watching Sarah.
The tableau holds for a moment, Dean watching Cas watching Sam watching Sarah (all while Sarah, oblivious to all this, continues typing in notes on the little computer). Dean gently shifts in his chair, trying to angle himself so that he can watch Sam too without it being too obvious.

Sam's not ogling, exactly. Nothing quite that blatant. It's more like his eyes have at last found something pleasant to rest on, something more relaxing to look at than chemotherapy infusions and IV's and hospital gowns. But Dean almost snorts to see Sam's eyes drifting up and down Sarah's form a few times. Then Sam asks her a couple of questions — all perfectly on-topic, all appropriate, all about chemotherapy and tonight's hospital routine. Her answers, Dean judges, seem slightly longer than necessary, with one or two more personal asides than necessary, and she even seems to be lingering a tiny bit in the room with them. Her work here seems done for now (she's finished with her notes) yet she stays, one hand now resting lightly on Cas's bedrail while she chats across him to Sam.

Finally she seems to remember, almost with a start, that she has other duties. "I've got to get to my other patients," she says. "Castiel, remember, just press the button if you need me. I'll check in soon."

Cas nods, and Sarah gathers up a few stray items and heads out the door. Sam watches her leave. There's a tiny moment where their eyes meet; a little smile flits across Sarah's face, and there's an answering nod from Sam, a perfectly polite farewell, but with a warmth in his eyes. Then she's gone.

A diplomatic silence settles onto the room for a few moments. Dean's actually biting his lower lip, in a valiant effort to hold back a comment along the lines of "Really, Sam? Literally right while Cas is getting chemo? Seriously?" But — there's a slightly lost look in Sam's eyes now. Sam lets out a little sigh and turns back to Cas and Dean, and his shoulders slump a little, like he's making himself get back to work. Like he's setting something aside, putting aside some hopeful wistful daydream.

It suddenly makes Dean wonder what it's really been like for him the last few weeks, watching Dean and Cas turning into a bona-fide couple. Watching them head off together to the same room at night, very obviously sharing a bed... while Sam goes to his own room alone, each and every night. There's been no hint of jealousy, and it's very clear Sam is happy for them both. But it's got to be throwing Sam's own solitude into especially sharp relief.


"Is that so," says Dean. Sam's totally quiet.

There's a beat of silence.

"I happen to know that she is thirty years of age, and currently single," Castiel announces. "She had her thirtieth birthday during my first cycle a few months ago. And she broke up with her boyfriend during my second cycle. I think he wasn't good for her. I think she's ready now for somebody new."

Dean bursts out laughing, Sam clears his throat awkwardly, and Cas gives them both a surprisingly cool gaze.

"Thanks for the inside scoop, Cas," says Dean, still chuckling. "I'm sure Sam's fascinated to hear all that. Sam, you need me to take any notes?"

Sam has gone a little red. "Oh, come on, guys," he complains. "I was just chatting with her, that's all. Can't a guy just chat?"

Dean snorts. "You mean, can't a guy just chat up an attractive single nurse right in the middle of a
chemo ward without taking a huge amount of grief from his buddies? An attractive nurse he's already had an unnecessary number of phone calls with? Absolutely not. No frickin' way. You are going to get grief, little brother, boatloads of it, so get used to it."

"I was just making conversation..." Sam protests weakly.

"Hey, I gotta find my entertainment where I can," says Dean. "Don't sweat it." He claps his hands like he's changing the topic, and says, "Moving on — I'm getting the munchies. We should fuel up a little. Sam, could you maybe go grab some coffee? Maybe bring back some snacks?" Sam nods with relief, and makes a beeline for the door like he's eager to escape. Dean calls to him when he's almost out the door, "Hey, see if Cas's nurse wants any coffee too, would ya? What's her name... " (Dean makes a show of having suddenly forgotten her name, tapping his forehead and gazing up at the ceiling.) "Um... What was her name? Sam, help me out here."

"Sarah," growls Sam from the doorway.

Dean snaps his fingers. "Right! Sarah, that was it. Ask Sarah if she wants any coffee."

Sam shoots him an evil glance and disappears out the door.

There's another moment of silence. Cas is now watching Dean, an eyebrow cocked.

"Just following your lead," Dean says, grinning at him. "You're the one who just had to clarify Sarah's age and marital status totally out of nowhere."

Cas gives a little laugh. "True. But I don't much see the point in wasting time." There's a crooked smile on his face now, as he adds, "Life seems far too short."

"Yeah..." says Dean, "you got a point there." Once again he reaches out and grasps Cas's hand.

Cas squeezes his hand back. Maybe it should be a solemn moment, this reminder of how short life can be, but now Cas is looking at him again with that magical little smile, and then all Dean can do is grin back at him.

It's the last good moment for a while. Fifteen minutes later, the chemo hits.

Dean and Sam actually do head back to their motel room later on Monday evening. They even try to get an early night's sleep, dutifully following Sarah's advice. But Dean ends up lying in his bed wide awake, listening to Sam's slow snoring.

Life seems far too short....

After an hour he rises and jots down a quick note for Sam: Can't sleep. Went back to hospital.

Where, of course, there's not much he can do. Cas is already in expert hands. But at least it feels better to be nearby, if just to help hold the ice cubes on Cas's neck, and pat his back while he's retching. Sarah, holding the pans in place, is mostly focused on Castiel, but now and then she gives Dean a searching look.

At eleven o'clock, when her shift is ending, there's a lull where Cas seems to have found a brief moment of calm. Sarah takes the opportunity to pull Dean out to the hallway.
"This is that moment I warned you about," she says, hands on hips. She's studying Dean's bleary-eyed expression. "The moment you should go take care of yourself."

"I tried. I couldn't sleep," Dean says. "I can't leave him." He knows Sarah is right, that he needs to take care of himself, but he just can't stand to leave Cas's side during such an awful night. He says, "Maybe I could just... sleep near him? Sleep here, instead of miles away in the motel?" He glances toward Cas's room and suggests, "I could sleep in that chair in the corner, maybe? I promise I'll stay out of the way."

Sarah gives him a calculating look. Her hands are still on her hips, head tipped a little to the side as she studies him. She's been watching Dean with Cas all afternoon, and now most of the evening, and it occurs to Dean that there's maybe been a few quick moments of that hand-holding, a few reassuring strokes-to-the-head, a couple soft pats on Cas's arm and at least one to his cheek, that just might have caught her eye.

"Brothers, huh?" she remarks.

Dean shrugs. "Uh... family."

It seems impossible to just come out and say it, and it's suddenly painfully clear to Dean just how difficult the social pressures can be. Because, who knows how any given person might react?

Dean remembers an interview he read once, in a news article about some gay-rights thing, where someone had said: The thing is, you don't "come out" just once. It's never over. You have to do it again, and again, and again, for every new person you meet.

It's sinking home now just how true that is. And how scary it feels; what a risk it is, each and every time. Sarah seems nice enough, but Dean doesn't really know her. She has Cas's care in her hands every week; what if she reacts the wrong way?

Sarah holds Dean's eyes for just a fraction too long, her brow slightly furrowed, and slowly Dean realizes that she, too, has a dilemma of her own. Even if she is cool with couples like Cas and Dean, she can't ask straight out. There are probably rules about that, policy issues maybe, legal issues. Or even just a fear of being wrong — of mistaking brotherly affection for something else and triggering an outraged complaint from an easily-offended patient or family member.

She finally says, her tone completely professional but her eyes warm and sympathetic, "Would you like me to bring in a cot for you? I can set it up by the side of his bed. My shift's technically over but it'll just take a couple minutes."

"That'd be great," Dean says, in a rush of relief. "That'd be awesome."

"We do that sometimes," she adds off-handedly, "for spouses, or, you know, partners, or other situations like, say, parents with kids, or siblings. Various sorts of situations."

He has to admire how quickly and naturally she's glided over that clue word "partner," like it's just one of a whole set of possibilities.

"Yes, please," he says, nodding. "Thanks."

She doesn't ask what "situation" Dean and Cas might be in, and she doesn't try to clarify whether "partner" is the correct term. She just heads off down the hall. Dean leans into Cas's room for a quick Cas-check (he still seems okay, even dozing), and then positions himself exactly halfway through the door, where he can keep one eye on Cas and one eye on the hallway where Sarah had gone.
Soon she reappears, coming around a corner at the far end of the hall. She's half in her civvie clothes now, a bulky parka pulled on over her scrubs for the winter weather outside, a puffy cream-colored hat jammed on her head and a little backpack slung over one shoulder. But she's also got the cot, a bulky folded thing that she's trying to wheel slowly down the hall. It's got a sticky wheel and it keeps trying to veer around, and she has to bend almost double over it, shoving at it heavily on one side to keep it going the right direction. Dean joins her to help wrestle the balky cot the rest of the way.

"Sam's single, by the way," Dean blurts out, just as they're maneuvering the cot around the door. Then he cringes so hard he actually grimaces. "Ah. Forget I said that." Sarah makes no comment; she's breathing hard as they both shove the cot through the door. "I don't know what I'm thinking," Dean whispers as they enter Cas's room. "Sorry, just forget I said that."

"Actually I might prefer to not forget that particular piece of information, if you don't mind," she whispers back, as they finally get the cot into place against a side wall. "Okay, so, can you just flip that lever there and it'll flatten out—"

By late Tuesday the bleomycin's over and the nausea's a little better, but Cas is still getting the other two drugs, and now he's racked head to toe with bouts of feverish shivering. Dean spends almost every hour in Cas's room, though Sam and Sarah between them do manage to convince him to take a few hours off now and then. And Dean even manages to remember to make sure Sam's taking some breaks, too. He even tries to encourage Sam and Sarah to get coffee together a few times. But oddly, Sam resists this idea, with a quiet, "Not while Cas is feeling this bad."

"Later, then?" Dean suggests. "After. Once he's better." Sam considers that, and he nods.

As Tuesday drags into evening and then into night, Cas seems to withdraw into himself. It's not even clear if he's aware that this is the second night that Dean's been sleeping on a cot right by his bedside. It's almost like he's gone into some kind of hibernation. A remote silence has settled over him, and in the few hours when he even seems somewhat awake, he spends long stretches curled on his side staring dully at a clock on the side-table, and only very rarely responding to Dean's occasional questions. As the hours drag by he even folds up physically, till he's curled in a small shivering ball in the bed, eyes almost always closed whether or not he's actually asleep.

Past midnight his bouts of shivering start to include fits of restlessness, his feet stirring endlessly in the blankets, hands pushing the bedding around as if it's impossible for him to get comfortable. One moment he's tossing his blankets off, the next he's grabbing fitfully at the blanket edges and pulling them back into place and huddling down under them again. Dean's unable to calm him. Very early Wednesday morning, Dean's roused from his cot by the extremely disturbing sound of Castiel actually moaning. Cas doesn't seem in pain exactly, more like he's stuck in a half-asleep state of distressed discomfort that he just can't seem to find any way out of. He's thrashing around again. The night nurse (not Sarah, but she's pleasant enough) seems unable to think of anything that might help, and she hints to Dean that at this point Cas just has to suffer through the rest of the night. But Dean's almost maddened by the sound of Cas's confused little whimpers, and at last, once the nurse has
gone, he tries to grasp Cas's hand, hoping a light hand-hold might calm him.

"No," Cas says, batting Dean's hand roughly away with an irritated swipe of his other hand. "Don't."

A few minutes later Dean, who's nearly brain-dead with fatigue, mindlessly does the same thing — automatically reaching out to take Cas's hand. It's the kind of touch Cas normally welcomes, but this time Dean accidentally brushes one of the new bruises on Cas's arm. This time Cas yanks his arm away and snaps, "Don't touch me."

_It's just the chemo_, Dean reminds himself, as he withdraws his hand, wide awake now and chastened. He thinks for a moment, and it occurs to him to try the ice-on-the-back-of-the-neck again, so he goes and gets some ice from the nurse's station. When he gets back to Cas's room he positions himself on the other side of the bed, so that he's now facing Cas's back (in order to reach the back of Cas's neck). But then Dean finds himself just sitting there, holding the bag of ice in his lap, uncertain what to do.

_It's just the chemo that's making him not want to be touched_, Dean reminds himself. It's just the chemo, it's just the bruises, just the dry cracked skin, just the terrible nausea, the fever, the aching; it's just the chemo that's making Cas so restless, so irritable, so distant and unconsolable. Normally Cas would welcome Dean's touch, clearly.

_He'll be better this weekend_, Dean thinks. But a heavy sorrow seems to be settling over him, and he realizes there's a stupidly childish sense of rejection stirring around in him now, about how Cas had batted his arm away. It's totally illogical, but it's almost making Dean's eyes prick with tears.

_This is what Sarah meant_, he realizes. He takes a long breath, and lets it out slowly.

_Everybody's exhausted, on edge, irritable. Not just Cas, but me too._

He reminds himself, _It's just the chemo. And besides, it's not about me._

_It's about Cas, and it's about what Cas needs._

He peers cautiously over Cas's shoulder and discovers that Cas's eyes are half-open now. Dean can only just see the edge of his eyelashes but it seems like Cas might be back in that semi-awake state where he's staring dully at the clock.

"Cas?" Dean finally asks, his voice gentle and quiet. "I got some ice. Want me to put it on your neck? You know, the back of your neck? If you want."

Cas gives a tiny shrug with one shoulder. He keeps staring at the clock. "Dunno," he whispers.

"I thought it might help a little."

"Don't care," says Cas.

Dean stays in his chair.

He wonders if he should dump the ice down the sink. It's already starting to melt in Dean's lap, the ziploc bag damp with condensation. But then he thinks: _Well, he didn't exactly say no._

_Maybe he's not sure?_  
_Might as well give it a try._

"Tell me if you don't want it," Dean says. Moving very slowly, he sets the ice gently against the back
of Cas's neck. Dean's careful not to touch any other part of Cas's body — just the back of the neck. Cas doesn't react at all; he just keeps staring at the clock, eyes barely open.

It's like he's drifting away. Like he's floating off down some deep, dark river and out to sea.

Cas doesn't say he likes the ice. But he also doesn't say that he doesn't like it, so Dean holds it there. It keeps wanting to slip out of place; Dean wraps it in a towel and tries to prop it up with a little pillow, but it won't stay put. Dean's bent over in an awkward position now and his neck's hurting again. He inches his chair even closer to the bed and finds a way to brace both elbows on the mattress, so that he can let his head hang down, holding the ice in place while also trying to give his sore neck some relief. He closes his eyes.

Long minutes slide by.

He said he's doing all this for me.... Dean remembers.

It's crazy, really, because no way is Dean worth all this trouble. I'm definitely not worth this, Dean thinks. Then he realizes that he's so sleepy he's whispered the words out loud, quite unintentionally.

Cas whispers, almost inaudibly, "You are," and then there's a soft touch on Dean's hand. He opens his eyes; Cas has moved one hand to the back of his own neck, so that it's partly covering Dean's fingers.


"I know," Dean whispers. "It's okay."

"Sorry—"

"It's really okay. I'll just hold the ice on, okay? If it helps?"


Dean stays.

A/N - For some reason this chapter has been one of the hardest to write, I think because Dean's out of ideas now (the feather didn't work... all their ideas haven't worked). All the cool supernatural stuff is over, none of it worked, and now all Dean can do is just watch Cas suffer. And wait. It is so grueling to have to watch these two beloved characters simply having to endure like this, even to the point where Dean's starting to fall apart physically and they're both so exhausted they start snapping at each other. But even this low point needs to be witnessed, and in the end they both learn they will always be there for each other, no matter what.

More Sunday. Thank you all for reading.

PS - please do leave a comment if you can! Your comments are what keep me going on this fic. :}
Angel of Thursday, you gotta listen to me now

A/N - Next chapter! Two in one weekend, and long ones! I've really been working hard, I swear.

Monday was bad, Tuesday was bad, and Wednesday's bad, but in the end it's Thursday that becomes the worst day of the week. And in a whole new way.

It's Wednesday afternoon by the time they decamp to the Chemo Motel, which Sam has carefully prepared again (with Sarah's help, interestingly; she spontaneously volunteers to come over to the motel on her off-hours, in the middle of the day, to help Sam prep the room). Cas is partly functional by now and it's a tremendous relief to see him approaching his old self again, finally able to sit up in bed and talk a little, then walk a little, and even managing a weak smile now and then. It's especially wonderful when he starts welcoming Dean's tentative little touches — relaxing under Dean's touch once more, and reaching out to hold Dean's hand whenever possible. All in all he definitely seems on the mend. But when they reach the motel room he warns them all, as he totters slowly into the room with Dean gripping one of his arms, "I should perhaps warn you all that Wednesday evening, and the next day, can be... somewhat difficult. On Week 1, I mean. When I get the three days of chemo in a row, my, um... " He darts a cautious glance at Sarah, who's doing a final fluffing-up of the bedpillows. "My... defenses are lower than usual. It's not nausea, thankfully, but..." Another pause. "I don't know if it's the etoposide or the cisplatin, some effect of those particular drugs, but... " Finally he concludes with, "I might get a little distracted. But don't worry about it."

"Like... your shields are down?" suggests Dean, not quite sure what Cas means.

"Exactly," says Cas, relaxing a little, as if he's glad Dean's understood. Dean and Sam exchange a puzzled glance. Presumably Cas just means that he feels especially drained on the first night out of the hospital, after this awful week that's been so chock-full of chemo. But surely he's much better now, right? He says the nausea has almost entirely abated by now (though he still can't eat much), the shaky chills have stopped and the fever's almost gone, and even Sarah seems to agree that the worst is over. When Sarah leaves shortly afterwards, headed to her work shift, she does one last check of Cas's vitals and declares that he's in pretty good shape. So, with both Sam's and Cas's urging, Dean finally allows himself to flop down for a nap on the extra mattress in the corner.

But sleep is not exactly refreshing. Dean's soon swept into a dark, confusing dream in which he and Cas are in an incredibly tiny, cramped hospital room where all the furniture and bedding seems oddly tangled and compressed. For some ill-defined reason the room is full of clocks, all of which are set to different times. In the dream Cas is doing pretty well, sitting up and able to talk, and he keeps looking around at all the clocks.
There's one little clock whose hands are nearly at midnight. It has a small picture of some mountains on the clock face. Cas points to it and says to Dean, "See that one? It's nearly time."

"But they're all set to different times—" Dean starts to say, but Cas shakes his head, saying, "Doesn't matter. The first midnight starts it." Dean has no idea what he means, but Cas reaches out and takes Dean's hand. In the dream Cas's hand is fever-hot, but he still seems very alert, watching the clock intently.

The little clock with the mountain-picture reaches midnight, its second hand sweeping smoothly past the 12.

Cas sits up even straighter, still gripping Dean's hand. "Listen," he says, scanning around as if he's waiting for something. Dean listens too, and soon he hears a distant hubbub, a commotion that gets louder and louder. It's coming from all directions.

It's voices. Human voices. Men and women, adults, children... all sorts of voices.

It gets louder, and louder, and louder, till there seem to be hundreds of voices, coming from all around. Dean's thinking, Are they all out in the hallway? But then the walls fade away and soon Cas's hospital bed is sitting incongruously in the middle of a vast open prairie, with mountains visible on the horizon — the same mountains, Dean realizes, that had been pictured on the clock-face. Some of the voices are getting more audible; most are just talking but there are some louder ones, some yells and screams, and, disturbingly, Dean can even hear some sobbing. There must be a crowd of people approaching, some kind of mob that's walking closer, maybe just over the horizon. Dean's on his feet now, looking all around at the mountains and trying to figure out where all the people are, when he hears a whistling noise. Something whizzes past his head and there's a horrible wet thunk, and Dean spins around to see, to his shock and horror, that Castiel has been struck by an arrow.

The shaft is sticking right out of Cas's chest. Cas just looks down a little sadly at the arrow shaft, and a trickle of blood starts running down his chest from the wound.

"It's started," he says to Dean, with eerie calm. Dean jumps over to him desperately, grabbing him by one shoulder and tentatively touching the arrow shaft (he's terrified of moving it, but is hoping to at least slow the bleeding somehow). But Dean's hand passes right through the arrow shaft. It's like it's a ghost arrow. Yet Cas's face is pinched with pain now, and he's going pale. Ghost arrow or not, it's clearly hurting him.

There's another whoosh, and another, and another, and arrows are flying at them from all directions. Somehow none of the arrows hit Dean, but all of them hit Cas, and Dean yells "NO!" in horror, grabbing Cas and trying to shield him. Somehow, impossibly, Cas is still alive. But he just closes his eyes, letting his head sink onto Dean's shoulder, as if all he can do is try to endure it.

Dean wakes thrashing, his pillow clutched tightly to his chest. Sam's shaking his shoulder, whispering "Dean! Dean! Wake up! Something's wrong."

Dean scrambles to his feet in a single uncoordinated lurch. He's still clutching his pillow tight to his body, half thinking the pillow is Cas. "Arrows, is it the arrows?" he mumbles. Sam gives him a puzzled look. "It's Cas," Sam says, tugging Dean over toward the bed. Dean's limbs are heavy with sleep and his mind still foggy, and as he tries to stumble toward Cas's bed, his own blanket tangles around his feet and he nearly falls, saved only by Sam keeping a firm hold of his upper arm.

"Listen to him," says Sam, once they reach Cas's bedside. He gently pulls the pillow out of Dean's arms (Dean's still clinging onto it) and gestures to Cas. "Dean, does he ever talk in his sleep or anything? Have you ever seen him like this?"
Dean stares down at Castiel, slowly coming more awake. It seems Cas is not being skewered by
dozens of ghost-arrows after all. He's not in his hospital bed at all, in fact, and they're not in that
dreamlike prairie by the mysterious mountains; they're in the Chemo Motel, and it's Wednesday
night, and Cas should be better by now. He was better just hours ago. But now he's curled tightly on
his side clutching his head, his eyes screwed closed, his whole face locked in a grimace. Cas is
muttering something, and Dean leans close to hear.

"Get up, get up, move—" Cas is whispering, in between heavy, strained gasps. "Move, hurry, hurry,
get up, I can't help, I can't help, keep moving—"

"No bleeding. No throwing up," Sam whispers. "Still a touch of the fever but really not bad. But a
little while ago he starting saying all these strange things, and holding his head like that. I thought it
was just a dream at first but it's been getting worse. I don't know why. And I can't wake him."

Dean and Sam spend the next several minutes alternately trying to shake Cas awake, but Cas seems
stuck in a nightmare. Sam flicks the light on, and they're both alarmed and unsettled to find that
Castiel is weeping steadily. Not in racking sobs but with almost an exhausted calm, taking long,
slow, heavy breaths while a steady trickle of tears slides slowly down his cheeks and across his nose.
Occasionally he flinches, a little bodywide jolt like an electric shock, and Dean can't help thinking of
those mysterious ghost-arrows striking him, one after another, in that spooky dream.

Cas's murmured whispers never quite stop, though the words keep changing. First it's "I can't help,"
for a while. Then, a while later: "You have to run down the stairs. I know that's toward the flames.
You have to. It's your only chance." (Dean and Sam exchange a baffled glance.) Then after a brief
pause there's a sequence with "Hide in the closet. Now, now, go, hide." Then a long muttered string
of "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry...." Finally he seems to circle back to where he'd started, with "Get
up, move, keep moving, don't stop—"

"Is he... like... cycling through different nightmares?" Sam finally says. "Seems like in one he's in a
fire? And in another he's, what, with somebody in a closet or something?"

Dean's standing there tensely, fists clenched, even bouncing a little from foot to foot; he's ready for
action now, automatically gearing up for some kind of a fight, but totally unsure what to do. He'd
been prepared for nausea, he was ready for fever and chills and even bleeding-out, but this? What do
they even do? Who could they even call?

At last there comes a brief pause; Cas's muttered whispers slow and finally stop.

"Cas?" Dean calls, bending over to shake him again.

At long last Cas's eyelids drag open.

"Jesus christ," Dean blurs out in relief.

"He's not here," whispers Cas, blinking at Dean's face. "He can't hear them. It's only me tonight. It's
always only me. And I can't help them, Dean... I can't do anything...."

"You were dreaming," Dean informs him, kneeling down by the bed to get eye-to-eye with him.
Dean cups his face with one hand, stroking his cheek gently with the pad of his thumb. "You back
with us? You're okay. Everything's okay."

Cas's eyes slowly focus on Dean's. "Not a dream," he says. "Sorry... It'll be like this, all Thursday."

"It's Wednesday," Dean tells him.
"It's Thursday in the old lands," Cas whispers, his eyes sliding closed again.

Dean and Sam look at each other. "Thursday?" Sam mouths to Dean. And something starts pinging at Dean's memory.

"Thursday in the Ural Mountains.... Been Thursday there for a while...." says Cas, almost dreamily. His eyes are still closed, but there's a frown creasing his forehead like he's assessing something. "Thursday in Nova Scotia, now, too..." he adds. "Thursday in Peru." He goes quiet, and a cold chill grips Dean's heart as he realizes Cas looks like he's listening to something, just as he had been doing in Dean's dream. He thinks of the dream with all the clocks; time zones? Had those strange mountains on the clock been the Ural Mountains? Had that dream been... Cas's dream, somehow? Some form of dream-walking, maybe. A dream with something about time? Maybe about when Wednesday becomes Thursday...

A fresh spasm seems to hit Cas then, and his face scrunches up, eyes screwed tightly closed again, and soon he's grabbing at his head with both hands again, fingertips digging into his gray wool hat as if he's got a splitting headache. "No, no, no..." he whispers to himself. "I'm sorry..."

It's at this point that Dean remembers that this is not the only time he's seen Cas clutch at his head in this way.

Cas has done that a few times in the past — whenever he's gotten a sudden strong blast of angel-communication. Whenever the angel-radio flares up, with a bunch of angels talking all at once. And a couple times when there's been some weird burst of Heavenly power.

"Cas, is it angel-radio?" Dean says sharply. "Are you hearing something?"

Cas nods, eyes still closed. Then he actually hisses to himself. "Losing her," he mutters, and he starts speaking in some language that Dean doesn't know. It doesn't sound like Enochian. Whatever he's saying sounds urgent and worried, and then Cas takes in a long gasp and holds his breath. His hands tighten on his head, the tendons of his forearms standing out so rigidly that Dean starts to worry that he'll actually hurt himself — strain an arm or even bruise his own skull, he's clinging that tightly. Dean's about to try to drag Cas's hands off his head when Cas's tension abruptly breaks and he goes limp with an exhausted gasp. His whole body's drenched in sweat and he's panting suddenly, like he's been running up a mountain; he's even got a nosebleed now. His eyes flicker open again, and they're bright with tears.

"She died," he informs Dean. He wipes his nose almost absentmindedly, and doesn't seem to realize his nose is bleeding; there's soon blood all over his hands, and on his pillow. He's still gasping, with rough sobs. "I couldn't help her, Dean," he says, and he sounds truly distressed. "I couldn't help her...."

"Who?" Dean asks. Sam throws him a little hand-towel; Dean presses it to Cas's nose.

Cas barely seems to notice the towel. Through it, he mutters, "Girl praying to me."

Sam and Dean stare at each other again, aghast.

It clicks. "Angel of Thursday," Dean whispers to Sam, and Sam's eyes widen.

They've long known that this is listed in the lore as one of Castiel's angelic traits. In the oldest stories, his name is often associated with Thursdays. But it's never been clear what being the "angel of Thursday" actually means, or whether it means anything at all. Dean's a little ashamed to realize that he'd more or less forgotten about it. Until now.
Cas's breathing is steadying. Sam gets some ice to hold to Cas's nose, and finally the bleeding's getting under control, and at last Cas starts to speak. "I think she was in... Kazakhstan somewhere?" he says. "Poor. Herders... herding family... sheep. She was hit by... something, a truck? I couldn't see... she was delirious. Lying in a ditch. Crawling. Such pain. Nobody knew, nobody found her, she was dying... Her grandmother had told her my name when she was young." He pulls the ice off his nose long enough to look up at Dean, and his voice cracks as he says, "She was desperate, Dean. Desperate enough to try me... but I couldn't help...."

Sam breaks in with, "Cas, you're hearing prayers?"

Cas's eyes shift slowly to Sam's, and he nods. "Some villages, some tribes... still know my name," he whispers. He takes a long breath. He finally seems to notice he's been bleeding, but he just looks idly at the bloody towel and the bloody bag of ice, like the blood is not of much interest. Sam hands him a couple of new, clean, damp washcloths and Cas rubs his face more-or-less clean with one, and then rubs the other over his head, deliberately pulling his gray hat off in the process. He scrubs the washcloth over the bare skin of his scalp several times, like he's trying to wipe his whole head clean, not just wiping the blood off but almost like he's trying to wipe the prayers off. He rubs a forearm across his eyes, too, then leaves his arm there for a moment, letting it cover his face as if he's instinctively trying to get behind a fragment of shelter for a moment.

Dean and Sam both wait, too confused to even know what to say. Finally Cas lowers his arm and continues, his voice a little stronger. "There's still groups that know all the old angel names... who's associated with which day. On Thursdays, it's... endless. All kinds of prayers. It didn't used to be this bad, though...." As he's speaking he still keeps flinching, flashes of worry and pain flickering over his face every few seconds. It almost looks like some kind of a nervous tic, but Dean wonders now if Cas is being bombarded constantly with random prayers even as he's talking, prayers that are hitting him from all sides like a storm of tiny bullets.

_The arrows_, Dean thinks. _I'd bet anything that he was dreaming a normal dream at first, dreaming of being in the hospital. And then the prayers started. And for some reason he pulled me into his dream right when it changed. Right when the prayers were starting to take over._

_Like he needed my help? And just pulled me in somehow?_

Dean's still been kneeling on the floor; he gets up now and sits on the side of the bed, finding a little spot near Cas's knees where he can wedge himself. Dean offers his hand, a little hesitantly; Cas grabs on tightly, but his flinching doesn't stop.

"You're...uh... kind of jumping," Sam points out gently. "Is that more prayers? Right now?"

Cas nods, with yet another flinch. "Mostly just... little prayers," he says. "People asking for... blessings, for luck... searching for hope. Routine, mostly...." He closes his eyes briefly and mutters, apparently in answer to some distant prayer that's just arrived, "I'm sorry, I don't know what a penalty kick even is...."

Sam lets out an amazed snort of laughter, and after a few seconds Cas continues, "Mostly little prayers. But some... some are desperate. Always a few, on any Thursday. Usually just a few dozen, but, Dean, Sam, you can't imagine, it's, it's, it's so awful to hear and to not be able to help. It's so..." He actually shudders. "It's so much more vivid now than it used to be," he finally says.

There's a brief pause then, maybe just a lucky break in between randomly arriving prayers. Sam silently offers him a drink of water, holding out a bottle of water with one of the little bendy straws, and Cas sucks greedily at the straw. (He keeps hold of Dean's hand with his other hand.) He nods a brief thanks, hands the bottle back to Sam, and finally says, "When I was an angel I could ignore it
when I needed to. Turn it down. Or mute it entirely. Turn it off."

Dean, of course, can't help remembering a few times when Cas hadn't answered his own prayers. Had he just been too swamped? Had he had to "mute" everything?

And then he realizes that those times when Cas had answered Dean's prayers, Cas must have been filtering through thousands of other prayers somehow, just to even be able to hear Dean's. Especially if it had been on a Thursday... Had any of Dean's prayers been sent on a Thursday? Dean can't even remember.

It's starting to seem incredible that Cas could ever even hear, let alone answer, any of Dean's prayers at all.

Cas says slowly, "Then when I lost my grace it all went silent. I thought I'd lost the ability to receive prayers at all." A rueful smile crosses his face. "I actually missed it...."

A few more prayers seem to hit him just then, but just mild ones apparently (Dean's already thinking of those as "soccer prayers") for Cas only flinches again, eyes flickering shut for a moment.

When he opens his eyes again he says, "The two extra drugs this week, the etoposide and cisplatin... one of them, or both maybe, makes the prayers come through again. I don't know why, or how, but I usually get those drugs on Wednesdays and the prayers arrive absolutely full-volume again all through Thursday. Even more loudly than when I had my grace. And I can't mute it in the least." He takes a long breath. "Most prayers are just... mild distractions, really. But some are so strong, people who really need help, and I can't help...."

"Okay," says Dean, squeezing his hand gently. "Okay. So, does this last twenty-four hours? Like... when it's Thursday in Bethlehem, or something?"

Cas shakes his head. "When it's Thursday anywhere," he explains. "When the person believes it's Thursday, wherever they happen to be. And it's surprisingly... widely scattered. I mostly hear from the Urals and the Caucasus, and the Middle East. And also, some in Spain for some reason... one village in Scotland... There's this one family in Nova Scotia who pipe up now and then. I've no idea how they ever heard of my name, but for two centuries now, there's been this one family in a fishing village on Cape Breton Island that I keep hearing from. And then there's a scattering of kabalists and pagans around the world — they dig up every angel name—there's more and more of them, too—" (There's a slightly annoyed tone in his voice as he says this, like the last thing he needs is more kabalists and pagans joining in with all the hubbub.) He adds, "And there's also a couple of Andean villages who have somehow held onto my name ever since the guinea pig incident. Those are usually the last to join in."

Cas has been talking in full sentences for a few minutes, but now he goes abruptly quiet and stiffens again, his eyes squeezing closed and his face scrunching up again in pain. Simultaneously he claps one hand to his head, gripping his bare scalp so tightly his fingers go white. His other hand tightens on Dean's, so hard that Dean flinches. And Cas starts muttering again.

Dean and Sam both try to ask him a few more questions but Cas can't seem to hear them now. It becomes clear he's getting a fresh burst of a "desperate" prayer. It seems to be from one of the previous people, the person who's trapped in a fire; it becomes clear that they're in a burning building and they've failed to run down the stairs in time, and the fire has reached their room now, and they've embarked on another round of desperate prayer for help. Cas begs them to jump out the window. But Dean and Sam never learn what happens, for that prayer is soon overwhelmed by panicked pleas from a grieving mother who's wild with despair as she watches her critically ill child draw its last breaths, in a tiny, cold mountain hut in some unnamed hamlet. She's run out of fuel for her smoky
little cookstove and there's no source of heat; she's clutching the child to her chest, trying to wrap some insufficient clothing around it, and she's begging Castiel to help. From Cas's whispered comments, Dean realizes she's trying to bargain, offering everything she's got, offering her very soul. (Dean almost wants to chime in with advice about crossroads demons, as bad an idea as that is. And Sam asks Cas where she is, but Cas can't seem to pick up her exact location. "Aral Sea area?" is his best guess.) It's awful to hear about the mother's desperate begging, even secondhand, and Dean's soon gritting his teeth while Sam starts pacing back and forth by the bed, hands on his head. But all Cas can do is mutter, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry..."

No angel feather to help, this time; no miraculous Emily-like revival. All Cas can do is hear the woman's grief as her child draws its last breath.

He doesn't get even a moment to relax; several more prayers arrive then, all in a row. First an elderly woman lost in a blizzard (this seems to be another person Cas has heard from earlier, the one he'd been telling to "keep moving"); then a new one from a man somewhere on the Black Sea coast who's apparently about to kill himself (he seems to be asking Cas to "give him a sign"); and, maybe most horrifying, a girl somewhere in the Balkans who's actually in the middle of being raped. Dean and Sam's mouths both drop open in horror as they realize what Cas is hearing from the girl. She's apparently praying to Cas silently, and perhaps mostly as a means of mental escape; she doesn't expect rescue; she's only hoping for survival.

Cas is obviously trying to give some advice and comfort to each one of these people, but it's unclear if they can hear him. It seems not; there's never any hint of improvement in anybody's situation. Sam wonders aloud if maybe they can somehow contact overseas emergency services and he's soon flipping through foreign websites on his phone, murmuring, "Do the Balkans have 911?" But it unfolds far too rapidly. The woman's child has died; the elderly woman sinks into a delirium in the snowstorm; and the man on the Black Sea coast goes abruptly silent.

The girl, at least, survives. Cas reports that her attackers have left and that the girl has picked herself up and is staggering home numbly.

"She's thanking me," Cas groans, clutching his head again. "I didn't do anything. I didn't do anything!"

His nose is bleeding again. More heavily this time.

They work on him a while, with more towels and more ice, till the bleeding slows, and then Sam pulls Dean aside. "We're never gonna to find any of these people in time to help them," Sam whispers. "Not from here in Denver when he can't even tell what country they're in. And Dean, this is gonna completely burn him out. He really can't afford to keep losing blood like this. Especially not with his platelet count so low from the chemo. They always say it's really bad for chemo patients to bleed at all."

"It can't have been happening every month, can it?" Dean wonders. "Every Week 1?"

Sam shrugs. "Maybe. It'd be just like him to never mention it."

They both watch Cas for a few moments; he seems to be in another brief hiatus between bursts of prayers. One forearm's across his eyes again, the other hand holding a new bag of ice to his nose while he tries to catch his breath.

Sam whispers, "He might've been tough enough to get through this sort of stuff a few months ago. But he just doesn't have much stamina now."
"Not to mention, he doesn't have much blood now," points out Dean, who's really getting worried.

"Yeah. We gotta find a way to stop this."

The solution comes to Dean in a flash. "We gotta swamp his prayer-signal," he says, and he turns to Sam and explains, "We both pray to him. We'll be louder. I mean, I hope we'll be louder. We're closer, and we know him. We can't save everyone he's hearing from, but maybe we can at least shield him."

"Of course, of course," whispers Sam, his expression brightening. "And we send him, what, prayers to... be happy, I guess?"

"Let's tell him to sleep," Dean suggests. "To rest. To heal."

They try it. Dean goes back to his spot on the edge of Cas's bed and gently takes hold of one of his hands (again Cas clutches back, though — alarmingly — his grip seems weaker this time). Sam pulls one of the rickety little motel chairs close to the bed, puts his elbows on his knees, props his chin on his fists, and stares at Cas's face. Dean checks his phone for the time; it's just past midnight.

Thursday, local time. It occurs to him that it must already have been Thursday for quite a while in the Middle East; it's unclear if Cas has been hearing prayers for hours already, maybe while he slept, or if he only starts picking up prayers once the drugs get to a certain level into his bloodstream.

Either way, he's certainly hearing prayers now. And Thursday's only just started here in Denver.

There's a long day ahead.

Dean closes his eyes, trying to focus enough to get into that almost trance-like "prayer" state. But he's so rattled by the whole strange situation that it takes a couple of tries.

"Castiel. Castiel. Castiel," Dean murmurs softly, trying to send the words out not just with his voice, but with his mind as well, through that mysterious and elusive prayer-channel. Finally he starts to feel like the prayer has really started, and he says, "Castiel. Angel of Thursday, right? Well, it's Thursday, right here and right now. So, Angel of Thursday, you gotta listen to me now." He feels Cas's hand twitch, and looks down to see Cas blinking up at him in startled surprise. Dean gives him a smile but almost loses the thread of the prayer, so he closes his eyes again, trying to "think at" Cas, resisting the urge to lapse into regular speech and trying instead to really keep the prayer going mentally.

Dean thinks: You gotta rest. You just need to rest. And sleep. And get better.

Don't worry about anything. Don't worry about anybody — all those other people, it's sad, I know, it's awful, but they're just too far away and we can't even figure out where they are. We can't help everybody... you gotta just let them go. Just rest, angel... Take it easy... I'm right here with you. I'll watch over you.

(Dean then has a slightly startled moment when he realizes he's offering to "watch over" Castiel, just as Castiel has often offered, in the past, to "watch over" Dean. Is this, maybe, what it really means to an angel, to watch over each other?)

You just go to sleep. Everything's all right.

It seems it might be working. He feels Cas's hand relax, and risks opening his eyes again to find that Cas's eyes have drifted shut. Best of all, the flinching's stopped. Cas lets out a long, slow, sigh; and another; his shoulders relax, and his fingers open slowly, till his hand is loose and limp in Dean's.

At last it seems he's found his way to some kind of calm sleep. "No nightmares, now, Cas," Dean
whispers to him. "No prayers. Only good dreams. Just rest."

They manage to keep up the prayers for about half an hour while Cas sleeps. But there comes a moment when a truck backfires outside in the parking lot and both Sam and Dean have a moment of inattention, a simultaneous lapse of concentration. Cas snaps awake with a lurch, instantly clutching his head as a whole fresh crop of prayers seem to almost attack him all at once, like they've been piling up in some sort of queue. Now there's a boy along the Caspian Sea coast who's just been in a car crash and is sending out panicky prayers from inside the wrecked car; there's an eight-year-old girl in the Andes (the first South American prayer, Dean notices) who's trying to lead her sick mother down a long mountain road to a local clinic in the wee hours of the morning. The eight-year-old's carrying her little baby sister, and they've already been going for miles and she's exhausted, but she keeps coaxing her mother onward, in a long stumbling walk toward help. And there's an abrupt and desperate prayer from somebody caught in a flash flood in mid-morning somewhere in Bulgaria, who seems to be chancing helplessly at Cas while he clings to a tree, hoping for the flood to subside.

Cas is weeping again. (With yet another nosebleed. There's a stack of towels wedged around his head now.) Each prayer seems a spear right to his heart. The arrow metaphor from Cas's dream had been all too accurate; whatever dispassionate emotional armor he must once have had as an angel seems long gone, and each hopeless prayer seems to pierce him right to the bone.

Dean's already started up his own prayer again, but it's a little hard to get really settled into it while also still hearing these appalling stories via Cas's whispers. He finally has to resort to actually singing a lullaby to Castiel — mostly just to calm himself. Lullabies seem maybe a little babyish for the situation, a little too saccharine-sweet, but it's all Dean can think of, and the sing-song rhythms of the old nursery songs finally allow Dean to get himself into a mellower state of mind. And, then, to direct that mellowness toward Castiel.

He's well into his third muttered rendition of "Rock-a-bye, angel" when Sam whispers in Dean's ear, "You keep praying. I'm calling in the cavalry." Dean cracks one eye open; Sam's backing off to the far corner of the room and is digging his phone out of his pocket, and then Dean hears him say quietly, "Hey, Claire? You got a minute? Sorry, I know it's late, but we kinda need your help. I know you weren't planning on coming out to Kansas till tomorrow, but look, it turns out there's something you can help with right now, from right where you are. Is Jody there too?"

Jody and Claire are onboard immediately (and even Alex too, who's never even met Castiel but seems eager to help). Sam's quickly arranging a rotating set of prayer-shifts. Jody and Claire take first shift, and there's even some discussion of whether they can pray effectively while they drive. It seems they're all planning to reunite at the bunker as soon as possible, in the hope that physical proximity to Castiel will make everybody's prayers stronger.

Jody and Claire get started right away, and even though they're still a couple states away, and are also apparently going up against the three powerful competing prayers from the Caspian Sea car crash victim, the Bulgaria flash-flood man and the little Peruvian girl, it seems to help nonetheless. Jody and Claire are a bit closer than any of those other three locations. And maybe the fact that they know Cas personally gives their prayers extra strength? Dean's unsure, but either way it seems to be working; Cas is soon relaxing again, and Dean and Sam have a moment to plan.

"Still not enough people," says Dean. "They're gonna wear out soon. It's hard to keep that kind of focus, especially if they're driving. And we're gonna have to go all night and most of tomorrow."

Sam's staring at his phone again, like he's thinking. "I wonder if...." he says, hesitating. "I wonder if Sharon might be willing. Or Emily."

"They don't know he's an angel," Dean points out. "He told them he wasn't."
Sam gives him a skeptical look. "Yeah, right. Cas cruises into Emily's room and plunks a *feather* on her throat and Sharon watches her little girl get magically, *instantly*, healed from terminal stage-4 cancer, and Emily's been seeing Cas's wings for like a month already, so I'm sure Sharon was totally 'Oh, he's *definitely* not an angel, because he said he wasn't.'"

Dean has to concede the point, and soon Sam's flipping through his phone contacts. "I wonder if Sarah might know how to reach them..." Sam murmurs. "It'd be irregular, of course, for her to give me their contact info—"


"... but, thing is, Dean, when I brought her that coffee we got into this conversation—"

"Did you now," says Dean.

Sam scowls at him. "Now is *not* the time. Just a *little* conversation, anyway. We got into this *little* conversation, and out of the blue she starts telling me about how stunned the whole staff was about Emily. I guess Emily came back for some follow-up work and she's completely cancer-free. Full remission. They're all amazed. And they all know it happened right when Cas visited. And, it also turns out Emily had already told the entire clinic staff about Cas's wings. Of course they were all thinking that the wing thing was just some kid stuff, just make-believe, but... Sarah's not dumb. I mean, she doesn't know he's an angel exactly, not literally, but she already knew there's something a little... *decidedly unique* about him, is how she put it." Sam hesitates, and adds, "She said there's always been something a little odd about his case — something about the way the anti-emetics don't work on him, and I guess the progression's unusual, something weird about the histology and stuff." (Dean has no idea what "histology and stuff" means, and he's pretty sure Sam doesn't know either, but Dean nods knowingly.) "And see, thing is," adds Sam, "Sarah brought all this up on her own. She wasn't asking anything outright, but it was like she was trying to give me this big obvious opportunity for me to say something." Sam hefts his phone in his hand, and he's getting a look on his face like he's just talked himself into a decision. "Worth a try," he says. "Can't hurt, right? And she gave me her cell number." (Dean lets the obvious joke slide, about Sam and Sarah trading cell numbers; Sam's right, now is clearly not the time for that kind of joking.)

But Dean's a little uncertain. As much as he's been liking Sarah, generally they try to avoid dragging additional people into their inner circle unless it's absolutely necessary. But it's already coming clear that this is turning into one of those "absolutely necessary" moments. (Not to mention that Sarah seems fairly cool. And she *did* give Sam her number.)

Dean finally nods, saying "If we could get just a couple more Goodnight-Moon prayers winging his way, it might help. Go for it." Sam disappears out the door to the parking lot with his phone while Dean stands guard over Cas, swapping out the current set of bloody towels for some fresh ones, and also trying to assess, mostly from the frequency of Cas's flinching (very low, now) whether the Jody/Claire prayer combo is still working.

Sam reappears a few minutes later, whispering, "Guess what, turns out Sharon's been wanting to get in touch with Cas! She'd already given the go-ahead for Sarah to put us all in touch with each other! So I called Sharon, didn't tell her much but just said Cas really needs happy prayers sent his way tonight and tomorrow, prayers to tell him to rest and heal, as many prayers as possible all through Thursday. And she was like, say no more, I know exactly what you mean, we're on it, me and Em both. And..." Sam pauses, a hesitant smile flitting over his face. "And get this. Sarah says she'll try a few prayers too. I wasn't even sure whether to mention it to her but then I thought, what the hell, we could use one more person, and I just said, hey, if you want to send Cas a few prayers that'd be really cool, like tomorrow especially, and guess what she says? She says, I just happened to google
Castiel's name the other day and, she says, did you know there's an angel with his exact same name who's supposedly the Angel of Thursday? And I was like, oh huh, really? And she's like, yes really, Sam. And I'm like, what a funny coincidence, anyway could you pray to him? And she's all, absolutely."

"I'm so grateful to you all," Cas keeps saying, Friday night over dinner.

After a grueling Thursday drive from the Chemo Motel, with Cas huddled in the back seat dozing while the lullaby-prayers kept coming from everybody else, they'd finally arrived back at the bunker late Thursday evening. Where they'd found Jody, Claire and Alex all there waiting for them, with one of Jody's homecooked meals piping-hot on the stove, the fridge full of food and stocked with beer, and everybody's beds made up and waiting. Alex and Claire had even still been trading prayer-shifts when they'd pulled in. (Jody'd taken over the organization of the "prayer squad" with almost military efficiency. She'd even found a new recruit: Sheriff Donna, who apparently has been chiming in from her own home state of Minnesota.)

Cas had collapsed into his bed almost instantly, but today, Friday, he seems really back on his feet at last. As the final traces of the last two chemo drugs finally left his system, his weird angel-radio abilities seem to have turned off again. And, additionally, of course, Thursday is at last over. The prayers have all stopped (till next month, anyway).

Cas is even eating again. Dean's been sitting by his side tonight at dinner, feeling almost light-headed with relief just to see Cas slowly, but steadily, eating a small plate of Jody's delicious Friday night dinner — rosemary roast chicken, mashed potatoes, and perfectly-done peas swimming in butter and a bit of pepper. Cas has now gotten to a small slice of excellent pumpkin pie that Claire and Alex have somehow whipped up, and though it's a very small slice, he's eating it, forkful by slow forkful. Remarkably, Dean doesn't even want much pie himself (which is completely bizarre) — he's getting that much pleasure just from seeing Cas eat his own slice.

Dean feels almost like he's floating. It's partly just the relief; the Thursday prayer-assault had been a totally unexpected crisis right when they'd already all been exhausted. And it had been more than a little startling, too, to re-discover that even though Castiel has been seeming so very mortal lately, even though he's been suffering in such a sadly mundane, physical, human way from a mundane, physical chemotherapy treatment, he does still retain some angelic traits. And some ways in which the chemo really does hit him differently. It'd actually been a shock to be reminded how unique he really is; the whole thing had seemed out of left field. But they'd adapted. They'd found a solution, and they'd actually managed to help him get through even this bizarre, and uniquely angelic, side effect.

Somehow it makes Dean feel hopeful. If Cas still has a few tiny bits of angel in him... and if they can roll with even unexpected punches like this last one, and somehow come out on top.... maybe all hope isn't lost? Maybe there's still a few things they could try?

Dean doesn't exactly have a plan yet, but at least it's making him feel slightly better. Like a stubborn little spark of hope is resurfacing in his heart.

And one thing's for sure: Hellish Week 1 is finally over.

Of course, Week 2's already in sight (it'll start all over again on Monday, though at least just with a
single day of chemo this time). But it feels incredible to even get just a couple days off.

Dean stretches back in his chair, one hand holding a beer, trying to soak up every single second of relative calm.

Then he realizes he's rubbing Cas's back gently with his other hand, now and then stroking the back of Cas's neck. Dean hadn't even noticed he was doing it. Dean hesitates, then, his hand pausing on Cas's upper back. Everybody's here. Everybody can see. Not just Sam, but Jody and Alex and Claire too.

But then he thinks, *Oh, for chrissake. Life is too short. What the hell.* And he leaves his hand exactly where it is, resting in the middle of Cas's back. He then lets his hand drift slightly upward; he gently strokes the back of Cas's neck. Cas, in turn, smiles at him, and — very visibly and obviously, right in front of everyone — he sets a hand on Dean's knee.

And nobody seems the slightest bit surprised. There's maybe the briefest exchange of glances between Jody and Claire, with something that looks a bit like a "See, I told you so" look from Claire (it's answered by an entirely unsurprised "Like I didn't already know" sort of a look from Jody). Alex doesn't even bat an eye.

Dean feels himself relax a little, and he starts moving his hand over Cas's back in a bit of a wider circle, with a sense of a little more freedom.

It had seemed like it might be a little... constricting, or worrying even, to have all the extra people here. A little crowded, maybe. But instead it's been nothing but good. Truth is, they really did need the help. (It doesn't hurt that the bunker's so big; there's still so many unused bedrooms, and dorm rooms, that the bunker seems to have absorbed the three additional people almost effortlessly.)

And they're family. They're *all* family, now, even Alex.

Cas has embarked on another round of thank-you's, and Jody finally speaks up.

"We're just so glad we could help," she says. "Sam, I would've been so pissed if you hadn't called us. As soon as Claire explained what was going on we were all, like, prayer *machines!*"

Claire's nodding, adding in, "Prayed our little butts off. Alex too, even. Though she needed a little, like, Prayer 101."

"Vampires aren't really big on prayer," mutters Alex, glancing down at her plate. "Never really done it much before."

"I have," says Claire. "I used to do it for hours when I was a kid."

Dean feels Cas's shoulders tense under his hand, and Cas gives Claire a dismayed and saddened look. He takes a deep breath, and there's a distinct shift of warmth around Dean's hand — as if Cas's wings, possibly, have started to droop down on either side of Dean's hand. Dean's sure Cas is about to launch on a long heartfelt apology.

But Claire just gives him a little smile and says, forestalling whatever he was about to say, "I just meant, I got pretty good at it. I learned how to go into this, like, prayer zone, kinda. I can keep it up for ages."

Cas relaxes slightly. "You can indeed," he confirms to her. "Impressive focus." (Claire actually grins, like it's a real compliment.) Cas goes on, "I was so touched when I realized what you were doing." He looks around the table, at everybody. "All of you. It helped enormously, all of your prayers. I
can't even describe what a sheer relief it was just to be able to get some respite."

Claire says, "I never even thought how many people you must hear from."

Cas nods. "Even for a lesser-known angel like myself, it still adds up to quite a lot of people. And unfortunately it's just too many people to help. Even in the old times when we were down on Earth much more often, I usually couldn't respond to even a fraction of a fraction of those in need." With a long sigh, he adds, "I wish I could have helped all those poor people from last night. I keep thinking about them...." He pauses for a moment; and there's another drifting of warmth around Dean's hand, a compressing this time, like Cas's damaged wings are folding in.

"Doesn't seem fair that you have to still hear the prayers, if you can't help them," says Claire. "Dean told us some of the things you were hearing. It sounded... " She shudders. "Awful. I mean, back when I used to pray to you, sure I had my problems, but at least I wasn't literally dying, or trapped in a fire, or...." She shakes her head. "My problems must've seemed such small-potatoes," she finally says. There's a contemplative look on her face.

"I wanted to reply to you, Claire, I truly did," says Castiel. "So many times I tried to, but — well, honestly, the Apocalypse had the most frustrating way of interfering with things." Claire actually lets out a little snort of laughter at that. But her laughter fades when Cas says, with obvious sorrow, "Now I can't do anything helpful. Without the use of my wings..." (More warmth slides past Dean's hand again, as if the wings are drooping again.) Cas pauses, then finally says, "Even if I still had my powers of flight, I don't have any grace any more anyway. I'm really not an angel anymore. I couldn't even figure out where anybody even was. I couldn't do a thing. I just can't help anybody anymore."

Dean puts in, "You helped Emily. Don't forget that. That's huge."

Cas looks at him.

"One starfish at a time," says Claire. "Remember?"

He nods at her, slowly.

Sam says, "You can't always save the entire world, Cas. We all know there's always horrible things happening everywhere, every day. Car crashes, assaults, fires, every day of the year. In every city in the world. The rest of us are just lucky enough to never have to hear it. It must be brutal to actually hear it all happening, but you can't blame yourself."

Cas nods. "One actually does get somewhat used to it, over the millennia. But it's never easy, to hear the suffering. Even the survivors, like that girl..." He pauses for a long moment, looking down at his plate, and when he finally continues his expression is haunted. "It was a lot easier when there were just a few hundred thousand of you humans, you know. Your population was down to just a couple thousand at one point, did you know that? And there were more angels."

"Better prayer-to-angel ratio?" says Jody.

"Exactly," Cas says, nodding at her. "Far fewer prayers per angel. We could focus more, and help more, and we could, well, afford to really look at each tragedy. Really devote ourselves to it; take on the burden of it, in our hearts. We still couldn't always interfere, but we could at least... Witness it. Be by their side, as it were." He gives a heavy sigh. "There's just too many now. It used to be.... well, a manageable number of tragedies."

"Seven and a half billion people on the planet now," points out Sam.
"And seven and a half billion tragedies, probably," says Dean. "You gotta take a break."

"How were you dealing with it before this?" asks Jody. "I mean, what have you been doing on Thursdays before this? On these Week-1 chemo weeks?"

"The first time, it took me entirely by surprise," says Cas. He shakes his head at the memory. "As I recall I spent about thirty-six hours just lying in bed at that motel with a pillow over my head. Which didn't help at all, of course, and I missed the next shift at work and almost lost my job. Then the second month, I tried drugging myself to sleep with some sleeping medication. It did send me to sleep except then it turned out the prayers infect the dreams anyway." He darts a quick glance at Dean as he says this, and Dean wonders, then, if Cas realizes that Dean saw part of the arrow dream.

"The third month," Cas goes on, "I tried marijuana—" (Claire snorts again, and Alex's eyes widen in amusement) "— which, well, there's several aspects about that that I do like, but it turns out it makes prayers extremely confusing. Very disorienting, like they all are in disconnected pieces. And somehow everything seems to last much longer. So the fourth month I tried alcohol, which made the prayers mix together into this sort of... fuzzy blur, and that actually helped a little bit. But then the next morning, Friday morning, was just terrible—" (Claire and Alex are both stifling laughter now, though both are also looking rather guilty about it.) Cas finishes with: "And apparently it's unwise to add alcohol in with the chemo drugs anyway." He looks around the table at all of them and says, "I never even thought of a counter-prayer strategy. It was the oddest sensation, you know, to start getting those prayers from you all. You almost all have direct channels to me, because of personal history with me — that makes prayers stronger, you know — but the really odd thing was that your prayers weren't asking me for help at all, but were the other way around. You were all trying to help me. It felt almost like... flying upside-down, in a way. A complete inversion of what I'm used to prayers feeling like. Remarkable sensation, really." He thinks a moment, and adds, "And I wouldn't even have thought that I would even have enough, um... enough...." He's looking around the table at all of them again — Sam and Dean, and Jody, and Claire, and Alex. "Enough... prayer sources for that strategy to be viable."

"Enough friends, you mean?" says Dean.

Cas looks over at him with a bashful little nod. It had been an nine-person prayer team in the end, what with Donna, Sharon, Sarah, and even little Emily joining in from afar.

"Yes," says Cas simply. "Enough friends." He looks around the table again, and he's got one of those lopsided smiles on his face now. They all grin back at him.

Dean chuckles and rubs Cas's back again (he's starting to take a ridiculous, and totally unexpected, amount of pleasure in being able to do this sort of affectionate touch openly). He says, "I think you might have more friends than I do, at this point. And you're adding new ones, too. Sharon and Emily. And even Sam's nurse!"

"She's not my nurse," protests Sam. "She's Cas's nurse, and... just... Look, would you just stop with the—"

"Relentless grief, little brother," Dean says, shaking a finger at him. "Relentless. It's the brother code. It was in the big-brother agreement that I signed the day you were born. And if you're gonna be calling her like twelve times a day or whatever it's been the last few days—"

"Your girlfriend's a nurse, Sam?" breaks in Alex. "I just started nursing school. Maybe I could talk to her a little bit? Would you mind?"

"She's not... we barely even... " Sam says, but he gives up and leans back in his chair with a
sigh. "Yeah, I can give you her phone number," he finally says. "Lemme just check with her first."

Dean can only laugh. He laughs more than he needs to; he laughs long enough so that Sam starts rolling his eyes and Cas even starts giving Dean a puzzled glance. But the laughter is only partly about Sam and Sarah, really. It's also partly because it just feels so plain good to know they're back at a point where he can tease, and joke; where Cas is feeling good enough that Dean can get back to ribbing Sam about possible girlfriends; where he can sit here with his arm right around Cas's shoulders, or rubbing his back, or having Cas's hand right there on his knee, plain as day, in a circle of his friends (Cas's friends too, it's turned out), and not have to worry about it at all. And most of all, it's making him positively giddy just to know that Castiel has survived one more week. Castiel is alive and awake and breathing and eating, and in fact he's looking at Dean right now with that warm smile again, and his hand's on Dean's knee, and they'll have all night together, and all the next day, and all the next night after that. It's not much, this brief moment, this scant couple of days ahead. It's not nearly enough. But right now it feels like the greatest gift in the world.

A/N - I've always had this idea that Cas might get a flood of prayers on Thursdays. His name's in angel lore, he's known to be associated with Thursdays, so of course there'd be some people praying to him on Thursdays, right? Sure he's not exactly a famous angel, not on earth anyway; but there's not an angel name out there, not even the most obscure, that hasn't been noticed by some little church somewhere or other. I figure he might get prayers on other days too, but that there'd be a whole lot on Thursdays (because there are a whole lot of little churches in the world). And once I'd thought of that... it occurred to me that there is a LOT of tragedy in the world. When do people pray? When they're desperate, usually. (Or when their soccer team is in a critical match!) Castiel must hear tragic stories every single week. Lots of them. And what would it be like to have to deal with that? To have to hear it all first-hand, even the prayers of the desperate and the dying? What would it be like to have to hear all that if you're sick, and helpless, and powerless, and can't even do anything about it?

And, of course, you all know from my previous fics that I love the motif of Dean and Sam being able to reach Cas via prayer. It's always interesting to consider ways in which that prayer-communication method might come in handy. In this fic, I thought: what about a whole prayer-squad? Who could they call on? And could it really help him? Thus this chapter.

The other reason I wanted to explore this aspect of Castiel's angelic nature is that so far the fic has focused on Cas having to face cancer solely as a mortal human. But he is not purely a mortal human; he still does have some angelic traits. They're weak, they're buried, but they're there. Our dear cinnamon-roll, though he's been suffering terribly as a human throughout this fic, is also still an angel in some important ways. Is it a tiny flicker of hope, maybe? If nothing else, it's a reminder that Castiel's case is unique.

And there you go - two chapters in one weekend! (and both of them long!) And even ending with a happy scene for once, how about that. I'm pushing hard to try to get the rest of the fic wrapped up. All remaining chapters are now outlined and all are in at least partial draft form. Not sure if I'll have one for next weekend but I'm pushing hard for Saturday. Thank you all so much for reading - I know it's a very difficult fic and I know several of you have found it terribly painful, and I thank you for even giving it a shot at all. Those who are still with me — please drop a comment if you have a minute; it's what keeps me going. I love to hear from you.
Utterly exhausted after a long day hiking, and AO3's servers seem to be choking right now, but am determined to get this up. Only a few chapters left now and they're all drafted now!

In a blink of an eye it's Monday morning again, they're already back in Denver, and Dean's driving Cas right back to the hospital. The chemo cycle grinds on. It's become a weirdly familiar routine. As Dean parks the car in the hospital's snowy lot and shepherds Cas to the lobby, one hand protectively on Cas's arm, it seems like he can almost see the week spread out before them — a grid of days that almost seem visibly laid out on the sidewalk right in front of Cas, blocked out in painfully predictable detail. Each day's already scheduled full with awful things that must happen, that can't be avoided. From little annoyances, like the irritatingly long wait to get checked in, to the minor pain of getting the IV's started, then the hours of chemo, then shifting to the Chemo Motel where they will spend another awful Monday night together, and another awful Tuesday morning... finally the exhausted Tuesday evening when Cas will mostly be sleeping... then, coaxing a wobbly Castiel back into the Impala late on Wednesday for the long drive home. (Where there'll hopefully be a brief respite — Jody, Claire and Alex have promised to be there waiting for them yet again, with another round of hot meals, freshly made beds and moral support.) It all has to happen. At least Thursday will be easier this week (or so Cas says) but even so, Week 2 is still a heavy burden.

Automatically Cas heads to the correct elevator. Where Dean automatically hits the button. It occurs to Dean, then, that they're both sliding into a numb autopilot about it all. It's a sensation he knows from long drawn-out battles, from tedious year-long campaigns: the war-weary soldiers, hauling themselves out of bed each morning (or out of the cot at the hospital, or up from the mattress in the corner at the Chemo Motel) to face the next inevitable battle. Another exhausting night... another bleary-eyed dawn.

And somehow this Monday Dean's more exhausted than ever. He'd woken very early, with a throbbing headache, feeling so crappy that he'd actually foregone the chance for a last-minute snuggle with Cas. Instead he'd tiptoed into the bathroom for a long hot shower and a handful of headache pills, hoping that would freshen him up enough to be able to take care of Cas today.

The headache hasn't really gotten any better, but there's nothing to do but keep going.

Life isn't always like this, Dean reminds himself, as the elevator spits them out in the lobby of the outpatient chemo ward. It won't always be this way. Someday this'll all be over...

But it's getting hard to believe that there's actually else in the world other than cancer and chemo... anything beyond the hospital, the Chemo Motel, and poor Cas's relentless monthly cycle.

Later that long Monday, once Cas has been discharged and they're finally back at the Chemo Motel, Dean goes shuffling out to the lobby to fetch a starter set of ice cubes for the long night ahead. It's only four o'clock, but Dean's already exhausted. His headache still hasn't gone away and he's
actually aching with fatigue. On his way to the ice machine, he crosses paths with a little family who's just arrived and who are dragging their wheeled luggage, a little haphazardly, across Dean's path. They're just checking in. The frazzled-looking mother is complaining about being "so tired" after a "long road trip" that turns out to have been all of four hours long (this doesn't even count as a road trip; four hours is just an errand). The dad's griping about having to pay an extra ten bucks for their motel room; their whiny little son is going on and on about having run out of pretzels or something. And then it turns out they're starting out on a skiing trip. They're in Colorado for fun, and they're actually complaining about it, and suddenly Dean wants to punch every single one of them right in the face.

The sense of injustice blazes up so intensely that it nearly spirals into rage. It's simply unbelievable, unfathomable really, that these oblivious, undeserving people can just be trotting about their usual business, going on their stupid tiny road trips, taking their stupid kid on a totally pointless frickin' luxurious skiing trip to roll around in the stupid frickin' snow, pretty much tossing money in the air, all of them in completely perfect health by the looks of it, not a one of them with any nausea or pain, and they're actually complaining! While Castiel (and Dean, and Sam) are stuck in such a nightmare just a couple rooms away!

Why doesn't the stupid skiing family have a family member sick with cancer? Why does it have to be Cas?

Why Cas?

Why us?

Dean's fuming now, as he stands there staring fixedly at the ice machine with his fists clenched, listening to the tired family arguing with each other about whether or not to buy the damn kid some more damn pretzels. He turns to glare at them. The parents aren't facing his direction, but the boy is, and just as he's saying something about how hungry he is he happens to glance right toward Dean, and when he catches Dean's eye he falls completely silent, clutching his empty pretzel bag tightly. The kid takes a step backwards, toward his mom.

He looks about nine years old.

Dean takes a long breath. He opens his fists.

He forces a wan smile at the little kid, and turns back to the ice machine.

As Dean's shuffling back down the side of the parking lot with the bucket of ice, headed toward Cas's room, he spots Sam rummaging around in the trunk of the Impala. Sam straightens up as Dean approaches; he looks a little bothered.

"Hey, so, I can't find the water bottles," Sam says. He holds up a single water bottle. "I only found this one rolling around in the back of the Impala. Also... I'm sorry but, I think I forgot the hoodies."

"What?"

"The sloth hoodies," says Sam. Now he's looking sheepish. He closes the trunk and leads Dean over to an open motel room door close by. It's Sam and Dean's room (though really Sam's room, these days, since Dean spends practically all his time in Cas's room.) Sam tosses the Impala keys on a side
table and peers into a big duffel of supplies that's lying open on one of the beds. He rummages around in it a little hopelessly, and sighs, shaking his head. "I thought the hoodies were in here, but...You know, the hoodies with all the different smells. I had them in those big baggies, and I meant to put 'em in this duffel, but I must've left them in the bunker garage. They were right by the car but I must've forgot to put them in the duffel." He adds again, as he takes in the look on Dean's face, "Sorry."

Slowly, Dean sets down the bucket of ice.

"You forgot the hoodies?" Dean repeats. Sam nods. Dean walks over and looks in the duffel. Sure enough, no hoodies.

It should be a little thing, but it's not. Cas needs those hoodies. And also, *Dean* needs those hoodies. Dean's the one who spends the most time by Cas, these days; curled up right next to Cas most nights, in fact. If Cas happens to end up with the wrong "odor aversion" (say, to Dean's cologne... or Dean's shampoo... or just to Dean himself) it's Dean, not Sam, who's really going to pay the price.

"You forgot the giant ground sloth hoodies," Dean repeats.

"Yeah," says Sam.

"Cas needs us to be wearing those," says Dean.

"I know. I'm really sorry."

"You *said* you packed them," says Dean. "I *asked* if you'd packed them. You said yes. I asked like *three times*," and suddenly all the frustration is boiling up again, and the nagging headache certainly isn't helping, and next thing Dean knows he's somehow started shouting at Sam. And he can't stop. And he doesn't really want to stop, because, Sam had *said* he'd packed the sloth hoodies and Dean had *reminded him* to pack them *three times at least*, because *Castiel needs them*, and *Dean* needs them, and also *Dean knows* it's because *Sam got distracted* with yet another phone call to *Sarah*, right when they were *packing* — Dean's shouting all this by now, right in Sam's face, and Sam's even swinging the door shut as if to keep people from hearing, but Dean barely notices. His head's actually throbbing with pain, his muscles aching again, he's that furious about it. They don't have the sloth hoodies and *now what?!* Dean's barely aware that he's now actually backing Sam up against the door — Sam's inching backwards step by step, and he's even got one hand up as if to halt Dean, and he's murmuring in a soothing tone (a very annoying soothing tone), "Hey, hey, keep your voice down. Cas is right next door, remember?"

Dean manages to lower his voice a little bit (just for Cas's sake), but he's certainly not going to stop the lecture because by now he's well into a deeply satisfying, furious, rough, growled speech about how Sam *better get his act together and focus more on Cas* and get more organized —

Dean's spitting out the words in such fury that he starts coughing in the middle of his last couple sentences. Sam's kind of pinned against the door now but he's just looking back at Dean silently; he doesn't say another word.

Oddly, as Dean goes on, Sam starts looking rather thoughtful — rather than defensive. His eyes even flick up and down Dean's body a couple times, like he's no longer even paying that much attention to Dean's exact words and is just watching him. This, of course, pisses Dean off even more, and the coughing gets worse, and then Dean's in a full-on coughing fit.

Sam hands him the bottle of water.
The coughing finally subsides after a few swigs of water. A total exhaustion seems to settle over Dean then, and he winds down into silence, sitting down heavily on the side of the bed. Now he feels too tired to even say another word to Sam; too tired to hold his head up, in fact. He can't even look Sam in the eye.

"You okay?" Sam ventures.

"Yeah," says Dean quietly. "Just so frickin' tired. I just want this to be over." He winces as the words come out of his mouth, because, of course, Cas's cancer "being over" might mean something very, very bad.

"I'll go to Target," says Sam. "I'll get a batch of all the smells and make some new hoodies. Really sorry, I thought I packed them, but... well, I'll be right back. And... " He hesitates. "When I get back, you gotta get some sleep."

Dean nods dully, still looking at the floor.

Sam grabs his winter coat and scarf and starts pulling them on. (It's real winter now, bitterly cold here in the high Denver mountains, and the first couple snowfalls are already piled up in heavy drifts on the sidewalks.) Dean's starting to feel bad about the whole insane rant — because, of course, Sam hadn't deserved any of it at all. Sam's been totally awesome, all along.

"Sorry," Dean mutters.

Sam shrugs, wrapping his scarf around his neck. He pulls a fuzzy hat out of his coat pocket, jams it on his head and says, almost offhandedly, "Sarah warned me this would happen."

"Warned you what would happen?"

"Said you'd start losing it," says Sam. He grabs the Impala keys back off the side table and adds, "Actually she advised me to just..." He pauses a moment, and finally says, "She told me to just let it wash by. Not take it personally."

Dean tries to summon up some mild outrage about this, but of course Sarah's exactly right. Finally Dean just gives a tired little nod.

Sam's ready to go, but he's still hesitating, standing there in the middle of the room holding the Impala keys, watching Dean.

Sam says gently, "He's gonna be okay."

"Right, sure," says Dean, still staring at the floor. "Of course he will." Sam turns to leave.

Just as Sam's heading out the door, Dean says, "Hey." Sam glances back, a cautiously neutral look on his face.

Dean says, "Get something nice for Sarah while you're there, would ya?"

"Get something for Sarah at Target?" says Sam, with a faint little laugh. "What, like, an extension cord? A set of towels?"

"If I found that damn houseplant for Cas at a frickin' Home Depot, you can definitely find something for Sarah at a Target," says Dean. (The houseplant's safely back at the bunker; yesterday, Cas had painstakingly carried it all the way up to the top floor where it could get some light while they were away, and he'd even set up some kind of complicated water drip thing involving an upside-down
plastic bottle and a lot of string. Something he'd seen online). Dean adds, "They've got like ten million more gift type things at Target than at Home Depot. I dunno, a little Christmas thing or something? Whatever. She's been so awesome. Get her something."

Sam nods. But he's still looking a little guarded.

"And, dude," Dean adds. "Keep calling her. I didn't mean you shouldn't call her, I just, I don't know, I'm not thinking straight, I just really wanted those hoodies, I guess... it was just, one more thing, y'know? But it doesn't matter. I don't know, I'm just not really in gear today. Anyway, Sarah's a good one. A really good one. You keep calling her."

That, at last, drags a little smile out of Sam.

"I'm really sorry I forgot the hoodies," says Sam.

"I forgot the damn water bottles," confesses Dean at last. "Left 'em in the bunker kitchen. Could you pick up a few packs of those too?"

While Sam's away at Target, Dean finally rouses himself to head over to Cas's room. It turns out Cas has migrated off his bed and over to the bathroom floor again. He still tends to do that whenever Dean and Sam have to leave the room for while; invariably, upon returning, they find Cas curled up on the bathroom floor next to the toilet, a brownie pan by his side for insurance (the pan is in case he can't hoist himself up to the toilet when the nausea strikes). It's developed into a running argument, actually, a small recurring battle, about whether or not Cas should stay in the bed. He's usually willing to relocate back to the bed later, though, once Dean and Sam are back — but of course he often needs a little assistance getting there.

This time, like most times, Cas has actually set himself up fairly well in the bathroom, with the brownie pan and a box of Kleenex within reach, a pillow under his head, and he even already has the little room clock perched on the tile floor next to him. It's not a bad setup exactly, but certainly not as comfortable as the bed (also, he always gets cold), so Dean tries now to get him back to his bed. But today Cas seems much heavier than usual and Dean can't seem to help him up. Cas even makes a weak effort to stand, and usually then Dean can just kind of drag him to the bed, but instead there's just a minute or two of Cas just half-sitting up while Dean pulls ineffectively on his arm. Finally Cas mutters, "Too tired," and he simply slides back down to the bathroom floor and curls up on his side. And Dean's so extremely tired by now that all he can seem to do is slump down there with him. He sits there on the bathroom floor right by Cas's side.

Minutes seem to be drifting by quite slowly. More slowly than usual. Dean finds himself gazing blankly at the clock right along with Castiel.

Together they watch the second hand's slow progress. Five minutes slide by.

"Dean?" Cas whispers at last, breaking into Dean's half-awake doze. "Is there some water?"

Dean's a little confused to find that fifteen minutes have now slipped by, somehow, not five. But Cas needs water; Dean focuses on that. It seems a difficult problem to solve. Slowly he concludes that he should probably go get Cas a water bottle. But there's only one water bottle this time — the one Sam gave to Dean earlier, to stop the coughing. It's now on the counter out in the bedroom, and Dean realizes he should not only get that one but also go get a few more for Cas from the vending machine.
in the lobby. But it's a real struggle to stand — it's like gravity's been turned up — and Dean's totally exhausted just by the simple act of getting up and walking across the bedroom and picking up the water bottle. The lobby seems extremely far away, so Dean decides to temporarily postpone the vending machine expedition, and instead he sits down, just for a moment, on one of Cas's carefully positioned chairs right in the middle of the room. Just for a little bit of a rest. Dean's panting as he sits there, trying to catch his breath after the long journey across the room.

"Dean?" Cas whispers from the bathroom.

Dean hauls himself out of the chair and staggers back to the bathroom. It's gotten dark already; the sun seems to have set (wasn't it just up?), and the night has just begun, and there's so many hours still ahead, and Dean's head's pounding worse than ever and his muscles aching, and he's shivering and it's so cold and he's just so terribly, terribly tired. He fumbles the water bottle open and then stares at it blankly, almost forgetting what he's supposed to do with it. He sits down next to Cas with it, and has just handed him the bottle when all of a sudden his stomach is churning, and suddenly Dean's retching.

Dean, not Castiel, is throwing up.

The toilet's too far away — Castiel is between Dean and the toilet, and Dean doesn't dare try to clamber over him. The tub's also not near enough. But Cas, who's staring at him wide-eyed now, somehow manages to shove the brownie pan over toward Dean just in time. Dean hunches over the brownie pan throwing up into it, totally bewildered. Cas seems just as confused; he's staring at Dean with a mix of intense concern and pure bafflement. Cas struggles to sit, and eventually manages to slowly haul himself up to a seated position. He pushes his box of Kleenex over toward Dean, and then a towel, and even his pillow, and he hands the water bottle back too (he hasn't even drunk from it yet). Dean can only nod in thanks, as he retches again into the brownie pan, and again. His whole lunch seems to be coming up. When it's finally over, he can't stop shivering.

"Dean — did you — did you get any on you?" says Cas weakly. He's slumped against the tub now, watching Dean closely. He sounds very worried as he says, "Any of my body fluids? You must've gotten some on you, the chemo drugs, Dean, they must have gotten into you—"

"No.... didn't get any on me..." Dean gasps. "Pretty sure. Got gloves, see?" He looks at the blue exam gloves on his hands; they seem intact. He tries again to stand, but why is the room spinning so much? Why can't he seem to stand up? "What's wrong with me?" he mutters to Cas.

The rest is a blur. "Holy shit, Dean," Sam is saying next, apparently having teleported somehow all the way from Target, for Dean hadn't even seen him come in. Somehow Dean's now lying on the tile floor (which feels wonderfully cool and soothing against his skin — Dean's starting to understand why Cas likes it here). Sam's crouched over him, feeling at Dean's forehead. "You're burning up," Sam says. Cas seems to have slithered down again to the floor too, lying parallel to Dean and facing him. He looks far too weak to sit up again, but he's watching Dean with wide, worried eyes, and he keeps whispering anxious questions to Sam.

"Is it my chemo drugs, Sam?" Cas whispers. "It must be... the bleomycin..."

Dean stares again at his gloved hands. Woozy and sick, he nonetheless manages to peel the gloves off, looking for any holes, but the gloves are intact. "I had the gloves on.... " Dean mutters. "Gloves are on...."

"You're sick, dude," says Sam. He's fiddling with his phone, trying to place a call to someone. "Like, regular sick. I think you got the flu or something. Damn, I should've known when you started coughing. And by how super crabby you've been. I knew something had to be wrong, but I thought
"Oh, Dean..." murmurs Cas. Dean looks at him.

As they lie there, facing each other on the cool tiled floor of the Chemo Motel bathroom, it seems they must be the only two people in the universe who can truly understand what it means to be pinned down like this, pressed helplessly to this wide expanse of cold tile. The only two who can possibly know what the world looks like from this quietly defeated angle. Cas tries to reach for Dean's bare hand, and Dean reaches back.

But Sam lunges between them, batting Cas's hand away. "Cas, don't touch him!" he says, and the sudden urgency in his voice makes them both stare up at him. Sam says sharply to Cas, "Don't touch the brownie pan either. Don't touch that water bottle. You didn't drink from that bottle, did you?" Cas shakes his head no, and Sam looks very slightly relieved and says, "Don't touch anything. You can't get the flu, Cas, you really can't." Then he turns to Dean and says, "Shit, Dean, we gotta get you away from Cas immediately."

"I'm not gonna say I told you so," says a female voice, in a very soft, low tone from a few yards away. "So I'll just say, I was worried about this."

Dean's only half-hearing; he seems to be in bed now. He automatically feels around on the mattress next to him, expecting to find Cas by his side. But Cas isn't there, and slowly he realizes he's in a lumpy, unfamiliar bed in a different motel room, swathed in blankets. Hazy memories surface: Sam dragging him down the hallway, one of Dean's arms looped over Sam's shoulders; Sarah's face hovering nearby, slipping a thermometer under Dean's tongue; and there's a rather fuzzy memory of Sarah whispering instructions to a quietly nodding Sam in the middle of the night, about gloves and masks and "quarantine protocol." There'd been some more throwing up, hadn't there? There'd been a lot of shivering. There'd maybe been some chicken broth that stayed down, at one point. As Dean slowly wakens further, he also becomes vaguely aware that some time has gone by. Multiple hours at least. Maybe the whole night? The windows are still dark — is it nearly dawn?

He manages to crane his head around and discovers Sarah and Sam standing close together in the corner of the room, having a hushed discussion. Both of them seem to be wearing exam gloves and hospital masks, Sarah's wearing a set of green scrubs, and she seems to have found a green men's scrub top for Sam as well. Together they look like a mini surgical team.

"You did tell me so," whispers Sam through his mask. "And believe me, I listened. I knew he was falling apart — I just didn't realize he was sick too."

"This is classic," says Sarah. "Absolutely classic. Caretaker partner gets totally run down and ends up with the flu and then we have to worry about it spreading to the primary patient. And also now we have two patients instead of one. Sam, he's been driving himself right into the ground. I'll bet he hasn't been giving himself any breaks at all. Or getting much sleep." She pauses, narrowing her eyes, studying Sam. "And the same's true for you, isn't it?"

Sam gives a faint shrug, and Sarah rolls her eyes. "You're gonna get sick next, I guarantee it," she says. "You two need some help — some additional people to help with Castiel. Don't get me wrong, you're both doing a fantastic job, but you need some assistants. I'm taking a few days off work. I already called in to swap some shifts around. I'll stay here this week for as long as you need, to help
"Oh, Sarah, are you serious?" says Sam, and he sounds almost wretchedly grateful. "That would be awesome, but can you really?"

"My pleasure," she says. "Absolutely my pleasure."

"I'll pay you for your time," Sam offers. "We can, like, hire you maybe?"

She shakes her head. "Call it a Christmas gift," she says. And now Sam's giving her his extra-pathetic Nuclear-Puppy-Eyes look. It's a very effective look (Dean knows this from experience) and Sarah almost melts. She even reaches out with both hands and covers Sam's gloved hands with her own.

"I don't normally do this," she says softly, "I always want to, of course, but it's hard to get time off, especially around the holidays. But I'll make it work. For Castiel... for Dean... and for you." There's a brief pause then, the two of them holding each other's eyes. And Dean, who suddenly realizes they don't know he's awake, looks away.

"If I didn't have this stupid quarantine mask on, I'd kiss you," Sam says.

"If I didn't have my own stupid quarantine mask on, I'd kiss you back," Sarah answers.

(Dean closes his eyes and pretends he's asleep.)

"Also, Sam," says Sarah a moment later, "Didn't you say you guys had some friends or extended family or something? A woman and her adopted daughters? What was her name, Jody or something? Would she be able to come and help too, maybe? One more reliable pair of hands would be good."

Dean risks glancing back and notices that they both seem to be re-adjusting their masks. Sam's nodding, too, digging out his phone — probably looking up Jody's number. "She was gonna come meet us Thursday anyway," Sam says as he starts scrolling through his contacts. "I'll see if she could maybe come here a bit earlier."

The little Sam-and-Sarah moment seems to be over, so Dean finally speaks up, going straight to his most urgent question, which is: "Where's Cas?"

They both jump a little and look over at him.

"Dean!" Sam says, and though Dean can't see the lower half of Sam's face through the mask, it's clear Sam's smiling. Sarah comes zipping right over and feels Dean's forehead, checks his pulse and peers at his eyes.

"How do you feel?" she asks. "You've got the flu, by the way. Walloped you pretty hard. Had a high fever for half the night; you were delirious. Didn't I tell you that you need to take care of yourself?"

"And you left me with all the work, by the way," says Sam cheerfully through his mask. "Nice fainting act you had going there. Really good strategy. Now I have to do everything, jerk."

"Bitch," Dean replies automatically. "But where's Cas? What time is it? He shouldn't be left alone, he's always still sick on Tuesday morning--"

"It's Tuesday night now," says Sarah, plunking a thermometer into Dean's mouth. "You slept all day. Castiel's doing quite well. Doing better than you, right now, actually. Now hold your mouth closed."
"He's two doors down," says Sam. "We got a third room, this room, for your flu-quarantine zone. We had to shift Cas to a different room too — Sarah wouldn't let him stay in that bathroom after you'd spewed like a billion flu viruses all over the place. It's a total miracle he doesn't seem to have gotten it."

"Cas is alone right now?" says Dean in alarm, trying to sit up. He yanks the thermometer out of his mouth and says, "Isn't anybody with him?"

"I just checked him a minute ago," says Sam. "He's watching tv. Still not much energy and not eating yet, but doing pretty well otherwise. He totally lapped you during the last eight hours, health-wise; he's good now, you're been the dicey one." (Sarah's nodding as Sam talks.) Sam goes on, "Sarah and I have been trading shifts back and forth with you two."

"I'll take a shift," says Dean. "I'll take a shift with him right now." It's Dean's job to take care of Castiel; Sam and Sarah can help, sure, but this is Dean's job. Dean should have been with him all night! "I gotta go see him," Dean adds decisively, and he tries to swing his legs out of bed and sit up. But his legs seem to weigh approximately one ton each, and Sarah holds him down effortlessly with one hand on his chest.

"You're gonna stay away from Castiel for at least one more day," she declares. "Influenza is contagious for up to five days after first symptoms. The first three are most hazardous — that's yesterday, today and tomorrow — and even after that I'm gonna have you wear a mask and gloves for a few more days. We really can't risk him getting the flu, Dean, his immune system's way too beaten down and it would hit him very hard. He can't afford to get sick."

"Ah, dammit," moans Dean, slumping back on the pillow. The thought of not being able to check on Cas for another whole day is maddening. "But he's really okay?"

Sam points to Dean's phone, which is on the bedside table. "He's sent you about a thousand texts, so I'm pretty sure he's alive. We told him to text you instead of calling, so you could sleep."

Dean fumbles for the phone. He sees a little banner at the top that says:

**Tuesday 8:23pm - 32 New Messages from: Feather Boy**

('Feather Boy' is the new nickname Dean had assigned to Cas's phone number a few weeks back, after the memorable discovery of the feather kink.)

Dean swipes down to see the four most recent messages, and reads:

**FROM: Feather Boy  TIME:  7:32pm. MESSAGE:** Dean, just checking in, I'm feeling better and I was hoping you might be awake? I feel just awful knowing you're sick. I know how bad it feels to be ill. Please let me know if you're feeling better.

**FROM: Feather Boy  TIME:  7:45pm. MESSAGE:** Dean, whenever you wake up could you just drop me a note? Just checking in. Sam says you're resting and I don't want to disturb you, but just let me know if you wake.

**FROM: Feather Boy  TIME:  8:02pm. MESSAGE:** Dean, there's the most interesting documentary on the National Geographic channel right now, about eagles, if you're awake.
Dean fumbles a little with the phone. He still seems to be hampered by that strangely intense exhaustion that had made it so impossible to walk across Cas's room before—this time, it's making it amazingly hard to even hold his hands up and grip the phone. But he manages to slowly peck out: 
*I'm awake. I'm ok now. Don't worry.*

Within fifteen seconds there's a reply from Cas: 
*DEAN. Thank heavens. I was so worried. Are you really okay?*

Sarah and Sam are talking on the phone with Jody now. Dean barely notices, engrossed now in painstakingly typing out another text. He rolls on his side away from Sarah and Sam, curling around the phone so he can really focus on it.

Dean sends, 
*Don't you worry. I'm fine. Everything'll be fine. I swear. Sorry I got sick - last thing you need.*

Cas replies, 
*You've been working yourself far too hard. Taking care of me. I feel responsible. This wouldn't have happened to you if I hadn't been ill.*

*No blame games,* writes Dean. 
*Not your fault. Just wish I could've helped you today. Sorry I wasn't there.*

*You have to promise you'll take care of yourself better from here on,* writes Cas. 
*I mean it, Dean. Promise you'll take better care of yourself.*

*I promise,* writes Dean.

There's a pause of almost a minute. Dean's staring at the phone, and he's somehow certain that Cas is about to send another text. He can feel it; something in the nature of the pause, the thoughtful duration of it. Dean can even imagine the expression that must be on Castiel's face right now, that introspective look that Cas gets sometimes when he's weighing his words, considering what to say.

Sure enough, a text arrives.

FROM: Feather Boy  TIME:  8:52pm. MESSAGE:  I miss you

Dean gazes at the words, soaking them in. Castiel misses him.

It's just a little message, not a big thing, but it seems amazingly significant, deeply meaningful, that even though they're only two doors apart from each other, and even though they've only been apart for all of twenty-four hours, Cas misses him. Dean's angel misses him. Dean's 'Feather Boy' misses him.

It's not unexpected, of course, but it's maybe the first time Cas has actually said something like that, come right out and said it (or texted it, at least). And it's so plain and sweet and direct that Dean can't help smiling. He gazes at the message for a long moment, grinning like a fool, and for a moment all the aches and pains of his illness seem to float away.

He finds himself typing out *I miss you too*. But wait, isn't it kind of dumb to just repeat the same
thing back? Is it too goopy and dumb and unimaginative to just echo the exact same thing back? He should come up with a joke or something instead. Maybe some funny little quip. Dean deletes what he’d just typed.

And then he mutters to himself "For the love of all that is holy, Dean Winchester." (Sam overhears Dean's muttered comment, and for some reason it makes Sam laugh).

Dean carefully types *I miss you too*, and taps Send.

There’s a little pause.

Three blinking gray dots appear. They keep blinking. Dean's irresistibly reminded of that time back at the silver mine in Utah, months ago, when Cas had almost told Dean about the cancer... and had changed his mind and erased his whole message. But this time the blinking gray dots keep blinking, and then Castiel sends the entire thing: *I wish you were here in my room with me. I wish my immune system were stronger. I don't like that you have to be in a separate room. I don't like it at all. I mean, I understand it, but it's hard to sleep without you and also you're the only one who puts the ice on my neck. You're much too far away. And I hate knowing you've been suffering.*

*I'll tell Sam about the ice*, writes Dean. *He can do the ice.*

Cas writes: *No, you have to do the ice. It has to be you. I just miss you. Please get better soon.*

Dean replies, *Sarah says it's only for a few days. I'll be back before you know it. It's just because of the chemo.*

*I really hate cancer*, writes Cas.

*You and me both*, writes Dean.

By dawn Jody's arrived, and she shoos Sam off to bed and starts trading nursing shifts back and forth with Sarah. It's unclear how Jody's arranged the time off of work — or how Sarah has, for that matter — or how long it must have taken Jody to drive here. And Alex and Claire, apparently, have headed on their own to the bunker (in the T-bird, it turns out) to get things ready there. Dean, who's still barely able to stand, is deeply grateful.

And Sam then sleeps sixteen hours straight.

The extra help's fantastic and it takes a huge load of worry off, but it's still infuriating having to be quarantined from Castiel. It's obviously for a good reason (Sarah's explained about a hundred times by now about how chemotherapy affects the immune system). And Dean *does* trust that Sarah and Jody are taking appropriate care of Castiel; he totally trusts them, really, but he also keeps thinking of things Cas might need that they won't know about; the ice on the back of the neck is a big one, of course, and also how to stroke his neck and head to calm him; and the way he likes his pillows arranged, and where he's used to having the pans and the water bottles, and the clothes he prefers to sleep in, and how to help him get in and out the tub when he's still wobbly, and how to tell from the patterns of warm air around him where his wings are and what he's thinking...and a hundred other little details. Dean keeps relaying bits of Castiel-care advice to both Jody and Sarah, and though they both keep reassuring him that Cas is fine, Dean keeps worrying anyway. Castiel's room seems like it might as well be miles away.
Not to mention that the little lumpy mattress here in this new room seems bewilderingly cold and empty. It's incredibly difficult to get to sleep; Dean keeps reaching out in the night to feel for Cas, and jolting awake when it turns out he's not there. How is it possible that he could have gotten so addicted to Castiel's presence in his bed in just a few short weeks?

It strikes Dean, then, how crazy it is that he could possibly have been sleeping alone for so many years. All those nights in the bunker alone.... It's inconceivable, really. So many long, pointless years, when Cas had been right there, sometimes literally right there in the bunker, or just a phone call away.

It's horrible to think of all the wasted time.

Especially now that time seems so short.

*We should've got together years ago,* texts Dean very late that night, in a sudden burst of damn-the-torpedoes honesty.

*You weren't ready,* Cas texts back. He must be awake; the reply comes almost immediately.

*I was an idiot.*

*You just needed time,* replies Cas.

But Dean's not so sure. Would time alone really have brought them together? Or would they have just sailed along silently in their parallel tracks — so close, yet never quite touching — for years and years more?

Dean finally writes back, *I needed a kick in the ass is what I needed.*

*You needed something in the ass, all right,* sends Castiel, and once Dean reads that he laughs so hard he ends up in another coughing fit.

When the coughing finally subsides, Dean sends, *You're getting dangerous.*

*I've always been dangerous. You just weren't paying attention.*

*Obviously,* writes Dean, laughing again. *But I'm paying attention now. And what I think is, we gotta make up for lost time. Once you're better, and once I'm not goddam Typhoid Mary anymore, we'll get right back into action.*

*You better promise. Because I'll hold you to that.*

*I promise, feather boy.*

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Two days later the worst of Dean's symptoms have abated, and Sarah decrees that Cas and Dean can at last be in the same room again without Castiel instantly dropping dead — though she'll only allow this if Dean's freshly showered (practically sterilized head to toe, she seems to mean, scrubbed raw under hot water with plenty of soap), wearing freshly-laundered clothes, and with a mask and gloves on at all times. Sarah even gives Dean a remarkably detailed set of instructions, complete with demos, about how to make sure he never touches his face with the gloves, what to do if he needs to blow his nose, or if he starts to cough — on and on. And, of course, no kissing, no sex, and the
gloves and mask stay on at all times. Those are the rules, for two more days, she announces.

Dean's fine with all of it. He's thrilled with all of it. He's absolutely delighted to jump through each and every hoop of the mask-and-glove routine, and he can even tolerate the no-kissing/no-sex part, if it'll just keep Cas healthy and if he can just get back to Cas's side.

Half an hour later Dean is pretty much glowing pink all over from the longest hottest shower of his life. He dons a spanking new t-shirt and sweatpants that still have the Target tags on them, and then, his hands double-gloved and a new mask tied carefully in place, he's shuffling down the motel hallway with Sam and Sarah hovering by either side. Dean's actually still a little wobbly and he then gets worried, halfway down the hall, about whether his continuing weakness and exhaustion might mean he's still contagious; but Sarah assures him that the exhaustion from the flu lasts much longer than the contagiousness.

"I wouldn't let you do this if it weren't safe," she assures him. "I do this with family at the clinic, as well. When it's clear that the patient really needs to see somebody."

Dean's plan, once they get into Cas's room, is actually to keep a bit of distance and not overwhelm Castiel (who must still be feeling tired) with too much too soon. (Not to mention that Dean doesn't want to overwhelm Sarah and Sam with too much too soon, either — too much public affection, that is.) He'll start off with a cheerful joke about how good Cas is looking, and then maybe give him a affectionate slap on the shoulder, kind of a bro-slap; or maybe, at the very most, a quick one-armed classic Side Hug. Maybe Dean'll allow himself a quick pat to Cas's head, but no more than that, not with Sarah watching. Then Dean'll sit in a chair by Cas's bed and chat for a little bit while Sam and Sarah go get dinner. Keep it low-key; no chick-flick stuff.

That's the plan, anyway. But all of five seconds after Sarah's opened Cas's door, somehow Dean's climbing into Cas's bed. This definitely hadn't been the plan but there's Cas right there and he's actually reaching out to Dean, sitting up in bed with such a bright eager look on his face, and such a beaming smile, saying "Dean, I was so worried," and Dean beams back like a total idiot and then realizes he's almost getting teary, and so's Cas, and Dean's voice comes out almost squeaky as he asks, "You okay, Cas, you really okay?"

"Yes, yes," Cas says. "But are you?"

"I'm so sorry I wasn't here for you—"

"I'm so sorry I've been so much work for you, Dean, I'm so awfully sorry—"

"Don't be ridiculous," says Dean, and now he's making a beeline right to him, drawn straight to Cas like somebody's flipped on a gigantic magnet that's right in the center of Cas's chest. A half-assed Side Hug is clearly not going to do at all. It needs to be a full-on bear hug, and it needs to be a tight and close as possible, and next thing Dean knows he's kicking off his shoes so that he can sit on Cas's bed just to give him a good, proper, real hug. Without a second's hesitation Cas wraps his arms around Dean and then he just lies right back down, dragging Dean inexorably down with him. Dean's still so tired he just goes with it (well, actually, he goes with it because he wants to), flopping down next to him.

Cas wraps his arms even more tightly around Dean, pulling Dean's head right down to Cas's chest. "Promise you'll take better care of yourself," says Cas.

"Promise you'll be okay," Dean blurs out, through his mask.

"I will, I will, I swear—" says Cas. "I promise—"
Dean's somehow ended up half sprawled on top of Cas, his head on Cas's chest, one leg even half-flung across both of Cas's. It's not exactly a calm safe Side Hug. But there's nothing sexual in it; they're both still far too exhausted and both still half-sick anyway; but just the contact, the warmth of Cas's body, the pressure of Cas’s arms, is so comforting, and so reassuring, and so right... and Dean knows that he's home. He's at last come home.

He closes his eyes and tucks his head right down under Cas's chin. It occurs to him that Sam'll be teasing him about this someday, but it's just so wonderful to hear Cas's heart beating that Dean simply doesn't care at all who sees. He lets out a long, exhausted sigh.

There's a fainting creaking noise of the door opening, and then closing. Sarah and Sam have quietly slipped out of the room.

"This is much better," says Cas, after a moment. "It was so frustrating when you had to be in the other room."

Dean can't even seem to speak.

Cas starts stroking the back of Dean's neck, running his fingers gently through the short hairs there.

"That means something, doesn't it?" says Dean at last. "To angels? The back of the neck? It means something?"

"Yes," is all Castiel says.

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A/N - I'm sure many of you have noticed that there has been a running theme for many chapters now that Dean has been developing health problems. It's been creeping up on him for weeks and weeks. The flu is only part of it; he's been running ragged and has at least 3 other things going wrong physically. I wanted to show what can happen, when the caretaker almost inevitably gets sick themselves. I've seen it happen so many times... and it's hard to adjust to the shift in who needs care; hard for Dean to let others care for Cas, and to remember to take care of himself; hard for Cas to be confronted with how much stress Dean has been under. And hardest of all to be separated! But it's all part of the journey together. And in a way the forced separation of the flu quarantine has made them both realize how attached they've gotten; how much they simply cherish each other's company.

Next chapter's done; I'll give it one more polish tomorrow and probably will post it Sunday. The remaining chapters (3) will all post on the following weekend, just before the new season begins.

Thanks so much for all the encouraging comments last week! Please leave a comment again if you have time; I'm in a mad dash to get this wrapped up, logging hours every day and pretty much tabling everything else in my life, and could really use some support & encouragement in the home stretch! (& please forgive my lack of responses to the comments the last week; every spare second is going to the actual fic-writing right now. I hope to circle back & respond in the end).

Thank you for reading!
Long chapter this time - over 11K words! Normally this would be split into 2 or even 3, but I am on a roll now and I am just posting the whole thing.

By Friday they're finally headed back to the bunker for a brief weekend of rest. Dean and Cas reluctantly agree to do the drive separately, in the interest of a bit more quarantine-time (a five- or even twenty-minute hug, with Dean freshly showered, is one thing; ten hours side by side in the same enclosed car seems a little more risky). So Jody drives Dean in her pickup, while Sam drives Cas in the Impala.

Sarah gives them a fond farewell as they take off. She looks frustrated to see her two patients heading off without her — and especially frustrated, it seems, to see Sam leaving. She's even making noises about maybe visiting the bunker someday (with Sam giving her eager encouragement). But she explains that she has to work double shifts all this coming weekend in Denver, as well as the following weekend, Christmas weekend. This, it turns out, is how she'd been able to get so many days free this week to help take care of Castiel and Dean: she'd been bribing colleagues to trade shifts, with an offer of taking on their weekend and holiday shifts in exchange.

Jody assures her that "our boys" will be in good hands all weekend, and Sarah and Jody part with a big hug of their own. They've been trading shifts for days and it's clear they're bosom buddies by now.

The farewell-hugs continue: Sarah gives Cas a warm hug goodbye, and gives one to Dean as well, peppering them both with a few last medical instructions as she does so. ("Remember to sleep!" she hisses in Dean's ear.)

And then Sam and Sarah have to have their own long farewell hug. Which turns out to also include a totally public, and fairly long, kiss.

Jody politely pretends not to notice, turning aside to pack her bag and Dean's duffel into her pickup. But Dean can't help sneaking a few looks. He throws his backpack in the pickup cab and sneaks another look — Sam and Sarah are still kissing! Sam's now even stroking Sarah's hair. (Dean's filing a few details away for later teasing — he's positive he'll need some teasing ammo stored up for the future, if just to counter the inevitable Cas-snuggling jokes that Sam's sure to start in on at some point.)

Jody elbows Dean quietly as she wedges his duffel bag behind the seat of the pickup cab. She mutters, "Give S2 some space, already."

"S2?" whispers Dean, glancing at her.

"Sam and Sarah," mutters Jody. Dean turns again to look at them and Jody hisses, "Don't stare, jeez, dude, were you raised in a barn?"
Castiel, though, apparently was raised in a barn (or at least in a garrison); he's settled in a nest of pillows in the passenger seat of the Impala already, but he's staring openly at Sam and Sarah's interactions with obvious curiosity, even leaning over and craning his neck for a better look around his open door. A few minutes later, when Sam's handing a few last things to Cas for the trip, Dean hears Cas asking, "Have you kissed Sarah before, Sam, or was that the first kiss? Do you think that next time, you might—"

Sam hurriedly shuts Cas's door, cutting off his question in mid-word, and scurries around to the driver's side. But the second he opens the driver's door Cas picks right up with the question exactly where he'd been interrupted: "— kiss her even longer? Or would you move on to other things?"

Sarah's laughing (and blushing fiercely) as they drive away. Cas gives a long, eager wave to Dean as they drive off, but even in mid-wave Cas is turning again to Sam and saying something. Apparently asking more questions, for Sam shoots Dean a rather harried look in the side mirror as they drive away.

"Follow that car," Dean says to Jody. "I've got to see what happens next."

Keep up the questions, feather boy, texts Dean from the pickup. I think he might tell you more than he'll tell me.

She's my nurse, after all, replies Cas. I believe I have a right to know.

A few minutes later Cas sends: Dean, I think he likes her.

Yeah, I think you're right, replies Dean.

Cas clarifies, No, I mean, I think he likes her quite a lot.

Dean replies, And I mean, I think you're right.

Claire and Alex are both waiting for them when they pull into the Kansas bunker. Now that Dean's gotten sick too (well, recuperating now, but still frustratingly low on energy), Alex's nursing-school career choice turns out to be a distinct plus. She seems to have adopted both Cas and Dean as some sort of personal class project; she's already got two little notebooks started that she carries around with her everywhere, and as soon as they arrive she starts monitoring their vital rates every hour, making tidy notes in both notebooks. "These are your clinical charts," she says to Cas and Dean later that night, showing off her neat columns of numbers — blood pressure, heart rate, respiration, food eaten, water drunk, "BM's" (Dean doesn't dare ask how she is tracking this) and a whole host of notes on activity and miscellaneous symptoms. Alex even has her own stethoscope now, which she wears almost constantly looped around her neck (Claire: "Showoff." Alex: "Excuse me for wanting to actually help people.") She's also got her own little velcro blood pressure cuff, and says she's saving up for her own "O2-sat", whatever that is. And she can't seem to resist using all of her little tools at every opportunity. She consults over the phone with Sarah twice daily, and it's not long before Sarah's called Alex's nursing school teachers to arrange some extra credit for a "home health
Jody and Claire, meanwhile, hold down the fort in the kitchen. Hot home-cooked meals appear as if by magic every day. In addition to the fresh food, the fridge and its little freezer soon start piling full with neatly arranged plastic containers, each one full of pre-portioned, pre-prepped home-cooked food. The fridge door accumulates an impressive array of healthy snacks in handy little ziploc bags. Jody and Claire seem to be stacking up weeks' worth of food, as if they're expecting that right after they leave, Dean, Sam and Cas will have to survive for months here alone in some kind of endless winter blizzard, apparently far too incompetent to possibly be able to feed themselves.

"Not that we're not grateful," says Dean, "But, I don't want you to feel like you have to do all this. We can take care of ourselves. We have for years."

Claire and Jody both roll their eyes, in such perfect synchrony that it looks like they've rehearsed it.

Later on Friday Dean's tottering slowly around the bunker, mostly just trying to assess whether he has enough stamina yet to get back to any potential hunts that might come up. (The answer is clearly no, since he's still getting completely winded just by slowly strolling fifty yards.) He's accompanied by Cas, and they're both carrying mugs of thick, dark hot chocolate, sipping at them now and then. Cas has been hovering around Dean like a nervous mother hen for several days now — he's clearly been very rattled by Dean's illness — and in just the last forty-eight hours he's developed a whole side hobby involving constant taste-testing of new brands of tea, hot chocolate, cider and chicken broth that Dean might like. Almost every hour Cas seems to be tinkering with some new concoction over the stove, and pressing a fresh mug of some steaming-hot beverage into Dean's hands, frowning intently at Dean while he takes a few experimental sips. Based on the feedback, he then invariably heads back to the kitchen to refine his next experiment. (Dean doesn't mind at all, especially since part of the pattern is that Cas tends to drink his own mugful too, while watching Dean drink his.)

And it's true that Dean's not totally well yet. But right now, he decides nonetheless to try to make it as far as the garage to check on the Impala. Castiel's still close by his side. But once they reach the garage they're both a little startled to encounter all three women — Jody, Claire and Alex — wrestling a gigantic cardboard box out of the bed of Jody's pickup.

"I was up in Hastings," Jody explains — she's referring to the nearest large town, just over the Nebraska state line to the north, where most of the stores are. "Did a little dash up there to get a few groceries and some new cider and hot chocolate for Castiel, and I happened to pick up this little thing along the way."

"Little thing?" says Dean, moving closer for a look. The three women are just now maneuvering the thing down to the ground, and Dean says, "Hey, I'll help move it—"

All three women turn on him immediately, Jody saying "Nope," Claire shaking her head sternly, and Alex saying in a crisp professional tone, "You're recuperating, Dean. Castiel. Both of you. Go sit."

And Alex firmly herds them over to the sofa by the side wall of the garage. (Dean put the sofa here a few weeks ago for Cas, so that Cas could have a comfortable place to hang out while Dean works on the cars.)

Castiel and Dean settle on the couch together, but Dean can't help fidgeting as he watches the women start to drag the heavy cardboard box over to a nearby corner, the corner nearest the kitchen door. They still won't confess what's inside it, and it's got only a very generic Home Depot logo on the side, but whatever it is, it's clearly heavy. Dean's still sure they'll need help, but Jody refuses all of Dean's offers.
But there's three women, after all, all grown and all three of them quite tough, and with some intelligent use of leverage and a few straps and Dean's little rolling mechanic's dolly, they manage to get the thing where they want — the corner closest to the kitchen door. Dean's biting his tongue the whole time, but, rather to his disappointment, it turns out they don't need any of his help at all. Then the two girls start stripping all the cardboard away, cutting it away carefully in large slabs. There's some styrofoam next, and a big wispy plastic bag, and soon a smooth shining white box comes into view. It looks just about the right size to hold a human body.

"Is that the world's largest chest freezer?" says Dean. "Or is it our very own morgue?"

"Chest freezer!" says Jody, grinning at him. "Twenty-one cubic feet, baby." She pats its gleaming white side and says to Dean, "I am donating it to the Men of Letters bunker on condition that I am going to REQUIRE that it be devoted to food. Which means, by the way, not monster bodies. NO decapitated heads, NOTHING infectious. Edible food only, and I'll be checking up on that."

The thing's absolutely huge. Claire's setting up a long, heavy-duty extension cord now, Jody plugs it in, and they all give a little cheer as it whirs to life.

"You seriously bought us a chest freezer?" Dean says. It's a great idea — he's wondering now why he'd never thought of it himself.

Jody gives him a proud smile. "I couldn't believe you guys don't have a chest freezer by now!" she says. "With all this free electricity, too! I mean, without one, how ever do you meal-prep before hunts?"

Dean gives her a blank look. "Meal prep?" he asks hesitantly.

This time all three women roll their eyes simultaneously.

The "meal-prepping" turns out to involve all the pre-portioned meals that have been piling up in the kitchen refrigerator's tiny freezer. All those frozen, home-cooked meals soon migrate to the chest freezer, and they're almost instantly joined by dozens and dozens of new plastic tubs of food, as Jody and Claire accelerate their kitchen workflow to a truly impressive pace. There's soon stacks of neat little trays that each have entire home-cooked meals complete with side dishes. (Dean: "So it's like a TV dinner?" Jody: "Except HOME-COOKED. AND HEALTHY." Claire: "AND ORGANIC. AND TASTY." Jody: "AND MADE WITH LOVE." Sam, whispering: "Dammit, Dean, don't kill the goose that's laying the golden eggs!"). There's piles of individual servings of beef stir fry and chicken pot pies, there's big mouthwatering slabs of lasagna, there's pre-portioned tubs of stews and chilis. There's also a whole section of the chest freezer stacked full with raw ingredients for more meals — frozen chicken breasts in bulk, stacks of frozen vegetables and even some frozen, hand-sliced loaves of home-baked bread. (Over the following days, Dean tries a few times to ask, delicately, how much Jody has spent on all this, hoping to figure out how to reimburse her for at least some of it. But she's having none of it. "Merry Christmas," is all she says.)

And also, there's anything and everything that Castiel shows the slightest appetite for. On Friday it turns out that Castiel's quite fond of a potato soup that Claire offers up that night; the next day there's two huge pots of the same soup bubbling on the stove, and shortly thereafter there are no less than fifteen servings tucked away in the chest freezer. On Saturday morning Cas mentions he likes breakfast burritos; by noon that day, twenty-four pre-prepped breakfast burritos, each individually wrapped in foil and carefully sealed in its own little baggie, are lined up in a tub in the chest freezer, every one of them neatly labeled with the date they were made.

Claire seems to be doing quite a lot of the Castiel-related food prep. Later that Saturday, Claire offers an idea that maybe, during the coming Week 3 on the days when Cas can't quite eat, he could chew
on little frozen seedless grapes, one at a time like little popsicles. "Like ice chips, except it'll give him a few calories too," says Claire.

She won't say where she got this idea, and in fact she's so evasive when Dean asks about it, and gets such an odd look on her face, that Dean starts to suspect it's something to do with her dad.

Maybe Jimmy Novak used to give frozen grapes to little Claire whenever she was sick?

Whatever the source of the idea, it turns out Claire's already gone ahead and frozen a few grapes as a test. Cas tries one tentatively while Claire hovers nearby with a curiously blank look on her face. He likes it. He turns to her with a smile, and asks for another, and suddenly Claire's face almost crumples.

She scurries away so fast, scampering off get some more of her "test grapes" from the chest freezer, that it's pretty clear she's trying to hide a certain shine of tears in her eyes. They even hear her blow her nose when she's out of view, but when she returns a moment later (with more frozen grapes, in a little bowl), she's smiling. And it seems a genuine smile, as if it's a relief for her to find that a few of her childhood memories still have some use.

Cas says he loves the grapes. He doesn't ask where she got the idea, but he gets up and gives her a hug, and says, quite seriously, "Thank you."

She replies, softly, "I'm glad you like them."

She doesn't say anything more about it, and Castiel doesn't press. But Cas eats frozen grapes for the whole rest of the day, an endless stream of them, and Claire mentions, quite casually, that maybe she'll "freeze a few more, just in case."

More and more grown-up every day, Dean thinks, watching Claire prepping another batch of red seedless grapes that evening. Turns out she doesn't just toss them as-is in the freezer; she's inspecting each grape one by one before freezing it, discarding the squishier and discolored ones, carefully removing every scrap of stem and washing them all in a big bin of clean water. Once the grapes have all passed inspection, she piles them neatly into yet another plastic bin, writes a little label on a piece of tape with the date, and leans into the TV room to tell Cas where they'll be. She adds to him, "I'm freezing some ice packs, too. You can put the ice packs and the grapes in the cooler and take it all to Denver." She then adds, to Dean, "I got a second cooler for you guys. You can take meals for you and Sam, and the soup for Cas, and breakfast burritos for the whole week. Everything'll fit in it, I already checked, meals for the whole trip, and Cas's grapes and the soup. It's a five-day cooler, one of those thick-walled ones, so if I pack it Sunday night it'll last through the whole trip for you guys."

It's suddenly very easy to imagine Claire with a family of her own someday.

Claire disappears back into the garage. Dean and Cas exchange a look.

"She's growing up," says Cas. He adds, thoughtfully. "I'm so grateful to Jody...."

Dean nods. After a moment he adds, "Gonna ask her where that cooler is," and he gets up and walks to the garage, expecting to find her rummaging around in the chest freezer.

He's actually planning to thank her privately for all her care with Castiel's food. But to Dean's
surprise, for once Claire's not doing frozen-food tasks at all. Instead she's uncoiling the long hose on the far wall of the garage. Dean stays in the doorway, now trying to keep subtly out of view as he watches: she gets a bucket, she fills it with water, she fetches some soap (dishwashing soap, Dean notices); she finds a sponge, she tests the sponge carefully, rubbing her hand over it like she's checking the texture... and she goes over to the Thunderbird and starts to wash it.

"Wait," says Dean. Claire jumps a little, turning to look at him.

"I've got a bigger sponge, for the cars," Dean says. "A little softer, too. The one you've got there is fine — good for you for checking if it was scratchy, I saw you check — and that one's okay, but I've got an even better one. Also I have some better soap, specifically for cars, that won't hurt rubber or wax finishes, and won't leave any residue. Dishwashing soap can pull off a wax finish and it can be tough on rubber. Want me to help?"

"You're sick," says Claire, shaking her head. "I mean, definitely tell me where the soap is, but, you can't do any work. You're sick."

"I was sick," Dean complains.

"You're recuperating, like Alex says," says Claire. "You're only six days out. Alex says flu fatigue lasts two weeks." She points to the sofa once more. "Sit," she orders. Dean tells her where the correct soap and sponge are, and then sits, yet again, starting to feel more than a little useless as he watches Claire doing all the work.

Castiel soon appears in the doorway, carrying (inevitably) a tray of three steaming mugs. Framed in the doorway like this, he seems thinner than ever. His cheeks are positively hollow now, the tassels of the monkey hat only accentuating his gauntness. And though he's at least on his feet again, Dean's more and more worried about his overall condition — and feeling more and more frustrated, and guilty, about not having been able to care for him. Not to mention feeling a little guilty about how much Cas keeps fussing now over Dean.

"Come sit," suggests Dean. "Come and rest with me." Cas gives him a warm smile, delivers a mug of cider to Claire (she chugs it down immediately), and comes over to sit by Dean's side.

It's becoming a comfortable pattern, the two of them sitting side-by-side. Dean slouches comfortably against Castiel's side, and Cas rests his hand on Dean's knee, both of them watching Claire. They sip their cider together as she carefully washes the Thunderbird and then buffs it dry with one of Dean's clean chamois cloths.

"I could get used to this," says Dean to Cas. "Sitting and watching everybody else do all the work."

"Supervising," Cas says, with a nod.

"Supervising, exactly," says Dean.

Then it occurs to him that he could be doing some actual supervising. And maybe even some training, as he'd once promised to do.

"Hey, Claire," he calls. She glances over to him.

Dean checks his phone for the time. Still several hours before dinner. "Plenty of time to get in an oil change before dinner," he tells her. "Maybe even a brake job too. You game for an oil change on the T-Bird, to start out? I'll talk you through it."

She brightens immediately at the idea. It soon turns out she still won't let Dean do any work; he's
only allowed to roll around on a second mechanic's dolly in order to point things out on the underside of the car. (Cas soon joins them, of course, and he ends up walking around the T-Bird and studying its wardings with professional interest.) Dean also insists on a thorough tutorial about properly chocking the wheels when working under any kind of a vehicle. But it turns out he only has to point and explain; Claire does all the work, and she does a very careful job. Then she wants to hear about how to do brake jobs, for her Subaru. The parts have long since arrived (Dean ordered them weeks ago), and Dean talks her through that too.

Pretty soon Claire delivers Dean and Cas back to the sofa. There’s still a little time before dinner and, interestingly, she returns to the T-Bird rather than spending more time on the Subaru. Soon she’s embarked on a full wax-and-polish of the T-Bird's clean finish.

"She's really not doing a bad job," Dean murmurs to Cas.

Cas raises an eyebrow and gives Dean an appraising look. "Does 'not doing a bad job' mean she's doing an excellent job?"

Dean chuckles. But he has to nod. Claire is doing a great job with the cars.

Cas nods to himself. "I'm glad to hear it," he says, looking back at Claire polishing the T-Bird. He watches her for a few moments and adds, "You know, I've always liked that car's name. It seems appropriate."

Dean blinks at him, and looks over at the T-bird.

Oh.

"Thunderbird?" he whispers to Cas. Thunderbird, as in bird.

And Cas nods. "As in, a flying creature," he whispers back. There's even a stylized winged — and feathered — bird emblem on the hood. "I like the idea of her having a Thunderbird to watch over her," adds Cas. "And one that she takes care of, in return." Then he sits up, and takes in a little breath, like he's just had an idea. He turns to Dean, and Dean knows what he's going to say next. He's nodding before the words are even out of Cas's mouth.

Like clockwork the next chemo week rolls into view and plows right over them. Dean's been telling everyone he's "just about back to normal now," meaning, of course, he's not back to normal at all and is still terrifically tired. He and Cas have even still been staying in separate beds out of fear of contagiousness (there's always the masks, of course, but Dean's been afraid he might start coughing in his sleep and maybe even might pull his mask off in his sleep).

Fortunately Sarah and Jody again somehow both manage to come help them, just for a couple days this time, both pitching in some help on the Monday and Tuesday (at god knows what price to their regular work schedules). Dean can only seem to manage a few hours "on call" at a time, but at least now he can be in Cas's room, though often just flopped on the mattress in the corner, observing everything watchfully while Jody, Sarah or Sam do all the heavy lifting.

With Dean on the mend, and with Jody and Sarah both helping, it should be a relatively easy chemo week. Claire's "five-day cooler" makes meals easier than ever, and the frozen grapes turn out to be a godsend. But even an "easy" chemo week is still a chemo week, and poor Cas still doesn't have a
very comfortable time of it.

But at least it's the last chemo week — for a while, at least. This should feel hopeful, triumphant even, but oddly everyone seems reluctant to mention it. It's almost worrying how superstitious everybody seems to be about it. The clinic staff seem a little more open about the topic, but there it seems almost too forced, with too-chipper jokes about "Hope we never see you again!" and one too many of those worrying mentions of "make the most of the holidays". Dean finds he can't stop fretting about Castiel's consultation with Dr. Klein next week, after Christmas. Cas won't mention it at all, which seems ominous. Has the chemo been helping at all? What will Dr. Klein say?

What will the scans show?

The worry and strain keep hanging over Dean, and though he tries to hide it, he knows it's slowing his own recovery. It's still hard to get to sleep; he's still fighting off a heavy fatigue and it's difficult to drum up much appetite. There's even a new problem emerging — the stomachache that's been dogging Dean on and off for weeks has flowered into some kind of regular stabbing abdominal pain. Which Dean doesn't mention to a soul, of course, until one day Sarah spots him hunkered on the mattress clutching his stomach.

"Ulcer," she says after quizzing him with some pointed questions and prodding experimentally at his abdomen. She adds, with a tired sigh. "I'm not gonna say I told you so...."

"All right, all right, I get it," wheezes Dean. "But what do I do?"

"See a doctor," she says. "I can't diagnose anything; that's just my guess. But, if it were me... no coffee, no acidic foods for a while, drink a lot of fluids, and there's some over-the-counter meds that might be worth a try."

Dean's hoping, a little desperately, to hide all this. But Castiel has already overheard.

And Cas's mother-hen mode won't turn off any more, not even when he's at his most ill. More often than not, when Dean wakes from one of his exhausted naps on the mattress in the corner, he finds that Castiel is watching him, curled on his side in his bed but staring at Dean now instead of staring at his little clock. Cas keeps whispering suggestions to Jody, Sam and Sarah about things they could do for Dean; herbal teas and soft foods that might be good for Dean's stomach, how Dean might need a hot bath or some other form of pampering.

The moment Cas is first back on his feet again on Tuesday, his very first move is to stagger over to the motel room's tiny microwave to make a fresh mug of hot sweet chamomile tea for Dean, not for himself.

And, furthermore, it's clear that Cas is trying more than ever to hide how bad he feels, trying to act like he's full of energy when he's obviously not. All clearly in an effort to keep Dean from worrying.

But Cas can't hide everything. It's been six months now, of grueling chemo cycle after grueling chemo cycle. Cas has now lost all his hair; even his eyebrows are gone now, giving him a ghostly, almost haunted look. His thinness is getting really alarming, and he feels almost skeletal whenever Dean (carefully masked and gloved) curls up with him in bed.

It occurs to Dean, late that Tuesday, as he's sitting up in his mattress on the floor sipping the chamomile tea (with Cas curled up by his side watching him drink), that there's been no sex in a couple weeks now, since Dean got sick. This has come to seem completely irrelevant. It's even interesting how irrelevant it seems — it's rather a new experience for Dean, actually, to have sex drifting so far down the priority list that it goes almost completely out of sight. Whether it's stress
shutting down certain hormones, or just the fact that they're both sick, or just this grinding feeling of constantly worrying about each other, and worrying about each other's worrying about each other — well, it's rather a relief that they're both out of action now, because it's very clear that Cas simply doesn't have the energy anyway. His whole body seems to be shutting down. He seems even more tired this week than last.

Dean's hand drifts down to Cas's head, and while he sips his tea, he strokes Cas's head. And the back of his neck, of course. Only now, with Dean's hand drifting steadily over his head, does Cas's look of constant concern start to fade. His face relaxes; his eyes start to slide shut.

Dean keeps it up till Cas at last falls asleep. And then Dean sets down the mug, curls up at Cas's side, and sleeps too.

Somehow they limp through Week 3; Dean can't shake an image of he and Cas as a pair of drowning dogs who have just barely managed to stagger, weakly, on to the far shore of a roaring river. They've made it to the other side, but they're both utterly wiped out.

But at least it's the last chemo week. Or so Dean desperately hopes.

On Wednesday, Cas explains he has to make one brief visit back to the clinic, to finish some last paperwork relating to wrapping up his last week of chemo, before they start the drive back to Kansas. And, it turns out, the hospital staff considers this moment to mark the official end of Cas's long chemotherapy treatment. The lobby of the chemo ward has a little bell mounted on a side wall; Dean's noticed it now and then, but hadn't thought about what it was for. It turns out it's the "last chemo bell", and that patients ring it when they are walking out the clinic doors for (hopefully) the last time.

Dozens of people come over to witness Cas ringing the bell. Cas, Dean and Sam are all a little startled by what a production this turns into; Sarah and all the other nurses are suddenly there, and a ring of other patients, and, to Dean's (and Castiel's) surprise, Sharon and Emily have even come. Sam and Dean stand back a little to give Cas some room. Cas looks like he's a little overwhelmed by all the attention. But he shoots Dean a (slightly nervous) smile, straightens his back, and rings the bell.

It makes a cheery little dinging noise. It's actually rather a quiet bell, but everybody's gone so very silent to hear it that its little shimmery pealing sound rings out bright and clear. It echoes through the whole clinic, like a shining little note of hope amid all the darkness.

Then there's a big round of congratulations, and shaking of hands, and hugs.

Once the round of hugs is mostly over, people start drifting away. Sam and Sarah inevitably get into a long conversation about something or other, and Dean has a brief moment alone with Cas. He's still a little worried about kisses being contagious, so he gives Cas a hug instead, and it's a long one, and a close one. Cas lets his head nod down onto Dean's shoulder.

"Dean..." Cas murmurs, and pauses, like he can't even think what to say.

In lieu of a kiss, Dean strokes the back of Cas's neck. For nearly half a minute.

When Dean finally lets him go, Cas seems almost dizzy with the sensation. His blue eyes are wide,
the pupils huge and dark; he's blinking back tears, and his smile is a bit wavery. But, it seems, it's a good kind of wavery.

"Dean..." Cas whispers to him again, clutching both Dean's hands and looking deep into Dean's eyes. Again he can't seem to finish his sentence.

"I know," says Dean.

"I..." says Cas, and he falters again.

"I know," says Dean. "Me too." He grins at Cas and gives him another quick hug.

They leave it at that, for now. Dean hands over Cas's warmest winter coat, and two scarves and two hats (Dean and Sam have both decided that Cas needs to double up on the winter insulation). But now, all of a sudden, little Emily appears at Dean's elbow, Sharon just behind her. Cas is just starting to wrap his cream-colored scarf into place, but when he sees Emily he pauses, a smile blossoming on his face. She looks fantastic, standing straight and tall, a perky white knit cap on her head. She's already put on some weight, and her face has a pink, healthy glow — the flush of health.

"Emily!" says Cas, beaming down at her. "You look wonderful!"

Emily tugs on the sleeve of Cas's blue sweater, and he bends down to hear what she has to say.

"Mom and me watched this Christmas movie last weekend," she says to Cas, "and there was an angel in it, and the movie says that every time a bell rings, an angel gets his wings."

"It's A Wonderful Life," Sharon mouths to Dean. Dean nods; he'd recognized the line.

Emily goes on, "So, now that you've rung your bell, will you get your wings back?" She adds, sounding quite worried, "Because, I can't see them anymore. I can't see your wings. Are they gone?"

Cas crouches down on his heels to look at her eye-to-eye. "I've still got my wings," he assures her. (Dean's a little surprised to hear him telling the truth so plainly — but, of course, as Sam has pointed out, Sharon and Emily most likely know the truth anyway.) Cas explains, "They've only become invisible to you because you're healing now. It's a good thing, Emily. It means you're getting better."

Emily blinks. "Your wings are invisible?" she says.

"To most people, yes," says Cas.

"But you swear they're still there?" she says.

She sounds unconvinced — and worried, too. Dean finally says to her, "Give me your hand." He glances at Cas for approval, and to Sharon too; they both give him a nod. Cas is still crouched down on his heels, and his back is within Emily's reach. Dean takes gentle hold of Emily's little hand and steers it in a slow arc through the air across Cas's back.

"Feel the warmth?" Dean says. Emily nods; he releases her hand, and she moves it through the air a second time on her own, waving her fingers back and forth above Cas's back. Dean adds, "Two areas of warmth, you feel that? Left side and right side?"

Emily's frowning in intense concentration. "That's your wings?" she whispers to Cas.

Cas nods. A smile spreads slowly over Emily's face. "You've still got them!" she says, and she seems greatly relieved.
Dean leans down to whisper to her, "Emily, just by the way, you've got to keep that a secret, okay? Most people can't see his wings, and it's safer for him if people don't know."

"Because he can't just fly away?" she asks. Cas gives Dean a slightly startled look. Emily says, "He's lost all his long feathers, right? So he can't fly away, and people could catch him. Is that why it has to be a secret?"

She's hit the nail right on the head, of course.

"That's right," Cas says to her quietly. "That's exactly the problem."

Emily just nods. "I understand," she says. "Me and Mom'll keep it a secret from now on." Then she asks, "But your feathers will grow back now, won't they? Now that you're done with the chemo, they'll grow back, and then you'll be able to fly again."

Cas's face stiffens slightly at this statement — it's clear this is something he's unsure about.

"Things grow back," Emily assures him. "See, look at my hair." She pulls off her little white knit hat, revealing a short blonde fuzz of new-grown hair. "You can feel it," she offers, and Cas runs his hand over her head gently.

"Very soft," he says.

"It's softer than it used to be," says Emily.

"You look beautiful," says Cas.

She grins at him and pulls her hat back on. "Your hair'll grow back too," she says. "And your feathers also. I mean, won't they? It makes sense. If hair grows back, then feathers grow back."

"I don't know about my feathers," says Cas, in a low voice. "But, honestly, I'm happy just to be alive."

She nods again, like she understands this sort of philosophical point of view. Then she starts to get an uncertain look, and takes a breath, as if she's trying to decide whether to say something more. Finally she leans in and says, "Did you hear my prayers?"

A warm smile spreads over Cas's face. "I did indeed. Thank you so much."

"I'll send some every week," she whispers. "And thank you for the feather. My mom told me about it."

Dean and Cas both look up, then, at Sharon, who's standing nearby, and Cas stands to speak to Sharon.

"It was my great pleasure," is all Cas says. But Sharon's face starts to screw up, like she's choking up and trying to hold back tears. She leans forward and gives Cas a quick, tight hug — and Dean can see (though Cas can't) that during the hug, Sharon lifts one hand slightly off Cas's back and moves it through the air above his shoulders, sweeping her hand in an arc just like Emily had, left to right through the air. Apparently she feels something too, for her eyes widen. When she steps back, her face is carefully controlled.

Emily's now asking more questions to Cas, and Sharon takes another step back, next to Dean.

"It's true, isn't it?" she murmurs to Dean. "What he is?"
"It is a secret," says Dean to her.

"Crappy secret if he goes around magically healing people," she points out.

"That was a one-off," says Dean. Keeping his voice very low, so that Cas won't hear, he whispers, "He doesn't have much power now. Or, any, really. He gave everything he had to Emily."

Then Sharon's blinking back tears again, and she interrupts Emily and Castiel once more, just to lean in and gives Cas another hug, an even tighter one. "Thank you," she says to Cas. "I don't know what we did to deserve this."

Cas just smiles at her. "You're my friends," he says.

They reach the bunker Wednesday night, and all of a sudden Christmas is just a few days away, Sunday of the coming weekend. Jody, Claire and Alex spend another two days at the bunker on Thursday and Friday, apparently still all on a joint campaign to pretty much force-feed both Castiel and Dean back to health. But then the three women all have to pack up and head back to South Dakota early Friday afternoon, so as to reach Sioux Falls by Saturday, Christmas Eve.

"I'm so bummed I have to work on the holidays," Jody says as she's packing up her bag to load into her pickup. The girls are already out in the garage, and Jody hoists her bag over her shoulder and starts heading that way too, with Cas, Sam and Dean accompanying her. "I really wish we could stay," she adds as they walk down the hallway, "but it's because of swapping shifts around to be in Denver. I gotta work the whole holiday now, double shifts; day before, day of, day after, starting crack of dawn tomorrow. I'm really sorry, guys."

"Jody, we'll be fine," says Dean. "You've already done so much for us. I just feel bad you have to work so much."

"I suggested to the girls that they could stay with you. But they were all, we'd like to but you can't be alone on Christmas, Mom." Jody gives Dean a little grin. "Hard to resist those two when they start throwing in the Mom word, to be honest. It seems like they're worried about me being alone or something, isn't that silly? Anyway, they said you'd told them you'd all be fine."

"We will be fine," Sam assures her. "Same with Sarah, she has to work too, we get it. And you and your girls should do Christmas together. They're right, you shouldn't be alone. And you all gotta get in some family time too."

"Can't you guys come to Sioux Falls with us?" says Jody mournfully. "Or let us make your Christmas dinner at least?"

Dean says, "One thing we can manage, believe it or not, is a Christmas dinner. Or at least, Sam can manage it — guess I'm kinda volunteering you to do it, Sam, sorry—" (Sam gives a mock sigh, but it's clear he's pleased with the idea.) "You should've seen Sam's Thanksgiving." Dean adds to Jody. "He really pulled it off. We'll be fine. And honestly, a little downtime would be kind of nice..."

He hesitates, and Jody grins at him. She says, "You boys probably need some time together, don't you? Especially you and Cas."

Dean nods. He's a little shy about saying it outright, but it's true; this Saturday the masks and gloves
can at last come off for good, and what he really wants, most of all, is to curl up with Castiel for all of Christmas Eve, for a long, long, blissful session in bed. Whether the "bliss" involves sex, neck-scratches, cuddling or even just sleeping doesn't even matter; most of all Dean just wants some time alone with him.

Sam'll be around too, of course, but Sam is different than having all the Jody-Claire-Alex trio around. Sam fits in, he's totally familiar, he just... belongs.

Dean confesses, "I think we all need a little quiet time after all the hospital stuff. But we'll be in touch after the holidays, okay?"

"Okay... I guess...." says Jody. She still looks a little bothered. But she brightens when they reach the garage. "But, let me at least show you what we've got for you so far. Girls! We gotta show off our production, c'mon over here."

Alex and Claire come join them and Jody embarks on a chest freezer tour. "Sorry it's not full yet," says Jody as she flips the huge lid open. She seems to think that the hundreds of prepared meals are not nearly enough. Dean, Sam and Cas can only eye the bonanza of food with awe. "I know it's Cas's last week of chemo," adds Jody. "But I figure, if he needs any more treatment, you'll need this food; and if he doesn't need any more treatment, you'll still need this food, because pardon me for pointing this out but it's obvious you guys are total crap at taking care of yourselves."

"Well, partial crap maybe," says Dean, bristling a little. "Like I said, Sam made a great Thanksgiving! And I've been known to make a decent burger or two."

"Which I'm sure you make at least once a year, in between all the hunts and all the junk food, right?"

Dean has to nod, and Jody laughs, saying, "You know, I used to think you were joking when you guys would tell me how you were living off of pizza and Slim Jims. But, oh my god, your refrigerator here was downright pathetic. Claire and I were like, how have they survived? Anyway, this—" (she does an expansive arm-wave toward all the frozen food) "—will carry you well through the holidays and part of January. If you go on hunts you take some with you, got it? And I think I might come down now and then even after Castiel's all better. Anyway, so, the roast chicken's over here and this here is the new batch of mango-sriracha chicken, and the new beef barley soup is in these tubs. Everything's labeled. Oh and, I made this red sauce from scratch, that's in these little jars, you just put it on pasta, okay? You can boil water, I hope? And, you know, if you guys have any interest in learning how to cook—" She hesitates. "I mean, I know Sarah's got some ideas for drumming some better health habits into you guys; Sam, I think you'll be her first guinea pig, but even without whatever Sarah manages to accomplish, it'd be nice if one of you three put a little effort into learning to make some decent food."

"I could learn," says Castiel. They all turn and look at him.

"I'd love to learn to cook," he says. "I think I could do it. This whole... experience... has taught me just how important good health is. And good nutrition." (He darts a glance at Dean.) "You just follow a set of instructions, right?"

"A recipe," corrects Claire, with a little grin.

"Maybe you can show me some of your recipes on your next visit?" Cas suggests to Claire. "And after that, once I've memorized the instructions, I'm sure I could cook meals for Dean and Sam." He adds, "Sam's cooked for me so often, and Dean's been caring for me so much that he even got sick. I'd love to cook for them both." He adds, a little uncertainly, "Once I'm better."
"Yeah, once you're better," agrees Jody, a little too cheerily. "That's a great idea."

"Maybe I could learn to cook some cookies, too," suggests Cas.


Cas frowns at her. "Then why are they called cookies?"

They all blink at him.

"Teach him to cook and bake, Claire," Dean suggests. "You know what they say, give a man a fish and he eats for a day; teach an angel to cook and you get cookies for eternity."

And soon the time has come to say goodbye. There's rounds of hugs, and exchanges of several carefully wrapped presents that everybody promises not to open till Christmas.

The three women are all wishing Cas things like "Hoping for good news," "Can't wait to hear that you're all done," "Take care of yourself," "Let us know as soon as there's news." It's all vaguely phrased, and it's clear everybody's scared to say it straight out: I really, really hope your cancer is gone.

And with every vague expression of hope, a grim aura of worry starts to settle over everybody.

Dean knows just how to snap everybody out of it: He looks over toward the Thunderbird, and draws a breath to speak.

But Claire beats him to it. "Oh, um," she says hesitantly. "About the T-Bird. So... the Subie's ready now, huh? Brakes are all good now?"

Dean nods. "You did the brakes and the oil change, right? And you checked it all over."

"And it's ready now?" says Claire.

"You did all the work," points out Dean. "What do you think?"

"I think it's all good?" she says, even more hesitantly, and Dean nods. (He'd checked everything himself later. The Subaru's definitely roadworthy now.)

"Okay, then," says Claire. "Thanks for helping me fix up my car. Or, I mean, watching me while I fixed up my car." She digs the Thunderbird keys out of her pocket and holds them (a little reluctantly, it seems) out to Dean. "Thanks for the loaner," she says, a wistful tone in her voice, and now she's gazing over at the lovely Thunderbird (which is absolutely gleaming now, with a mirror shine) with a distinctly loving look in her eye. "That T-Bird's such a great car."

"You'll need to wash it again," says Dean. He doesn't take the keys.

She blinks at him, still holding the keys out. "But I just washed it. Did I miss a spot or something?"

"Come and look," says Dean. He heads over to the Thunderbird and leans in the open driver's window. There's a large manila envelope sitting on the driver's seat, which Dean pulls out. Claire's now walking in a circle around the Thunderbird, peering at its glossy surface, trying to figure out
what spot she missed. Dean tells her, "You didn't miss a spot. It's perfect; you've done a great job with it. It's just that long road trips always get a car dirty, so once you get it back to Jody's place you'll need to wash it again. The wax job should hold, but give it a wash. I put the soap and sponge and bucket in the trunk for you. And don't you dare forget the undercarriage! Hose off the undercarriage like I told you, okay? Otherwise the salt in winter will eat up a car like you wouldn't believe."

Claire is staring at him blankly as Dean hefts the manila envelope in his hands. It's a little heavy, and there's a faint clink of metal shifting around inside. Claire's gaze shifts to the envelope — she's still not understanding (or, more likely, not daring to let herself believe it). Sam, Jody, Alex and Castiel have all drawn close to watch, forming a little semi-circle around the hood of the T-Bird, as Dean tells Claire, "Cas gets credit for this idea. So, it's Christmas in a few days, and Jody tells me you just hit twenty-one this year, and Cas was kind of bothered that we missed your birthday, so... here." He holds the manila envelope out at her.

Slowly, Claire takes the manila envelope, and opens it, and tilts it into one hand. A large wadded clump of papers slide out, wrapped around some rectangular pieces of metal. She unfolds the papers and stares at them; it's the title to the Thunderbird, in her name, and a new registration, and an insurance card; and it's all folded neatly around a pair of South Dakota license plates.

"What," she says, like she can't process it. "What is this?"

"A car," says Dean. "The T-bird. Take care of it. Please don't die crashing into a tree or anything." Claire looks up at him with a completely confused expression, and Dean adds, "I was gonna just... I don't know, hold on to it forever, I guess? But Cas pointed out, that car's been sitting here fifty years at least, and sure it's been totally pristine and totally safe here, yeah, but for what? Just to be mothballed here and never get used? Nobody even got to see that car in fifty years, let alone drive it. And I never drive it. The Impala's my baby. The Thunderbird hasn't been used at all since we've been living here. And that's just a waste."

"You should have a Thunderbird," Cas puts in. "It's an old legend, you know; a winged creature of old myths." He hesitates for an oddly long moment, his eyes drifting to the stylized winged-bird emblem on the car's hood. He adds, "It'll watch over you, and you can watch over it. Um... I've added a few extra wards to it. I put them on last night. It'll take care of you."

Claire stares at Castiel for a long moment.

"It comes with conditions," says Dean, and Claire's gaze slowly shifts back to Dean. "And the first one is, till you get some real snow tires, you only use your Subaru in snow and ice, not the T-bird. Once you get snow tires then maybe we'll reconsider that. And the second is, you have to learn some more maintenance for it, and some additional driving skills. The third is, you're gonna keep it in Jody's garage — she says there's room, so don't you dare let this beauty sit out in the snow and hail and road salt and all. Like Cas says, you take care of it and it'll take care of you. And the last condition is, like I said before, don't you dare go and die in some dumb crash or I will personally hunt you down in the afterlife and you will be very sorry." Claire's literally gaping now, her mouth starting to actually hang half-open, her eyes wide. She keeps looking back and forth from Cas to Dean as Dean says, "I'll be giving you a few lessons. More maintenance, stuff you should know about driving. After New Year's, once Cas is all done with his treatment." (Dean manages to say this like it's a foregone conclusion.) He flicks a glance at Alex. "Lessons for you too, if you want. And when your twenty-first rolls around we'll find something for you too." He adds, to Claire, who's still standing there dumbstruck, "Cas paid the registration fee for you—" (Castiel gives Dean a slightly
annoyed look; he'd wanted this part to stay secret) "— and the title transfer fee and all of that, out of
the money he still had saved up from his job. He even tried to buy the car off me originally, just to
give it to you. Then Jody did all the legwork getting it registered and insured last week when you
had it up in Sioux Falls, while you weren't looking. And Alex kept the plates hid in her bag all
week." Dean gives Alex a quick wink, and she grins back.

Claire's astounded. She stares at the license plates, at the title and registration and the little insurance
card. She spins around and stares at the car for a long moment, and then gives Castiel a long, almost
bewildered look, and she looks around at all the others, too; Dean, Sam, Jody, Alex. She almost
looks like she's going to burst into tears.

"Is this for real?" she finally says.

"Merry Christmas, Claire," says Castiel, and then she really does burst into tears.

And suddenly the women are gone. (They depart in a three-car convoy: pickup, T-Bird, and
Subaru.)

Christmas is just a few days away.

Between Cas's last chemo week and Dean's flu it really feels like the holiday has kind of snuck up on
them. And with the Jody gang all gone, the bunker feels weirdly empty — maybe a little emptier
than they'd all been prepared for. Dean's a little surprised to even find himself wishing for some
excuse to take Cas out on the road in the Impala. But Sam and Dean proceed with the plan of just
sticking to a mellow Christmas at the bunker.

But then, over dinner that night (one of Jody's delightful mango-chicken meals) Castiel speaks up
with, "By the way — Sam, Dean — there's something we need to discuss." Cas pauses a moment,
and sets his fork down. "I still need to arrange my scans and tests. The post-chemotherapy scans."

They both stare at him.

"Wait, isn't that next week?" says Dean. "I thought it was all arranged for next week?"

"The meeting with Dr. Klein is next week," says Cas. "But the scans were supposed to be done last
week. But I cancelled the appointments."

There's a moment of confused silence. Cas has never mentioned this.

"You were so ill, Dean," Cas says, and Dean's heart sinks. Cas continues, "And I wanted to help
take care of you. So I postponed the appointments, till I could be sure you were better."

Dean sets his fork down too — his appetite has suddenly vanished. "Cas...." he can only say.

"The tests can be rescheduled," says Castiel calmly. "Though Aaron — Dr. Klein, I mean — is
strongly recommending that I try to reschedule the tests for as soon as possible. But, he called me
today and it turns out they're booked up in Denver for all the rest of month. He also called the
Kansas City hospitals but they were booked up too."

By now Dean almost wants to cry. Cas cancelled his critically important tests just so he could "take
care" of Dean?

Cas seems to see the stricken look on Dean's face, for he sets a hand on Dean's knee and squeezes tightly, saying with a smile, "Don't worry, I have an idea! Dr. Klein tells me he's been calling around to other hospitals, but then it occurred to me.... this might sound odd, but I was wondering.... " He hesitates. "It might be nice to go visit the Grand Canyon for Christmas. Don't you think?"

Dean and Sam just stare at him again.

"The Grand Canyon?" Dean says. "For Christmas?" Cas nods. Dean says, "I'm fairly sure they don't have an MRI machine down in the Grand Canyon."

"But they've got one in Flagstaff," says Cas, with a little smile.

Flagstaff. Of course.

Flagstaff, Arizona, where it all began.

It's strange to remember it now, after so many months. How they'd driven there in such a hurry, through that strange high mountain desert, that endless red-rock landscape, to search for Castiel. Right after Dean had returned from his bizarre, brief meeting with Mom. (In fact, it's been quite a while since Dean's thought about that strange reunion. Let yourself be happy...) They'd been so worried...only to find Cas on his feet and looking perfectly fine, in the Flagstaff Regional Trauma Center... but, he'd also been talking to a worried doctor about "more tests." It had been months more till they'd found out what was really going on, but it was really that Flagstaff doctor who had discovered Cas's cancer.

"They did the initial scan there, with the Flagstaff cat," Cas reminds them, "and then also a whole battery of follow-up tests were done there as well, later that week, right after you two left. Lots of bloodwork and all the scans. Much later, I arranged to shift my treatment to Denver so as to try to stay closer to you both — the Flagstaff hospital recommended the Denver one, and the marijuana availability in Denver was rather appealing as well, and it wasn't far from Kansas. So I ended up doing most of the treatment in Denver. But Aaron happened to mention recently that it would actually be ideal to get the new tests done in the same facility that did the first round, so that it's all exactly comparable. I gather he means, with the same cat. I'm sure the Denver cat is good too, but I rather like the idea of going back to the Flagstaff cat. So I called Flagstaff, and their cat does have some availability next week, right after Christmas." And then Castiel adds, with an unmistakably hopeful look, "And, you see, I had already been thinking what a pity it was that I didn't really get to see the Grand Canyon, and it's only an hour's drive from Flagstaff—"

He looks so wistful as he's saying all this, so eager and hopeful, trying so earnestly to convince them, that Dean's already made his decision. If Cas wants to see the Grand Canyon for Christmas, he thinks, then we are going to the Grand Canyon for Christmas.

Let yourself be happy....

And let those you love be happy, too. It's all part of the package.

"Haven't you had your fill of that canyon, though?" Sam asks, while Dean's thinking. "By, you know, falling into it?"

"But I didn't see it then," says Cas. "That's just it. I was unconscious."

Sam asks, "But haven't you seen it before? I mean, I'm just wondering — you've been around the
world like a million times as an angel, haven't you?"

"Well, yes, but, as an angel, exactly," says Castiel. Sam looks puzzled, and Castiel explains, "I've only seen it as an angel, that's exactly it. I even first saw it when it was just beginning to be carved; but it was only a few hundred feet deep then; just another little gully. Later once it got larger, I've done some flyovers, when traversing the Earth on various missions, but from very high up and I was only using my angelic senses then, seeing it through other electromagnetic spectra, and via the ether and so on. I even visited the very base of the canyon once, quite recently in fact, just a century ago; but that time I flew sideways through the canyon walls, just materializing near the base, as I was on a quite urgent mission regarding a phantom-demon that had taken up residence in the base of the canyon, and of course there had to be an associated diplomatic negotiation with the resident river elemental—" (Dean's completely lost track of this story by now, and only vaguely wonders what an "elemental" is) "—and obviously I was in my true form the whole time, and I was only there for two minutes and I only glimpsed a very small part of the canyon, just this one alcove really, and only with my angelic senses. I even once was talking with another angel, very recently, about visiting it, but... well, we didn't manage to get there. So, in sum," he concludes, "I've seen it when it was new, I've seen it from space and from the ether and I've seen a tiny part of the base." He pauses. "But only ever as an angel. I've never seen it as a human."

Cas looks back and forth between them, a very earnest expression on his face. "I want to see one of the great wonders of the world, as a human," he says. "At human size. With human vision. With my human eyes." He pauses, and adds slowly, like he's trying to make them understand, "Life as a human is... different. In many ways the angelic senses are superior, but... the colors are just... different as a human, and the sense of space and sense of scale are different too. I've come to feel it's not lesser, it's not inferior, but it's... very, very different. I feel so much smaller, now — I am so much smaller — and the world feels larger. Grander, even. 'Grand' is a very good word for the difference. And this Grand Canyon's supposed to be so very large when seen from the human scale, and... well, I would like to see it as a human. Everyone in the Flagstaff hospital kept telling me, oh, if you don't remember your accident there, you absolutely must go see it again; you must see it at least once before you die."

Cas comes to an abrupt halt there, coloring slightly as he realizes what he's just said.

He adds hurriedly, "Of course, they had no idea I had cancer or anything, not yet, they just were making that point in general terms. Anyway, they kept saying, once you're healed up you really must return, it's so spectacular. And I mean, every single nurse and doctor and orderly said to go, the motel owner where I stayed later, the employees at the little coffeeshop — they all had opinions about which trail was best, which viewpoint is best. They'd all been dozens of times. People come from all around the world simply to go see that canyon." He pauses and finishes with, "Humans love that canyon. So I would like to see it as a human."

Before I die. He doesn't say it; but that's what he means, of course.

Sam nods, slowly. And Dean, of course, has already made up his mind.

"I wouldn't mind seeing it myself," Dean says. "You know, I've never actually been. Criss-crossed the country so many times, but we never quite got there."

"Dude, what are you talking about?" says Sam, turning to him with a laugh. "I am never gonna forget that mule you rode! Don't you remember? The mule that was farting the whole time down? When Dad took us down to the base of the Grand Canyon?"

Dean starts laughing. "Sam, that was Bryce Canyon."
"Bryce Canyon in Utah," says Dean, and he's shaking his head at the memory. "Not far away actually, next state north, but it's a different canyon."

"What?" Sam says. He looks baffled. "It was Bryce? Are you serious?"

It's only then that Dean realizes that Sam has never gotten straightened out about this little detail. About which canyon, exactly, he'd been to when he was four years old.

"Uh... I guess we never, um... quite got around to telling you?" says Dean. Sam's staring at him like he's totally confused, and Dean starts to feel uncomfortable, so he tries to explain, "You were four, dude. It was... what happened was..." He's getting nervous now but he plows on. "Well, see, Dad had sworn he'd take us to the Grand Canyon for a mule ride and you had your heart absolutely set on it, but of course a hunt came up. I mean, you know how a hunt always came up? How, whatever he'd promised, the plans always had to change because a hunt always came up? You know how that like literally always happened?"

Sam nods slowly. (They both remember, very keenly, that particular pattern of parenting.)

Castiel's watching the two of them cautiously while Dean goes on. "So we ended up in the middle of Utah while Dad did this hunt, and, thing is, you were just heartbroken. You'd had your heart totally set on a mule ride. But, there's a canyon in Utah too, right? Bryce Canyon! It's also a national park! And it also has mules! And it turns out that in Bryce, little kids can ride the mules, and they go all the way to the bottom and back in just a couple hours 'cause it's a much smaller canyon. So anyway, I convinced Dad to drive us there right after the hunt. And, um, you asked if it we were at the Grand Canyon and Dad was kinda like, well, it's a grand canyon..."

Sam's definitely got a stricken look now, like a childhood memory is imploding, and Dean says desperately, "It was frickin' gorgeous, Sam, you remember! it was awesome, wasn't it? And you were so excited about being at the 'grand' canyon at last and we just... kinda didn't explain that there are two canyons...." He's trailing off, aware now that he really should have gotten around to straightening Sam out about all this. Cas is watching very quietly, like he's aware there's some history here.

It's only one in an endless string of lies and half-truths that have haunted the Winchesters over the years, of course, but somehow now it's starting to seem like a bad one. "Ah shit, man," says Dean at last. "Honestly, I never really connected that I never explained that. I'd kind of forgotten about it. Sorry, man..."

Sam's quiet for a long moment. And then he starts to laugh.

"I mean, you were like four," says Dean helplessly.

"I was four, which means you were eight," says Sam, and he's shaking his head now, still chuckling a little. "It's on Dad, not on you. Okay. This explains why when I was in Flagstaff I kept disagreeing with people about how big the canyon is and about how long the mule ride is. And I didn't bother going to the Grand Canyon then, when I was in Flag I mean, because I was sure I'd already been!" He pauses and asks, "So... just out of curiosity.... how long does it take to ride mules down to the base of the actual Grand Canyon?"

"Two frickin' days," says Dean promptly — he still remembers this detail from when he'd been trying to convince Dad that Bryce Canyon was feasible. "It's a monster trip, whole day down, overnight at the bottom, and then whole day up the next day. And by the way it turned out they don't
let little kids do that ride anyway. There's a height restriction, and it's pretty grueling."

"So it was a Bryce Canyon mule that was farting up a storm?" asks Sam, like he really needs to clarify that one detail.

"Yeah, that's a Bryce Canyon specialty," says Dean, now grinning in relief. "Paid extra for that just to entertain you. Grand Canyon mules never fart at all."

"It's settled then," Castiel says, and they turn to look at him. He holds up his phone; he's already got his finger over the Call button. "I'm going to schedule my tests," he says. "With the Flagstaff cat, for the twenty-sixth of December. And we'll have Christmas at the Grand Canyon. We're all agreed?"

Dean and Sam both nod.

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A/N - I have to admit I was rather pleased with my solution to the infamous "Grand Canyon problem" in Supernatural canon. Dean's on record as saying he's never been to the Grand Canyon, and yet Sam's also on record as saying that he and Dean took a mule ride to the base of the Grand Canyon as kids. Writer Ben Edlund even apologized for the mixup. But it was totally cleared up for me this year when I happened to visit both Grand Canyon National Park and also Bryce Canyon National Park, which are not far from each other, and I learned two things: First, little kids are not allowed on the Grand Canyon mule rides at all, which indeed are TWO DAYS long and are very grueling (and also have to be booked thirteen months in advance, something I have trouble envisioning John Winchester doing). Second, Bryce Canyon also has mule rides, kids can go on the mules, and the ride is only a couple hours long. Ta-da!

Anyway, this chapter was a wrap-up of many, many things - the last weeks of chemo, a clear advance to romance for Sam and Sarah, a revisit with Sharon and Emily, additional Jody/Claire/Alex bonding, and a little more development with Claire, including a turning point for Dean in being willing to give Claire the Thunderbird. In the next, and last, chapters we'll narrow down to our beloved trio again - Dean, Castiel and Sam — and take them on one last road trip together, while they all wait to hear what the future holds for Castiel.

Thanks very much for all your comments - they mean the world to me! I fly to the west coast this coming week for some gray whale research and will be there Tuesday through Monday, potentially out on the boats on Sat (weather permitting), but I'm DETERMINED to get this fic done. The last chapters are drafted but still need a lot of work; I'll be hard at work on the plane and for several days while in Portland. (Chapters being "drafted" does not mean they are ready, lol) Thank you so much for your patience, and please drop another comment if you have time! <3
The decision's barely been made when Dean's suddenly raring to go.

"We could leave tomorrow morning, I guess," Sam says hesitantly. "And we'd get there late Christmas Eve..."

"Or we could leave now," says Dean. Suddenly it's like he can already see the open road ahead of them, stretching far off to the horizon. And that road's heading, for once, at last, somewhere other than the Chemo Motel.

"Yes, we could indeed leave now," says Cas. He's watching Dean's face.

It's not just Dean, though. The months of back-and-forth Denver-Kansas drives seem to have left all three of them itching for a happier road trip for once. A trip that doesn't have chemotherapy or enforced recuperation waiting at the end; but, instead, one that just carries them away to...

somewhere else.

Dean's assuming he'll have to talk Sam and Cas into leaving right away, but no sooner has Dean mentioned the idea than Sam's already looking up Flagstaff motels on his laptop. And Cas just gets up and starts packing a set of Jody's meals and snacks into Claire's cooler.

Only ten minutes later, Dean's tossing their bags in the Impala's trunk. The old road-trip feeling is stirring in his veins again, and it seems like it's been months since he's felt it this strongly. It's starting to sink in that Cas is done with chemo, that he's free (for now, at least) — and that they don't have to stay within a day's drive of Denver anymore! And the idea of taking off like this has grabbed them all suddenly, the heady thought of the Grand Canyon calling them like a siren's song.

They're packed in a flash, they pile everything into the car and off they go.

It's a crisp clear winter evening, a light snow frosting the stubbly Kansas fields. They start out with
Dean at the wheel for the first driving shift, Cas beside him resting against the passenger door in a little nest of pillows and blankets. Sam's flopped out in the back with a single pillow of his own — he's theoretically supposed to be napping, so as to be able to take a driving shift later, but it's still pretty early and he's now gotten deeply into some complicated motel decision on his phone. He's looking for a place "with a real kitchen," for Christmas dinner apparently. (And he's also texting Sarah, to inform her of their sudden new holiday plans.)

They haven't even gotten to I-70 yet when Castiel scoots a little closer to Dean.

And a little closer still. Soon Cas is sitting right in the middle of the front seat. He drags his pillows and blanket over, and asks if Dean might want some of the blanket too.

"You're still recuperating," Castiel reminds him. "You might catch a chill if you get too cold. The blanket's big enough for both of us."

Dean glances in the rear-view mirror, and catches Sam grinning quietly to himself. But Sam's still pecking away on his phone, pretending not to overhear.

"I swear I'm not at death's door," Dean tells Cas. "Really."

"Still, though, would you like some blanket?"

Actually, it is a little chilly. Dean could turn on the Impala's hot air blower... or...

"Sure. Thanks," says Dean.

Cas not only flips the corner of his blanket over Dean's legs, but also then inches closer still, sneaking a hand under the blanket to squeeze Dean's thigh.

"Close contact helps preserve body warmth," he tells Dean. (There's a soft chuckle from the back seat.) "And you're not contagious any more."

And then Cas leans comfortably against Dean's side. A faint band of warmth materializes across Dean's shoulders; Cas must even be extending a wing over Dean's back.

It's wonderful to have Cas so close, and the hand-on-the-thigh move is even starting to get a little distracting. Definitely dangerous, Dean thinks, giving him a quiet little grin. Cas winks back, with an unexpected suaveness that almost makes Dean laugh. And of course it's almost enchanting to think that he's got a wing around Dean now.

But there's an undercurrent of genuine worry in Cas's actions, too. He's soon rearranging the blanket some more, to tuck the edges a little more securely around Dean's legs, and Dean starts feeling a little guilty — again — about how much Castiel seems to be fretting over the state of Dean's health.

"I swear I'm okay," Dean whispers to him. "I'm much better this week. Stop worrying."

"I'll stop worrying if you start taking care of yourself," whispers Cas back, with another squeeze of Dean's thigh (and what feels like a subtle, heated, squeeze of the wing as well). "Don't drive for too long. Remember to let Sam take a shift. And I'll take a shift too."

"You need to rest, Cas," Dean starts to object. "Sam and me can drive. You don't have to drive—"

"I can drive," Cas insists. "It's a long journey. Let me help."

Dean finally nods in agreement. Cas seems only slightly mollified, and after that he even seems to be
trying his best to act exceptionally awake, sitting up very alertly beside Dean. He even starts pointing out various sights along the road — houses decorated with Christmas lights, gas stations they might want to stop at, signs for the I-70 junction coming up — as if he's helping navigate, ready to take over the driving at a moment's notice. But only fifteen minutes later, Cas's head starts to nod. His hand goes still on Dean's thigh, and soon Cas is fast asleep, his head slumped onto Dean's shoulder.

Dean cranes his neck a little to try to peer down at Cas's face, a bit worried about whether he's okay. But Cas seems fine, breathing evenly; he's just asleep. Which means he must still be very tired from this week's chemo. From all the chemo, really.

Dean leans his cheek against the top of Cas's monkey-hat, thinking.

Cas is right about it being a long drive. It's more than twelve hours to Flagstaff, too long to do in one shot. Sam's already been talking about stopping after just two or three hours, maybe even grabbing a motel while they're still in Kansas, and finishing the rest of the drive tomorrow. That'll mean they'll be driving for most of tomorrow. But tomorrow is Christmas Eve; the next day will be Christmas, and they'll have to rush right out to the Canyon; and the very next day after that will have Cas's tests.

It'd be awfully nice to get Castiel to a comfortable bed sooner than nightfall on Christmas Eve.

Dean hisses over his shoulder, "Hey, Sam, could you grab that Flagstaff motel for tonight as well as tomorrow night?"

Dean can only see Sam's knees in the rearview mirror; he must be lying down. Sam hoists himself up on one elbow, his knees disappearing and his tousled head coming into view, and he blinks blearily at Dean in the mirror. "Not gonna get there till late tomorrow," Sam points out quietly (he's whispering, probably so as not to wake Cas). "Why?"

"We might make better time than that," Dean whispers back. "It'd be nice to check in as soon as we want, tomorrow. I mean, instead of having to sit around in the car waiting till five p.m. or whenever check-in normally is." He glances down at Cas, and then ends up leaning his cheek against Cas's hat again. Sam, in the mirror, watches this silently.

Sam pulls out his phone. A moment later he reports, "Got it. It's available tonight too, and I grabbed the extra night. Bit of a waste of money maybe, but, hey... it's Christmas, right?"

"Thanks, dude," Dean tells him.

"No prob. By the way it's a whole house," Sam says. "An Airbnb, not a motel. Sarah was, like, laughing at me about never having tried Airbnb. Full kitchen, she says, pots and pans, the works. Separate bedrooms, too." (He manages to sneak in this last tidbit like it's of no particular interest.) Sam yawns casually and adds, "Right near downtown. It'll be nice. Anyway, wake me for my shift, okay? Two hours or so?" Dean nods, and Sam disappears from the mirror again, flopping down for his own nap.

Sam's yawn had actually looked pretty genuine. And soon comes the sound of soft snoring from the back; Sam must've conked out like a light.

Dean's reminded, then, of how hard Sam's been working too, all these weeks. It seems like Dean's the only one of the three of them who's actually feeling pretty good right now; Dean, of course, is the only one who really got to rest this last week. Cas and Sam both seem like they're still totally wiped out.

A peaceful silence settles over the Impala; the only sounds are the growling of the motor, the purr of
the tires on the road, and some fairly soft singing from one of Dean's old Doobie Brothers tapes. Dean manages to turn down the volume on the music a little more (this involves a very careful reaching over to the tape player — without disrupting Cas's somewhat-precarious position leaning on Dean's shoulder, that is). Soon the Doobie Brothers are so soft they're barely audible. Dean gently maneuvers to get his right arm around Cas's shoulders, and settles in for a long drive.

It's nice to have the arm around Cas, but he still feels too thin. Even through Cas's warm winter jacket, his shoulder blade feels like a knife, and the bones of his shoulder joint seem hard and prominent under Dean's hand.

*He'll start getting better now, though,* Dean tells himself, stroking Cas's bony shoulder ever-so-lightly. Cas shifts at the touch, and he comes half-awake. His hand squeezes Dean's thigh once again, and then Cas lifts his head and kisses Dean on the cheek.

It's such a gentle kiss. So unafraid... so casual... so affectionate.

Such a little thing...

Such a huge thing.

Cas tries to go back to sleep but now it seems like he can't find a comfortable position; something about Dean's new arm-around-the-shoulder position is making Cas's head keep sliding off Dean's shoulder every time he starts to nod off. He jerks half-awake a couple times and starts shifting around, shoving his pillow under his chin almost like he's trying to prop his head in position. There's a flutter of warmth along Dean's back, like Cas is restlessly shifting his wings.

"Lie down," Dean suggests.

"What — where?" Cas says. He raises his head and looks around, momentarily more awake. "There's no room."

"Put your head on my lap," says Dean.

Cas just looks over at him, frowning, like he's unfamiliar with the concept.

It occurs to Dean then that maybe Cas has never had his head in anybody's lap. Or had anybody's head in his own lap either, probably.

Dean explains, "Like my leg's your pillow. Go on, lie down. Put your head right in my lap."

Cas looks at him a moment longer and then rearranges, sliding down tentatively till his head's lying across Dean's thigh. He works his winter boots off, carefully tucks his feet up by the door and folds the far corner of the blanket around his feet. Then there's a long moment when Cas is lying there a little tensely, but eventually he relaxes, letting the weight of his head sink fully onto Dean's leg. He shifts one hand up by his chin so that it's gently cupping Dean's knee. Dean works his fingers a little under Cas's hat and starts stroking his head (and, of course, the back of his neck).

"This is very nice," Cas murmurs.

"That's the idea," says Dean. He keeps stroking Cas's head, and Cas squeezes Dean's knee from time to time. The Impala purrs onward.

It's so peaceful it's making Dean's throat hurt.

"Don't forget to wake me for my shift," mutters Cas. He's almost slurring his words, he's so close to
sleep now. He gives a heavy sigh and shuts his eyes, squeezes Dean's knee one more time, and then he drifts off.

Dean keeps stroking Cas's head a little longer, and then he moves his hand to Cas's shoulder. Experimentally, he closes his fingers lightly around Cas's bicep. It's not just his shoulders; Cas's upper arm is terribly thin too. He used to have a decent amount of solid muscle there, didn't he? Now his upper arm's like a bony stick.

But he'll get better now, Dean thinks again to himself, almost obstinately. He tries to ignore the thinness of Cas's arms, and returns his hand to Cas's head, patting the monkey-hat lightly. The chemo's over. The scans'll come back fine, and Dr. Klein'll give him the all-clear, and he'll start getting better. His hair'll grow back, he'll put on weight, the bruises'll go away. The muscle'll come back, he'll bulk up. He's gonna turn the corner. He's gonna be fine. Any day now.

The moonlit snowy landscape goes gliding by. For a long time they're headed straight west on I-70, which is a little depressing because it's actually the exact same route they've been taking, week after week, to get to Denver — and the Chemo Motel. But finally there's a wonderful moment when Dean gets to leave I-70, peeling off it to head southwest. His heart almost leaps when he takes the off-ramp, and he resists an impulse to wake up both Sam and Cas to cheer the departure from the chemotherapy route.

"Bye bye, Chemo Road," Dean murmurs. "And good riddance."

But he lets Cas and Sam sleep, and he drives on.

They cut through a corner of Colorado. Dean checks the clock; nearly ten p.m. He should wake Sam soon, to swap driving shifts. But it'd be great to get out of Colorado first, wouldn't it? Not only off the Chemo Road, but out of the Chemo State entirely. Of course it's really no fault of Colorado's that it happens to have been home to Castiel's chemotherapy treatments; in fact, Colorado may well have saved Cas's life. Nonetheless, Dean finds he wants to keep going, driven now by some superstitious sense that he has to get Castiel safely out of Colorado before he can hand over the wheel to Sam.

The sun's long gone now. They're driving through the Rocky Mountain foothills, past dark hills covered with scruffy conifer trees that are all dusted with snow. They go up and over low mountain passes, still accompanied by a thin scattering of other cars — holiday travelers, most likely.

And at last, a couple hours later, there's the Welcome to New Mexico sign. Dean grins to see it.

Again he almost wakes Sam and Cas; again he decides to let them sleep.

Out of the Chemo State at last, thinks Dean. On to the Grand Canyon. Where Cas really wants to be.

Where it all started.

The whole story seems to parade by then, in Dean's mind, as he drives. All the months since spring. All the horrible things that have happened. And a few wonderful things too...
The confrontation with Chuck and Amara... the eerie meeting with Mom. The gulping, shaky sense of relief at the reunion with Sam, and then the panic upon hearing that Cas had been zapped away. The desperate search that had led them to Flagstaff. But there he'd been, safe and sound... Except not, not really, of course.

Then that one night in the motel in Flagstaff, when Cas had been sitting on his bed watching Dean sleep. Dean remembers the look on Cas's face, when Dean had woken and had caught his eye... Resolute, like he'd made an important decision. Grim, too; gearing up for some kind of campaign, some kind of terrible looming battle.

_I should've known right then_, thinks Dean.

And then those strange summer months, thinking Cas was drifting away. And Dean left behind in Kansas, finally, _finally_ realizing that he might've just lost the best thing he'd never quite had. And meanwhile, all those critical clues he'd kept missing, one after another: the repeating three-week cycles, the visits to Denver, the hat, the thinness, the job, the change in diet....

The drawings Cas had kept hidden in his dresser drawer.

The day Dean had found him in Denver....

The night when Dean had first gotten under the covers.

The night when Castiel had first reached out.

_Let yourself be happy._

_I am, Mom_, Dean thinks. _I finally am._

_Or, I'm trying to be.... I would be, and I think Cas would be too, if we can just beat this damn cancer thing. Beat it once and for all._

It's past midnight now, the road nearly empty. The Doobie Brothers tape has been on endless repeat for at least six times through when it finally occurs to Dean that it's long past time to give Sam a stint at the wheel. He pulls off at the next gas station with every intention of handing over the keys when Sam wakes up. But the snowy little gas station's quiet and dark and peaceful, Sam doesn't happen to wake, and Cas barely even stirs when Dean gently slides his thigh out from under Cas's head, quickly swapping in one of the pillows as a substitute.

Dean hops out of the car into the chilly night air, shutting his door as softly as he can to keep from waking the others, and he starts gassing up the car himself, shivering a little in a wicked night wind that's rolling down from the dark hills nearby. He dashes for the men's room while the car's fueling, grabs some coffee, and in just a couple minutes Dean's back behind the wheel, car freshly fueled, pulling away from the deserted gas station and back on to the empty highway. Dean's still feeling wide awake, after all, and Sam seems like he needs the sleep, and Cas _obviously_ shouldn't be driving at all in his state of fatigue, so why not keep going?

_Dad used to call this "road fever",_ Dean remembers. Road fever, that late-night miracle of wakefulness that sometimes strikes on very long road trips on the open western roads, when all the fatigue completely evaporates, and whoever's driving feels like they could just go on driving forever. Under the spell of road fever, a thirteen-hour drive, or even a fourteen or fifteen or sixteen hour one, starts to seem like a snap of the fingers, a piece of cake. Dean's once gone twelve hundred miles in a
single shot; a little drive to Flagstaff is nothing. Flagstaff's just a hop, a skip and a jump away. Dean could go on to Tucson, even; he could drive clear to the border, and straight on through Mexico; they could drive all the way down to Panama, to Peru, all the way to Patagonia, right on down to Tierra del Fuego. Dean could just keep right on going the whole way there, driving clear to the other side of the planet in a single night.

The Impala feels unstoppable. It's a beautiful night. The moon's up now and the whole world's bathed in an even silvery light, faint stars wheeling slowly overhead beside the shining white moon. They've come into high desert now and the moon's so bright there are even rock outcroppings and mesas dimly visible in the distance, great dark lumps of dimly striped stone that are all frosted with silvery snow. The Impala's only companions on the road now are the huge semi-tractor-trailers, which seem to be traveling in packs, three or four all in a row. The semis sometimes emerge on the interstates late at night like this, like some great scattered herd of immense nocturnal beasts that disappear in the daytime and only come out at night. Each semi's outlined in bright strings of nighttime orange running lights. On the dark hills the huge trucks slow to a crawl, inching upwards in the slow lane with their hazard lights blinking. Dean shifts left, floors the gas, and the Impala leaps forward, whipping past the great behemoths so fast that they seem almost unreal, a hallucination, a brief huge vision of blinking orange that flies past on the right and shrinks behind them, big round headlights dwindling to tiny dots in the rear-view mirror and then vanishing completely, like the trucks had never been there at all. The Impala leaves them all in the dust.

And the farther Dean drives, the more it seems he might be able to just fly right past the cancer like this, too. Just sneak right past it and floor the gas and dash away, so fast it'll never catch them. He'll whisk Castiel away from everything — Sam too, both of them, whisk them both away, from the cancer, the chemo, the sickness, the bruises, the fatigue. Away from all the worry and the fear. If Dean drives them all the way to Tierra del Fuego, maybe the cancer'll never find them at all.

Castiel sleeps. Sam sleeps. Dean keeps driving.

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*A/N - More tomorrow.*

*Please drop me a note if you have time — your comments keep me going! Thank you so much for reading.*
Got this Christmas angel I wanted to spend a little time with

A/N - Been working absolutely nonstop on the fic. I spent all last weekend on it, most of Wed & Thurs nights, all day today from 7am to 10pm. I think now I have a chance of getting it done before S13 after all. For those asking why I'm trying so hard to wrap it up - it's only partly because of S13. I do find it useful to not be watching new episodes when writing a fic (right now I'm not even looking at trailers or any kind of spoilers) - this is because the new episodes can shift my sense of the characters, and also keep pulling me out of the fic world. But the real urgency is actually because as of next weekend, I have to switch to working full-time on grant proposals for the next three months (full time as in, no evenings or weekends free for a while. Full time as in "every single waking second."). So I'm trying to wrap this up before then! I'm very, very close. Several chapters will start going up rapidly after this.

We've reached the Christmas holiday part of this fic, and part of me wants to wait till actual Christmas to post this, but that would be cruel to you all, wouldn't it? So here we go, with a chapter on some pleasant holiday interludes. It turns out Dean and Cas really want a little time together. They've had to wear those damn masks for two weeks, remember? The masks are finally off!

"What time is it?" Sam says, hoisting himself up with a yawn. Ahead to the west it's still dark, stars still glittering faintly overhead, but there's a pale ice-blue glow starting to spread across the eastern horizon behind them. Sam twists around and peers out the rear window at the brightening glow. He asks doubtfully, "Is that... dawn?" Yanking his phone out of his pocket, he stares at it for a moment and then gives Dean a sharp look in the mirror, "Is it really seven in the morning? You were supposed to wake me!"

"You needed your beauty rest," says Dean, grinning at him.

"Dammit, Dean—" Sam starts, but then he gets distracted by a strip of roadside diners and old motels that they're passing now. Many of the motels have elaborate neon signs, some featuring big glowing hamburgers, others with classic cars that move in stop-motion across the sign, or covered wagons with the horses' neon legs blinking back and forth. Modest Rates! Modern Amenities! the signs say, in elegant neon cursive. One says, with curiously antique spelling, Steam-Heated Inclosed Garages! The signs must be at least half a century old; by now they probably qualify as historical artifacts.

"I swear I've seen these signs before...." says Sam, peering around. "That covered wagon one for sure."

"Paint yer wagon, bucko," says Dean. "We're just coming in to Flagstaff."

"What?" Sam sounds amazed. "Flagstaff? We're here already?"

"Little touch of road fever might've hit last night," says Dean. "We are indeed here already. Not bad, huh?" He can't keep a touch of pride out of his voice. In fact, he's feeling downright pleased with himself; he's gotten Sam and Castiel all the way here, safely, in a single night.
Cas, too, finally stirs on Dean's lap, pushing himself up with a yawn. He stretches, and yawns again, and there's a flutter of heat that moves very rapidly past Dean's neck, back and forth several times. It's an unfamiliar wing-move that takes Dean a moment to figure out: Cas has just flapped his wings a few times, right when he sat up and yawned. Some morning instinct to shake out his feathers, maybe. But then Cas peers around narrow-eyed.

"You drove all night," Cas says, turning to Dean almost accusingly. "That's dawn on the eastern horizon, isn't it? You're supposed to be recuperating, Dean. And you were supposed to give me a turn driving."

Dean shrugs, giving him a grin. "Wanted to get you here for Christmas," he says, reaching out and clapping one hand on Cas's knee with a friendly squeeze. "Wanted you to get some rest, too. So sue me."

But Castiel still looks annoyed. And worried. "But you need your rest too! You were very ill just two weeks ago—"

"And that was two weeks ago, and now I'm fine," Dean says, cutting him off. He squeezes Cas's knee again. "I feel great. Quit worrying. I'll catch a nap later while you and Sam go shopping or whatever. And check out the town! All Christmas'd up now, isn't it? Isn't it great to be here?"

Despite his worry about Dean, Castiel does start glancing around at the town, and he almost does a doubletake as he realizes where they are. "Oh, my," he says. "We're in Flagstaff already?" He's silent for a few moments, peering out the windows with growing curiosity, and he adds, "Quite different in winter-time, isn't it?"

He's right; the little town of Flagstaff seems transformed. Back in summer it had seemed a warm, almost tropical place, with people wearing tank tops and flip-flops as they strolled around in the hot, lazy summer evenings. The sun had seemed, then, to stay up for ages. Now the whole town's still pitch black, the sunrise coming late (and only a few streets seem to have any streetlights) and it's all covered in several feet of fresh snow. There are big snowdrifts on the sidewalks, and snow's piled up in narrow berms along all the parked cars at the side of the street. There's several inches of fresh snow right under the Impala's wheels, too, and the car even fishtails a little when Dean takes the turn from Route 66 into Flagstaff's tiny downtown area.

Right on cue, a huge snowplow goes rattling past in the next lane over. It's even scattering some kind of crunchy black sand in its wake. Dean tucks in behind the plow, following its neatly plowed-and-sanded trail, and the Impala straightens out.

"This is a real winter," Sam comments. "Look at the people." Some early-morning pedestrians are already out and about (maybe involved with last-minute shopping expeditions) and there are no more tank tops or flip-flops. They're all bundled up like Arctic explorers, wearing thick winter coats with fur-lined hoods, long scarves wrapped tightly around the their faces, puffy-looking winter mittens, and with tall, fuzzy-looking snow boots on their feet. Some of the people are floundering through hip-deep drifts at the street intersections, laughing as they help each other toward the shops farther down the block.

"I thought Arizona was a desert," says Dean. The snowdrifts had started showing up on Route 66 about an hour ago, and to Dean's puzzlement, the farther into Arizona he'd driven, the thicker the snowdrifts had become. "Isn't it supposed to be, like... hot? I wasn't expecting all this snow."

"The northern part of this state is a distinct geographic province," says Castiel. "It's quite high elevation here. Approximately six thousand nine hundred and ten feet above current sea level."
"Approximately," Dean tells Sam. "Roughly."

"Give or take a foot," says Sam, grinning.

Castiel ignores them both, adding, "We're essentially on top of a very broad, very flat, mountain — the Colorado Plateau, you call it now. It extends across four states, not just Colorado. Flagstaff sits on top of it, and the Grand Canyon's carved down into it. Anyway, the clouds that come up here from the west drop all their moisture as they head up over this whole huge mesa, and because we're well above snowline at this elevation, it all falls as snow."

"Well, it's downright Christmassy," says Dean. The Impala's now rolling through Flagstaff's tiny downtown, past a charming assemblage of two-story settler-era brick buildings that are completely festooned with Christmas lights. The little town square — which, Dean remembers, had been hosting open-air children's movies back in summer — is now almost completely filled by a huge Christmas tree, all lit up with hundreds of tiny lights in blue, red and green. The tree and its lights stand out beautifully against the backdrop of the last glittering stars that are even now fading from the sky.

Some of the little shops around the square are opening up already. It's early still, but they must be preparing for the rush of last-minute Christmas Eve shoppers. Dean slows as he drives so they can all look around. The Impala coasts past artsy little fashion boutiques, tiny bookstores, little hole-in-the-wall shops selling vintage shoes and handbags and Grand Canyon souvenirs. There's a whole store selling hippie-type crystals, and one full of hand-made soaps, and another featuring big framed prints of horses cantering through Western landscapes. They pass a string of microbreweries for the college kids (with names like "Wanderlust", "Dark Sky Brewing" and "Mother Road Brewery" - the "mother road" must refer to grand old Route 66, of course), along with classy-looking foodie restaurants for their parents. They pass a tiny old movie theater that's showing nothing but Christmas movies — and Castiel perks up when he notices that the entire side wall of the movie theater is a gigantic mural featuring nothing but birds. Birds of all kinds, all flying.

Dean glances over at him, a little worried that the sight of all those wings might make him a little sad, but Castiel's got a fond smile on his face as he gazes at the mural.

They pass a cafe that's already crowded with early-morning coffee drinkers, the big windows steaming up from a long line of people who have already jammed inside. They pass a candy store that looks right out of a childhood dream, its big front window filled with trays of caramel-covered apples, and big classic spiral candy canes, and gigantic rainbow-colored lollipops. The candy store's opening up too, lights coming on inside as a chipper-looking shopgirl flips the sign on the door from Closed to Open.

It's all absurdly picturesque, like a little snow-globe vision of an idealized American town.

"This place is ridiculously cute," comments Dean. "It's like goddam Harry Potter Goes To Small-Town USA or something."

Sam nods from the back seat; he's smiling as he looks around. "It's a great little town," he says. "That's why I liked it here, y'know."

And it occurs to Dean, then, really for the first time, that maybe the reason Sam had fled off to Flagstaff, way back when, wasn't necessarily about escaping Dad (and Dean). Or, not entirely about that, at least.

Maybe it had also been just that Flagstaff had simply turned out to be a nice place.

A little, long-ago knot in Dean's chest eases at the thought.
"What's that gigantic pine cone?" Castiel says, pointing at a huge round ball-shaped thing covered with lights that's suspended at the top of an old wooden hotel. Dean starts to laugh, about to correct him — surely it's not a giant pine cone. But then he looks closer and it is indeed a pine cone. It's ten feet tall. It's suspended high above the road, and it's totally wreathed in thousands of Christmas lights. There's a digital clock above it that seems to be counting down days, hours and minutes.

"Oh, the pine cone drop!" says Sam. He chuckles. "I heard about that. I guess they lower this huge goofy fake pine cone on New Year's Eve at midnight. Like they do in Times Square in New York City. Except the crowd here is about a million times smaller and, obviously, it's a pine cone."

"Um... why?" says Castiel.

Sam hesitates. "Tradition?" he offers, uncertainly. "Or maybe they just want an excuse for a party?"

Dean has to laugh. "Guess there's worse traditions in the world," he says.

They pass one old settler-era business that has what seems like a decidedly non-PC name ("Babbitt's Indian Traders"), and once Dean notices that bit of questionable history, he realizes that not a few of the passersby have a certain high-cheekboned look to their faces. High cheekbones, and the men have long, dark hair, tied neatly back in ponytails. Long dark ponytails... could they be actual American Indians? (Or "native Americans", or whatever the appropriate term is these days — Dean's not actually sure.)

"Probably Navajo," Sam confirms, when Dean asks. "There's a huge Navajo reservation just over the hill. There's even a Navajo radio station you can pick up from here. And some Hopi, too, and some others. Arizona's still got dozens of different tribes. A lot of 'em come in to Flag, from the reservation I mean, to do their shopping."

It's an odd mix — dark streets and stars and small-town shops and Christmas lights and pine cones and Navajos and college kids (and even Navajo college kids, it turns out). But somehow it all seems to fit together. As they keep driving along, pointing out the little shops and the local oddities to each other, Dean feels his heart lifting. It's festive. It's cute. It's downright Christmassy.

And most of all, it's not the Chemo Motel.

Sam directs them to their holiday Airbnb rental, which turns out to be a compact little bungalow that's only three blocks from the downtown shops. (Dean decides not to ask how much it's costing them.) Sam manages to get them inside with a numbered key code that he reads carefully off his phone, punching the numbers into a thing on the door. Dean and Cas are standing behind him waiting, and they're both shivering by the time Sam gets the door open. (Dean's starting to regret that he hadn't made Cas wait in the car, for it's absolutely frigid outside — this is, indeed, a real winter.) But finally the door pops open, and a wave of welcome warmth billows around them as they walk in.

Sam comments, "The owner said he'd leave the heat up for us. Now I know why he bothered to mention that — this Arizona-mountain-winter thing is no joke! Man, that feels good."

Dean makes Cas stay inside while the two brothers return a few times to the Impala to haul in the duffels and the food cooler. By the time they get back inside, Cas has been through the whole place flicking on all the lights.
It's beautiful. It's perfect. It's got a lovely living room, decorated what Sam immediately calls "default Flagstaff-chic" (this seems to involve a big glossy framed photo of dramatic red-rock outcroppings, another of aspen trees with bright yellow leaves, and an assemblage of Native American art prints). There's three bedrooms — though they'll only be using two, of course. Dean soon claims one for Castiel and himself, a room on the second floor that isn't the largest bedroom but instead has the largest bed, with a gigantic king-size mattress that's heaped high with a ridiculous number of pillows and an incredibly appealing comforter. There's an enormous kitchen ("It's got a real fridge, Sam," says Dean in surprise. "I mean, it's not a minifridge. It's a real fridge. I don't believe it."). There's a full-size dining table in one nook, and a big leather sofa facing a huge TV, and a vast dvd movie collection, and a fireplace. There's even a bottle of wine on the table, a couple free taster bottles of local beer in the fridge, some little Christmas decorations sprinkled here and there and even a bowl of chocolates.

"It's okay, huh?" says Sam, once they've all finished exploring.

"It's perfect, Sam, says Castiel. He's already unpacking the food cooler, handing the snacks and Jody's frozen meals to Dean, who's loading them into the fridge.

"Ya did good, kid," says Dean, who's now checking out the free bottles of beer. Even the beer names make him feel at home: the selection includes Mother Road's "Lost Highway", Wanderlust's "Chateau Americana," and Dean laughs when he sees Dark Sky's "Blood Of My Enemies IPA".

"Ya did real good, kid," Dean repeats to Sam, as he cracks open "Lost Highway" for a taste.

"Beer at eight in the morning?" says Sam, raising an eyebrow.

"Eight in the morning to you," Dean says, raising the bottle in a toast. "End of a fourteen-hour road-fever stretch, to me. And I think I deserve a drink. I'm gonna swig this sucker down and check out one of those beds. Okay if Cas and I take the king-size, upstairs?"

"Be my guest," says Sam, grinning at them both. He's obviously pleased that they like the house. Dean's barely drunk half the beer before the fatigue hits him. He gives Cas a hug goodbye (Cas and Sam seem to be planning to head out together to "get some stuff"), and he stumbles into the bathroom for a quick shower before bed.

Even while Dean's still showering he feels like he's dreaming. The house is almost too perfect, the town too cute. It's like they're all floating through some sort of heady, delirious dream of an ideal Christmas, full of snow and candy canes and gorgeous little shops and no chemo at all.

If it weren't for Cas's ever-worrying thinness, and the perpetual monkey-hat on his head, it'd be easy to imagine that the chemo had never happened at all, that the cancer had all been some kind of horrible nightmare.

*Maybe it IS all over, Dean dares to think.*

*What if the chemo HAS worked? What if he's actually okay?*

*What if we can really just enjoy a Christmas for once? Me, and Cas, and Sam, on a perfect little Christmas vacation?*

*Is that too much to ask?*

Maybe not. For the first time it actually seems possible.
The king-size bed's ridiculously comfortable. It's even nicer than that fancy hotel in Denver. It's got warm flannel sheets that seem as soft as velvet, the comforter's thick and puffy, and yet it's all got a homey feel that's about ten time more welcoming than a sterile hotel atmosphere. Dean relishes it all as he lies down, noticing how the pillows are squishing up just right under his head and how the comforter's nestling around him so cozily. He thinks, Cas'll like this bed, and then he's gone, dreaming only of driving, and Cas asleep on his knee, and the endless purr of the Impala in the night.

He wakes some time later to find Castiel, clad only in a t-shirt and boxers, sitting on the far side of the bed with his back to Dean. From the angle of the slanting light coming in the window, it must be quite a few hours later — past noon, probably. Cas is scrubbing a towel over his bare head and Dean realizes that he's probably just taken a shower; he looks a little damp all over. He's shivering, too; the bed's toasty warm but the air in the room is a touch chilly and Cas isn't fully dried off, as if he'd been hurrying to get from the shower to the bed.

As Dean watches, Cas leans back on one elbow, delicately lifts the comforter about three inches, and slides first one leg under the sheets and then the other. He's moving at a snail's pace. Oh; he's trying not to wake Dean.

Dean rolls toward him, reaching one arm out under the covers. Cas is cold; as Dean wraps a warm arm around him, Cas lets out a gasp of surprise that quickly turns into a groan of delight.

"You're so warm!" says Cas, turning toward Dean. "That feels so nice—" But then he hesitates, and says, "But wait, then I must feel cold to you, right? Do I feel cold?" He feels downright icy, actually, and now he's trying to pull away, but Dean just loops a leg across his hips, tightens his grip and wriggles closer.

"C'mere, ice angel," says Dean. Cas gives in and almost melts, curving against Dean with a sigh.

There's a lovely long moment then where Cas actually snuggles into Dean's embrace. Dean presses as close as he can, trying to transfer as much warmth as possible, and Cas's chilly skin at last starts to feel a little warmer.

"Better?" asks Dean.

"Better," Cas confirms. "But I was trying not to wake you. I know you must still need some more rest."

"But you need some warming up, obviously," points out Dean.

Cas gives a little sigh that turns into a shiver. As Dean tightens his grip again (with both his arm and his leg), Cas confesses, "I was a little chilly, I suppose, yes. I was walking around the downtown with Sam, and it's very nice there and we found a lovely coffeehouse and there was a very tasty soup, a pumpkin soup, and a cinnamon tea; but even after the soup and the tea, as we kept walking I found I was getting a little tired. And then a little cold. So Sam suggested I join you for a nap. He drove me back here, and told me to take a hot shower. And I started to, the hot shower I mean, but the water wasn't warm at first and I suppose I didn't want to wait long enough for it to warm up."

"Why not?" asks Dean.

"The bed was more appealing," says Cas, "Or, rather... the bed's contents. So I took a cold shower
"You're an idiot," says Dean, clutching him tighter.

"On the contrary," says Cas firmly, with a pointed glance down towards Dean's arm (which is now wrapped tightly around Cas's chest), "I believe my decision has turned out very well." He glances at Dean out of the corner of his eye, and there's a definite smile dancing over Cas's lips as he adds, "By the way, Sam's gone back out to do more shopping."

"Has he now," says Dean, in a low grumbly voice, right into Cas's ear.

"He has," says Cas. "In fact he told me to tell you he won't be back for another couple hours. It's two now; he'll be back at four o'clock."

"Four o'clock exactly? That what he said?"

"His exact words were: Four o'clock and not a minute earlier and feel free to tell Dean that," says Cas. He rolls a little farther toward Dean, and there's that flickering, sly smile again. "If I recall correctly."

"You're sure you're recalling correctly?"

"Quite certain," says Cas. "He just happened to mention his afternoon shopping schedule three times in a row for some reason—" And then he falls silent, probably because Dean has started kissing him. First on the cheek, and then on the tip of Cas's nose, and then right on his mouth — and oh, it's wonderful to have the flu-quarantine mask and gloves gone. It's the best thing in the world to get skin-to-skin again, face-to-face, mouth-to-mouth, it's positively magical, and Dean can't get enough of it. He's running his hands all over Cas's head, pulling the monkey-hat off and tossing it aside, and kissing, and kissing and kissing some more. Dean starts adding in some tongue, exploring every inch of Cas's lips, and the way he tastes, and, now the feel of Cas's own tongue as he starts kissing back.

No need for those sloth hoodies now! Hopefully never again. Hopefully Cas can just drink in Dean's various scents now without any issues. And Cas really smells good to Dean, too. Dean's a little surprised to realize that he, too, is relieved to have the hospital smells gone — the faint cotton smell of the mask, the smells of the nitrile gloves, and the faintly metallic odor that used to cling to Cas whenever he'd just had the chemo drugs. Instead Cas smells clean and airy. He's even got a sort of a holiday perfume today; Dean can pick up the faint spices of that pumpkin soup, and a whiff of the cinnamon tea... and there's also a tantalizing hint of something else. A whiff of something like heather; an addictive, smoky, almost pine-resin campfire type of scent that seems to be just Cas himself.

He smells fantastic.

He tastes fantastic.

"You should probably get some more sleep," mumbles Cas about five minutes later, now sprawled fully on top of Dean. They've been making out like a couple of teenagers.

"I will," says Dean. "Later. Got this Christmas angel I wanted to spend a little time with first." He feels Cas actually hesitate, with a slight tensing and a little intake of breath, like he's planning to ask who this 'Christmas angel' is that Dean's going to go spend some time with.

Dean starts chuckling, and a slow smile finally spreads over Cas's face.

"I've never really thought of myself as a Christmas angel," Cas confesses. "I didn't have much hand
in Christmas. I mean, I wasn't directly involved in the star in the east, or in any of the events of those
days. I was stationed by the Black Sea at the time. And of course I'm not an angel now, not really—"

"You absolutely are an angel," says Dean. Cas hesitates again, and this time he goes quite still, for
rather a long moment.

Castiel props himself up with one elbow, pulling his head up enough so that he can really focus on
Dean. He's gazing down at Dean with a solemn, and rather sad, look on his face now, and Dean's
sure he's thinking about the loss of his flight feathers. Well, and the loss of his grace. And maybe the
loss of his powers; that too.

And of his home, and his old family....

And, maybe, his immortality?

All that he's lost.

All the things he's not.

"I'm really not an—" Cas begins.

"You are an angel, dumbass," Dean says, lifting one hand to cup Cas's cheek. Cas still looks
doubtful; he frowns down at Dean and draws in a breath like he's about to start arguing, but Dean
interrupts him with, "A: You've still got wings. I don't care if the feathers are gone, you've got wings,
dude. B: You still hear prayers — sometimes, at least. C: You magically heal little girls with your
own grace and your own damn feather. And, D, you just... you just frickin' care, Cas. Even if you
didn't hear the prayers, even if you can't heal anybody else, even if you didn't have the wings at all,
you'd still be an angel. A Christmas angel, even."

Cas's blue eyes have gone soft, the frowning doubtful look gradually replaced by a puppy-eyed,
almost teary look as Dean's been speaking. Dean adds, "You're my dumbass Christmas angel," one
more time, just to make sure his point is crystal-clear, and then he pulls Cas's head down and starts
kissing him again.

This time it occurs to Dean to run his hands across Cas's shoulders, over his wings (or, through
them, maybe?) Cas sighs at the touch. So Dean does it again, and Cas sighs again and lets his head drop
down onto Dean's shoulder. Dean then runs one hand up the back of Cas's neck and the other across
his shoulderblades. Right through the wings; Cas lets out a soft groan.

"Definitely an angel, dude," mutters Dean, and he keeps working the back-of-neck and across-the-
wings areas and the next thing Dean knows, Cas is softly biting Dean's neck, and then he's pressing
one knee between Dean's. Mere moments later Cas is grinding his crotch slowly against Dean's
thigh.

Dean actually hadn't been planning on pushing the sex thing at all today. Cas had just seemed so
very tired during that car drive, and he's gotten so thin and worn that Dean's been thinking of him in
terms like "fragile" and "vulnerable". But now that he's shifting around on top of Dean, his weight
lying heavily across Dean's torso, now that his hips are sliding so gently and insistently back and
forth, he doesn't seem quite so fragile and vulnerable after all, but actually rather formidable. And
unstoppable. And, well, hot. Dean's soon getting a hard-on, and it just keeps getting harder, and
there's a distinct bulge firming up in Cas's boxers as well.

The bed's suddenly way too hot — the comforter that had seemed so comfy earlier is now feeling
like an oven. The whole room's too hot all of sudden. Cas sits up and flips the whole comforter off
"Thought you were cold," says Dean.

"Not anymore," says Cas. He wriggles off of Dean, jumps off the bed to stand up, and shucks his boxers off (though he leaves his t-shirt on), kicking them briskly to the corner of the room.

"Thought you were tired," says Dean (who's now wriggling out of his own boxers and t-shirt).

"Not anymore," repeats Cas, and his voice goes a little hoarse as he takes in the sight of Dean stripping his own clothes off. Dean's cock is at full mast now. And so is Cas's.

For a long moment Cas just stands there and watches. And Dean, somewhat to his own surprise, feels a touch of the exhibitionist taking over. This isn't something Dean has done a lot of, but it seems to come naturally now; slowly, Dean licks the palm of one hand; slowly, he wraps his hand around his cock and starts jerking himself. Slowly. Slowly. And what a rush it is to see how Cas's eyes widen; to see how he can't seem to tear his eyes away; to see how his lips part slightly, to see his cock stiffen slightly when Dean allows himself to let out just the softest little grunt; to hear the breathy little gasp that Cas lets out in return.

Emboldened, Dean spreads his legs slightly, to give him a better view. Cas actually moans; then he bites his lip, and his own hands go to his own dick then. And as Dean keep stroking his own cock, Cas starts stroking his.

It takes Dean a moment to realize that Cas is deliberately mirroring Dean's moves. Dean licks a finger and runs it around his own cockhead; Cas licks his own finger, and runs it around his own cockhead, letting out a soft sigh of pleasure. Dean lets his free hand trace its way over the skin of his belly, and up to his nipples; Cas does exactly the same, one hand sliding up under his t-shirt. Dean wraps one hand around the very, very base of his cock, forming a sort of a cockring with his own fingers, and slowly slides the ring upwards; Cas does exactly the same. Dean's absolutely fascinated watching this. It's almost disorienting, like Dean's somehow actually jerking Cas off by telekinesis. Dean's cock is soon getting harder still, and he licks his hand again and starts doing longer strokes, all the way down the shaft. Cas mimics this perfectly, matching Dean's tempo with every move. Will Cas copy everything Dean does? All sorts of possibilities are springing to mind, but it's getting hard to focus on all the possible experiments because Dean's compelled to start jerking himself hard now. And Cas does the same.

It's been less than a minute and they're both panting, and Dean starts getting worried that he'll come before he gets to feel Cas's hands on him. Also, it's starting to look like Cas might be having a little trouble keeping his balance. He seems so lost in sensation, so focused on Dean, his eyes so huge and dark, that he's actually swaying a little on his feet.

All Dean has to do then is beckon with one finger. It's a move that would be laughably cheesy if Dean weren't so very turned on. One crook of the finger, one little invitation, and Cas scrambles onto the bed. And then all of a sudden he's the one in control (Dean's starting to wonder if he was all along), looming over Dean, electrifyingly close. He crawls right over Dean on all fours, straddles his thighs and sinks down slowly, grabbing Dean's cock in both hands.

"Thought you wanted me to sleep," gasps Dean.

"Not anymore," says Cas. He's got both hands wrapped around both their cocks now, pressing the cockshafts together, and Dean hisses at the sensation. Castiel closes his eyes; his head tips back. Dean stares up at him, gasping now, almost breathless at the sight. Cas should look skeletal and deathly, from the chemo, shouldn't he? Shouldn't he seem like he's at death's door? And sure, maybe
his t-shirt's hanging pretty loosely (maybe that's why he kept it on, in fact), his arms are too thin, sure, but the look on his face! With his head flung back like that, breathing heavily, his lips parted, he's absolutely the hottest thing Dean's ever seen. There's a faint warping in the air behind him, something like a heat shimmer; caused by the wings, maybe? Do his wings get hotter when... well, when he gets hotter?

"Slow down," gasps Dean. "Slow down a little... don't wanna come yet...."

Cas pauses for a long moment, looking down at Dean with lidded eyes. His cheeks are getting flushed; he's breathing hard. He allows Dean all of five seconds to try to get back under control, and then lifts himself up a little on his knees and inches forward, till he's straddling Dean's dick. Dean doesn't quite understand where he's going with this until Cas reaches one hand behind himself, gently wraps a warm hand around Dean's dick and starts to lower himself down. They both groan when the head of Dean's cock starts to press against something lava-hot, and silky soft, and it's yielding — it's opening, it's giving way, Dean's going in—

Dean finds he's grabbed Cas's hips, and more than anything he wants to just yank Cas down, thrust deep, bury himself to the balls —

But no. Stop. Wait. Think.

"Cas, no, we can't," groans Dean. He forces himself to push Cas away.

"Oh, right, the lubricant, I've got some, I've got it here—" Cas says, and he scrambles on all fours over to the bedside table and starts rummaging around in its drawer. "I almost forgot. But I've got it right here, and I already cleaned myself, that's actually why I took the shower, I looked up what to do—" In a flash he's back.

Dean tries not to get distracted by a sudden mental image of Castiel frowning studiously over his phone as he googles something like How to prepare oneself for receiving anal sex. "No, Cas, we really can't," Dean says, and he feels miserable at having to stop this incredibly exciting momentum. But he has to: "Your doc said not to, remember?"

"But I'm done with chemo," Cas says. He's got a little box of lube in one hand (when did he buy that, exactly?) and he actually rips the box open with his teeth. Spitting a fragment of cardboard box out of his mouth as he pulls out the little tube inside, he adds, "I think I can do this now that I'm done with chemo—"

"You think you can? You only finished four days ago," points out Dean, and now he's really starting to get worried. A terrible memory from the Chemo Motel jumps to mind: Cas coughing up blood. Buckets of blood. Pouring out blood. Cas going white as a sheet, his lips going gray... Cas collapsing to the floor.

The whole intestinal tract can bleed. Sam had said that, hadn't he?

Dean asks, "Isn't there supposed to be some recovery time first? To, like, let things heal up more? I just don't want to hurt you, Cas, I really don't—"

"I want this, Dean!" says Cas, and now there's a look of real frustration on his face. He pauses his fiddling with the tube of lubricant, sets it down, plants a hand on either side of Dean's head and leans forward to stare straight down at Dean, saying intensely, "I want you in me. Inside. I just want to feel it, Dean, just once!"

It's totally hot to hear him say this, of course... but there's actually a tinge of anger in Cas's voice
now. And... something else, too. Something close to despair.

As if he's really not sure he'll ever get another chance to do this.

Dean blinks up at him for a long moment. He knows they're at a tipping point; Cas is already starting to lose his hard-on, and so is Dean, and in about four more heartbeats this whole wonderful heated interlude, this magical holiday moment, is going to collapse. Dean can feel it coming; he can see it, from that look that's somehow crept into Cas's eyes. Dean sees all the need, all the want, all the frustration. And all the fear.

All that he's already lost...

All that he might still lose.

It's unbearable to see him look so bereft, so, almost automatically, Dean lifts a hand to stroke the back of Cas's neck. Cas's eyes soften at the touch, as Dean knew would happen; but Dean's really just trying to kill some time, hoping to reassure Cas briefly while Dean scrambles mentally for some kind of a real solution.

*I want you in me,* Cas had said.

"Well, how about another part of me?" Dean offers. "Inside you, I mean?"

Cas blinks at him. "*What* other part of you?" he asks, eyes narrowing. He sounds skeptical. "Your foot? An ear?"

Dean has to laugh at the images. "No, I got an idea," he says. "Ever heard of a rimjob?"

It turns out Cas is not familiar with the term. "Go with me on this. I think you'll like it," is all the explanation Dean gives him. Dean sits up and grabs the lubricant (he's planning on using it for an early phase of non-rim-job activities, and also it turns out Cas has bought the strawberry-tasting kind) and he tugs on Cas's arm. Cas follows his pull, crawling closer; he's clearly a little uncertain and a little puzzled, but he's also starting to look curious, and, best of all, it seems they've somehow successfully detoured around the no-anal-sex roadblock that was about to bring it all crashing down. Dean gets him to the center of the bed and then pauses for a moment, looking around at the pillows as he thinks about positioning and mechanics. There's still those scars to work around, from all of Cas's surgeries.... it should also be a very low-effort position for Cas, one where he can relax completely and doesn't have to hold himself up in anyway.... "How about this," says Dean, tugging him closer still and shoving the pillows around. "You lie down, on your side there — yeah, that's it, and kinda lift up your leg — your top leg I mean — okay, let's get a pillow between your knees — I want access, bud. Total access between your legs, front to back. Fold your leg higher. Prop this pillow under your knee. Oh, and we should put a towel down, right about here. Yeah, that's it—"

It's clear Cas has no idea what Dean's going for, and Dean's actually slightly uncertain about the positioning himself. As with the pegging, Dean's done this with girls (he's done quite a lot of things with girls) but has never tried it with a guy, and maintaining a clear lane of access to the dick is making it all a little different. Not to mention the scars and all. So it takes a little shuffling around. But Dean soon finds an angle where Cas is on his side, upper leg folded high to get it out of the way, and Dean's got full access to his crotch. Perfect.
Dean starts in with a slow, gentle blowjob while he lubes up a finger, works a finger around Cas's ass and slowly, slowly, works it gently inside. Cas knows about this sort of thing, of course; he's had a finger or two (or three) in Dean before. But Dean's never done it to Cas yet. And a single finger, Dean knows from personal experience, should be small enough to not cause any physical problems. It won't stretch anything too far, and it won't cause any bleeding.

"Oh, your finger," mutters Cas. "Of course. That's... that's nice... that's quite nice...." He lets out a long sigh.

Dean pulls his mouth off Cas's cock just long enough to tell him, "Not just my finger."

"... what?" Cas mutters, glancing down at him. "What else do you have?"

"Wait and see," says Dean, and he gets back to work.

It's reassuring to find that Cas's hard-on is stiffening back up again. Stiffening up quite nicely, actually. But it's not till Cas lets out a breathy little moan that Dean knows it's going to work. It's back on track; the whole wonderful Christmas Eve holiday sex train is back on the tracks. This is going to work, and Cas is going to love it, and Dean is going to make him feel so damn good. And now, of course, it's become a campaign, a a challenge: Give Castiel the best possible Christmas Eve orgasm. (Dean's totally forgotten about his own pleasure. His own cock, in fact, has gone almost completely soft, he's concentrating that hard on Castiel. But that doesn't matter.)

The single-finger approach seems to be working very well (so well that Dean even wonders if the rimjob is necessary. But necessary or not, it'll be fun). Once he's worked Cas up to a panting, fever pitch, Dean decides it's time. He pulls his mouth off Cas's cock, shifts around, parts Cas's asscheeks, extends his tongue, and leans in for a long, firm swirl, licking around in a broad circle, and then spiraling in.

"AH!" yelps Cas. "Dean — what—" He draws in a shuddering gasp. "What are you doing?"

"Eating out your angelic ass," says Dean, and he dives back in.

Eating ass is practically vanilla these days, of course (it's really just a matter of cleaning up beforehand, and it's turning out that Cas is absolutely squeaky clean. Apparently he'd found some useful info online; whatever he'd done during that cold shower had worked). And it's... different with Cas, too. Different than with the girls. The surrounding landscape's different, of course; there's that cock, right nearby, that absolutely fascinating erect throbbing cock just a mere couple inches away; there's the scrotum, and the balls (ball, Dean reminds himself; he's just got the one, but this detail seems irrelevant). There's no hair at all, which Dean absentmindedly assumes must mean that Cas has shaved himself completely — before he remembers that, of course, Castiel didn't have to shave a single square inch.

Well, at least it makes access easier.

And also there's a faintly wild musk that's unlike anybody else Dean has been with. A definite tinge of the masculine that brings with it a heady excitement; and something else too, that smoky, almost ozone-like smell. Angelic ass, thinks Dean again, and he almost laughs.

There is something truly thrilling about this whole idea, after all, about taking an actual angel down this earthiest of paths, exploring the very most physical part of this mortal body that he's become trapped in... and making it a source of true delight. The taboo, the divine, the obscene, the angelic, all together at once; it's a heady mixture, and Dean's getting more and more into it. (His hard-on is back, though Dean barely notices.) And Cas is really moaning now, his hips starting to squirm so much
that it's getting a little challenging to stay with him.

Then Dean notices Cas is jerking his own cock. How long has that been going on?

"None of that, now," says Dean, batting Cas's hand away. "My job. Let me do everything. You don't get to touch yourself." Dean glances up, and sees Cas obediently shifting both hands to his pillow, grabbing on tightly and clutching the pillow to his chest. His eyes are screwed shut. Dean dives back in, and he's feeling even bolder now. **Deep as I can get**, thinks Dean, and his tongue goes right inside. Cas groans.

It turns into a game. The game is about how close Dean can take Cas to the edge, how often, without quite letting him get there. Dean's tongue's everywhere now, and his finger's gotten involved again too. One hand on Cas's cock, tongue at work around the rim, a finger deep inside him too; even some very careful, delicately cautious licks to the ballsack; Dean's mixing every kind of stimulation he can come up with. Cas seems absolutely lost in it, groaning constantly, his hips rocking endlessly back and forth. But whenever his hips starts to really pump and his groans start speeding into yelps, Dean pauses, removing the finger, the tongue, the hand, everything going still, till Cas moans with frustration. Then Dean starts in again, and takes him higher still. And pauses again. And higher still.

Dean's feeling like the ringmaster at a three-ring circus, a chef with all the pots bubbling on the stove, a virtuoso playing a dozen instruments at once. **You're mine, angel**, Dean keeps thinking. **Mine. All mine.**

Cas seems to be cresting to a peak again, his hips starting to piston. Dean's tempted to keep him balanced on the edge even longer, to keep it going for hours, but a raggedness is coming into Cas's yelps, a hoarseness creeping into his gasps. He still certainly seems to be enjoying it all, but it reminds Dean, abruptly, that Cas has had a very rough three weeks and that he doesn't have a lot of stamina these days.

**All right then, now it is. Now, angel.**

Dean strokes his cock firmly with one hand, long, slow strokes, and works his tongue in farther still. Cas is almost screaming with every lick of Dean's tongue. He's long stopped saying actual words; it's just wordless yelps now, grunts turning into shouts, till he's crying "AH! AH! AH!" He seems to reach some kind of frantic pivot point and suddenly both of Cas's hands are back in action: he wraps one hand tightly around Dean's fingers on his cock, and slams his other hand onto Dean's head, virtually smashing Dean's face right into his ass. And then Cas is totally taken over by a series of such shockingly strong hip thrusts that it seem completely involuntary. He's absolutely pounding into Dean's hand, holding Dean's hand tightly in position as he goes ricocheting back and forth between Dean's fingers and his tongue. Cas bucks one last time and freezes, sucking in a huge gasp of air; Dean does one, slow lick deep inside him, and simultaneously squeezes his hand on Cas's cock, and instantly Cas's ass spasms hard, and his cock actually seems to flex in Dean's hand. Cas howls into his pillow and then spurts of dampness are shooting out through Dean's fingers while Cas thrashes, mewling into the pillow.

Eventually he goes still. But his cock's still hard, and somehow Dean knows there's more potential still untapped. Dean waits for a long half-minute till he judges that Cas has recovered just enough, and suddenly dives in again, keeping the rimjob going at one end and going into a faster hand-job tempo at the other end. Cas cries out, and almost right away he's coming again, groaning anew as his cock starts pulsing again, semen dribbling out over Dean's hand.

His cock's still slightly hard. It's been a while for him, Dean realizes.

Again Dean waits for the perfect moment. This time he does a fast switch of position, gets a finger
deep into Cas and switches to a blowjob, swallowing him down. This time it takes a little longer, Cas curling over Dean's head almost whimpering, fingers digging into Dean's scalp as he starts slowly thrusting into Dean's mouth. It's all slower this time, and a little milder in the end, Cas jerking quietly on the bed with soft groans as his cock somehow starts pulsing again.

He's somehow come three times. *Not bad for just one ball*, Dean thinks.

Not bad for being at death's door, for that matter.

Which might even mean... maybe he's not at death's door at all?

Cas is limp as a rag doll when it's over, panting heavily. He can't even seem to speak; he's drenched in sweat, eyes closed. His panting gradually slows to a series of long, soft sighs. Dean darts to the bathroom to quickly wash his face and hands, and he grabs a couple of clean damp washcloths and then wipes Cas down all over, twice, head to toe, like a body-wide massage.

Cas is completely quiet during the washcloth-massage, eyes still closed, his breathing slowing further, and further still. It even seems he might have fallen asleep already, but as Dean tiptoes a few steps away from the bed to set the washcloths down, Cas murmurs, "Dean...." and reaches out a hand. Dean joins him, pulling the sheet and comforter back over them both. Cas is fumbling one hand toward Dean's crotch, like he still wants to get Dean off too. But Dean can practically see the unstoppable wave of blissful sleepiness that's rolling through him.

Dean pushes Cas's hand away, rolls him over, and curls up behind him to spoon him.

"Shh," Dean says. "You can do me some other time."

"But... it's Christmas...." murmurs Cas.

"Christmas Eve," Dean corrects him. "And besides, that was the best present you could've given me anyway. Most fun I've had in weeks. You sleep."

Cas doesn't need too much convincing. He's going limp all over. "Still want your cock, too, though," he mutters. "Later, I mean...."

"Later," agrees Dean. "But this wasn't bad, right?"

There's a moment of silence, and then Cas's torso starts vibrating quietly. He's laughing. With slow, sleepy, almost silent chuckles. He's laughing even while he's falling asleep.

"Merry Christmas, angel," whispers Dean as he pulls the comforter snugly over both of them. And then for long blissful minutes Dean just lies there, in the huge soft bed, in the beautiful house in the winter afternoon, in the snowy little Christmas town, curled around his Christmas angel, feeling him fall asleep. Feeling his angel so warm, and breathing, and happy, and well-cared-for, and alive, so very *alive*, in Dean's arms.

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*A/N - Ahh. I think they both needed that, don't you?*

*More tomorrow.*
Thought you might want one of my feathers, maybe?

A/N - So glad you all liked the previous chapter! The way the fic has unrolled, it seemed they all just needed, and deserved, one truly happy vacation together before Cas gets his scan results. The scans are two days away...

And also, it's time to revisit a certain black book.

They doze for nearly an hour. Dean wakes first; Cas is still curled up next to him, breathing slowly as he sleeps. The house is quiet, Sam presumably still out somewhere. Dean reaches for his phone; it's only three-thirty. Another half hour or so till Sam returns, then. Dean's feeling surprisingly well-rested, but now it seems to be Cas who still needs more sleep, and Dean's reluctant to leave him.

After a moment's thought, he gets quietly out of bed, rummages around in his laptop bag, and returns a moment later with a thick black book tucked under one arm. He slips back under the covers and curls up with his back to Cas, so that he can prop the book up against a couple of pillows and get a little reading done — while also staying with Castiel.

Cas shuffles around when Dean re-enters the bed. He doesn't wake exactly, but he turns over, flings an arm over Dean's waist and tucks his head against Dean's back. He goes still again, his breathing slowing. Little-spoon time for me, thinks Dean, grinning quietly, as he gently opens *The Physiology of Angels*.

Dean's been carrying *The Physiology of Angels* around in his bag for weeks now. It's almost always wedged next to his laptop in his shoulder bag, and by now he's read most of the chapters at least twice. Sam says he's already read the whole thing through three times. They've both pored over the chapters about grace and power, about vessels and possession, about angelic abilities, searching endlessly for some new information about healing or about regenerating grace. They've found nothing, but Dean's kept on carrying it around anyway. There's certain chapters he hasn't quite gotten through yet, and though he knows Sam's read it all, Dean's still hoping to find some overlooked little clue that might be useful.

And in addition to the search for some method of angelic healing, Dean's also found himself returning repeatedly to the section on feathers.

Particularly, he's been reading the "Molt" section over and over. Cas needs his wings back; or rather, more precisely, he needs his flight feathers back. So more than once, recently, Dean finds himself flipping back to Chapter 6, *Wings, Feathers and Flight*.

He's even found himself, once or twice, thinking the incredibly depressing thought, If he could at least get his feathers back before he dies...

Of course, what Dean really wants is both solutions: a way to beat the cancer, and also a way to
regrow the flight feathers too. He's been wondering, too, if there might even be some dual solution, some link between the two. If Cas's feathers regrew, could he then somehow get some of his powers back? With new feathers, could he... collect new grace somehow, or regrow a new grace from scratch? Somehow regain the power of healing? But it seems to be a catch-22: without flight feathers, it turns out that Cas can't collect power; and without power, he can't heal anything — he can't heal the cancer and also he can't heal his feathers.

The best chance to beat the cancer is simply regular old chemotherapy. As for the feathers....

The feathers might be a lost cause. Feather growth apparently requires a tremendous amount of angelic power — power that's usually stored up in the grace, which, of course, Cas doesn't have any more. The book *does* mention something about "stealing" grace as a rare method by which angels can regain power, and Dean and Sam both know Cas has done this once before. But Cas had shut that idea down cold when Dean had asked about it once, a few weeks back.

"Absolutely not," Cas had stated, with a flat edge to his voice. "Absolutely not. I will never do that again. And besides...." He'd hesitated then, glancing over his shoulder as if instinctively trying to look at his wings, and finally he'd confessed, "The feather roots are damaged anyway. The primaries, secondaries, the tertials — all the flight feathers were damaged, when Metatron stripped my wings and sent me down here. I don't think I could regrow the flight feathers even if I had sufficient power. I doubt I could even store up any power anymore; it'd just leak out through the damaged roots."

"Couldn't another angel heal your feather-roots, then?" Dean had asked.

Cas shook his head. "Exceedingly difficult," he'd answered. "It'd require a huge amount of energy. More than any one angel could safely provide. An archangel, *maybe*... But of course there are none of those available. I certainly am not going to approach Lucifer again. And anyway, even if the roots were healed, I still wouldn't have any grace. There'd be no way to store power, no way to regrow the feathers."

"But if the feather-roots *were* healed, could you then get a grace again?" Dean had pressed, unable to stop from following this line of questioning.

Cas had given him a flat look. "What are you suggesting, exactly?" he'd asked. "That I somehow convince another angel to heal my feather-roots and *then* kill him and steal his grace?" The question could have been bitingly bitter, but by the time Cas had reached the end of his sentence, his shoulders had been slumping, a hollow look in his eyes.

It had dawned on Dean then that Cas must have actually considered this course of action — and is probably hating himself for doing so.

"No, no, not that," Dean had said, going over to him. He'd taken Cas's hand, rubbed it between his own, and pulled him close in a tight hug. Cas had simply leaned on him, bowing his head against Dean's shoulder.

"I don't want to kill," he'd whispered.

"I know," as Dean said, "I get it. I was just trying to, I don't know, just trying to understand how it all works. We'll find another way. We will."
Cas has never spoken of it since, and Dean hasn't pressed the issue. It's been clear ever since the alula-feather experiment that their best hope is simply the chemotherapy.

But if the chemotherapy doesn't work....

For lack of any better ideas, Dean just keeps carrying the book around. And sometimes, late at night, he flips it open and re-reads a chapter or two.

Castiel has noticed, Dean knows. He's seen the book in Dean's bag; Cas has sometimes even awoken in the night and seen Dean reading it. He's never mentioned it, but now and then Dean finds a fresh drawing from Cas tucked in the pages; often just an illustration of a wing, or of a feather, as if maybe he's just been using the book's illustrations as a reference. But, sometimes, it's a little sketch of Dean, or of Sam. There's even been one of the houseplant, sitting in its little window on the upper floors in a cheerful shaft of sunlight, with the bright yellow blooms and the little honeybee on the pot captured in loving detail.

Dean's not entirely sure if Cas has just been putting the little sketches in the book to keep them safe, maybe just using *The Physiology Of Angels* as a portable portfolio to keep the sketches from getting wrinkled. But Dean likes to think that they're meant as a little secret surprise gift for Dean. (He could just ask, of course, but it's actually been kind of fun to not know for sure.) Either way, Dean's been carefully saving each and every sketch.

And he finds one now. As Dean props the book up against a pillow, it falls open to a little wedge of paper that's been tucked between the pages. This one turns out to be a sketch of Claire washing the Thunderbird; a small sketch, just a quick impression dashed off on a small piece of cream-colored paper, but Cas has captured her face beautifully, and the outline of the T-Bird. He's put a surprising amount of detail into the spread-winged bird emblem on the car's hood.

Dean studies the little sketch, a soft smile on his face.

But then Dean notices where it's been placed. He can always tell which chapter Cas has been reading (or, possibly, which chapter Cas wants Dean to read?) by where the most recent sketch has been placed. And this sketch of Claire has been tucked into Chapter 10.

Chapter 10 is the only chapter that Dean hasn't been able to bring himself to read all the way through. He's tried a few times, and each time he's gotten partway through it, but he's never been able to finish. This is because Chapter 10 is titled *The Question of Lifespan and Death*, and somehow whenever Dean starts this chapter, he always ends up setting the book down after just a few minutes.

Dean looks at the drawing of Claire. He sets it safely aside on the bedside table, and, taking a deep breath, he starts to read Chapter 10.

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*Chapter 10 - The Question of Lifespan and Death*

*Do angels age? How long can they live? Can they die?*

*We know the answers to only some of these questions. The first is perhaps the easiest; angels do not age as long as they retain a normal store of Heavenly power in their grace. That is, when in a normal state of power, angels do not experience biological senescence, i.e. the progressive...*
degradation of tissue maintenance and organ performance that afflicts most mortal beings. And hence angels do not have a finite lifespan. Their true forms, further, seems to continue growing; countless legends recount that the oldest angels attain truly immense sizes (tails "extending the full length of a city", wings "darkening the entire sky," "blotting out the sun" and the like). Such tales hint that the true forms of angels may exhibit what is known as "indeterminate growth". That is, rather than growing to a certain adult size and then stopping there ("determinate" growth, as occurs with humans, and in fact most mammals and even the birds), angels' true forms seem to continue to become ever larger and larger with the passage of time. Their growth rate seems to slow with advancing years, such that a eons-old angel with a mile-wide wingspan may accrue only another foot or two of additional body length with each succeeding year, but they never completely stop growing. And thus the very oldest of angels may be immensely huge when in their true forms.

They still, however, can compress down into a normal-size human vessel when they so desire. In the envesseled state, the wings remain in the ethereal plane but scale down to match the size of the vessel (this scaling-down of the wingspan appears to occur instinctively; angels do not consciously control this process). The remainder of the true form, apart from the wings, coils into a microscopically compact nested wavelength. This coil of celestial wavelength is then bound to the vessel, reaching from etheric plane to material plane in a tight knot that connects directly to the heart of the material vessel. (See Ch. 4, "Vessels and Possession.") Thus, in the envesseled state even an elder angel can become quite physically compact, but their true forms are large and continue to grow throughout life.

So angels do not age, assuming they are sufficiently powered. However, even so, angels can indeed die. There are only a few known causes of death, however. Folklore and angelic tradition both hold that "only an angel can kill another angel" (though, one presumes, God must be able to kill angels too). This saying is not strictly true — there are cases on record of demons killing angels, and of humans killing angels — but the kernel of truth behind it seems to be angels are vulnerable primarily to the weapons of other angels, in the forms of, first, holy-fire and, second, angel-blades.

Holy-fire is an intensely hot flame derived from the burning exhalations of the angelic true form. It is produced from a fuel known as holy-oil which is present, in very low concentration, within the angel's mouth (that is, the mouth of the true form). When alit, holy-oil has the unique ability to produce a shaft of divine flame of virtually unimaginable, but highly localized, heat. Within a very small radius of a less than a millimeter, the temperature of holy-fire is comparable to that of the surface of the Sun and can incinerate even angel-feathers; yet just a few inches farther away, this heat, most peculiarly, is no longer felt at all, the flame seeming to produce only a cool and steady glow of illumination. From time to time angels produce holy-fire or even pure holy-oil while upon the earth, primarily during battles. Holy-oil can be stored, and later re-lit to awaken the holy-fire once more. And holy-fire can incinerate an angel. A small ring of holy-fire is also one of the best methods of containing an angel; they are afraid even to spread their wings, for fear the feathers may be set aflame, and thus they cannot fly out of the circle.

Angel-blades, in turn, are actually the carved tips of the silver talons of an angel's true form. These talons are composed of a substance that, when in the material plane, appears to humans as a silver or chrome-colored metal, yet surprisingly light in density. An angel-blade in the hand feels nearly weightless. In reality it is no metal at all, but rather a piece of compressed etheric particles that have been made solid and that can pierce through the etheric boundary of an angel's grace (as well as piercing quite easily through material bodies as well). Angels in their true forms, therefore, can potentially kill each other with their talons. The ends of these talons must be trimmed and sharpened from time to time, and the trimmed-off tips can be reshaped into these small and light, but quite deadly, blades. But once an angel-blade has been carved from a talon-tip, it is of course no longer attached to the angel, and it can potentially be wielded by non-angels as well. Thus can a human kill an angel.
Thus, both holy-fire and angel-blades are derived from natural weapons of an angel's true form. Apparently these weapons were bestowed upon angels by God, presumably for defense from each other (which implies the existence of certain degree of inter-angel conflict).

These, however, are not the only two causes of angelic mortality. Angels can die by several other means as well. They can die if their power is utterly drained at the same time as they are proceeding through molt, which can put them into a state of severely negative energy balance. This is the primary reason that angels seek out molt-companions during periods of intense feather growth, and it may in fact be the underlying reason that many angels display a considerable capacity for pair-bonding. (Even despite continued efforts by Heaven's garrison-commanders to root out this instinctive tendency, most angels persist in the desire to exchange alula-feathers with their chosen molt-companions — see Ch. 6, "Wings, Feathers and Flight", and Ch. 11, "Behavior and the Expression of Emotion".) Additionally, angels are vulnerable to certain glyphs of the word of God. Archangels, too, can kill lesser angels with a single effort of will, pulverizing a weaker angel's essence (and whatever vessel it may be occupying at the time) to a mixture of etheric fog and subatomic material particles. An additional source of mortality may occur with completely depowered angels who are also envesseled — that is to say, an angel which has lost all of its grace and power while trapped within a mortal vessel, and who cannot collect power anew due to some sort of damage to the wings. Such cases do occur from time to time (see section on Tertialing, Ch. 6) and an angel who has been fully depowered in this way will die itself if its vessel happens to die of some mortal cause.

This is always the place where Dean stops reading.

But this is also the place where the new sketch of Claire had been tucked; and so, today, somehow, Dean keeps going.

So angels normally do not age; but angels can indeed die. The question, then, is: what happens to the essence of an angel when it dies?

Might there be some sort of an afterlife for angels, some variety of Heaven to which the angel's essence may go? Intuitively one hopes so, for it does not seem quite right that these hard-working creatures, who serve God, and Man as well, so faithfully and selflessly for so many eons, should have no reward or rest when their long lives finally end. Whether "servant", "warrior" or even "slave" is the best term for their condition is a question of much debate, but from our humble mortal perspective it would seem fitting that they might at last move to some place of peace upon finally ceasing their life's work. But the fundamental problem is that angels do not have souls, and only souls go to Heaven. All available sources, including the seraph consulted for this text, are in agreement on these two points: Only creatures with true souls can go to Heaven when they die; and angels do not have true souls.

Angels do, however, have what is known as an "essence" — that folded-down patterning of celestial wavelength in which the angel's personality, memories and emotions seem to somehow reside. This "essence" is the angel's self. How an "essence" differs from a true soul has never been completely
clear, but it may be a question of the energy contained within. In angels, the essence contains no
natural power of its own; their power is provided separately, by Heaven. Angels collect Heavenly
power from the ether via the tertial-feathers, whence it is stored in the angel's grace, which is
separate from the angel's essence. In humans, however, a true human soul contains its own power
— unfathomable energy, in fact, often likened to a delicately contained atomic explosion. Such a true
soul develops first by being seeded at birth (by God, one assumes) and the seed then grows and
flowers, and becomes more powerful, with the mortal experiences of life. Every twist and turn of our
little human lives, every sting of grief and despair and pain, and every glowing moment of love or
affection or joy, every moment of nobility or generosity or sympathy — all the richness and beauty
and pain of these mortal emotions cause the newborn soul to flower, like a blossom unfurling from a
bud. The resulting bloom may be beautiful or may be foul, but one way or another, it changes and
grows. At the moment that a human finally dies, a reaper collects the soul (thus accomplishing the
actual moment of death), assesses its final state — the final shape of the blossom, to follow our (likely
inaccurate) metaphor — and the reaper then draws upon the soul's inherent power to open a gate
that leads either to Heaven or to Hell. But the underlying power must be there for either gate to open
at all.

Angels, lacking this source of inherent power, therefore cannot be admitted to Heaven, nor to Hell,
after death. Apparently, the gates simply do not open. And surely, as well, if any angels had "died
and gone to Heaven", the other, still-living, angels, who of course move freely within Heaven
anyway, would have encountered them there. No such "dead angel" has ever been reported in the
annals of Heaven.

One yet wonders, however, if a deceased angel may not go somewhere else. There are some hints,
from the lore of the werewolves and the vampires, that some third sort of afterlife exists, neither
Heaven nor Hell but something else, perhaps some sort of limbo or purgatory. This is apparently
where the deeply distorted souls of these once-human creatures (demons, vampires, werewolves,
etc.) go upon their own deaths. Might angels go to this third location? Yet these creatures, too, do
have a sort of a human soul, for they were literally once human themselves. Additionally, the tales of
the vampires and werewolves state that any angel in that third location would apparently "burn like
a beacon" there, and would soon be torn to pieces by the undead souls of the other creatures, who
would be drawn irresistibly to its light and warmth. So it seems that deceased angels probably do
not go to this third place either, or if any do, they surely would not last long.

Can it truly be the case that these magnificent beings, the glorious angels, simply cease to exist
entirely? We do not know the answer to this question with any surety. But one sort of creature may
know the answer: reapers. It is clear that all creatures that can die are met by reapers at the moment
of death. We do not clearly understand what sort of creature the reapers themselves are — some sort
demon? Some separate species that resides only within the Veil and has never been well-
described? (There is even a theory, though supported by little more than speculation, that reapers
may even be a highly specialized sub-species of angel.) What we do know is that dying demons are
met by reapers; dying vampires and werewolves are met by reapers; and dying humans are met by
reapers. It appears that every sort of creature is reaped in the end. The oldest tales state that even
God will be reaped someday, met personally by the greatest reaper of all — the lord and master of
all the other reapers, Death himself, the famed Fourth Horseman. And if even God can be reaped,
perhaps it follows logically that angels can be reaped too. We may speculate, then, that a dying
angel is greeted at the moment of death by some sort of a reaper — and that the reaper is the being
who in fact accomplishes the death, and who witnesses, or even causes, whatever happens to the
angel's essence immediately after.

Where, then, might angels go when they die, if they go anywhere at all? Only the reapers know. But
they have not spoken.
"Close the book," whispers Castiel, over Dean's shoulder. Dean jumps; he's been fixed with such concentration on the incredibly depressing Chapter 10 that he hasn't realized Cas has woken. Cas reaches over Dean's shoulder and gently folds the black book closed.

"But I need to know," says Dean, turning to him. "I've gotta know, Cas."

"None of us know," says Cas, shaking his head, a deep sympathy in his eyes. "Nobody knows what happens."

"But there's got to be something we can do," says Dean. "Cas, there's got to be something—"

"Of course there's something we can do," says Cas, with a soft smile. "We can do... this." He reaches over Dean's shoulder again and gently pushes the book aside. Then he pulls on Dean's shoulder till Dean rolls over toward him. Cas sets a hand on Dean's cheek and turns Dean's face to his, and Cas starts kissing him.

"That's not what I meant..." murmurs Dean a moment later.

"Isn't it?" whispers Cas. He takes hold of Dean's face in both his hands now, holding Dean's gaze from just a few inches away. There's a shaft of late-afternoon light slanting in the windows now, and it's hitting Cas's face. His eyes seem shockingly blue, like turquoise pools, almost glowing, as he says softly to Dean, "Isn't this what really matters the most? Isn't it? Isn't this the best thing we can do?"

He starts kissing Dean again, and Dean realizes he's right.

It turns out it's Dean's turn then. They both know they have to be quiet this time, for Sam might be home soon. But Cas is remarkably efficient (he's gotten very effective, and he seems to learn very fast). He goes for a classic blowjob, with the (now-classic) finger as well, and it's not long at all before Dean's having to muffle his cries with his pillow, just as Cas had earlier.

They fall into another lazy doze after that, both of them half-awake and just lying sleepily together. Pleasant minutes drift by; Cas is trailing his finger's through Dean's hair....

... till at last they hear Sam rattling around downstairs. Dean winks at Cas and whispers, "Guess it's finally time to get up."

They haul themselves out of bed, trade turns in the shower (Dean's careful to make sure the water's hot for Cas). Turns out Sam's fetched certain mysterious packages, along with the last ingredients for some kind of dinner he's planning for tomorrow once they return from the Grand Canyon. Tonight, though, he's decided they can heat up some of Jody's incredible lasagna for the Christmas Eve dinner, followed by a dessert composed of a mixture of Claire's frozen grapes along with some
pastries that Sam grabbed from the little coffeehouse. And, it turns out, he's also brought three caramel apples from the candy store downtown. ("I saw you looking at those!" says Sam, laughing, as he presents one to Dean.)

They're planning to get an early start tomorrow morning, so after a little discussion they decide to do their gifts tonight. "Gifts?" says Castiel, and he seems a little surprised when both Dean and Sam turn out to have presents for him. "But you've both already done so much for me," he protests. "I mean, I got gifts for both of you, but you two don't need to give gifts to me—"

"Shut up and open your presents," says Dean, tossing a wrapped box into his lap.

Sam hands his over more carefully, saying, "This one probably shouldn't be hurled across the room like a football, so don't let Dean get hold of it."

It turns out Sam's present for Castiel is a little package of three gifts: a full-spectrum plant light, a timer so that the light will turn on and off at the right times, and a delicate-looking blown glass thing that turns out to be a slow-drip waterer (essentially a fancier version of Cas's ad-hoc upside-down plastic bottle). Cas is delighted, and he says to Sam, "This means the plant'll be okay on its own for more than a week! We can go on hunts again!"

"Exactly," Sam replies, grinning. "I figured, what if we're gone more than a week?"

Dean's very touched by Sam's gifts (because, after all, the plant was originally Dean's gift, not Sam's). His own gifts for Cas (or at least, the ones he's willing to give publicly) are mostly forms of insulation: a whole new set of scarves and winter mittens, and a new warm down vest in gleaming jet-black. All of which Cas puts on immediately, till he's sitting in the warm living room all bundled up. He soon gets so hot he has to strip down again, but he insists on keeping the black vest on.

Dean receives a set of hand-made (by Castiel) pre-mixed (by Castiel) spice bags with all his favorite varieties of tea, cider and hot chocolate — this all turns out to be the final results of all of Castiel's taste-testing experiments over the previous two weeks. There's a coordinated present from Sam as well, some kind of fancy Japanese thermos to put Cas's various mixes into. Dean's delighted with the thermos, discovering he can pop it open easily with one hand — perfect for driving, of course.

Cas surprises both Sam and Dean with a hand-written promise of an annual National Parks pass for the Impala. ("I'll buy it as soon as we get there tomorrow. I can't believe you two have never been to the Grand Canyon. How many other parks have you never been to?") For Sam there's a beautiful photo book about hiking trails in the "Great Parks of the West" — it includes sections not just on the Grand Canyon, but on Bryce Canyon as well. And for Dean there's a big spiral candy cane from the candy store (Cas, too, had noticed Dean eyeing that particular store), along with another whole set of more scarves and mittens and hats. Apparently Cas is still worried about Dean's bout with the flu — and they all laugh when they realize that Dean and Cas have basically just traded a lot of mittens and scarves and hats back and forth.

The rest of the evening passes in a happy blur of holiday spirits. Chapter 10 is forgotten, for now at least (maybe Castiel really was right; maybe the best thing to do about Chapter 10 is really just to spend time together). Dinner's wonderful; the lasagna's delicious, the wine is great (Cas even has a tiny half of a glass). Then there's all kinds of silly kids' animated cartoons on the TV — all the old classics — and the three of them spend a lazy, happy evening lying around on the sofa drinking one of Cas's newest concoctions, home-made eggnog dusted with cinnamon, and laughing together at the old cartoons.

It's the perfect Christmas Eve.
They wake early to the perfect Christmas morning.

Sam's made some halfway-decent coffee and Cas is determined to try to make his first omelet (he's gotten quite inspired by Jody's and Claire's encouragement). It turns out not bad at all. There's a jovial breakfast, after which Sam disappears to his room to give Sarah a call before they head off for the Grand Canyon.

Dean then says to Cas, as they finish up the breakfast dishes, "I've got one more thing for you, actually. Um... guess I kind of wanted to wait till actual Christmas morning. This is totally dopey, just a little thing, but... well, it's upstairs. Hold on a sec." But Cas follows him upstairs, trotting along right behind Dean, his eyes bright with curiosity. Dean's now feeling stupidly shy about it, but he doggedly walks across the room, picks up The Physiology of Angels, opens the back cover and pulls out a white envelope. (It turns out the big book does work pretty well as a place to keep things flat. Dean's had the envelope tucked there all week.) He hands the envelope to Cas. Cas looks at it curiously, and he glances up at Dean, holding Dean's eyes for a long moment. Dean's surprised to feel his face heating up a little bit.

Cas opens the envelope and peers inside. And he goes still.

He stares into the envelope. Slowly, he draws out a small white feather.

"I know it's not mine, exactly," says Dean, "And I don't know if it's an alula feather exactly, but it's little—"

"It's an alula feather," says Cas. He sets the envelope on the bed, and holds the little white feather, stroking it lightly with one hand.

"It's probably just another one from a goose or whatever," says Dean.

"Duck," corrects Cas absently. He's still stroking the feather. There's an odd smile crooking up one corner of his mouth.

"Okay, duck," agrees Dean, "But it's my feather in that I bought it, I guess. I actually bought a bunch more feathers, all kinds, and brought 'em all along in case we want to... well, you know. Almost brought 'em out last night actually, but I hadn't unpacked yet and they were still in my duffel. But then I realized this one might be from an alula, and, well, I read that bit in the book about... alula feathers? And... Not sure I was understanding it right, but... thought you might want one of my feathers, maybe?" Dean's cringing at how clumsy he sounds about it all. What exactly does the alula-feather thing mean?

But then Cas looks up at Dean, and his eyes are shining.

And then Cas starts laughing. It's that slow lazy chuckle again, but this time Dean's not quite sure what it means and just gives him an uncertain smile back. Then Cas says, "Look through that book again. Chapter 6."

Dean's getting a little worried that he's totally misunderstood the alula-feather thing. And probably the back-of-the-neck thing. And the wing positions, and everything, probably. He should've been studying the book more... he should've talked to Cas about all this. Clearly Cas thinks that whatever mistake Dean's just made is charming, like it's not a bad thing or anything, but has Dean totally
misunderstood Chapter 6 somehow? Face a little heated, he swallows and grabs The Physiology of Angels. (He manages to blot Chapter 10 from his mind.) Dean starts to flip to Chapter 6.

But the book falls right open to Chapter 6 immediately, because there's another envelope there, this one a thick, stiff, bright-red Christmas-card envelope, and it says "Dean" on the front, in Cas's neat cursive handwriting. It definitely hadn't been there yesterday; Dean's sure, for it's such a stiff envelope that the book would have surely fallen open here, rather than to the little sketch of Claire.

Dean looks up at Cas, who's grinning widely at him now. He confirms, "I put it there this morning. I was thinking to give it to you tonight... but I think now is better."

Slowly, Dean picks up the red envelope, and he sets the book down. He opens the envelope. There's a Christmas card inside, which, interestingly, has no religious symbols at all; Cas has selected a card that shows just a simple winter scene, of a black raven sitting on a snowy tree in the woods, stars glittering overhead in the winter night.

Dean knows what he'll find inside, and sure enough, when he opens the card a little black feather slides out into his hand.

"Yours," says Dean. It's not a question. Dean's seen this feather before. It's Cas's lone remaining alula-feather, the one from his other wing. Emily got the feather from the right wing; the one from the left has still been in Cas's possession all along.

"It's totally depowered, of course," says Cas, with an almost casual shrug (but there's a slight tension in his face, too; Dean's fairly sure the casualness is just an act). He adds, "So it's really just a symbolic gesture. And it's not like you need any assistance going through a molt."

"I might," says Dean, automatically trying to joke, despite the sweet, choked-up lump that's starting to form in his throat. "You never know! What if I decide I want to molt?"

Cas laughs obligingly. "You'll have some difficulty, then," he says. "Maybe you will need some assistance." But then he adds, his tone going quiet and serious, "I want you to have it, Dean. I mean..." He hesitates. "... if you want it."

"Of course I want it, dumbass," says Dean, nodding. "Are you nuts or something? Definitely I want it."

"You don't have to take it, you know—" Cas starts to say, but Dean's already sliding the little black feather carefully into the breast pocket of his flannel shirt. Cas falls silent; his eyes seem to go round and bright as he watches Dean buttons the pocket-flap carefully closed. He lets out a slightly ragged breath, and another, and even hurriedly wipes his eyes. It's clear, then, that this means far more to Cas than he's letting on.

And it means just as much to Dean, of course.

And then Cas is patting his own shirt hurriedly. Dean realizes he's looking for a similar pocket to put the white feather into. Maybe trading alula-feathers has some element of treating your partner's feather the same way he's treating yours? Whatever the reason, Cas seems to urgently need a shirt pocket all of a sudden. He's even digging through his duffel now, pulling out several other shirts with one hand (the other hand's still clutching the white feather tightly) and discarding them in annoyance. He mostly wears soft t-shirts these days, not the type of button-downs that have pockets.

"Oh! I know!" Cas says suddenly, straightening up from the duffel bag. His face brightens; he's had an idea. "Come with me," he orders, and he spins and goes scampering down the stairs, still
clutching Dean's white duck feather in one hand.

Dean trots along behind him, a little bemused. Sam's in the middle of carrying the cooler through the living room — apparently it's all packed with snacks for the Grand Canyon trip — and he stops still, startled, when Cas bursts out of the stairwell clutching a little white feather in one hand, and dashing across the room to scoop up his new black vest. Dean remembers, then, that the new black vest has several handy zip pockets — including one halfway up the front side, like a little zipped breast pocket. Cas carefully dons the vest, catches his breath, and then, with an air of ceremony, he tucks the white feather carefully into the pocket and zips the zipper all the way closed. Cas looks inordinately pleased about this, patting his vest with obvious delight, and Dean realizes then that the black vest also has feathers — it's a black down vest, after all, and Cas's natural feather color seems to be black. So it's as if Cas is tucking Dean's white feather in amongst his own black coat of feathers.

Cas sets one hand over the pocket of the vest and looks up at Dean, and his eyes are absolutely shining now.

They grin at each other stupidly for a long moment. Then Dean steps forward, laughing, and wraps him in a tight hug.

"So... um...." Sam says, a little hesitantly. He's still holding the cooler, paused in the middle of the room, looking at them in some confusion. "Should I ask what that was all about?"

"We've traded feathers," Cas reports to Sam from over Dean's shoulder. His voice is full of barely-suppressed excitement. "Alula-feathers," he adds.

Sam starts grinning too; Cas's excitement is contagious. "O-kay," says Sam, setting down the cooler. "So are you, like, married or something?"

Once upon a time a question like that would've stopped Dean dead in his tracks.

Once upon a time, Sam had cracked a dumb joke about that exact topic and Dean had almost been completely paralyzed with shyness and uncertainty.

But now Dean (who's still in mid-hug) just tightens his grip on Cas's shoulders, laughs and says, "Hell if I know. Cas?"

"I haven't the foggiest," says Cas, "but I've got Dean's feather and he's got mine." He finally pulls away from Dean in order to clarify to Sam, "It's sort of an angelic tradition, I suppose."

"It's a molt thing, right?" Sam says. "That book had something about it."

"Yes, Chapter 6," Cas says easily. "It signifies a mutual pledge of support. Specifically, it signifies that Dean is willing to assist me when I molt — except that I don't molt now — and, likewise, I'll assist Dean when he melts — except he doesn't molt either. So the whole thing's a little pointless, I suppose, except that—" (again the contagious grin's spreading over Cas's face) "—the really important part is, he took my feather! And I've got his."

"Ah, I see," says Sam, laughing now.

"You do?" says Cas. "Really?"

"Well, not really," admits Sam. He's still laughing. "But if you guys want to go molt together or whatever, I'm all for it, and if you're both happy about it, then so am I. And clearly we've gotta have a quick toast before we hit the road. Where's the hot chocolate?"
A/N - In an odd way, the fact that this little holiday break is turning out so nicely, so joyfully, is also enabling both Cas and Dean to face, and maybe to accept, some harsh realities. Dean's never even been able to read Chapter 10 until now. But maybe Castiel is right; the best thing to do may simply be not to endlessly fight death, endlessly scramble for terrible solutions, but simply to enjoy the brief moments that we have together - before death comes for us all.

One more "holiday chapter" coming tomorrow and then the Christmas interlude will be over. And after that we will finally get the results of those scans....

I really hope you're all enjoying this. Please do leave a comment if you have a moment - it means the world to me!
Cas's excitement about the feather-trading ritual has put all three of them in a buoyant mood, and they're practically giggly as they pile into the Impala and start the drive to the Grand Canyon. They're trading the thermos around, taking ceremonial swigs out of it (it's Dean's new thermos, now filled with Cas's delicious dark-hot-chocolate mix). Dean and Sam get into a long exchange of stupid puns about wings and feathers ("I gotta confess, Sam, when I picked out that little feather in the store, I wasn't even sure it was from an alula. I was really just... winging it." "Wing and a prayer, Dean, right?" "Flying by the seat of my pants. But ya know what they say, a bird in the hand..." "... is worth two in the bush, Dean, right. But I thought you were done with the chicks? And the bushes?") Dean's not even sure if Cas is following most of this, but nevertheless Cas is laughing at everything they say, laughing so hard at one point that he starts coughing, and Dean has to thump him on the back and give him more hot chocolate.

The mood is positively joyful. It's beautiful out, too, an absolutely picture-perfect Christmas morning; the sky's a flawless bowl of deep blue, and the winter landscape around seems bright and beautiful. They drive past endless miles of peaceful pine forest, all the trees coated with a thick blanket of fresh snow. The sun's blazing, the snow's blindingly bright; it's a gorgeous winter scene. But Dean takes the drive very carefully. The road to the Canyon looks like it's been well-plowed, but he doesn't want to risk any sort of a skid or a crash, not today of all days.

It's a long enough drive from Flagstaff to the Grand Canyon (an hour and a half) that the giddy adrenaline finally eases a little, and they all eventually settle down into their now-familiar spots in the car: Cas takes up his usual position leaning comfortably against Dean's side, sharing a single blanket that's stretched across both their laps, while Sam lounges in the back on a pillow. Sam's trying to text Sarah, despite what seems to be a total lack of cell service for most of the drive. Eventually he insists that Cas and Dean get their two alula-feathers out so he can snap a pic of both the feathers together, explaining he'll send the photo to Sarah later, once they get to the Grand Canyon (and back into cell range, hopefully).

They come out of the thick snowy forest into a seemingly endless stretch of high desert. In the winter snows it's just a vast open field of white, peppered with fat low mounds of sagebrush and rabbit-brush shrubs that are each bearing almost cartoonishly round caps of snow. The road's dotted with a long series of little market stands with bundled-up entrepreneurs selling all kinds of tourist fare: Navajo jewelry and "certified native" blankets, fossils and geodes and lesser gemstones, and one stall featuring real home-made buffalo jerky (Dean snorts with laughter when he sees its sign: "IT'S BETTER THAN YOU THINK"). Farther away are scattered stretches of dwarf Ponderosa pines, all capped with their own puffy round mounds of snow that make all the trees look like they're wearing big white hats. It's an incredibly lovely drive.

The one point of worry is that now and then Cas gives a rough cough or two, tidily covering his mouth every time. This is a new development, and Dean gets a little worried that he might've picked
up the flu bug. But Cas insists he's feeling fine otherwise: no fever, no headache, no unusual fatigue — in other words, none of the early flu symptoms that Dean had experienced two weeks ago. They tentatively conclude it's probably just the winter air, and Dean cranks up the heat a little. (Though Dean also suspects, privately, the running up and down the stairs today, not to mention all the "activities" yesterday, might have worn Cas out a little too. He makes a mental note to make sure Cas gets a lot of rest tonight.)

And soon there's the entrance to Grand Canyon National Park.

The official entrance turns out to look like nothing much. It's in the middle of a featureless stretch of pine forest, with just a humble little row of three or four tiny ticket-taker booths, each one constructed like a miniature wooden cabin. It's nearly deserted. Only one of the booths seems to be open, tended by a lone park ranger lady who's totally muffled up in hat, earmuffs and scarf. Only her eyes are visible, but the corners of her eyes crinkle cheerily as she greets them.

She confirms, voice muffled through her scarf, that hardly any park visitors have arrived yet. "You guys have absolutely perfect timing!" she says through her scarf. "Park's nearly deserted right now. Even the lodge guests are all still in the lodges. But everybody'll all start flooding to the trails after noon, so enjoy it while it's quiet!" They thank her. And then Castiel makes a show of paying for the annual national-parks pass for Sam and Dean, receiving a huge bundle of brochures and maps in return.

Dean, Cas and Sam are all quiet in expectation now, all awaiting their first view of the famed canyon. But the canyon itself seems to be nowhere in sight. There's just a long stretch of quiet winding road that seems surrounded by nothing but more of the endless stands of snow-covered Ponderosa pines.

"It's like a whole forest of nothing but Christmas trees," says Sam. "I mean, it's pretty and all, but where's the canyon?"

"Dunno," says Dean. "But this road is going on forever." The road winds in and out, eventually leading past a confusing series of parking lots and big wooden buildings — the latter are the "lodges", presumably, huge buildings that all seem to have that 1930's-era wooden-cabin look, with walls of massive round logs holding up sloping snowy roofs. There's lots of signs to the various "lodges" as well as to "villages" and "visitor centers," but there's no sign to the actual canyon.

"I'm gonna just park somewhere," Dean finally announces. "Cas, where'd all those brochures go, that the ranger gave us? See if there's a map in one of those." Cas starts opening up a bewildering series of brochures, all of which seem to unfold into huge unwieldy maps (some of which turn out to be for other parks), while Dean selects a parking lot at random, planning to hop out and ask someone where the road to the canyon is. He finds a freshly plowed spot and parks. They all pile out of the car — and they're immediately all startled at how cold it is. There's a bitter breeze whipping at them from the side of the parking lot. Cas is laughing now, saying, "I'm fine, really, I'm fine. But thank you." Then, as they get him securely bundled up, Cas glances past Sam and Dean, toward the end of the parking lot, and his eyes widen.
"Oh...." he says. Dean and Sam both turn and look.

There's a thin line of six or seven pine trees at the edge of the parking lot not far away. The wind is coming from those trees. And beyond the six or seven pine trees, between their trunks, is nothing but open space.

Dean takes a few steps closer and catches a glimpse, between the tree branches, of some unthinkably distant vista that's far, far beyond the little trees — hazily distant ridges of stone and snow that must be dozens of miles away.

They're at the edge of the Grand Canyon. It's right next to the parking lot, only thirty feet away. No wonder there'd been no signs; the road had been paralleling the canyon all along.

Quietly, the three of them walk closer. There's nobody else around. The whole parking lot's deserted, and it's eerily peaceful, the only sounds the rush of wind through the tree branches and the crunching of their boots on the snow. Together they flounder through a ridge of deep unplowed snow between the pine trees, Sam and Dean bracing Cas on either side. He gets through it fine, and they discover there's a little trail just past the trees, a freshly plowed paved trail about four feet wide. It stretches away to the left and the right, and there's a neatly lettered sign that says:

Welcome to the Grand Canyon
You are on the South Rim
Remember where you parked!

<-- RIM TRAIL -->

And directly ahead is the void.
They're standing on the edge of the world.

There's not even a fence or anything. Nothing at all preventing people from just walking right over the edge. The canyon is right there, the ground ending abruptly in a sheer drop-off that's just a dozen feet away.

"Oh my god," Sam murmurs. "Oh my god."

Castiel is silent; he just walks forward slowly, holding Dean's hand, and both brothers follow him almost to the rim. (Dean stops him a safe three feet from the edge; he's not taking any chances about Cas, or anybody, slipping on a patch of ice.) Then they all just stand and stare.

Serrated ranks of red and orange and gray canyon walls, striped with vivid color, spread out and drop away on all sides, a gigantic panorama that seems to spread away infinitely to the left and the right. There are miles of space to the left, miles of space to the right, and miles and miles and miles of
space straight ahead. Below them the ground seems to fall away for at least a thousand feet. And that's just the first step down; there's whole other mountains down below that, spires and towers and buttresses and lower cliffs that are far, far below, like whole other worlds cascading downward below them.

The bands of color are breathtaking. The top parts of the walls and spires are all coated in snow, but the snow abruptly stops at a certain point about a third of the way down, the white vanishing in an astonishingly even horizontal line that runs all the way around the canyon as if it'd been drawn with a gigantic ruler. *(That's the snowline, Dean realizes. The elevation line Cas was talking about.)* Farther down, below that shockingly abrupt snowline, the red and orange and yellow rocks shine brightly in the sun. Farther below still there are even green bands of trees.

The far wall — the wild, distant North Rim — can barely even be glimpsed; it's just a fuzzy blur in the distance. The canyon must be miles wide. In fact, it's so wide that it seems like they can't even see the real bottom from here. The Colorado River, which must be down there somewhere at the very bottom, is nowhere in sight. Instead the red and gray outcroppings below them seems to step down in levels, like a half-crumbled staircase made by giants, each successively lower level carved into its own series of sub-canyons and gullies. There's a sense of endless hidden wonders nested far below, and the more Dean looks, the more he sees. There's even a tiny trail far below that looks like a literal dotted line on a map, an infinitesimal ant trail that seems to be crossing an incredibly wide horizontal plateau that's far, far below them. Then that trail too vanishes, plunging even deeper down into a hazy distant gorge that disappears in the distance below.

For long minutes they just stand at the South Rim gazing out at the gorgeous expanse of space. They all seem to have been struck almost wordless. Sam finally starts murmuring, "Wow," over and over.

Dean at last says, "Ya know what, they oughta make this place into a national park or something. Think anybody knows about it?"

Sam gives an almost weak laugh. But Dean's joking because he's really kind of overwhelmed. Sure, everyone knows the Grand Canyon is cool, everybody's heard they should go see it, but this? It's actually dizzying to look down so far, to have to focus on such distant points that are below one's feet. Abruptly Dean realizes he's close to getting vertigo, and he tightens his grip on Cas's hand and backs up half a step.

"Freaky looking down so far," Dean mutters.

"Yeah, it's like being at the top of a roller coaster," says Sam. "Or looking down from an airplane."

"It's like flying," says Castiel quietly, and they both look at him. Cas's eyes are shining, and he's blinking. Is it just tears from the wind?

"Hey, you okay?" Dean says, squeezing his hand.

"Yes, yes," Cas says. "Yes, it's just...." He flashes Dean a smile. "It's beautiful. It's so very beautiful...." He glances down at the edge of the drop-off, a jagged edge of rough rock that's just a few feet away, and he says, "I have to admit, it's a little hard to hold back the impulse to just spread my wings and launch out."

Dean immediately tightens his grip on Cas's hand and pulls him back another step. "Okay now, don't go launching out," he says. Sam's moved closer on Cas's other side.

"No, no, I know," says Cas, laughing a little at their reactions. "I won't, I promise; I know I can't fly anymore. I'm not that far gone. I really just meant, isn't it spectacular?"
Sam and Dean both nod, and the three of them take in the view for another long minute more.

"I gotta say," says Sam at last. "From what I remember, Bryce was cool. It was really cool. More spires, even. Lotta color, if I remember right. But this is a whole different league."

Dean glances again at the sign:

<-- RIM TRAIL -->

... and then they all notice that the Rim Trail goes in both directions as far as the eye can see, curling in and out to follow the zig-zag shapes of the canyon's jagged walls. It's irresistibly tempting to follow it, like they've stumbled into a video game where a trail with magical views might lead to some sort of hidden treasure. (Dean's also biting back some extremely dubious jokes about "rim trails" potentially leading to "rim jobs" somewhere farther away, but he decides not to inflict any of those sorts of jokes on poor Sam just yet. Cas, though, might have to hear them later.)

Picking a direction at random, they head left, with no particular destination in mind.

It's actually quite cold, though, what with that winter wind zipping past and the snow and ice everywhere, but Cas insists he's fine (in fact he starts worrying about Dean instead). Dean makes Cas stop to zip up every possible zipper on every possible layer, and re-adjusts Cas's white scarf, his new black hat and his new mittens — and Cas then does exactly the same to Dean, and then they get into an intense little argument about which of them is healthy enough to be carrying Dean's shoulder bag, which has the thermos and some extra layers. Cas wins, temporarily, and slings the shoulder bag over one arm with an air of triumph. Sam's laughing at them both, and while they fight over the shoulder-bag and fuss with the scarfs, he occupies himself taking an endless series of pictures of the Canyon with his phone. Finally they get going again, though Dean insists that if Cas is going to carry the bag, he's at least got to walk on the parking-lot side of the path (rather than the one-slip-and-you-could-fall-to-your-death side of the path). The park rangers seem to have already scattered abundant salt and sand all along the rim trail to keep the footing safe, and between the trail and the actual dropoff there's a buffer zone of several more feet of rock, but nonetheless Dean takes great care to shepherd Cas far away from any dicey-looking patches of ice.

"You sure you're okay?" Dean asks him. "Five more minutes with that bag and then I swear I'm taking it back. We should get you inside soon. I wasn't liking that cough."

"No, no, I'm fine," Castiel insists. "You're the one recovering from influenza, remember? I want to keep going. I want to see it all. Besides, I'm not coughing now, am I?" He starts fiddling with his phone. "Maybe some pictures," he says. "I think Sam has a good idea."

"I just want to take a few more pics to send to Sarah," says Sam, who's already on at least his thirtieth shot. "This view here's perfect." Cas gets involved too, both of them seemingly enchanted with the play of light and shadow on the snowy red-rock walls. Every few feet the view changes subtly and they both then have to take another whole series of photos (and then Sam has to text about half of them to Sarah).

"This view's perfect," says Sam. "With that orange rock spire thing with the snow on top, see, Cas?"
"No, wait, *this* view's even better, Sam," says Cas, "Around this corner here, look at that wall — oh! Look at that hole in the cliff! Let me just get a picture of that, that's the best view yet. Wait, if that raven flies by again I can get a picture of it too—"

Every view is the best view, and apparently it's necessary to take several hundred photographs to document it all.

"You both better take as many photos as possible," says Dean after a while. "'Cause, you know, I'm not sure anybody's ever taken any pictures of the Grand Canyon before. This is really gonna hit the news big time when you finally post them on your Instagram, Sam."

Sam laughs at him. "Stuff it," he says cheerfully. "These are *my* photos. Not anybody else's." As if to prove it he turns the camera on himself for a selfie.

"No selfies," orders Dean. "Didn't you see that other sign back there? About people backing up right over the canyon wall taking selfies? No selfies!"

"I'm not backing up," points out Sam, "because I'm not an idiot. But *there's* an idiot, lemme just get a picture of *him*—" and he's turning the camera on Dean, laughing. Dean can't help laughing too, and then Sam ends up scampering ahead to take a series of pictures of Dean and Cas as they stroll along arm in arm, the stupendous Grand Canyon in the background.

Then Sam looks ahead and he starts laughing.

"Oh my god," he says. "Look at that sign! Can you believe it?"

Dean and Castiel both look ahead where he's pointing. They've come to a series of large wooden lodges that are centered around a trail that seems to be diving right down into the canyon. There's a classic little National Park Service sign right next to the start of the trail, with neatly carved, white-painted letters on a dark-brown background. It reads:

<-- Bright Angel Trail

"I don't believe it," says Dean. "Bright Angel? The trail's actually named Bright Angel?" He turns to Cas with a laugh. "So you've been here before?"

Cas hesitates, glancing at Dean. And then Dean remembers that Castiel actually *has* been to the Grand Canyon before.

Cas looks a little puzzled, though, and he walks a little closer to the trailhead. There's a second sign there, a historical marker of some sort that has a lot more details, and they all crowd close to read it. It starts:

*Bright Angel Trail*

8.0 miles to Phantom Ranch (Base of Canyon)

*Elevation change 4,380 feet (1,340 m)*

*Established 1902*

... along with a whole set of insistent warnings about how it's a really stupid idea to try to do the entire hike down and up in a single day.

"Hm," says Castiel.
"Hm?" repeats Dean, peering at him closely. Cas's eyes seem to be lingering on the "1902" part. Oh, and the "Phantom Ranch" part. He'd said he'd been here 'about a century ago', hadn't he? And he'd definitely said something about a "phantom-demon," as well. Can the Phantom Ranch name possibly be just a coincidence?

Sam's putting the pieces together too. "Cas, didn't you say you've been here once? About when this trail was named? Turn of the last century?" He's looking closely at Castiel. "And didn't you say something about a phantom at the base of the canyon?"

"Yes... " says Castiel slowly. "True phantoms are rare, you know; they're actually a ghost of a demon, a demon that wouldn't move on to Purgatory. That might indeed be the source of the Phantom Ranch name, I suppose. I dealt with it fairly quickly — just smote it, right away, really — and it was a brief visit, but it's just occurred to me that there were in fact some people nearby who might have seen me arrive." He hesitates, looking all around as if he's starting to recognize where he is. "There was a small mule trail close to where I flew in," he adds. "It was an older trail, actually; the local people, the Havasupai, had been using it for quite some time, but some miners had taken it over around recently. I wonder if they might have renamed it." He peers down Bright Angel Trail, which drops away below them, first in a series of tight switchbacks and then arcing out in a distant curving track that runs below a long cliff face. It then seems to zigzag down the canyon for miles, and dips over a ridge into some unseen gully. Dean realizes then that this same trail is very likely the tiny ant-trail that he'd spotted earlier, the one that reappears far, far, below, as just a tiny little dotted line creeping across the canyon floor.

"Hm," Cas says again after studying the path of the trail for a few moments. "I think this may indeed have been the trail that I flew in next to."

"Are you saying this trail got named after you?" Sam says, with an astonished little laugh.

"You flew in all glowy and winged and dramatic, didn't you?" says Dean.

Cas gives him a slightly embarrassed look. "I... might have, I suppose," he says.

Dean says to Sam, "Poofed into existence right by the trail and terrified everyone for miles, I'll bet."

Sam's laughing. "With a big crash of thunder."

"It was only a mild crash of thunder," protests Cas. "It only caused a few very small landslides."

Sam summarizes, "So, a massive crash of thunder that shook the entire Grand Canyon for miles around."

"And hey presto, the old Indian trail gets a new name!" Dean concludes.

"It wasn't like that..." Cas protests weakly, but by now Sam's insisting of taking some photos. They take several photos of an obviously-embarrassed Castiel as he stands right next to the "Bright Angel Trail" sign. Sam then gets Dean into the photo too, positioning them both carefully, and he seems to be framing the photo with extreme care as well. When Dean looks at the photo later it turns out Sam's framed it so that only the two words "Bright Angel" are visible (the word "Trail" is cut off by the edge of the photo), with the white-painted arrow pointing directly to Cas. In the photo, Dean's got one arm draped over Cas's shoulders and he's grinning widely at the camera. Dean looks about like he usually looks (Dean can never really judge his own photos), but Cas looks amazingly good. He's all bundled up, with his new black vest over a thick, dark blue polarfleece jacket, the new white scarf wrapped around his neck, the new black hat vivid against his skin, with the monkey-hat's little tassels poking out by his cheeks. It's quite an appealing color combination — his blue eyes have got
that beautiful bright shine again, standing out vividly against the blue jacket and the black vest and hat.

But Cas still doesn't really have the hang of posing for photos. In the photo he's not even looking at the camera at all; instead he's looking right at Dean, as Dean grins at the camera. Looking at Dean, and smiling at him.

And beyond them both is the vast sweep of the Canyon spreading out behind for miles behind them, the ancient ranks of red and gray and cream-colored rock fading away into the distance, dusted with snow.

"Oh, jeez, Sam, send that to me immediately," says Dean. And Sam does.

By now Castiel seems to have resigned himself to the "Bright Angel" moniker, and he even starts eyeing the trail below with an air of possessiveness. "Let's walk on it a little bit," he suggests. "I'd like to see my trail firsthand."

Dean and Sam agree they have to get Castiel, the actual Bright Angel, onto Bright Angel Trail. "Just a little way down, though," says Dean. "Don't want to wear anybody out. Two minutes down, tops? Maybe down to that weird hole in the rock?" (There's an obvious destination point shortly below, a dramatic-looking keyhole in a rock outcropping.) They all agree this is doable.

The beginning of the trail is comfortably wide. It's clear that this top section must be the most traveled trail in the whole park, for the first few hundred yards of switchbacks are all neatly shoveled, sanded and salted. They immediately pass multiple more stern warning signs about how strenuous it would be to hike all the way to the bottom, and how they should be bringing gallons and gallons of water if they're planning a several-hour hike. But of course they're only going to be strolling down just a few minutes.

It turns out that one doesn't have to go down Bright Angel Trail very far at all to get a feeling of truly being in the Grand Canyon. The wind dies down as soon as they get a few feet below the rim, and soon the colorful stone walls are stretching all around them. There's a black raven looping and soaring in the sky overhead, and some kind of little bird is singing its heart out despite the snow ("Canyon wren," says Castiel, with a little smile, when he hears its song). The scenery is unimaginably beautiful, and knowing the trail was very likely named after Castiel himself just makes it that much more wonderful.

"Not a bad trail you got here, Bright Angel," Dean remarks to Cas as they stroll along.

Cas gives a little chuckle. "It's really rather lovely, isn't it?"

In answer Dean just loops his arm through Cas's, and they walk on.

A minute later Dean finds himself slipping his other hand into his jacket, just to pat the little feather in his shirt-pocket. Cas sees this, and grins at him, and pats his own vest pocket too. And Dean wonders if this magical day could possibly get any better.

There's a flicker of a thought, then, about the tests tomorrow. And about what Dr. Klein will say.
Dean shuts the thought down before it even gets started.

*Just focus on today,* Dean thinks. Once again he remembers Mom's advice: *Let yourself be happy.*

And for a long, perfect moment, he is.

"Hey, we should turn around," says Sam. He's checking the time. "It's been five minutes." Dean comes back to himself with a start. They've walked just a bit farther down than he meant to. It turns out the destination point they've been aiming for, the keyhole in the stone wall, is a little farther than it had looked; he'd only meant to walk down for two minutes, but they've gone five.

No big deal, though; they turn around, and head back up.

And up.

And up.

And up.

Five minutes down turns out to require a *lot* more minutes going back up, and Dean's startled at how exhausting it is to climb up even a few dozen feet. They've got maybe six flights-of-stairs worth of elevation ahead of them, which shouldn't be a big deal at all, really... except that Cas is pretty weak, and Dean's recuperating from the flu. They're both out of breath immediately, gasping for air by the very next switchback turn. Actually all *three* of them are huffing and puffing, even Sam too. Which is a little puzzling — Sam's a runner, and he hasn't even been sick.

Finally something dawns on Dean.

"Goddammit," he says, as they're all pausing for a few moments at the next switchback corner, trying to get their breath back. "We're at high elevation, aren't we?"

"Seven... thousand... feet," pants Cas.

"Crap," says Sam, who's still breathing heavily. "Forgot all about that.... Seven thou is... pretty high. I'm really feeling it."

"Think we all are," says Dean.

"I thought it was six thousand and...." says Sam, who's now almost gotten his breath back. "... and nine hundred and something?"

"That was... Flagstaff," says Castiel, still panting. "Grand Canyon... South Rim's... a bit higher."

"I totally feel those extra hundred feet," says Dean.

"Extra *ninety* feet," corrects Castiel carefully, and they all laugh a little bit.

"Oh, *damn,*" Sam then adds suddenly, like he's just thought of something. "Cas, this is probably why you've been coughing! It's not just that it's winter; it's winter *at altitude.* Which means you're probably a little O2-deprived, and probably breathing kind of deep. *And* you're breathing super dry air, like, *super-duper* dry air — I mean, think about it, desert, at high altitude, in winter. O2-deprived, and breathing super-duper dry air, really deep. You should really take it easy."

"Damn, Cas, I'm sorry," says Dean ruefully. He's starting to get worried. "I should've thought about the altitude thing. And I didn't meant to take you down the trail so far."
"I'm not a child," Cas points out, and he's smiling a little even though he's still breathing a little heavily. "I knew how far... we were going. And I certainly know.... the elevation, obviously better than you two do. As well as the relative humidity. This is my trail, after all." He does seem to have gotten his breath back now, though there's then an alarming series of rasping coughs. But he straightens up after that and adds, "I was enjoying it. I still am. It was my decision to come down. I just may need to go a little slowly on the way back up, that's all, if you two don't mind."

So they take it very slowly. Dean's additionally guilty when he realizes Cas is also still carrying the shoulder-bag (which, granted, is very light; a thermos and some mittens don't weigh that much. But still!) Dean takes the bag back and also takes Cas's arm from here on, and again Dean insists on walking protectively on the outer side of the path, keeping Castiel safely on the inner side away from the drop-offs. Cas still has to stop at each switchback turn, sitting on a rock at the end of every straight stretch and resting for a minute or so to catch his breath. Fortunately, there are many nicely placed rocks to sit on, the views are all gorgeous, and at least it's warmer down here. They soon even have to strip off several outer layers (Cas sheds his black hat, and one of the scarves) and stuff them into Dean's bag. And Cas actually seems okay, just breathing heavily.

Gradually Dean begins to relax, though he's still kicking himself about it all. But everything seems to be okay; they just need to go slow.

But on the next loop of the switchback, Cas has another spell of coughing, and Dean decides they should to stop and rest not just at the corners of the switchbacks, but also in the middle of the straight stretches. Bit by bit they make progress, Cas panting hard the whole time. They finish all the hot chocolate, and Dean starts to wish he'd brought some water. They'd passed nearly a dozen signs about bringing water, but who knew that even a tiny little five-minute hike would require a water bottle?

I should've known, Dean chastises himself. Cas has never been hiking, not as a human, not while he's so weak, not at high elevation. He might know the elevation numerically, but he doesn't really get how it'd affect a sick human body, not really. I'm the one who should've known better.

In the middle of the next straight stretch they come to a long straight stone bench that's perfectly placed, right in very middle of the straight stretch with possibly the best view yet, and Cas slumps down onto it immediately, totally out of breath once again. They're very close to the top now, on the second-to-last switchback just a hundred paces or so from the trailhead, and Sam offers to "go buy some water and some snacks from that lodge nearby, so we can sit and have a little meal right here." Dean knows (and Cas must know too) that this is really a way to buy Cas some more time and make him feel like he can sit and rest a little longer without feeling pressured to hurry. It's a thoughtful idea, so Dean nods yes to Sam, and off Sam goes. Dean sits down next to Cas.

"Sorry," Dean says. "I should've been thinking."

Cas gives a little chuckle. "I repeat," he says, "This was my decision. I knew how far we were going and I wanted to do it. You need to stop claiming responsibility for my errors." He's still panting hard, shoulders hunched, but then he adds, "But I'm not sure it was an error. Because, isn't the view lovely?"

It is. The view is absolutely spectacular. If possible, it's even more dramatic from this vantage point than from the rim, because from here, nestled on this stone bench on Bright Angel Trail, they're sitting right under the looming red-rock cliffs, and the little canyon wrens are singing in the gullies, their trilling songs echoing through the canyon walls.... and they're also out of the wind. it's actually rather comfortable here sitting in the sun. Cas is breathing better now, and really it's absolutely gorgeous. Dean pats Cas's knee with a gloved hand. Cas looks at him with a smile, pulls off his
mitten, pulls off Dean's glove too, slips his bare hand into Dean's, laces his fingers into Dean's and holds on tight.

"I was secretly hoping that we'd get a chance to just sit here together," he whispers to Dean, between hoarse breaths. "It was all part of my plan."

Dean laughs. "All part of the plan," he replies skeptically. "Did your secret plan include all the coughing?"

Cas gives a hoarse laugh back, and confesses, "All right, it wasn't a secret plan exactly. But really, I'm so glad I could see this with you. And sit here with you for a while. It's perfect."

They sit companionably for several long minutes, enjoying the view. After a few moments Cas lets his head sink onto Dean's shoulder. Dean glances over at him; Cas seems relaxed, just watching the distant spires and gullies. His eyes are tracking something out in the middle of the canyon, and Dean follows his gaze and finds a little black speck soaring along the edge of a curving cliff-face nearby. It's a raven again, maybe the same one they'd seen earlier. It's playing in the wind, circling back and forth, doing bouncing swoops up and down where the wind comes up and over the canyon wall. Little spirals of snow are lofting up at from the tops of the snowy ridges, and the raven's playing in the spirals of airborne snow.

"We'll fix your wings, you know," says Dean quietly. "Once you're better. Once the chemo's all over we'll work on your wings. We'll get you all fixed up."

"It's okay now, you know," whispers Cas. He adds, "Flying was wonderful...."

He pauses, and Dean realizes he's used the past tense. Flying was wonderful.

Cas is still watching the raven, but he says, "Flying was wonderful. But honestly, this is even better."

His hand tightens on Dean's, and Dean squeezes back, as hard as he can.

They fall silent, watching the raven fly. The wind has really died down, and there's a moment of quiet so pure that it seems Dean can even hear his heart beating. The raven glides closer, and closer, almost at eye level; Cas's hand loosens slightly as they watch it approach. It seems to be sailing sideways directly toward them somehow, sideslipping over to inspect them maybe, in a way that almost seems to defy the wind. Its bright gleaming eyes fix on them, and then it glides on, swooping up and soaring past a mere dozen feet over their heads. It's so close that Dean can hear a rushing sound of wind in its feathers. It seems the only sound in the world.

The raven flies past.

It's at this moment that Dean realizes that Cas has stopped holding on to his hand.

His hand has loosened and slid slightly out of Dean's. Dean takes his hand back, and squeezes lightly, but Cas doesn't squeeze back. The raven's gone but Cas is still gazing straight ahead; a spark of worry is starting to flare up now, and Dean turns to look at Cas. As Dean's shoulder shifts, Cas's head slides right off Dean's shoulder and he slumps bonelessly forward into Dean's lap.

Dean grabs him, calling, "Cas? Cas!" Cas doesn't answer. Dean gets him twisted around enough to get a glimpse at the side of his face. Cas is staring sightlessly down into the canyon, his eyes glazed and half-closed. His face is deathly pale, and there's a steady flow of blood trickling from his mouth. It's been dripping down the shoulder of Dean's jacket for some time now, and Dean hadn't noticed.
A/N - You all knew this was coming. Hang in there.

Bright Angel Trail is the most famous, and most travelled, trail in the Grand Canyon, and indeed it goes directly to Phantom Ranch at the base. Ever since I saw that sign at the trailhead for myself, I knew Bright Angel Trail must have been named after Castiel; and ever since I started this fic I knew that it would all be leading up to this scene, with Castiel and Dean together on Bright Angel Trail.

And it is amazingly easy to make the same errors that Dean just made. So easy to stroll down "for just a couple minutes"... so tempting to go a tiny bit farther... so pleasant to be down by the colorful rock walls, out of the wind. Dozens of people, including experienced hikers, make all of these same errors there literally every single day. The high altitude really sneaks up on you; you don't feel it till you're on the way back up. And the lovely trail seems so deceptively easy on the way down. Most people aren't accustomed to walks that go straight down first and then back up later (most hikes are the other way around, up first and then back down) and it really messes with people's natural sense of how to pace themselves. So don't be too hard on poor Dean, because he is already going to be very hard on himself.

Next part will post later tonight (Sun); next chapter after that tomorrow (Mon). The fic will wrap up within a week.

Please drop me a comment if you have a moment! I'm working nonstop (have literally gone dawn to dusk for the last three days, and skipping meals) trying to wrap this up with the care it deserves. I read each and every comment - I'll start replying to them all next week, once this blast of writing & editing is finally over. And your feedback really does help keep me going! Thank you all for reading, and for staying with me for so long.
Don't you fucking dare

The next five minutes are all terror. First there's a sickening moment when Cas almost slithers right off the stone bench. It would be only a ten- or fifteen-foot drop here, only to the next section of trail, but that's still a potentially fatal fall, and Dean frantically yanks him back, grabbing him anywhere he can reach, scarf and jacket and arm, scrambling back till the two of them topple backwards together over the stone bench and land safely onto their own section of trail. Cas ends up on top of Dean, blood dripping everywhere, and Dean scrambles wildly to get Cas off him, and get him face-up, and then to get onto his own hands and knees next to him. Cas is still unconscious and Dean can't seem to get through his scarf to try to find a pulse, and suddenly the damn wind's picked up again so that it seems impossible to tell if Cas is breathing. Dean screams "SAM!" at the top of his lungs, bellowing it toward the top of the trail, hoping desperately that Sam or maybe some Christmas-Day tourist will hear him. But the trail's deserted, and Sam doesn't appear. Dean's hands are shaking so hard that for a moment he can't get the fucking goddamned scarf unwrapped to get to Cas's throat. Dean's not even aware that he's whimpering, but he is, whimpering and swearing, in a stream of "No, no, Cas, you bastard, not like this, not now, not today, not yet, Cas— don't you fucking dare, Cas—" He finally manages to get the scarf uncoiled and gets two fingers pressed to the hollow of Cas's throat. He can't feel anything except that Cas's skin is too cold. What were they thinking bringing him out in the cold, in this absolutely frigid winter, at HIGH ALTITUDE, marching poor Cas down and then back up the trail with no water at all like some sort of Bataan Death March, it's all Dean's fault—

— and there's a pulse. Dean almost can't believe it. He huddles over Cas's mouth next, trying to feel for any breath; but the wind's still too erratic, his hand's still shaking and he can't seem to feel anything — here Dean stops and takes a huge breath for another yell, again aiming up toward the top of the trail. He concentrates very hard on volume this time, bellowing at the very top of his lungs, "SAM! ANYBODY! HELP!" Nobody answers. He turns back down to Cas and puts his hand in front of Cas's mouth again. There's a very faint little warm puff of air, and then another.

"See, not yet, you bastard," Dean growls. Sam's not coming. Nobody's coming. A surge of strength comes to Dean and he gets one arm under Cas's shoulders, another under his knees, picks Cas up bodily, and staggers to his feet.

Castiel is not small, and six feet of human vessel, even if thinner than usual, is not trivial to carry. But Dean manages it. He staggers up the trail, one arm under Cas's torso and the other under his knees, chanting to himself, Don't drop him. Don't slip. Don't fall. Don't drop him. Don't slip. Don't fall. He studies every inch of footing ahead, making sure he doesn't step on any ice, terribly conscious of the potentially fatal fall just a few feet to the side. Cas is completely limp in his arms, gazing sightlessly upwards; he's somehow ended up in that melodramatic wounded-soldier pose, face to the sky, head flung back, both his arms spread dramatically wide. Cas coughs; he chokes.

He's choking on blood. He can't breathe.

Dean manages to stand him up for a split second against the natural rock wall that's on the uphill side of the trail. Cas instantly crumples, but Dean manages to reposition under him so that Cas falls over Dean's shoulder in a somewhat disorganized fireman's carry. Dean hoists him up and staggers on. Cas's head is now dangling down behind Dean's back. There's an ugly splat behind Dean — a glance behind reveals it was a gout of blood, from Cas's mouth, hitting the snow — but at least that means he hopefully can breathe now, and Dean just keeps going, staggering up.

It seems to take a year but finally he's at the trailhead, passing the Bright Angel Trail sign, and he wants to weep, for the Bright Angel is dying on Dean's shoulders. But there's no time for weeping;
that won't help at all, will it? Dean gulps it down and staggers on toward the nearest building, which turns out to be nothing other than Bright Angel Lodge. "Bright Angel," Dean mutters, determined to view the phrase as a good omen, as a good-luck mantra. Cas can't possibly die on Bright Angel Trail, and he can't possibly die in Bright Angel Lodge. "Bright Angel," mutters Dean again. "Bright Angel —". There's the sound of another rough cough over his shoulders, and another splat of blood hitting the icy ground. Then the big double doors of the lodge burst open and Sam comes pelting out. He's flinging some water bottles to the ground, he's dashing to Dean's side, and in mere seconds he's got Cas's shoulders and Dean's got Cas's legs and they're carrying him into the lobby of a plush hotel that seems stuffed full of Christmas decorations. There's a fireplace with a crackling fire, there's overstuffed chairs and a plush white fake-fur rug in front of the fire, there's poinsettias and a tree and a crowd of puzzled hotel guests, but Dean sees none of it. He only sees Cas, his gaze fixed on Cas's slack face as Sam and he drag Cas over toward the fireplace. People scatter out of the way and yank chairs around and somehow Cas ends up on the rug right by the fire, and Castiel is still unconscious, spitting up blood all over the white fake-fur rug, which doesn't stay white for long. Dean's worried that he's going to start choking again; he pulls Cas over onto his side so that the blood can pour out more easily and he won't choke. There's a commotion of activity, park rangers and lodge receptionists and crackling radios and talk about ambulances coming, but all Dean sees is Castiel.

He kneels by Cas's side. Where's the blood coming from? What's happening to him? Was it the coughing, is it his lungs? Dean has no idea. He puts all that aside and focuses on one main goal, which is, Wake him the fuck up. It's one of the very first things Dad taught them about emergency first aid: anybody who's losing blood has to be kept awake at all costs. Even if this can only be accomplished by yelling at them or even slapping them. The adrenaline of being awake (not to mention the adrenaline of being yelled at, and of being slapped) helps keep blood pressure up — and that little boost in blood pressure can literally keep the person alive.

So Dean calls Cas's name. "Cas!" he calls. Cas doesn't respond, so Dean yells louder. "Cas!!" he bellows. "CAS! Don't you fucking dare do this!"

To his surprise, and his intense relief, Cas's eyes actually flicker open. Cas's whole face is slack, though, his skin still ashen, and he seems only semi-conscious, his eyes half-lidded and unfocused. Almost immediately his eyelids start sliding shut again. Dean leans closer still, barking right into his ear, "WAKE UP! CAS!" Cas blinks once but then his eyes start sliding closed once again. So Dean slaps his cheek, hard; and again, a second stinging slap that actually leaves an imprint on Cas's pale cheek. "Don't you dare!" he snaps at Cas. "Don't you dare do this to me, you bastard! You fucking bastard angel, you keep your fucking eyes open! Fucking stay with me!"

Whether it's the slapping or the swearing or just the constant stream of sound, Cas blinks again.

"Dean...." Cas murmurs.

And Dean starts to beg. "You gotta stay awake, Cas," he says, and his voice is breaking now, the harsh yells turning to desperate pleas the moment he realizes that Cas can hear him. "You gotta, you gotta stay with me, please, you can't do this to me, not today, please—" Dean takes hold of his hand, and Cas's eyes drift to Dean's face. "That's it," Dean babbles, "That's it, stay with me now, Sam's getting an ambulance, you're gonna be okay but you gotta stay awake—"

Cas is sliding asleep again. His hand's going limp and is sliding out of Dean's. Dean grabs his hand back and physically folds Cas's fingers over his own. "Keep holding on, damn you!" Dean barks. "Don't you dare let go again! Keep holding on!" And at last Cas seems to become aware that it's really important to Dean that Castiel stay awake; Dean can see the understanding come into his eyes, a flicker of worry and concern at the tone in Dean's voice. Cas is actively trying now to keep his eyes focused on Dean's. Dean's alternately begging him and commanding him to hold on to Dean's hand,
and at one point he feels a faint twitch in Cas's fingers. It's a pathetically weak attempt at a grip, but it's something. Cas is breathing harder now; he's trying to stay awake; he's really trying, and Dean watches him go through rounds of effort, his eyes refocusing on Dean's, then unfocusing, then refocusing again. Through it all, Dean begs him, "Keep holding on. Stay with me. Keep holding on, damn you. Hold on, damn you—"

Dean's dimly aware of a circle of shocked guests standing in a solemn semicircle behind him. There's more radios crackling and a dim murmur of talking; there's hotel managers hovering nearby. He glances around briefly and takes in, for the first time, all the festive holiday decorations; poinsettias, a huge Christmas tree, the crackling fire, and the blood all over the fake-fur rug. None of it really registers; all Dean's really looking for are EMTs and their gurney and their precious ambulance. Dean turns back to Castiel, who, miracle of miracles, is still awake and is looking right at Dean.

"Now stay with me," Dean orders him. "You cannot die on Christmas Day, you fucking asshole, you just can't. I won't allow it, you hear me?"

"Dean," whispers Cas. He coughs weakly, and there's bright red in his mouth. "I think... I've lost some blood...."

"Oh really? Ya think?" says Dean.

"I'm sorry," whispers Cas, "I'm so sorry...." The regret and guilt in his voice is like a punch in the gut, and suddenly Dean's desperate to reassure him. He strokes Cas's face, he kisses his forehead, he says, "Don't be sorry, it's okay, baby, it's not your fault, you're doing great, you're doing awesome, just stay with me, just keep holding on to my hand, okay?" He barely notices the slightly startled reactions of the hotel guests around him (at the "baby", maybe, or at the kiss on the forehead). And, he finds, he really doesn't care at all what they think.

Dean completely loses track of time. It seems he's crouching over Cas for hours, gripping his hand, trying to keep him awake. Whenever his eyes flutter shut Dean calls his name, yelling sometimes, squeezing his hand sharply, even slapping him a few more times. Finally, an endless age later the EMTs are suddenly there (they later tell him it was only six minutes), swarming around Castiel in a flurry of professional efficiency. Sam's telling them about Cas's chemotherapy, about his cancer; the two EMT's trade a rather grim look at the news. Neither of them seem to understand that Cas is fine now, that his chemo's over. And there are more park rangers, and cops, and supervisors, there's a park service ambulance of some sort, and just as Dean's starting to dread the hour-long drive that it'll surely take to get to the Flagstaff hospital, he overhears the magical, wonderful words "medevac" and then "chopper".

Dean's ready to fight, physically fight, to get to go on the chopper with Cas, but it turns out the EMTs are already planning to bring him along. "You're doing a great job keeping him awake," one of them says. "Keep it up. It's very important."

"I'll take the Impala," Sam's saying next. "Meet you in Flagstaff." Dean barely hears, but he manages to look up from Cas just long enough meet Sam's eyes, and Sam crouches to give Dean a very quick, very tight hug. Sam doesn't say "He's gonna be okay," or "Everything's gonna be all right;" Sam looks very grim, actually. He doesn't say a word; there's just the quick hug, and then he turns to leave.

And then Sam turns back, with a sheepish, "Oh wait, I need the keys. The Impala keys?" It's startling
to have such a tiny everyday detail leap annoyingly into prominence. Which pocket are Dean's keys in? He has to hunt around (they've ended up in one of the layers he'd removed, in the shoulder bag). Where is the car, anyway? What parking lot had they parked in? There's a brief, surreal moment of discussing trivial little details, and it's then that Dean becomes aware that there will be similar logistics back in Flagstaff — cars and Ubers and stuff like parking, and the Airbnb rental, and they'll have to contact Dr. Klein, they'll have to get Cas's medical details from Denver... and along with all these annoying details comes the unfathomably horrid reminder that the world, and all its trivialities, will (unbelievably, impossibly) keep on going whether or not Castiel survives.

Then Sam's gone and Dean's in the ambulance next to Cas. The EMTs have positioned Dean right at Cas's head, where he can hold Cas's gaze and keep talking to him. There's what seems a far too long drive to some helicopter pad somewhere, hours and hours long (seven minutes, they tell him later), siren blaring the whole time, and for the entire drive Dean keeps clutching Cas's hand, commanding him over and over to stay awake, to keep holding on. Cas keeps blinking up at him; he's got an oxygen mask on now and Dean's slightly encouraged to see his color improving a little. But he still keeps coughing up blood, and the EMTs are calling Flagstaff with phrases like "severe hemorrhage" and "he's getting a little shocky" and "make sure the blood bank's on call". Then they're clambering into a helicopter, its rotors already slowly stirring. The EMTs push Dean to a little jump seat and strap him in, and they're aloft.

The chopper lifts off. Dean, and Cas too, are right by a window. It's down at Cas's level, and Cas's eyes drift to the view outside. From his vantage point he must be only seeing the sky, but he stares out the window vacantly, so Dean looks out the window with him.

Dean knows immediately that it's the most spectacular view he's ever going to see in his life.

The entire Grand Canyon is spread out below them, in endless folds and layers and receding gullies of snow-crusted red and orange rock that seem to spread out infinitely in all directions. It seems an entire world, not a mere cut in a mesa but an entire planetary landscape of its own. Cliffs plunging a mile down... rock spires dusted with snow... and little black dots floating in the air, those ravens again, soaring in the winter wind.

But the beauty now seems terrible and heartless. How is it possible that such beauty could exist when Cas is in such danger? When he might never see it again?

How cold and cruel can the natural world possibly be, to dare to be so remotely, dispassionately gorgeous? How dare the blue sky be so lovely, how dare the snow-capped spires gleam so brightly, how dare the ravens play in the wind, how dare the world keep on turning, when Castiel might not even survive the next hour?

And Cas's eyes have slid shut, and Dean can't get him to open them again, so Dean clutches Cas's hand and he prays. He prays first to Castiel himself, in the hope it might somehow wake him up; but Cas doesn't wake. Who else to pray to then? Dean's certain that no other angels will hear, and likely none would agree to help anyway. Who to pray to, then? God — Chuck — is gone.

Who to pray to?
The helicopter is higher now, gaining a bit of elevation so it can clear the trees before it really picks up speed. And for the first time a glint of distant water catches Dean's eye. It's far, far below, in the very lowest stretch of the canyon. The Colorado River. The river that had actually made most of this canyon.

Of course there had to be an associated diplomatic negotiation with the resident river elemental....

Dean prays, without any hope at all, to the "river elemental" that lives in the grand Canyon.

He doesn't even know what an elemental is. He doesn't know its name. He doesn't know if it's even still alive, or still in the Grand Canyon, or whether it can possibly receive prayers. But there's some kind of being here, apparently, something that once met Castiel, and Castiel once helped free its canyon from some kind of phantom-demon-ghost thing, right? It's all Dean can think of, and so Dean prays.

Anything in the canyon that can hear me, Dean prays, Mr. Colorado River Elemental or whatever you are, please help my friend Castiel, if you can. He stares at the tiny distant glint of water, focusing his thoughts as much as he can. He was here once, remember him? He's the angel who helped you with that phantom, remember? Please help him now. He needs any help he can get. Please.

"BP's still dropping," reports one EMT to the other. The chopper's picking up speed. The distant glint of water disappears; the whole canyon recedes, flattening into the distance. The chopper crests a hill and then the entire canyon vanishes from view, its astonishing grandeur snuffed out completely by a low, unprepossessing hill of scrubby little pine. All that's visible now, in any direction, is open desert, and the millions of tiny little lumps of snowy sagebrush and rabbit-brush, and the endless little pines dusted with snow. Dean turns away from the window and folds both hands around Cas's.

It's a short flight. Cas's eyes never open again. Three-quarters of the way there, a bunch of little portable monitors start beeping, heart monitors or oxygen or something, and one of the EMTs grabs his radio and reports, to the hospital, "Patient's crashing. We'll need the full team at the pad."

There's a lot of speedy commotion when they finally touch down. Cas is whisked out of the chopper so fast that Dean loses hold of Cas's hand while he's trying to get his own seatbelt off. Almost instantly Cas is outside surrounded by a tight cluster of four or five people, who are shouting cryptic abbreviations to each other and stabbing him with needles and slapping new, different, oxygen masks on him as they actually run with him, run very fast, to a bank of open elevator doors. Dean stumbles out of the chopper and tries to follow, but he's blocked by an extremely annoying orderly along with one of the EMTs, who has also suddenly become extremely annoying, because the two of them are efficiently blocking Dean's every move toward Cas. They're insisting that Dean "let the professionals do their job; it's best for him."

Dean knows they're right, but it's absolutely excruciating to not have hold of Cas's hand anymore (Dean's even groping at the air at his side, his right hand restlessly opening and closing on nothing, as if he can still grab hold of Cas somehow). He glances around, trying to get his bearings, and he realizes they're on the roof of a low brick building in some kind of snowy town.

Oh. Right. Flagstaff. The Flagstaff hospital.

Horrible terrible freezing Flagstaff, in horrible terrible Arizona, near the horrible ruthless Grand
Canyon, on the worst day in the world.

The EMT is now trying to steer Dean some kind of stairs, saying something about "If you'll just follow me" when Dean spots the chopper gurney that Cas had been lying on. They'd switched him onto a different gurney and the chopper one is just sitting there askew near the chopper. It's covered with blood. A lot of blood. Dean's not even sure where it had been coming from. Could that possibly all have been coming from his mouth?

Or... the other end? A lot of the blood's in the middle of the gurney.

Dean looks at his arms, then, and realizes his jacket sleeves are drenched in blood. From when he'd had Cas in the fireman's carry. He'd been hanging on to Cas's legs and his jacket sleeves had ended up bloody. Cas had been bleeding from both ends, not just one.

That's when Dean remembers last night.

It hadn't just been the hike down Bright Angel Trail, had it? It hadn't just been the coughing.

*Just a finger will be fine.*

A few seconds later Dean's on his knees at the side of the roof, vomiting up a thin bile into a clean white snowdrift. The orderly and the EMT both rush over him. There's a big fence around the edge of the roof, so it's not like he's going to fall right off the building or anything, but the EMT leans in and checks his pulse. Dean knows then that the EMT's about to call a doctor, and that once a doctor gets called, and once Dean becomes classed as a "patient" himself, it'll be a hell of a lot harder to get to Cas.

"I'm okay," Dean insists, gasping. He has to get to Cas. "Just saw all the blood. Gets to me sometimes."

The orderly and the EMT both relax a little, like they've both seen people who reacted like this to the sight of blood. They seem to believe him. Dean catches his breath, gazing out over the snowy town, dully noticing unimportant details — the glowing ER sign down below, the little hospital parking lot, a little back alley with a weird circular metal statue of some kind. Finally Dean manages to stagger to his feet, and the orderly leads him to another elevator.

Dean ends up, inevitably, in the ER lobby, his least favorite type of room in the entire world. They still won't let him anywhere near Cas. There's no news other than a vague "He's getting the best of care," and an ever-so-slightly-less-vague "They're giving him some blood." Dean tries to text Sam, but there's no reply; next Dean tries to call, but Sam doesn't pick up — and then Dean remembers the lack of cell service during the drive to the Grand Canyon. Sam must be driving through that hour-long dead zone where there's no cell towers. Dean curses horrible, terrible Arizona and its horrible empty deserts and its goddamn lack of cell towers. He curses the Grand Canyon and its terrible high-altitude air; he curses Flagstaff, and its bitter winter cold and its depressing dark skies and its stupid Christmas tree. Dean texts Sam again, begging him to drive safely, to watch out for ice now that the afternoon sunshine is fading and things are refreezing; Dean orders him to please, please, *please* not get in a crash. There's no reply.

Dean's phone's still in his hand. He scrolls back through the text messages, wondering if he might have somehow missed one from Sam. Oh, wait, there *is* one from Sam —

But it's from earlier. It's the photo that Sam had taken, of Cas and Dean standing by the Bright Angel Trail sign. The one Dean had asked Sam to send to him.
Dean makes the mistake of looking at the photo.

His hand's shaking as he clicks the phone off and shoves it in his pocket.

He thinks about last night.

Was it the sex? Was it me? Did I do this?

He finds himself thinking, If he's just gonna die anyway I should've pounded the shit out of him. He almost snorts with laughter, and then he realizes it's true, that now Cas might never get to feel what that's like, and Dean won't ever get to feel it either, not with Cas, not ever, and then he's choking back tears.

Calm down. Calm down, Dean orders himself, slowly realizing that ricocheting from laughter to tears like this is probably not a good sign. You need to calm down. You can't help Cas if you're a total wreck like this. Get a grip. It occurs to him that he needs to tidy up; people in the ER lobby are looking at him funny. He goes into the men's room and discovers he's covered with blood. Blood all over his jacket and shirt, blood smeared on his arms and his hands and his face, blood in his hair. He washes his face and arms as best he can, and sticks his head under a faucet to rinse his hair a little, and even tries to blot the jacket clean, but there's really no way he can clean up his clothes. He's starting to dab a damp towel pointlessly at the dark red blotches on his shirt when he remembers the little black feather. Dean's heart's suddenly in his throat. Carefully he unbuttons the pocket button; carefully he pries the pocket open. The little black feather's still there, and he slides it out as delicately as he can. It's got blood on it; the whole pocket's bloody.

Dean spends a good five minutes trying to clean the little feather. For some reason it occurs to him then, as he's running an endless stream of water over the feather, watching the red water trickling down the drain, that he's not sure what the last thing is that he actually said to Cas. Or rather, the last thing Castiel had heard. Had the last thing that Cas heard Dean say been when Dean swore at him? When Dean was calling him a bastard, an asshole, for passing out? Had it been Dean had said, sarcastically, "Ya think?" in reply Cas's weak whispered comment about having lost some blood? Was that the last thing that Cas heard Dean say?

Dean's numbly patting the little black feather dry with another paper towel when he realizes that Cas has never heard Dean say "I love you." Not even once. Never.

His hands slow on the feather; he gets a fresh paper towel, and strokes it gently, over and over, as he considers the fact that a half-assed texted "I miss you too" has been the closest Dean's ever gotten.

But Cas must know, right? He must know. He's got to. The whole alula-feather exchange had been about that. The scritches on the back of the head are all about that, the cuddling in the night, the spooning yesterday afternoon, that whole damn rimjob, the sloth hoodies, everything, everything, it's all about that. It has to be really obvious to Castiel, whether or not Dean's ever said it, right?

Right?

Dean actually jumps in surprise when a fat tear rolls right off the tip of his nose and falls on the feather. Apparently he's crying. This isn't really important except for the fact that a tear has now fallen on the feather, and Dean's unsure if a human tear might somehow mess up an angel's alula-feather somehow, contaminate it or something. Are tears worse than blood? Dean hastily blots his face dry with his sleeve, rinses the feather one more time in the sink, and blots it dry again (this time he's more careful to hold it well away from his face). Then he wraps the little black feather in a triple layer of clean paper towel and tucks it into the inner pocket of his jacket. It's the least bloody place he can find.
He returns to the ER lobby and checks for any word on Castiel. This time the receptionist says "We're doing all we can." It's the worst-case-scenario ER phrase, the one that Sam and Dean have always joked about as the "Bad News Phrase."

Dean finds a painted arrow on the wall that says "Chapel" and follows it to a tiny little room not far away. There Dean sits and prays again.

He prays once more to Castiel.

This time he even tries praying to Chuck. He knows this won't work. He prays anyway.

Then he shocks himself deeply by praying, in a bottomless free-fall moment of real desperation, to Amara.

Nothing happens.

He even prays again to the Colorado River elemental, a being he's still not even sure still exists. But it's last-straw time, atheist-in-the-foxhole time, and apparently Dean'll pray to absolutely anybody right now. Anything's worth a try, right?

But nothing happens, and Dean knows these are all just desperate shots in the dark.

He drinks some water and makes himself eat something; then he goes to the men's room and throws it all up; then he makes himself drink some more water. He sits in a chair in the lobby and stares at a tiny fake Christmas tree that's sitting on the receptionist's desk. There's a miniature plastic angel at the top. Dean looks away.

He's not sure how much time has passed when a doctor finally appears. Dean's startled to recognize him; it's the same doctor Cas had been talking to six months ago, the one who'd first spotted the cancer on Cas's scans. His name turns out to be Jason Flaherty, and he's carrying both an iPad and a big black plastic bag.

"Your friend Castiel's stable for the moment," Dr. Flaherty says, leading Dean to a quiet little nook to talk in private. But he follows that slightly-reassuring statement with a much more alarming, "But I have to be clear that his condition is still quite critical. He's hemorrhaging, and he's lost a great deal of blood and we're not sure the blood loss has stopped. We believe it's coming from somewhere in his intestinal tract. He's already had four units of blood and one of platelets. A great deal will depend on how he does tonight."

"Was it coming from... uh...." Dean's ashamed to ask. And ashamed of being ashamed. "Um, what end?" he finally says.

"Looks like it was happening at both ends," Dr. Flaherty replies calmly. "Rectal hemorrhaging, and also esophageal. We're not sure of the source yet — it might not be either the rectum or the esophagus, but somewhere deeper in, the intestines or the stomach. This happens occasionally, with chemotherapy patients. Their red blood cell count gets very low, and their platelets too." Dr. Flaherty's watching Dean carefully as he speaks, as if trying to assess if Dean is taking any of this in. Dean gives him as alert a nod as he can manage, and Dr. Flaherty, apparently encouraged, goes on with, "You probably already know that chemotherapy damages the intestinal lining, and bleeding can spontaneously occur. But unfortunately, chemotherapy also causes platelet counts to get quite low. Platelets are the little particles in the blood that help form blood clots to stop bleeding."

(He pauses here; Dean nods again, impatiently now, thinking, I've been taking care of a chemo patient, I know what goddam platelets are.) "So once bleeding starts, in a chemotherapy patient, it's difficult to stop it because there are so few platelets. And, additionally, since red blood cell counts are also low,
that means that any loss of blood can get quite critical very fast. It's an unfortunate triple whammy."

"You're saying it's really easy for chemo patients to bleed out," summarizes Dean dully.

"Exactly," says Dr. Flaherty, relaxing slightly, as if he's relieved to discover that Dean's capable of understanding anything at all.

"But he was done with chemo," says Dean. "He's all done. He's supposed to be fine now."

Dr. Flaherty gives him a sympathetic look. "Unfortunately the effects of chemotherapy can linger for quite a while after the last treatment. And it looks like he only just had his last treatment this very week, correct?" He fires up the iPad, flips through some electronic files and pauses on an electronic medical chart labeled WINCHESTER, CASTIEL. "I treated your friend this last summer," he adds. "Or... ah... didn't he say then that you were brothers?"

"Partners," says Dean evenly.

Dr. Flaherty's professional expression doesn't even falter. "I see. Well, I do remember him, and you as well. People have to be rescued from the Canyon almost every single day, you know, but I've never before had a cancer diagnosis emerge during the diagnostics. I'm very glad to see he's had a full course of chemo since, I'm the physician who referred him to Denver — you probably know that already? — and, anyway, I got his full chart from Dr. Klein's office just now, and it looks like his platelet counts actually still looked okay at the last check." He's flicking through Cas's chart, and he turns the iPad toward Dean to show him some completely incomprehensible numbers. "See? Not excellent, but acceptable. But sometimes patients can crash suddenly, right at the end of a cycle. Especially if they have some unanticipated physical strain...? Or anything that raises blood pressure?" His voice ends in a quiet question as he lowers the iPad.

Dean blinks slowly at him.

Blood pressure.

Sex raises blood pressure. Exercise raises blood pressure.

There was last night. Several times, in fact.

And there was Bright Angel Trail.

Dean finds his head has started drooping down. He's staring at his knees.

"Do you happen to know of any exertion that might potentially have triggered this?" says Dr. Flaherty. "It might well have been spontaneous — it often is. I'm just trying to get the complete picture of his last couple days."

"We walked a little bit down Bright Angel Trail," Dean mutters to the doctor. (He's too ashamed, at first, to mention the sex.) "I should've known... I should've known. I should've never taken him down there... he was already coughing... But he really wanted to go down. We only went five minutes down, just a couple hundred yards, but he got so tired coming back up. That's when he passed out."

"It might have been that," says Dr. Flaherty. "But it also might not have. Especially if he was coughing already. Even just the coughing alone could have triggered it. Coughing can sometimes—"

"We had sex last night," Dean confesses, and he knows he shouldn't be ashamed, but his voice is actually shaking as he says it. His hands are shaking too; he presses his palms together and squeezes
them between his knees just to try to keep them still. "I tried to be really... really gentle, y'know? Just a, um, just a, um, just a finger—" Dean has to blurt it out fast. He has to say it, he has to, it's Cas's doctor, it's Cas's doctor, and Cas's doctor needs to know about the last two days and Dean has to tell him. "Just a finger, I swear. I wasn't sure, but it was Christmas Eve, and it seemed okay, and, he, he, he wanted, he wanted...." At this point Dean's voice is shaking so much that he has to stop talking.

"It may not have been that either," says Dr. Flaherty, and when Dean at last risks a desperate glance up at him, he sees nothing but sympathy.

Dr. Flaherty sets his iPad down, and Dean's intensely grateful when he hands Dean a Kleenex, waits till Dean blows his nose, and then reaches out and gives Dean a professional pat on the knee. "These things are very unpredictable," Dr. Flaherty says. "If he'd gone out running or something like that, I'd be more concerned. But sex and walking are more minor. It may have been neither of those events. And, the thing is, life can't stop entirely. The only way to keep blood pressure down for sure is to chain someone to a bed, and enforced bedrest is actually terrible for health in all sorts of other ways. Life has to go on. Sex on Christmas Eve, a little five-minute walk in a beautiful national park on Christmas Day... These things are normal. They're good. They're part of life. And it may have been an entirely spontaneous bleed. You mustn't blame yourself." He picks up his iPad again, nodding toward Cas's file. "If I'd seen this file, with all his current numbers, and if you'd asked me yesterday if I'd advise sexual activity — the sort of sex that you've described — or short walks, I would have given you the go-ahead on both."

Dean nods numbly. The doctor's trying to be nice.

But it's very clearly all Dean's fault.

After all these weeks of so carefully taking care of Cas, watching over him, guiding him from the bed to the bathroom, from the bathroom to the bed, after all those drives back and forth to Denver, all those nights in the Chemo Motel, in the end Dean had just messed up. He'd indulged himself last night. And today he'd taken Cas out in the cold. And he'd meant to walk two minutes down Bright Angel Trail, and instead he'd walked five.

He hadn't even frickin' noticed when Cas had passed out! Dean had been watching the damn bird! It's utterly unforgivable, completely eternally unforgiveable, because it's Castiel who's paid the price.

Dr. Flaherty's saying something now about how Cas is fighting hard and how Dean shouldn't give up hope; how in the next hour or so it'll become clearer whether the intestinal bleeding has finally stopped, and "if it stops," and "if we can get enough fluids into him," then Cas will "likely pull through". Dean nods absenty. Only the "if it stops" part really sinks in. If it stops. If they can replace the blood. If. If. If.

Dr. Flaherty hands over the big plastic bag, saying something about returning Cas's clothes, with some kind of apology about blood, and another apology about "the rest" not being salvageable ("we had some difficulty getting an IV line started at first"). Then a new ambulance is arriving, Dr. Flaherty's beeper goes off. There's some other patient who also needs attention (how can there possibly be any other patients right now?) and he has to scurry away with a quick apology and a promise to be back "soon." Dean barely notices, for he's just opened the bag, and there's Cas's new black down vest, and the monkey-hat, and the white scarf that Dean just gave Cas for Christmas. Except the scarf's now mostly red instead of white. He gazes down at the bloody monkey-face on the monkey-hat for a long moment, and, idly, he touches the black vest. It hides the red better, but it's sticky with blood.

The vest. Wait. The down vest.
Dean pulls the the bag wider and digs around in the folds of the bloody vest till he finds the correct pocket, and he carefully pulls out the once-white duck feather. Like the scarf, it's red now.

He could go clean this feather too. He could spend all night carefully washing feathers.

Or he could do something else. Something useful.

Dean sits and thinks for a long moment. Then he puts the mostly-red alula-feather back in the vest's pocket, zips the pocket closed and folds the bag back up. There'll be time to clean it later.

His phone vibrates. It's a text from Sam.

_Bad cell coverage here, says Sam. Still can't call but I hope texts are going through. Any news? Pulled over to text this. Reply quick if you get it. Be there 20min._

Twenty minutes. Sam's twenty minutes away. And Dean realizes, with a dawning sense of possibility, that twenty minutes is absolutely perfect timing.

Dean texts back: _He's had 4 units blood + 1 platelets. Still critical. Doc says gut bleed somewhere, not sure if it's stopped. They won't let me see him._

Three dots appear; Sam's texting something back. But Dean, in a rush, writes another text before Sam finishes his. Dean's new text reads: _Meet me in the side alley out by the ER. Outside. There's a circle statue thing there. Check by the statue first, right away. Round looking statue like a circle. Bring the docs & tell them to bring crash cart. Vial will be in my pocket._

Dean presses Send. Then Dean turns off his phone.

Dean feels a little bad about this, because of course poor Sam's still out of cell range and he won't be able to call 911 for at least ten more minutes. But it's hardly the first time Dean's done this kind of thing, after all. It almost feels routine: another day, another hospital, another hospital pharmacy cabinet to break into, another deliberate overdose. He's done it for Sam, and of course he'll do it for Cas.

It's ridiculously easy to break into the pharmacy (hospital security is really not at its best on Christmas Day) and only a few short minutes later Dean's loading up a syringe from a little glass vial as he stands in the little alley outside the ER, right by the weird little statue that he'd noticed from the roof. The sun's starting to set (somehow the entire day has slipped by) and it's getting truly frigid outside, practically arctic conditions, but then it occurs to Dean that this will probably give him more time. Dying people last a little longer when they're cold, right? Which means, a little bit of hypothermia will be just perfect; it'll add to Dean's "definitely dying" status, while also prolonging chances that he can still be resuscitated.

Though, Dean's now starting to feel a little worse about panicking Sam. And even as he's wrapping an elastic band (also "borrowed" from the pharmacy) around his upper arm, even as he's stabbing the needle into his vein, he knows there's a slight, faint, _totally unlikely_ possibility that this is not going to work at all and that Sam might be left alone after all this. But probably Sarah would take care of him, in that case, right? Sam'll be all right. Sam can go off with Sarah or something, and he'll be all right.

_Dimly Dean knows he's not really thinking this through very well, but the drugs have already hit hi_
blood — he can feel it already — and the faint threads of logic he's trying to chase down, the *Wait, this is a really bad idea* voice that's trying to make itself heard in the back of his mind, all go flitting away. He manages to remove the syringe; he feels a little surge of pride when he even caps the needle neatly, and remembers to put the vial and the syringe in his pocket (so that the doctors, later, will know what he took), and he even lies down in the snow by the statue in a nice safe recovery position, the bag with Cas's black vest and monkey hat clutched in his arms, feeling like he's being extremely organized about everything. But as he's lying there, shivering, waiting to pass out (it's taking a while; he gave himself kind of a borderline dose; should he inject a little more?), a little light comes on at the base of the statue. It's just some sort of art spotlight, probably timed to come on automatically at sunset just to light up the little statue, but Dean jumps when it comes on. And now that the statue's all lit up, something about its circular shape grabs his attention, and he woozily hauls himself up to his knees and peers at the statue's sign.

It's a *halo*. It's a statue of a goddamn angel halo. It's even named "Halo," right there on the sign. Dean can only laugh.

He's still laughing, giddily, drunkenly, when the world goes black.

Then Dean's standing, bemused, by his own unconscious body. He looks down at himself, a little unsettled by the ugly twitches his body is now doing as the overdose really settles in. Feet and arms are both twitching, in almost a seizure. The body's drooling, too. He's left his body in a bit of a mess, actually; it's sprawled in the snow in such an ungraceful way; he'd passed out faster than anticipated and hadn't really had a chance to lie back down after looking at the statue. The plastic bag has tumbled a couple feet away and is half-covered in snow, and Dean worries about whether Sam will find it. Because of course, in addition to the black vest and the monkey hat, the white (or rather, red) feather is still in that bag.

And now that Dean looks at himself a little more closely, he realizes that his face (the face of his physical body, that is) is turned down a little too far, his mouth almost buried in the snow. This doesn't seem good. *I wonder if I can breathe*, thinks Dean.

But the thought causes only a faint pang of regret. There's nothing he can do about it now anyway; in his current half-dead, ghostly, spiritual form, he can't physically brush the snow away anyway, or reposition his own body. So he stands and starts walking toward the hospital. In theory he could just float over there; a really seasoned ghost could even just apparate directly to Cas's room. But Dean doesn't know where Cas's room actually is, and also Dean's really still pretty unfamiliar at the whole being-dead thing, and it's easier to just imagine that he still has a real body, with real feet that walk. So he walks.

There's no point worrying. *Sam'll be here soon*, he thinks. Though... there's no Impala in sight on the nearby streets, not yet, no grumble of the motor approaching, no 911-summoned medical team with a crash cart bursting out of the ER doors. Yet Sam must be racing here. Very soon, surely Sam'll be in cell range and he'll call 911, and he'll also get here in person pretty quick after that, and Sam'll check all the alleys and he'll find Dean's body and he'll get the doctors to resuscitate Dean and it'll all work fine, and Dean'll wake back up and everything'll be fine.

Probably.

Either that or Dean'll die and get tossed into the Empty.

And if Cas dies tonight, Cas dies for good too. Maybe they'll be tossed into the Empty together?

Still though, even they both are destined for the Empty, Dean has to be reaped first. And Cas has to be reaped too. Everything gets reaped in the end. Even God. Chapter 10 said so.
That damn book better be right about this, thinks Dean, as he walks straight through the closed doors of the ER and begins walking down the long ER hallway, searching for Cas's reaper.

A/N - Next chapter will go up tomorrow night (Monday).

Please leave a comment if you have a moment! Thank you for reading.

(PS - I was a little startled to discover that the Flagstaff hospital does in fact have a "Halo" statue just as described. I was just looking up the actual hospital for some ideas about layout, and lo and behold, the one and only obvious landmark, in all directions all around that hospital, is a statue of an angel halo. What with that and Bright Angel Trail, I feel like something else is writing this fic for me...)
Time moves a little differently in the Veil. Ten “real” minutes, back out there in the land of the living, can feel like an hour here. Which is a damn good thing, because it’s taking an alarmingly long time to find Cas.

Dean's trying to sort of speed-walk through all the rooms of the ER and then through the next-door ICU, but there's still that strange feeling of not being able to really walk normally. Running just doesn't work at all here (he tries, several times, but ends up almost jogging in place, levitating in slow motion between each footfall). Walking works better — at least Dean makes forward progress — but it's still got an unreal floating feeling to it, like his feet aren't really in contact with the ground. And of course they aren't; his real feet, along with the rest of his real body, are lying outside in the snow. The "body" he's wearing now is really just a projection from his mind. It's got the same surreal feeling as being in a dream.

But the oddest thing is how the entire hospital around him seems so weirdly remote. Dean can see everything perfectly well — the walls look solid, the other people look more or less normal (though moving a little slowly, maybe), and the hospital beds and the lobby chairs all seem to have their usual appearance. But it all looks almost two-dimensional, like he's watching it all on some very distant TV screen, from a very dark room. Sounds are slightly muffled, and there's even a faintly streaming quality to the light, almost as if Dean's seeing individual photons go flying past.

And of course he can't really touch anything. It's all so insubstantial — or rather, Dean's so insubstantial. He's already cruised directly through several solid doors, and even a wall or two as he gets braver about it. Twice, as he walks around looking for Cas, hospital staff push empty rolling gurneys right through him. Finally Dean spots Dr. Flaherty; he's standing in the hallway looking down at his iPad, and Dean edges in front of him, trying to get a look at the iPad too (he's hoping it might show Cas's chart — along with Cas's location). But Dr. Flaherty suddenly starts walking and he plows directly through Dean without the slightest hesitation. It leaves Dean a bit nauseous; there's a weird sensation of his body actually wavering with Dr Flaherty's passage, rippling like a flimsy curtain in the wind. Dean already knows that this "body" he's in right now is really nothing more than a wisp of memory, bound together only by an effort of his own will, but it's unsettling to get the reminder.

Dean manages to settle himself, and he hurries after Dr. Flaherty, still hoping he might be headed to Cas. But Dr. Flaherty just veers over to the staff station for a long discussion with an exhausted-looking medical student.

Dean hovers near them. Precious minutes are ticking by, and Dean's starting to get a little desperate when finally Dr. Flaherty says, "And today's Canyon medevac's an interesting one - intestinal bleedout, but secondary to chemotherapy. Meaning, he's a cancer patient."

"It's actually his second medevac flight out of the Canyon this year, can you believe it?" Dr. Flaherty goes on. "Awful for his family, of course, Christmas Day and all; I just spoke to the partner and he's a complete wreck. We actually get a Canyon rescue almost every day here, you know, and this one's really a good case study in never overlooking the possibility of some prior condition. Patient's nowhere near stable yet, borderline CTD I'm afraid—" (Dean winces; he's heard that one before. Standard ER black humor, it stands for Circling The Drain.) "— so I'm gonna have you sit with him
and keep an eye on his vitals. There's times that eyes-on-the-patient really makes the difference, especially with these borderline shocky cases, and the nurses can't spend every single second with them, so, he'll be Exhibit A for you. I'll walk you through his chart first, just quick —"

And now Dr. Flaherty's flipping through the iPad, just as Dean had hoped, though the med student is crowding too close for Dean to get a clear look. Increasingly impatient, Dean finally sticks his head right through the med student's back, his eyes emerging from near the student's throat, just to try to see the iPad. But it's a mess of confusing medical results, full of terms and abbreviations that make no sense to Dean. But then, like a miracle, he hears Dr. Flaherty say: "Oh, see, he's just gotten back from an MRI — that was to assess whether he's got a large amount of blood piling up anywhere internally — and see how this code popped up over here in this box when he got back to the ICU just now. So, we're testing this new system where we track our patients' current locations by—"

Dean doesn't hear the rest; he's already cruising right through Dr. Flaherty again and speedwalking back to the ICU. Cas had been taken for scans! Of course! And he's back at the ICU! Dean moves as fast as he can.

He knows that time is getting very short. Dean's physical body is probably cooling fast out there in the snow, his heart maybe fully stopped by now... and there's still been no sign of Sam. And more worrying, there's no sign of action here in the ER; nobody seems to have gotten any urgent calls to run out and check the back alley for unexpected overdose cases.

It's beginning to sink home how stupid this was.

Not to mention how cruel it is to do this to Sam....

And, Dean thinks as he hurry's along, even if he does find Cas's reaper, realistically what can he even do? Dean's keenly aware that he doesn't even have that much of a plan. He'd had a vague thought of seeing if he could bring an angel-blade into the Veil, to threaten the reaper with. But even if that were possible, he hadn't had one nearby anyway — all the angel-blades are in the Impala, with Sam. Cas hadn't had any tucked in his new jacket or vest.

What Dean's really hoping is just that he might be able to bargain with the reaper. Cut a deal; maybe offer his services somehow, maybe try to spin it like Dean is going to be an awesome new ally worth working with. Maybe try to impress, or frighten, the reaper with an exaggerated story about how Dean had even killed their boss, Death himself.

Or just plain try to trade himself for Cas. As he'd tried once to save Sam, with Billie.

Dean's aware that Sam and Cas are definitely both going to hate that plan. But it's much more important to save Cas than to save Dean, because Cas doesn't have a soul. Dean, at least, has a soul; he's got some hope of some kind of afterlife, whether it's in the "Empty" or what.

Cas, though, is probably just going to evaporate entirely.

And that's Dean's other main reason for coming to the Veil: he's hoping that if nothing else, he might be able to simply get the reaper to tell him what happens to angels when they die. Where they go. They've got to go somewhere, and if Dean could just find out where that is... then maybe he can go there himself. And bring Cas back.
Dean finally hurries through one last solid wall and finds himself back in the ICU. He remembers the layout here from back in the summer: there's the big open area where the hallways converge, there's the staff station in the middle, there's all the nurses, residents and orderlies hurrying this way and that, and there are the curtained-off ICU patient bays....

And there's Cas.

The curtains of his bay are still open because he's just been brought back here, and he's in the middle of being shifted over from a rolling gurney to an ICU bed. Lots of residents and nurses are clustered around him. They hoist him over to the bed, and start attaching all kinds of monitors and tubes, shining lights into his eyes, and checking his blood pressure.

He looks just awful. He's positioned on his side (does that mean he's still been choking up blood?), facing Dean; and he's been stripped nude, with only a little bit of bloody sheet haphazardly flung over his hips. He's thin as a rail, covered in bruises, and absolutely smeared with blood. It looks like there hasn't been any attempt to clean him up yet, or even time to cover him properly. There's just the bloody sheet thrown hastily over his hips, and some kind of big bloody pad wedged between his thighs to catch whatever blood is coming from there, and another, similar, pad stuck under his head. His skin looks white as ice; his lips are nearly blue, his eyes closed.

He looks unbearably pathetic, and so terribly exposed and helpless as he lies there, naked except for the tiny stretch of bloody sheet. Dean's horrified, and he can't help rushing over to Cas's side and calling his name, and trying to grasp his hand, but of course Dean's hand just sinks right through Cas's. Medical staff start to walk right through Dean — one's slipping little oxygen tubes under Cas's nose, another's slapping ECG leads to Cas's chest, one's swapping out the bloody sheet for a fresh one. A fourth one, a nurse, is carrying a fresh new IV bag of dark-red blood and she, too, cruises right through Dean as she starts hooking up the bag to Cas's IV line.

Dean can't help at all. He can't even touch Cas. Slowly he steps back, feeling utterly helpless. At last, in a (unnecessary) instinct to get out of the way and let the medical staff work, he walks around Cas's feet to move to the farthest corner of the ICU bay. This brings Cas's back into view for the first time, and that's when Dean finally spots the two glossy black wings that are attached to Cas's shoulders.

Both wings are totally limp. The lower one seems to somehow be drooping down through the bed; Dean can see the wing-tip dangling near the floor. The upper wing's flopped out behind Cas's back, hanging partly open under its own weight.

And despite Cas's desperate condition, Dean can't help noticing that his wings are truly beautiful. The long flight feathers may indeed be gone (this loss seems to have reduced the wings to a rather slender, pointy shape) but they still look like wings nonetheless, and they still have a fine lining of other, smaller feathers — delicate shining little black feathers with scalloped gold edging. The little arcs of gold glitter here and there, and the black seems to be slightly iridescent, throwing back dark reflective flashes of green and blue and even purple. The wings seem untouched by all the blood; they must really still be in the etheric plane, of course, not the material plane at all (somehow Dean must be seeing both planes at once, from here in the Veil) so right now the wings seem to be the only part of Cas's body that's still clean.

Dean gazes at them sadly. It's bittersweet to only finally get a look at Cas's wings now, now when he's dying. His wings are so beautiful! Little Emily had been right.

And then Dean remembers why Emily had been able to see Cas's wings in the first place.
And why Dean is able to see them now.

Time's running out. Where's that damn reaper? Dean thinks, turning around, looking at every single person he can see. Cas's reaper has got to be here somewhere. He steps through the ICU curtains and looks around, scanning the entire huge ICU hallway.

And there she is.

Dean recognizes her at once. Partly because she's wearing a totally weird outfit. But mostly because she alone, of all the bustling people here, is standing absolutely still, and she's looking right at Dean.

Dean had kind of been expecting Billie, or maybe some other reaper he's run into before, but this reaper's a new one. She's wearing the guise of a handsome olive-skinned woman, her face framed by a mantle of long, very straight, shining black hair that's parted neatly in the middle, hanging down from both sides of her face like glossy twin curtains. She's got the regal cheekbones and high nose of one of those Native American tribes, the same kind of facial structure that Dean's been seeing around town, and she's dressed in what looks like some kind of ceremonial garb — a buckskin dress decorated with dramatic zig-zag black and white patterns, and a gigantic necklace made of big round pendants that are each dotted with hundreds of turquoise beads. She's cradling a little round clay jug in one arm; it's painted with faded ochre stripes, with a little bluish-green rag stopper jammed in its narrow mouth, and it looks very, very old.

The whole get-up has an air of authenticity. This is no tourist-show outfit, no Halloween costume, but something genuine, and ancient, and eerie.

"Navajo vessel, huh?" Dean says, flashing her what he hopes looks like a friendly grin. (Navajo seems a reasonable guess, given that there's apparently that Navajo reservation just over the hill, and he's hoping to start off on the right foot.)

She doesn't smile; she just glances coolly down at her outfit. "This is not a material body," she says, "so strictly speaking it's not a vessel at all." She looks back up at Dean, gesturing at his own ghostly body. "Just as you no longer have your own physical body, but yet have assumed that form anyway, drawn from your memory because it feels familiar to you. In just the same way I like to assume certain familiar forms when I'm looking for my next... subject." She raises her free hand (the one that's not holding the little clay jug) to touch her turquoise-pendant necklace. "And I often take on a Navajo appearance, yes," she says. "We reapers always try to fit in with the local population. It makes souls more willing to speak with us at the moment of reaping. And the Navajo, it turns out, are particularly superstitious about death, so I do try to set them at ease. I also can appear as a Hopi —" Her outfit flickers, shifting to a white top, a dark skirt, and an astonishingly elaborate sunburst-shaped headpiece. "Or Havasupai—" Now she's suddenly a six-foot-tall burly muscled man wearing a bizarre, and rather frightening, mask that bears the huge coiled horns of a bighorn ram. Or is it just a mask? A chill runs down Dean's spine as he realizes that the horns seem actually attached to her—or his?—head.

She flickers back to her Navajo-maiden appearance. "I can appear as a member of any of a hundred other tribes, too. But I usually use this Navajo form. Though, these days, there's not as many Navajo anymore..." She glances around at all the non-Navajos bustling about nearby: Hispanics, Caucasians, Indians, Chinese — the hospital staff alone must have at least a dozen different nationalities. Her eyes drift, too, over to poor Castiel's desperately weakened vessel; and then she gives a slight start;
she's just seen his wings. She gazes at his sadly limp wings for a long moment, a little frown on her face.

And Dean, hoping to distract her from focusing on Castiel, asks, "So what's your name?"

She slowly tears her eyes away from Cas's wings and looks back at Dean. "The Navajo call me Chindi," she says. "They've partly misunderstood what I am, but they've got part of it right, and at least they treat me with respect. Which is more than I can say for some." She raises an eyebrow at Dean, then; and he wonders if she knows who he is. Probably; reapers always seem to know somehow.

Chindi starts surveying all the other people in the ICU again, as if she's just interested, purely academically, in how many Navajos might still be around. She even walks around a little bit, glancing in all the ICU bays, cradling the little clay jug snugly in one arm. Dean's hoping she's forgetting about Cas — she doesn't really seem particularly focused on him, oddly. But to Dean's alarm, Chindi soon drifts back over to Castiel's side, peering at his wings again. He's still got a clutch of hospital staff working around him (they're already changing out the bloody pad between his legs again — and the tired-looking medical student is there now too, dutifully checking Cas's blood pressure. Which apparently is still far too low and far too erratic, for he's soon making phone calls about it, and consulting with some of the nurses.) None of them pay any attention to Chindi, of course, nor to Dean.

There's something solemn and focused in Chindi's expression now, and she murmurs, gazing at Cas. "I really get all sorts in this area. The Canyon attracts so many types of people. And, of course, people just keep falling into it. I reap people here almost every day...."

She takes another step closer to Cas, peering at his wings again.

"You can't take him," Dean blurts out. "He's not ready. It's not his time."

Chindi turns to Dean with a frown. Her dark eyes are liquid and shining, and for a moment she seems almost sympathetic. *Almost* sympathetic, but with that disconcerting air of dispassionate professionalism, too. Tessa had always been the same way: Not unkind, but not exactly *kind*, either. (Billie had always verged more on the downright-unkind side).

"That's not for you to decide," Chindi says. "When it is time to die, then it is time, and nobody can halt that moment. Not even the passing of our lord Death could halt that. Our lord no longer personally oversees individual events as he once did, but the dying still die nonetheless, when their time has come. The only choice remaining to them then is whether to linger here in the Veil, or to move on. And this one..." She pauses, stepping even closer to Castiel, and she passes a hand over his heart and his head. "How odd," she murmurs, glancing at his wings again. "I was informed there was an angel here," Chindi says, leaning even closer to Cas and looking at his face. She straightens and passes a hand over Cas's heart again. "But this is no angel," she states.

"He *is* an angel," objects Dean. "He's an angel, and you can't have him."

Chindi arches a slender dark eyebrow at Dean. "He's an angel, and you can't have him."

"You reap angels, then?"

"I do," she replies. "It's rare, but I do. From time to time."
Dean takes a breath. *Here comes the sixty-four thousand dollar question,* he thinks. *Sixty-four billion dollar question, more like.* "And what do you do with them once you've reaped them?"

She stares at him.

A still silence grows.

"Where do they go?" insists Dean. "What happens to their essences?"

She sighs and turns away, gazing around the rest of the ICU again. "We reapers are angels ourselves, of a sort, you know," she says over her shoulder.

Dean's getting impatient. "And what does that mean? That you kill all your kin and won't even tell them what happens next?"

Chindi gives a short, harsh laugh. "It means we don't actually know. No angel knows what happens next. Not even we reapers."

"You don't know? How can you not know?" Dean's having a little trouble believing this. The reapers must know. "Don't you look? Don't you watch what happens?"

"Of course we look," she snaps, turning back to him with a glare. Apparently this is a bit of a sore point. "Don't you think we want to know? This will happen to each of us too, in the end! Reapers die too, you know. But all we see is that their essences scatter to pieces at the moment of reaping. The pieces seem to all fly away from the planet, out to space. We've tried to follow them, but nobody's managed to track them to their destination... if there is a destination. All we know is that after that we never see the angel again."

Dean blinks at her. Space? The pieces fly off Earth into space? What the hell does that mean?

"Well, anyway," says Dean, trying to refocus, "Okay, never mind about where angels go after they get die, because, I'm not letting you reap him anyway. He's alive. I mean, he's got to stay alive."

"Again I will state," Chindi says calmly, "since you didn't seem to hear me the first time, Dean Winchester, that is not for you to decide."

And there it is. She does know Dean's name. And does she have some kind of grudge against him, like Billie always seemed to have?

"Heard of me, then?" says Dean, trying to assess whether to act charming or threatening. (Trying, really, to assess whether he can bluff.)

"I do. We get... alerts, from time to time. We're kept informed."

"You saying Heaven put out an APB on me? What, like on your angel police scanner or something?"

She rolls her eyes. "We are informed when there's someone we should be looking for. You, sometimes your brother. Your mother, most recently —" Dean's a little startled to hear that one, and Chindi gives him a faint smile. "Oh, yes, your mother too. She'd been planning that little escape-from-Heaven for quite some time. Quite a clever one she is; picked a moment when everybody was completely distracted by the Sun going out. But she was found and returned, soon enough."

Dean's scowling now, realizing that this is probably why Mom had only had a few brief moments on Earth, just a few moments to talk to Dean: The damn reapers had taken her back.
"Couldn't you have given her just like five minutes more?" Dean says.

"The natural order forbids it," she says. She's scowling too, now.

"It wouldn't have hurt anyone—"

"That is not for you to decide," says Chindi flatly. "We have a job, and we do our job. Once the time comes for this... man..." (she's looking at Cas again, peering at his face, and she hesitates on the word 'man', with another quick glance at his wings) "... to die, then it is time for him to die. You have no say in the matter."

"But it's not his time," Dean blurts out. He's starting to feel a little desperate. He's struck out on finding out where angels go after they die; and he's certainly not making any progress at convincing her to leave Cas alone.

It's time to bargain.

"Look, how about we make a deal," Dean says, trying to give her an encouraging smile. (Might be too late to put on the charming act, but it's worth a try.) He gestures at Cas. "Me for him. He's not... he can't die, you see, because he doesn't have a soul, he's just gonna go poof and he doesn't deserve that. He doesn't deserve to go poof and have all his essence bits fly out to space and never be seen again! It's just not right, he deserves a life, even if he doesn't have a soul, so, if we could just cut a deal here—"

Chindi interrupts Dean with, ""What are you talking about?" She's not scowling anymore; she actually looks, and sounds, a little confused.

"I'm talking about, it's just not right that he shouldn't get to go to Heaven when he's worked so damn hard, just because he doesn't have a soul—"

"Why do you keep saying he doesn't have a soul?" says Chindi, and Dean falls silent.

Chindi points at Cas. "Are you talking about this man here? Because he's got a soul. Just like all the other humans here."

Dean just blinks at her for a long moment.

"W-what?" he stammers. "He's got — what?"

"A soul," she says. "I can feel it. It's right there. Inside him."

Dean stares at her in disbelief, and she says, sounding a little affronted, "This is what I do, Dean. I can feel everybody's souls. Everybody in this whole building!" She puts out both arms toward poor comatose Cas, closes her eyes, and spreads her fingers out as if she's warming herself at a fire. "Souls are... hot, to me. They're... extremely obvious, just put it that way." Opening her eyes, Chindi points at Cas again. "And he's definitely got a soul. He's fairly blazing with it." She lowers her hands and glances back at Dean, and at last she seems to notice the baffled expression on Dean's face. She gives him an odd look, like she's really not getting why he's so confused, and she says, "Very well. I'll show you."

Chindi turns back to Cas, and this time she sets a hand right on his torso, just below the ribcage. Then she bends over slightly — Cas is still lying on his side, and she seems to be crouching slightly to get her hand at a certain angle.

And then she slides her hand right into Cas's chest.
This time it's not just one of those ghostly Veil moves, not like just phasing through a door. She seems to be truly digging into him somehow, pushing almost... and there's a glow in there. Thin shafts of bright silver light dart out around her hand.

Dean's seen that before. Back when Cas had stuck his hand right into that poor kid, that one time years ago, to inspect the kid's...

To inspect the kid's soul.

Back then, that poor little kid had howled in pain. Castiel, deep in a coma, doesn't flinch at all. Though his upper wing quivers.

"Perfectly good soul, see?" says Chindi, her hand still deep inside Cas's chest.

Dean can only stare. Castiel... has... a... soul?

"Nice one, too," Chindi says, focusing on what she's feeling. "Nice feel to it. Strong. Lot of love... Though... that's odd... Hmm..." She feels around a little more. Cas's upper wing, the one that's splayed open just behind his back, starts to shiver more, and soon it's doing bursts of helpless little flutters, though the rest of Cas's body is still as a stone.

And then Cas's feet twitch slightly too. The med student, who's been sitting on a chair in a corner nearly in a doze, jerks to his feet. He walks closer and peers at Cas's heart rate monitor.

"Don't hurt him," says Dean urgently. "Are you hurting him? Don't hurt him, please—"

"That's odd..." Chindi repeats. Half her forearm is now buried in Cas's chest. She's paying Dean no mind whatsoever. "Oh... that's very odd... This soul, it's... is this an infant soul? It feels only a few months old. But, no, wait, I'm wrong, it's also very old. This is so peculiar... it almost feels like... good heavens, was this seeded directly by God? It's got that feel to it — Oh, oh, it's not quite anchored to the body, how peculiar! Is that... wait, is this an angel?"

"Well, he does have the wings, in case you hadn't noticed," says Dean.

Chindi finally glances over at Dean, with quite a patronizing look. "Wings can be put on any being," she says tartly. "There's all sorts of winged hybrids out there — nephilim, sphinxes, harpies, dozens of them. That doesn't make a creature an angel. All that matters to me is whether there's a soul or an..." Her eyes go a little unfocused again as she concentrates on Cas. "... or an essence...." she adds, and she's still feeling around in Cas's chest, her arm so deep in him now that it seems she must be reaching right through his ribcage all the way up to his throat.

Both Cas's wings are giving urgent bursts of flutters now. The med student's leaning out into the hall and calling for someone, and a nurse comes running over. Again Dean begs, "Please don't hurt him —" He takes a step closer, wanting to yank Chindi's arm right out of Cas. But then he remembers that this sort of procedure can be dangerous, and Dean's afraid it might damage Cas somehow if Chindi's yanked away too abruptly.

Chindi says slowly... "Is that... an... angel essence in there too?" She pauses, and to Dean's great relief she finally pulls her hand completely out of Castiel's chest. She backs up a step, staring down at Cas's ashen face.

"What in Heaven's name?" she says slowly. "Is this an angel after all? Not a nephilim... but I definitely felt an essence and a soul, and that's not poss—" She stops in mid-word, looking at Cas's wings again, and her eyes widen.
"Oh," she murmurs to herself. "They're damaged... that's why I didn't recognize them as angel wings... But, could it be? I haven't seen one in... I haven't seen one in so long...."

"Haven't seen one what?" says Dean, more and more baffled.

Chindi ignores him. She reaches out and touches Cas's upper wing — right on its two little alulas, Dean realizes, the bigger alula that Dean's feather is from, and also the smaller one. Holding both little alulas firmly in one hand, Chindi says, in a ringing tone of command, "Wake up. Come out. Let me see you."

There's a flash of light and a howl of wind, and something absolutely gigantic and blazing leaps from Castiel's chest. It seems a fountain of silver light at first, and it's absolutely blinding. Bright Angel, thinks Dean; he can't help crouching, and even instinctively tries to shield his head, suddenly convinced that the scaldingly bright light is going to totally burn away Dean's insubstantial Veil body. But it doesn't hurt Dean at all, and instead the fountain of silver light starts whirling around near the ceiling. It cools, and expands, and expands farther, until it's absolutely huge, nearly filling the whole vast hallway by the ICU staff station with a vast glittering cloud of silver fog. It coalesces rapidly. It darkens.

It starts to take on a form.

Cas, Dean thinks, heart in his throat. He's still not sure he believes Chindi about the whole "soul" business, but he's sure that this is Cas, Cas himself, somehow called out of his comatose vessel by the reaper.

Dean's expecting Cas to take on the dearly familiar shape of his Jimmy vessel. Though maybe with more of his old look — a healthier Jimmy vessel, possibly, with that dark tousled hair back in place. Maybe even wearing his old outfit, Greater Trenchcoat and backwards blue tie and all.

But it's something else entirely.

What's forming is massive — and terrifying. It's taking form right out of nothing, coalescing into a huge creature, a dinosaur-sized beast of some kind, a great dark four-footed feathered thing with a gigantic toothy head, a long neck with a great mane of fluffy blue-black plumes, and a huge hunched torso (the ICU's a big place, but it's having to crouch on all fours just to fit itself into the hallway). There's a long tail that's stretching almost out of view behind it, and gigantic feathered black wings are forming too, tremendous banners that arc out like shining dark sails on either side.

This isn't Cas at all. This is a dragon.

It's a feathered dragon.

And it looks rather dangerous. Its huge toothy snout is armed with an impressive array of glittering fangs; it's got enormous sapphire-blue eyes the size of dinner plates, with vertical black pupils like a cat's. And there's a set of vicious long silver claws, curved like scimitars, on each of its huge feathered front feet.

It sees Dean, who's still half-crouching, gaping at the thing, wondering whether to try to run. It sees Dean, and it sees Chindi.
It massive blue eyes dart from Dean to Chindi, and from Chindi back to Dean. The black vertical pupils expand in a flash, the blue eyes shifting almost instantaneously to a terrifying jet black, like a lion that's just spotted its prey. Plumed ears flatten back along its neck, a thunderous growl shatters the air, and the dragon lashes out one gigantic front foot so fast it's just a blur. It snatches Dean up bodily in a set of four immense silver claws. Dean gasps, struggling, but it's no use, the dragon's powerful toes are wrapped firmly around him, and it whisks him back to its own chest. It crouches there on all fours, wings now tucking in tightly on either side of Dean, as it clutches Dean close under its chin.

And then the dragon *bellows* at Chindi. Its great jaw opens wide, shining fangs gleaming, its eyes now narrowed to slits, and it lets out such an tremendous endless basso roar that Dean's sure he's going to be shaken to pieces by the very sound. It's a bellow of sheer rage and defiance, jaws wide, massive teeth bared; the dragon's whole body is shuddering with it. The very *air* is shaking. The hot wind of the dragon's breath blasts through the room, bringing with it a distinct scent of smoke, and Dean's suddenly sure that the thing can probably breathe out pure fire if it really wants to. It's still roaring; Chindi's hair is blowing back from her face like she's facing a hurricane. But she stands stoic, unmoved, her hair flying, still holding her little clay jug, facing the immense dragon unfazed. And while Dean gasps and shoves futilely at the black feathered toes (they don't budge even an inch), a slow smile is spreading over Chindi's face.

Faced with Chindi's calm smile, the dragon's deafening roar begins to peter down into a series of gruff little huffs. The dragon finishes it all off with an uncertain snort, sounding rather as if it's not quite sure what to do next. It wraps its other front foot around Dean then, surrounding him with a virtual cage of silver claws, and draws him even closer, till Dean's half-buried in a sea of the glossy blue-black feather-plumes at the base of the beast's neck.

Chindi steps forward. She's still smiling. She looks like she's finally figured something out; the look of puzzlement is gone, and there's a glow of understanding on her face now as she says, sure and confident, "Thunderbird."

"Thunderbird," she repeats. "You're a thunderbird. That's what you are. I couldn't figure it out at first."

Dean squirms around in the thing's vast claws, peering up at it. "Thunderbird?" Dean echoes blankly, looking up at the huge creature. The dragon's staring at Chindi; when Dean speaks it gives him a quick, startled glance, and its talons squeeze a little bit (not uncomfortably, just snugly). But then it stares back at Chindi. It's looking a little confused.

And then Dean notices its wings.

The dragon's wings seem very familiar.

They're fully feathered wings, with enormous long flight feathers that each look at least fifteen feet long. And the wings are absolutely massive — the dragon's keeping both wings tucked in pretty tightly (almost as if it's trying to wrap the wings around Dean) but if it were to spread them out fully its wingspan would be some fifty feet at least. But the colors seem awfully familiar... there's little gold crescents on the tips of the short feathers... and the dark feathers seem iridescent, reflecting glossy shining blues, and greens, and even purples, wherever they catch the light.
Dean looks over at Cas, who's still lying unmoving on his hospital bed. And he looks at Cas's wings. They're very much smaller (scaled to match the vessel...)... they're skinny, and slender, missing the flight feathers, but... Same black.

Same iridescence. Same golden crescents.

Dean glances down at his own body.

Souls in the Veil take on the form that the soul best remembers.

And then Dean remembers something from *The Physiology of Angels*:

*It is the author's opinion that the angel's true form is best captured by the old legends of griffins: a large feathered creature, four-footed and winged, with a long neck and long tail, bearing two taloned feet in the front and two padded paws in the rear.*

That had been back in Chapter 2. The chapter about "The Angel's True Form."

"Cas?" Dean whispers, disbelieving, staring up at the huge dark feathered head above him. The dragon rolls one huge blue eye down toward him, and it lowers its huge black snout, tucking its chin in tightly to nuzzle at Dean. Dean's still trying to look up at the thing, but it's a little hard to really get a good look when there's such a gigantic black snout in the way, huffing at Dean, sniffing him. Checking him all over.

Dean nearly jumps when a rough pink tongue the size of a bathtowel emerges... and scrubs over the back of Dean's neck and half of his head.

"C-Cas?" Dean stutters, almost staggering under the assault of dragon-licking. "Is that you?"

The dragon gives an almost bashful nod, and its talons loosen slightly. It glances back toward its vast winged body and it somehow looks a little worried now, its shoulders hunching and its wings drooping a little, like it's not sure how Dean's going to take this new appearance. But Dean's just gaping up at it. He looks over at Cas (human-Cas, that is) on the bed; he looks back up at the huge creature (which seems unable to stop nuzzling him).

Cas. This is Cas.

This is Cas in his true form.

Then Chindi takes a step closer.

The dragon (Cas...) growls. The talons tighten around Dean once more and it (he...) jerks Dean back a few feet, till Dean's almost buried again in the dragon's, no, in Castiel's, it's Castiel — in Castiel's thick mane of glossy blue-black neck feathers.

"Thunderbird," Chindi repeats. She's staring up at dragon-Cas with something like awe. "I don't believe it. It's been so long since I've met one! I can't even remember the last time that one was reported."

"Ford... Thunderbird?" says Dean weakly, under the vague impression that the reaper's talking about Claire's car for some reason. Chindi laughs.
"The automobile? Good lord, no, does he look like an automobile? It's a term from Native American folklore," she says. The dragon (Cas, Dean repeats to himself, it's Cas) watches Chindi with an air of doubtful confusion, as Chindi says to Dean, "It's the native term for a vast winged creature that used to appear now and then on the western plains, very long ago. What the local people didn't know is that these creatures are actually a very rare form of angel." She pauses and says, slowly, "A thunderbird is an angel that has acquired a soul."

Cas freezes absolutely still when she says this. He stares at her silently, wings now half-spread.

"This gives thunderbirds some unusual abilities," Chindi goes on, "including the ability to materialize more easily in the material plane in their true forms. They're nearly as powerful as archangels. And incredibly rare." She's gazing up at Cas again. "So rare that I didn't even recognize what you were at first. I'd been told there was an angel here, but I was looking for a regular angel. You know, a cherub, maybe a seraph... not a thunderbird!" She glances over at human-Cas briefly. "I did see the wings, but of course they're looking a little... unusual a the moment. I should have seen your double alulas; my apologies. The thing is, as you know, many types of creatures have wings of one sort or another, and I could feel immediately that you have a soul, and so I assumed you were not the angel that I was sent here to seek. Even with the wings, your soul is so prominent that you just... felt human. I never thought I'd see a thunderbird again. Exceptionally rare."

"Wait," says Dean. "Um. How does an angel get a soul?" Cas nods vigorously, adding a burbling sort of growl. It's becoming clear that Cas can't seem to speak English in this dragon-form that he's taken — but he seems able to speak some other sort of language that the reaper understands, for she answers him directly.

Chindi says to Cas, "It happens when a soul is personally seeded into the angel by God." (Cas is again holding very, very still.) She adds, "But even so, the seed can only flower into a real soul — I mean, a soul with power — if the angel then has... well, certain mortal experiences. There hasn't been a true thunderbird seen on the planet for a very long time." Then she frowns at dragon-Cas, who's just staring blankly back at her, toes still wrapped loosely around Dean. All the feathers along his head and shoulders seem to have puffed up, maybe in surprise (he looks a little bit like a huge Halloween cat) and Chindi finally says, "Wait.... you didn't know?"

The dragon shakes its head slowly.

Chindi smiles. "Look around," she says gently. "You're in astral form. This is the Veil. You've left your vessel behind, see?" She points to Cas's fragile human body, still unmoving on the bed. Cas stares at it, his dragon-eyes wide.

Chindi explains to dragon-Castiel, "I called your soul out of your mortal vessel in order to get a look at you, mostly just because I was confused. You have — you are — a soul. And a soul, when called out of the body to the Veil, automatically assumes its most familiar guise. In your case, your soul has taken the shape of an angelic true form. Which means that this — " (she gestures to Cas's dragon form) "— is the form that you've grown up with. Which means you are indeed an angel. And yet you have a soul. You are a thunderbird." She smiles and says, "I must confess, I'm afraid I don't recognize your angelic form, nor your human vessel. I've been living among the Navajo and their ancestors for a very long time; I have little desire to leave my charges, and I've not been to Heaven in a long time. May I ask your name?"

Cas seems struck silent. After a little pause, Dean answers for him: "His name's Castiel."

Chindi gives a start of surprise. "Good lord," she says to dragon-Cas. "You're Castiel? That Castiel?"

Dragon-Cas gives a somewhat bashful nod.
"I've heard of you, of course..." she murmurs. "I've heard many things. Some bad, some good. But — forgive me, but I'd never heard that you were a thunderbird."

Cas gives a liquid burbling growl. (More of that dragon-speech, apparently? Dragon Enochian or something?) It sounds like a somewhat worried question.

Chindi shakes her head firmly. "No, definitely from God. It's got that bright spark at the center. Nothing the least bit dark about it."

Cas considers that, blinking slowly, his vast head tilted a little to one side. Then he embarks on what seems to be a rather complex statement. It goes on and on, a whole commentary of burbling, warbling grumbles.

Chindi waits till he's done and then replies, "Well, God must have decided to seed a soul into you for some reason. Likely signifying that your good deeds have substantially outweighed all the bad deeds that you've just described, I would guess. And it happened quite recently — the seeding of your soul, I mean. I'd estimate, by the feel of it, that it's only about seven or eight months old."

Seven or eight months ago...

That would be just about the time that Castiel and Chuck had last crossed paths.

It had been the only time they'd ever actually met, as far as Dean knows. And Chuck hadn't even spoken to Cas.

Then again, Chuck had been dying at the time (or near-dying)... maybe he'd only had enough energy to do just one thing for Cas....

Or two things, rather.

It doesn't make sense, though. Why would Chuck give Cas cancer... and a soul?

It makes no sense at all. And clearly Cas is just as confused, for he's gazing down at Dean looking just about as baffled as Dean has ever seen a feathered dragon look. Both Cas's wings are half-flared out; his head's still tilted, with one ear pointing forward and one pointing back; and Dean can feel his big feathered toes flexing repeatedly, flexing lightly and loosening, over and over, like he just doesn't know what to think.

"Though," Chindi's saying now to Cas, "it's odd, I was quite uncertain as to your age at first because your soul has flowered quite a bit." She gestures at Cas's vast dragon-shape. "A newborn soul normally couldn't maintain a Veil apparation of quite this size, for example. I'll guess you must have had an... eventful eight months, yes?"

Cas falls totally silent. The toe-flexing stops, and his wings tuck in around Dean. He lowers his snout to Dean's head, and his huge blue eyes slide shut for a moment. There's a puff of hot smoky breath on Dean's neck, like Cas is huffing in Dean's scent.

Chindi laughs a little. "Oh — that reminds me. You can release your friend." Cas's response to this is to wrap both feet even more tightly around Dean, and a deep rumble starts in this throat. This time it doesn't sound like a language, but just a plain simple growl; looking up, Dean realizes that Cas is even baring his teeth.
But Chindi laughs, regarding them both now with her hands on her hips. "Soulmates," she murmurs to herself, shaking her head. "Never fails — always such drama! Truly, you can release your friend. I'm not here to reap him. I came here for you."

Dean's heart drops.

Slowly, Cas nuzzles Dean on the back of the neck.

Slowly he opens both his huge front feet, and lets Dean go.

But Dean steps forward, into Chindi's path. He knows he's got no hope of shielding gigantic dragon-Castiel from an actual reaper.... but he's got to try.

"You can't reap him," Dean says. "I won't let you."

She just rolls her eyes and mutters to herself, "Soulmates. The drama!" She shakes her head, laughing a little, and then says to Dean, "I'm not here to reap him either."

Dean blinks. "But... you just said you came here for him."

"I was sent here to seek him, yes. But not to reap him."

"But, then... why are you here?" Dean asks, totally confused now.

Chindi glances down at her little clay jug. She's been holding it all this time. She looks back up at Dean and says, "I was asked by a professional colleague, by the name of Havasu, to look for a wounded angel here," she replies. "Havasu and I share some territory and I try to maintain friendly relations. Including... well, occasionally he asks for a favor and occasionally I help out. It's a little bit off the books, actually; we reapers normally wouldn't interfere with the living like this, but..." Again she looks down at the little clay jug. She shrugs. "There are not that many diplomatic alliances between the angels and the elementals, and there's been a decision made that any such existing agreements are... useful, shall we say, and worth maintaining. And we do have such an agreement with Havasu. And so my superiors long ago gave me clearance to use some discretion where requests from Havasu are concerned. Anyway, Havasu heard from the ravens earlier today that there was an angel somewhere nearby who needed some assistance."

Dean blinks. "Ravens?" he asks. There'd been several ravens, at the Canyon.

Chindi gives him a wry smile. "Ravens are divine messengers, didn't you know? They move back and forth between the divine and the natural worlds. 'Harbingers of the divine,' they're often called. Anyway, apparently they picked up some sort of prayer about an angel needing assistance, and one of the ravens was convinced the angel in question had been bleeding — something it'd seen, I gather. But then some of the other ravens reported the angel had flown away somehow, despite being wounded—" (The helicopter, Dean thinks.) "— and so then there was a lot of arguing about whether the angel was fine after all, and where it might have ended up." She sighs and adds, shaking her head, "They may be harbingers of the divine, but they certainly do like to argue. They've been talking about it all day. Anyway, later on Havasu picked up a taste-trail of an angel-feather in his watershed, an angel-feather that had been anointed with blood and tears. That's his language, of course, the language of water — because, of course, blood and tears are both water. So he knew that it must be a message from the angel and that it was trying to tell him where it was."

Blood swirling down the drain. A tear falling on a little black feather. Rinsing the feather clean.

Castiel's blinking at Chindi blankly, but when Dean turns and looks up at him, his great blue eyes shift to Dean. Dean sees his eyes narrow as he studies Dean. Dean's hand goes to his shirt-pocket.
The feather's not there, of course — it's in his jacket now, out there in the snow in the real world, and apparently no version of it has followed Dean into the Veil — but Cas sees the motion of Dean's hand, and his huge blue eyes widen.

Chindi concludes, "The feather taste was coming from this town, from the outflow water of this town, so he sent me here to look around. I thought the hospital might be a likely place to start." With a little smile at Cas, she adds, "I had just concluded there was no angel here at all, though, because everybody here has a soul. it didn't even occur to me that I might be looking for a thunderbird."

And then she raises her little clay jug. The ancient round jug, painted with faded ochre stripes, with the twisted bluish-green rag closing off its mouth. "He sent this," say Chindi. "Said it might help. He's asked me to donate it to the angel — assuming I could find it."

"What is it?" asks Dean.

"Water," she says.

"But, like... what does it do?"

"It's water," she says.

Dean can't help asking, "Can it... heal?"

"It's water," repeats Chindi. "It makes things wet."

Dean hesitates, glancing up at Cas, who tilts his great head and looks back down at Dean with one big blue eye. Dean's still fairly new at reading dragon facial expressions, but sees the confused slant of the tufted ears, which are again pointed in two different directions, one forward and one back. Once again, Cas is just as baffled as Dean is.

Chindi laughs at their expressions. "You've got to understand, Havasu is a water elemental," she explains. "And water elementals really tend to have a one-track mind. As far as they're concerned, water is the answer to every possible problem. It's always the very best possible gift. And good luck trying to tell them otherwise; they're quite opinionated on the matter."

"You're, um, you're sure it can't heal?" says Dean hopelessly. "It can't, like... heal cancer or anything?"

"Nope," says Chindi. (Dean hears a faint sigh from above him.) "Sorry. What it'll do is just give your thunderbird friend here an ample supply of water. As much water as needed, is the idea, exactly when and where it's needed. That's what Havasu does best. Sorry, other than that there's no magical cures." Then she seems to see the disappointment in both their faces, and her eyes almost sparkle. She lifts the jug again, and says, "But remember, Havasu speaks the language of water; and the language of water is also the language of blood. What your vessel really needs right now, thunderbird, is blood. Blood is merely a form of water. This water will match the nature of the water around it — it will become blood — and it'll keep that water in its proper channels. Which is to say, inside the blood vessels where it belongs."

And then Chindi carries the little clay jug over to Cas's crumpled human vessel. "May I?" she says to dragon-Cas, and dragon-Cas slowly nods.

Dean speaks up with, "Wait, uh, it won't, like, drown him or anything, will it?"

Chindi shakes her head. "It's not supposed to be in his lungs, so it won't go to his lungs. It's supposed to be in his blood vessels, so that's where it'll stay. As much as needed, and no more; in the place
where it's needed, and nowhere else. Havasu knows what he's doing; blood spells are literally child's play to him. You needn't worry." She adds, to dragon-Cas, "It won't last forever, mind you, so don't go getting reckless. Two or three lunar cycles, probably — the water elementals' power is always linked to the tides. But your vessel should be safe from any dangerous bleeding for a couple of months."

Chindi moves over to human-Cas's bedside. She pauses for a moment and looks at Cas's wings. Dragon-Cas gives a hopeless little questioning sound, and Chindi shakes her head, almost sadly.

"Sorry, I've got nowhere near enough power to do anything about your wings," she says to dragon-Cas. "Even if I had clearance to interfere beyond Havasu's specific water-related request, which I don't, Heavenly power's been cut off anyway, you remember? I've been on starvation rations for months as far as power goes. I honestly couldn't even heal a single feather-root, and that's the truth."

Cas bows his head; Dean feels his hot breath again on the back of Dean's neck. Dean reaches up, pats him on the feathered snout and whispers to him, "We'll figure something out, Thunderbird." Privately he's thinking, *If we can just get him through this damn hemorrhage, we're back in the game. We'll take the rest one step at a time.*

Chindi studies human-Cas's wounded wings for a moment longer.

"Lovely color, though," she says at last, and she gives Castiel a searching glance. "I particularly like the gold."

At that, Cas gives a tiny, almost shy, lick to the back of Dean's neck.

Then Chindi turns her attention to the jug. She pulls the little bluish-green rag out of its mouth, twirls the rag into a thin coil, and puts one end back into the jug. She moves closer to Cas, bends over to look very closely at his face, and she carefully feeds the other end of the rag into human-Cas's mouth. She tips the jug up, bracing it against her hip and holding both ends of the little rag in their places with both her hands. They all watch as a thin trickle of water runs down the little bluish-green rag into human-Cas's mouth.

It hardly even looks like much water — just a couple of tablespoons, maybe — but Dean feels dragon-Cas shudder behind him, and, looking back, he sees all of Cas's feathers ruffle up at once, and then, with an almost dog-like shake, Cas sleeks them all down again. Cas's eyes are wide.

Other than that nothing changes; human-Cas remains limp and still on his bed.

But the med student sitting in the corner suddenly looks up. He can't see Chindi, of course, but he can see, and hear, the heart monitor. In fact, they all can hear the heart monitor. Dean realizes that the beeps have steadied, and the rush of relief that comes over him then makes him almost dizzy.

He reaches up a hand to Cas's great head again, and strokes the silky muzzle. Cas licks Dean's hand.

"Would he have died?" asks Dean, quietly, to Chindi.

Chindi's pulling the little rag back out of human-Cas's mouth. She gives Dean a noncommittal little shrug. "I really don't know," she says. "Not immediately. Later tonight, maybe. Tomorrow, maybe. Next week, maybe. Even we reapers never really know for sure till the moment arrives. All I can say now is, he won't die of blood loss tonight — not tonight, and not tomorrow, and not next week. More than that, I can't say."

She peers into the jug (it seems to be empty), re-stoppers it with the little rag, and straightens up to declare, "And *that* is the only reason that I came here this evening. Havasu wanted to give a small
part of himself to you, thunderbird. As his name states."

Dean asks, "What do you mean? What does his name mean?"

"Havasu means Bluish-Green Water," she replies. "Water elementals are pretty straightforward that way."

"And..." Dean can't help adding, "what does Chindi mean?"

"In Navajo it means, Demon Who Devours Souls," she says easily. She laughs at Dean's alarmed look, and adds, "As I said, they are partly right, and partly wrong. They've never understood exactly what I am. But I do appreciate the respect."

She then turns back to dragon-Cas and gives him a little bow, saying, "Quite an honor to meet you, thunderbird. Since I see you're still unfamiliar with your new station, I'll just say... you must surely have earned the personal favor of God himself, for there hasn't been a confirmed thunderbird, not in this hemisphere at least, for three thousand years. If I ever do reap you, I will consider it an honor. And..." She glances at Dean and looks back at Cas. "I'll be most curious to see where you both end up, given that you appear to be soulmates. The rule has always been, soulmates stay together."

She looks up at Cas and adds, "And now I would recommend you get your little human here back to his own mortal body, and then you probably should return directly to your own. Time does pass slowly here in the Veil, but even so, your friend here's running rather short on time. So if you have any concerns for his safety—"

Before she's even finished speaking, the silver talons have closed tightly around Dean and the vast black wings are beating. Dean just hears Chindi saying, "Always such drama..." and then she vanishes down below as he and Cas go rocketing upwards, straight through the ceiling of the ICU, straight through a couple other floors too, soaring up out of the hospital into a fantastically starry night sky.

Dean's dazzled by how high they are. There's no cold at all (the Veil is convenient that way) but it's absolutely glorious to be up here in the vast open sky, the snowy world and the little glittering town spinning around below them. But it turns out Cas is just doing a tight circle above the hospital to get his bearings. He's looking for something, his great dark head scanning intently left and right, and finally Dean realizes what he's searching for. Dean spots the little light of the halo statue, and he points, and Cas arrows down to it in a thrilling drop. A half-second later Cas is braking by the statue in a flashy hover, great wings beating the insubstantial air of the Veil in powerful beats. He lands by the halo statue on three feet, still clutching Dean with the fourth, and snuffles noisily around in the snow. Something almost frantic is coming into Cas's actions, something increasingly urgent and tense in his movements, and Dean starts to worry how close they're cutting it. How much time does Dean's body have left, exactly?

And more importantly, where is Dean's body? It's not by the statue any more. There's signs of some recent activity, though; the snow's been trampled down all around, and Cas gives a snort when he spots the Impala nearby, slewed to a halt in a truly messy parking job. It looks like Sam decided that the fastest way to stop would be to skid it sideways straight into a snowdrift.

"ER," calls Dean to Cas, pointing to the ER doors. "They probably took me into the ER—"

He hasn't even finished his sentence when Cas is shooting over to the ER in a blisteringly fast horizontal flight, skimming just above the ground. They blast directly through the unopened doors without a pause and Cas hurtles down the long hallway. He probably could keep his wings wide open and let them just flick right through all the surrounding rooms, but by some instinct he's tucked
his insubstantial wings in tight, so that he shoots neatly down the hall like a slender feathered rocket, holding Dean tucked up tight, positioned under Cas's great black feathered chin. Cas is huffing rather desperately. Rooms flash past, people flash past, as Cas whips down the hall — and then they nearly shoot straight past Sam, who's standing right there in the hall clutching his head with both hands, staring through a little window in a door. Cas brakes violently, flaring both wings out hard and tipping almost completely sideways (the outer halves of both wings briefly vanish into the floor below and the ceiling above) as he whips around in a dizzying sharp turn. He hurtles straight at the wall next to where Sam's standing; they burst seamlessly through it, and there's Dean's body at last, splayed unconscious on a gurney. Medical staff are clustered around, a doctor holding defibrillation paddles.

Dean twists around for one last look up at dragon-Cas; the brilliant blue eyes are staring at him, the glittering dark wings spread. *This is Cas, Dean thinks, it's truly him.* And then Dean suddenly remembers that he still hasn't said *I love you,* and he tries to, but it's too late now, for the great feathered foot is shoving him down, brutally, urgently, frantically; the heavy cold material world closing around him and Dean can't speak at all. It's too much, too hard, Cas is crushing him, Cas is crushing *all the air out of him* —

It's not Cas that's crushing him. It's his own body. There's a moment of terrible suffocation and blinding panic; then there's a jolt of lightning and Dean's gasping awake on the gurney. His whole body feels like it's on fire, a weirdly cold fire that feels like he's been packed in prickly, scalding ice. It's excruciating; Dean can barely breathe, sucking in one slow, ragged breath after another. But a very relieved-looking Dr. Flaherty is lowering the defibrillator paddles, saying, "Got him. We got him. Sinus rhythm. Okay, folks, keep your focus, we still got work to do, he's still hypothermic —"

Dean struggles to tip his head slightly toward the door, and there's a white-faced Sam staring straight at him through a tiny square window. Dean manages to give him a slow, very weak, thumbs-up.

Sam's head actually drops out of sight for a long moment, like he's had to buckle down into a crouch to steady himself. Dean gets a little worried — has Sam just had a heart attack or something? — but when Sam finally comes back up into view he looks fine. "Fine" meaning that he looks like he's been crying, and he also looks absolutely spitting mad, and he glares straight in Dean's eyes and mouths, very clearly, "YOU FUCKING MORON."

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*A/N* - *All my fics share the same angel headcanon. Some of you have met dragon-Cas in another fic; I hope you enjoyed meeting him here again. I loved the idea of Dean first encountering Castiel's true form in the Veil.*

*Chindi is based on a real Navajo "demon" (which, the more I read the myths, I'm convinced is just a misunderstood reaper). Havasu is from a native myth as well, the spirit of a sacred pool of bluish-green water down in the Canyon. And ravens are indeed the harbingers of the divine; I figured they would be able to see that Cas was an angel (that raven that flew right over them initially came over to check out Cas's wings - ravens can of course see the wings of angels - and it then noticed that Cas was bleeding). And it also seemed logical that ravens that were flying around below the helicopter would be able to relay Dean's prayer to Havasu - and that a water elemental would be able to detect a feather being rinsed in water, anywhere in its watershed.\*
And he's got a soul. What it means to be a thunderbird is still not fully clear, but one thing is sure - he is not going to just "go poof" if he dies. It's not a complete solution, and it's still totally unclear what Chuck was up to. But as Dean says, at least they're back in the game.

And now I absolutely MUST take a few days off to get back to my real life! This has been as hard a stretch of writing as I have ever done - I really wanted to get you guys through the worst of it and not leave you with a (literal) cliffhanger right over the season premiere. There's still some puzzle-pieces still to put in place, but I hope you can relax at little now.

The last chapter will be up just as soon as I can catch up on my food, laundry, showers, sleep, and, oh yeah, work.

Please leave me a comment if you have time! I really love - and need - to hear from you. <3

(PS no show spoilers please, thanks!)
A/N - Agh, my work schedule got impossible. Been working past midnight for days & days - so frustrating, the rest of the fic is all drafted but it's not RIGHT yet and I keep wanting to work on it more. I can't post it till it feels right, and it's not right yet. But I do have this one scene done. Hope you enjoy.

Sam's soon steered away by Dr. Flaherty for some kind of little meeting — presumably to reassure him that neither of his two "brothers" are going to die after all. Dean, though, suspects Dr. Flaherty's also just trying to keep Sam from seeing the next stage of Dean's recovery, which turns out to be kind of dramatic. And not very comfortable. Dean's started shivering with cold, and it escalates to such violent bouts of shuddering that his whole ER bed is soon shaking. The nurses all seem to think it's a good thing — apparently it means Dean's warming up from the hypothermia ("Your body's finally coming back online," one of them says to him). They bustle around him with cheerful comments, packing hot water bottles around his torso and wrapping him in blankets as he shivers miserably on the cot, still so weak and wobbly that he can't even really sit up. It doesn't really feel like he's "coming back online"; it feels like he's freezing to death. Each hot water bottle is a blazing pocket of fire against his skin, almost scaldingly uncomfortable, but it doesn't seem to be doing a thing to stop the shivering. Soon the nurses even have to put up the side rails on Dean's ER cot to be sure he won't shiver himself right off the edge.

They warn him this might go on for a half hour or more. It's not painful, exactly, but it's uncomfortable, and it's exhausting.

It also doesn't help that his chest is still aching like he's been stomped on by an elephant. Or that his thoughts feel frustratingly stumbly and slow. It's like his head is packed with cotton; maybe some aftereffect of the overdose.

Okay, so I'm still a bit of a mess, Dean thinks. But the important thing is that Cas is okay. Cas is okay. That's what matters.

Cas is okay... right?

And suddenly Dean's filled with doubt.

Is Cas okay? It had been kind of a confusing journey back from the Veil, and definitely a rough transition back to the material world, and Dean hasn't exactly had a chance to sit down and calmly think through all the implications of what just happened. Now, as he lies shuddering there on his cot, he tries to get a grasp on the current situation. Is Cas okay?

Cas has a soul. Which is... very cool, obviously. And rare, according to Chindi. But does it really help at all? He's still got no grace.

And therefore no healing abilities.

And then there's the little detail that Castiel's true form is apparently a frickin' gigantic dragon (or griffin, or whatever you want to call it, Dean reminds himself). That's another whole shocking, amazing fact to try to take in. A feathered dragon (griffin?), with great big gorgeous fully feathered
wings.

Wait, no— those big wings had indeed been gorgeous, but they aren't Cas's current wings at all, are they? The big wings, and the whole true form, had just been a Veil thing, a projection from Cas's recently minted soul as it groped through his (much older) angel memories for a familiar form. Cas's real wings had been the littler wings, the ones attached to his human vessel.

And the real wings are still damaged. The feather-roots are all still damaged. Chindi hadn't been able to fix those. And no feather-roots means... no flight feathers, which means... still no way of soaking up Heavenly power...

... so still no healing abilities...

But at least Cas isn't bleeding out anymore. Havasu's magic water had fixed that much—

But it won't fix anything else. Chindi had made that clear.

It's at this point that Dean realizes that the cancer is still a problem.

He'd been fuzzily aware of this even while talking to Chindi, but it's starting to sink in now: Nothing that just happened is going to fix the whole cancer issue. Havasu's water can't cure the cancer. Cas's awesome true form, cool as it is, can't cure the cancer. Even Cas's new shiny soul can't cure the cancer; and this should have been obvious right away — because if having a soul cured cancer, then no human being would ever get cancer in the first place! But humans get cancer all the time. Having a true soul is clearly no protection whatsoever against cancer. Therefore, Cas still has cancer —

Dean's struggling so hard to think all this through that he barely notices when the nurses pack some blankets around him and start wheeling him somewhere else. He just continues shivering (this seems to have become his full-time job), still curled on his side under his blanket, still reflexively clutching the hot water bottles as he doggedly tries to comprehend all that had happened in the Veil. Ceiling lights start gliding by overhead but Dean's not really paying attention.

The ceiling lights slow, and stop.

And Dean recognizes the lights.

Aren't these the very same ceiling lights where a certain shining silver fog had gone whirling around, not too long ago? Streamers of blinding light (...Bright Angel...) coalescing into a sparkling fog, darkening, and taking shape?

And that corner, over there — isn't that the corner where Chindi had stood? Chindi the Navajo reaper, with her buckskin dress and turquoise necklace and that incredibly important little clay jug?

Isn't this the same hallway where an enormous feathered dragon had crouched, just minutes ago?

This is the ICU. They've brought Dean to the ICU. Dean's gurney has come to a temporary halt right by the staff station.

It had all happened right here, in this very hallway. Those glittering sapphire eyes blazing with protective fury... the darkly sparkling wings arched all around... Shining silver talons flashing out to grab Dean, and hug him close, and nestle him into a sea of silken feathers.

"The d-dragon was... right here," Dean manages to say, through his chattering teeth. One of the nurses is re-arranging the blanket around Dean's legs, and she pauses and looks down at him. A second nurse near the staff station looks over too. "Cas," Dean tries to explain to them. "H-he's a
dragon..G-griffin. Or s-something. A-angel. Was... right here."

He realizes, belatedly, that none of this stuttered string of phrases is going to make any sense to the nurses. He must sound like a nutcase.

And sure enough, the second nurse says very quietly, to the first, "This the drug OD?"

The first nurse nods to her briefly and turns back to Dean with a professionally distant smile. "Now you just take it easy, Mr. Winchester," she says. "You've been hallucinating. You had an overdose and it made you hallucinate. But you'll be okay now. Just try to relax. We'll just take you to your room now, and you just relax. There's no dragons anywhere, I promise you — that was just a hallucination."

And then they start wheeling him down the hallway — and straight past Cas's little bay.

Dean's positive it's Cas's bay. It's in exactly the right spot, second from the end. But its curtains are closed now and he can't see Cas. Just as Dean's gurney is approaching, somebody comes walking out through the curtains, but it's not Cas at all. It's somebody else, with a bundle of bloody sheets. Bright red bloody sheets.

A horrible possibility occurs to Dean: Had the entire Veil-thing just been a hallucination?

A hallucination because of the drugs, maybe? Because, thing is, the nurse is right: Dean did take drugs. He'd taken an actual overdose, in fact, of what he'd been pretty sure were barbiturates. Which in theory have been neutralized now, but what about twenty minutes ago? He'd been assuming the drugs would only knock him out, but could they also cause hallucinations?

Had it all just been a drug-fevered dream? Chindi, Havasu's water, Cas-the-dragon, all of it?

Had any of it actually happened?

Is Cas actually okay?

"C-Cas, w-where's Cas, is he in there?" Dean stammers. The nurses don't even answer, but Dean's gurney is rolling past Cas's bay now, and he reaches out a shaking hand and manages to grab the edge of one of the curtains. The gurney spins around and slews to a halt, as Dean clings for all he's worth. He's only gotten hold of the very end of the curtain and it doesn't really open at all, just stretches out a bit, but at least he's managed to stop the damn gurney, and if only his muscles would obey him, he'd be able to sit up and jump off the gurney and pull the curtain open. But he still can't seem to even sit up, and one of the nurses tries to gently pull Dean's hand off the curtain. And then she's pulling not-so-gently. And soon both nurses are actually trying to physically pry his fingers free. "Is he okay?" Dean asks them, nearly pleading now. It's hard to even speak clearly with his teeth still chattering this much, but Dean tries, concentrating as hard as he can on getting the words out clearly. "Castiel? The angel, I mean, the g-guy in this bay?"

The two nurses look at each other.

They still think he's hallucinating. They're starting to get that look like they think he's a problem patient, "confused" or "combative" or whatever they'll call it. Dean can see the doubt in their faces as they glance at each other. And suddenly Dean's missing Sarah desperately. Oh, what he wouldn't give for a nurse who actually knows Cas, and knows Dean too, and has some idea what Cas really is! Who has an inkling what's actually going on! These Flagstaff nurses, they just don't get it; they think he's just another drug OD case. They think he's just been hallucinating.
And are they right?

The last time Dean has seen Cas in reality (not in the Veil), Cas had been... well... not good. Pale as ice, eyes closed, his hand limp in Dean's. Pale and silent in the helicopter, pale and silent when they landed, pale and silent as the crash team sprinted him away.

Comatose. Or possibly even already... dead.

That had been Dean's last definite sighting of Castiel.

"Cas!" Dean calls. Or, tries to call; it comes out just a whisper, faint and weak. The nurses are calling an orderly over and the orderly finally starts relentlessly prying Dean's fingers off the curtain, one finger at a time. Dean makes a last-ditch attempt to lunge up off the cot then, still hoping he can somehow just sit right up and jump off the gurney and nimbly dart past the orderly. But that heavy, shivering, hypothermia weakness is weighing him down like there are iron chains on all of his limbs, and the nurses easily hold him in place. He's helpless as a kitten as his hand is finally pried free. Terry-cloth cuffs appear. They're going to restrain Dean's hands. They're gonna cuff him to the bedrails and wheel him away, and what if Cas is dying right now?

"CAS!" Dean yells, frantic now. This time it comes out louder.

A rough, hoarse voice calls back, from behind the curtains, "Dean? Dean, is that you?"

There's a little pause. The orderly and nurses all hesitate, glancing at each other.

Dr. Flaherty's tired-looking med student emerges from the curtains. Apparently he's still been keeping eyes-on-the-patient just as instructed, for he says to the nurses, "Hey, so, the Canyon medevac here in Bay 2 is asking to see somebody by the name of Dean? He seems a little agitated about it."

"That's me," Dean gasps. "That's me." He holds up his wristband so they can all see the little name label. "Dean, see?"

The med student leans in for a closer look at the wristband. One of the nurses murmurs quietly to him, "Watch it, he's been a little combative...."

"Agitated," whispers Dean through his chattering teeth. This seems like a better word. "Not combative. I'm j-just, um, a little agitated. Not c-combative, I swear. Cas is in there?"

But the med student's still staring at Dean's wristband, frowning. He says, "Weird, same last name! The Canyon medevac's also named Winchester— Oh!" His eyes widen, and he straightens up and says quietly to the nurses, "Flaherty said there was a partner who was a total wreck."

All four of them — the med student, the two nurses, and the orderly — turn and look at Dean.

"That's me," says Dean. He gestures at himself with a shaking hand. "Total w-wreck, s-see? That's why I...the OD, I... I thought he was a g-goner. Please let me see him. Please?"

They all look at Dean a moment longer, and they all look at each other.

Some sort of silent consensus is reached, and then it turns out Flagstaff nurses aren't so bad after all.
"Ten minutes," says one of the nurses, leaning over Dean to do a quick pulse-check and tuck his blankets back around him. "We're still setting up your bay anyway, so... you both really need to rest, but you clearly both also really need to see each other. So, take ten minutes just to reassure each other. I'll stay just outside and keep an eye on you both. Quite a Christmas, huh?"

And then they're putting away the terry-cloth cuffs, and turning Dean's gurney around. The ceiling lights spin around overhead, the white curtains go whisking by, and there's Cas, who seems to glide into view magically as they roll Dean right up next to Cas's ICU bed.

Cas is lying exactly where Dean had seen him earlier, from back in the Veil.

Except now Cas is awake. His eyes are open.

And he's reaching out to Dean.

"It w-was real," Dean whispers, trying to control his shivering enough to reach back to him.

"It was real," Cas agrees. He grabs Dean's trembling hand in both of his, and suddenly everything's right with the world.

Dean lets out a shaky sigh. His teeth are still chattering, he's still shuddering all over, the hot water bottles have gone cold, his chest still feels like it's been stomped on by an elephant, he can barely control his hands and he can hardly even talk. But Castiel is holding his hand, and at last everything's all right. For the first time since that horrifying moment on Bright Angel Trail, everything's all right, because Cas isn't going to die tonight.

Not tonight, not tomorrow, not next week. Two or three lunar cycles, Chindi had said. Maybe Cas'll be fine for two whole months!

Cas's hands seem incredibly warm, clasped firmly around Dean's. Two months, Dean thinks. Two or three whole months....

Even just a couple more months seems like the most precious gift in the world.

"Oh, Dean, you're so cold!" Cas is saying, his hands tightening on Dean's. He somehow manages to wriggle a little closer on his bed, right up to his bedrail, so that they're only about a foot apart. There's a brushing of warmth in the air over Dean's shoulder and side; Cas must be extending a wing over Dean. "I should've gotten you back sooner," Cas says. "You're shivering — I didn't realize your body was lying in the snow for so long!"

Dean (who is indeed still shivering) just gazes at him, drinking up the sight of Castiel looking so alert and awake and alive. And there's something else: Cas's color is better. There's almost a ruddy glow to his cheeks. It looks so unfamiliar that only now does Dean realize that Castiel must have been looking paler-than-usual for months now, for so long that Dean's gotten used to it. Poor Cas must've been short on blood for ages.

The staff have even finally had some time to clean him up; the worst of the blood is gone from Cas's face and hands, and the bloody bedding looks like it's finally been swapped for clean white bedding. And the new bedding's staying clean and white. Which means....

"You're n-not b-bleeding," Dean whispers.

"Apparently that stopped," Cas says, with a little shrug, like that's barely of interest anymore. He looks much more worried about Dean's current state. "I should've flown you back much earlier," he says. "I woke up here a few minutes ago and I've been so worried. I thought I hadn't gotten you back
"I was f-fine," Dean lies. "Plenty of t-time." He tries to give Cas a reassuring grin (though the chattering teeth and the constant shivering probably ruin the effect). "Ace f-flying job," he adds. "Like a fighter...j-jet. Love how you... bank those turns."

"I should've apparated," says Cas, shaking his head. "Would've been faster. But I didn't know where you were. Where your body was, I mean. I couldn't talk to you, to ask."

"Gotta w-work on your... English," says Dean.

"Gotta work on your High Enochian," replies Cas, a faint smile flickering over his face.

Dean's too exhausted to come up with a retort; he just clings to Cas's hands, still soaking in the sight of those beloved blue eyes gazing at him.

And Dean realizes, then, that the dragon's great sapphire eyes, and this human vessel's blue irises, are exactly, precisely, the very same shade of blue.

They've even got the same expression. Despite the extreme difference in the size and shape of the head, there's somehow exactly the same expression. Dragon-Cas, when he'd been tilting his vast head to gaze down at Dean, and human-Cas now, trapped once more in this little weakened human body, but still gazing at Dean just the same: they have exactly the same expression. Worried and protective, intent and focused, those blue eyes alight with care and concern and affection....

"Really dig that... true form," Dean tells him.

"I was hoping to show you someday," he confesses, "but I never planned to show you like that. So suddenly, with no warning." His mouth twists, with a little grimace. "I'll admit I was a bit confused at first. All of a sudden there I was, and there you were. And there was a reaper! I didn't even fully realize I was in the Veil right away. I think I was rather disoriented; last thing I'd known, I'd been on that white rug, wherever that was. But I could see at once she was a reaper. She just had that look. And you were there too... so... I thought.... I thought at first that..." His jaw clenches, his expression darkening. "Well, never mind what I thought," he says, after a little pause. "Anyway, I've wondered for a long time how to prepare you for my, um, my true form... I mean, not that it's relevant exactly, because, when I'm envesseled, this vessel is my form. The true form then becomes sort of... hypothetical, in a way. But... I've wondered, you know, what you might think of.... I've wondered how to, um...."

Cas seems to be rambling a bit. His hands are moving a little restlessly too, on Dean's, tightening and loosening, tightening and loosening. There's a soft brush of warmth through the air, a soft fluttering. Like Cas's upper wing is fidgeting. And Dean's suddenly certain that if Cas were in his dragon form right now, one ear would be pointing forward and the other pointing back. Cas is uncertain about something. He's worried.

Finally Cas takes a tight little breath and says, hesitantly, "Hope you don't... um... mind? Um... my... true form? It's very different, I know—"

Dean almost laughs at him.

"Y-you kidding?" says Dean. "M-my own d-dragon? How c-cool is that?"

Cas's hands tighten again (this time more firmly). "Do you mean that?"
"You b-better believe it," says Dean. "D-different, sure, but, jeez, you looked awesome. Those w-wings, dude—"

"My actual wings don't look like that anymore, you understand," Cas says, instantly shifting from worrying about his true form to worrying about his vessel form — and worrying about the vessel's scaled-down wings. "I know my vessel's a wreck, and my actual wings are very much smaller now," he explains, "and, um, they're missing the flight feathers, as I think I've mentioned—"

"Your wings are beautiful," Dean tells him — finally managing to get one whole sentence out without his teeth chattering. (Dean's sure now that Cas has a wing stretched out over him, for the familiar wing-warmth feels incredibly good.)

"No, I mean, my actual wings, as they are now," says Cas. He glances, frowning, toward the area of invisible wing-warmth that's hovering just above Dean's shoulder. "You won't have seen them, but they look just terrible—"

"Saw 'em," says Dean.

Cas pauses, his frown deepening.

"Guess I really was dying," says Dean.

Understanding dawns on Cas's face.

"You're not seeing them now, are you?" says Cas sharply.

"No, not now," Dean reassures him. "Saw 'em in the Veil. They're beautiful. Don't care if you're m-missing your... primaries or... w-whatever."

"Primaries, secondaries, and tertials," says Cas.

"Yeah, I r-read Chapter 6," says Dean. "Primaries, secondaries, tertials. But you still got your coverts, don't you?"

Cas gives a surprised little laugh at that, as if he's startled that Dean actually remembers the term for the little feathers that line the whole wing. The feathers that he still has, in other words.

But Dean has read that chapter, more times than Cas knows, and Dean knows exactly which feathers Cas is missing, and which ones he still has; and Dean knows exactly what Cas's wings look like.

"Got your sparkly little c-coverts, don't you," Dean says, giving him another grin. "Gold edges, too. Right? They look great."

The warmth in the air seems to press even more closely.

"I... do still have my coverts," Castiel agrees, almost shyly. "With... Yes. They do seem to have, um, gold edges. Yes."

"Dig the colors," says Dean. "Dig the coverts." Dean's finally getting enough strength back in his hands to squeeze back a little bit on Cas's hands. "Dig the coverts," he says again. "Your wings are awesome. We'll get the other feathers back, anyway. We will. Oh, and... I guess you got a soul now too, huh? Just like Pinocchio — you're a real boy now?"

"Apparently," says Cas. His shakes his head slowly, frowning, like he still hasn't taken this in.

"Chindi knows her trade; I believe she was telling the truth about that. And... you know, something
has definitely...felt different, for months now. But..." He takes a breath. "It's not a cure, you understand. As long as my feather-roots remain damaged I still can't collect, or store up, any etheric power. I still can't... well, not to put too fine a point on it, but I still can't cure myself. Or anybody."

"Figured that out already," Dean says. "Not a cure. Got it. But at least you don't go poof now. Right?"

A slow smile spreads over Cas's face. "I won't go poof," he agrees.

It's not a cure for cancer. But it's something.

In fact, it's something huge. If Castiel does, unthinkably, end up dying (it's always such a horrific thought, but somehow it's wormed its way into becoming a routine possibility, something that Dean ponders on an hourly basis) — if the worst happens, something will survive. Castiel will go on, somehow, somewhere, in some form.

And wherever he goes, it seems Dean might be able to follow.

*Soulmates stay together*, Chindi had said.

*Soulmates....*

"It's not a perfect solution," Cas says. "Not going poof, I mean. I'd rather just — you know, *not die at all*. Stay here many more years with you. But, it's certainly better than the alternative, because—"

"I love you," says Dean.

Cas just blinks at him for a moment.

"I know that already...." Cas says, slowly. "We exchanged feathers.... You put the ice on my neck. I knew that already—"

"Just wanted to *say* it," says Dean. "Realized I hadn't *said* it. Guess it doesn't *need* to be said, but, I dunno, felt like I should just *say* it, just make sure you *know*—"

"It's *wonderful* to hear it," interrupts Castiel, hands tightening so firmly on Dean's now that his grip is almost painful. "It's... it's quite amazing how wonderful it is to hear it, actually, given that I already knew it." He adds, "Oh, and, I love you too. You must know that too, right? You'd better. It would be quite ridiculous if you didn't. Because I love you to a ridiculous degree."

And that's when Dean learns why it's worth saying, even when the other person already knows.

Even when it doesn't need to be said.

It's worth saying because speaking it aloud, maybe *especially* when it doesn't need to be said, is such a generous gift, so freely given. If there's no real reason to say it, if it doesn't *have* to be said, then that means the person who's saying it just wants to give that gift for no reason at all. It seems a pure act of care and kindness, and no matter how sure one already feels about it, no matter how much one "knows already," it's like a kiss on the very soul. A warm embrace in the cold night. A hearthfire to gather close to.

A nest of silken feathers....

"I've loved you for... quite a long time, I believe," Cas is saying. "I didn't even recognize what it was at first, but... well, I could never really take my eyes off you. I used to think about you; used to just...
wonder how you were doing, and what you were doing, and I would constantly be hoping you were okay. I used to worry about you, all the time; and I'd look forward to seeing you again. Did you know that?" (Dean shakes his head, slowly.) Cas goes on, "There was really nothing else that I ever looked forward to. In the midst of all those battles and wars, it was the one bright spot. Even if it was just going to be a routine visit, about a case or a problem or something else entirely, and even if I knew we would probably just end up arguing, I always looked forward to seeing you again." He's quiet a long moment, looking at Dean (who's just staring mutely back at him). At last Cas says, "For a long time I didn't understand what it was, for I'd never felt it before. But when I realized I might die and have to leave you, it all became clear: I love you so very much. I truly do. And it's only grown stronger since."

The feeling that's pouring through Dean as he listens to all this is so intense, and so warm, that it's almost like something's bursting inside him. Something's expanding.

And Dean realizes something: these are the moments when the soul grows.

These are the times when the blossom unfurls, even more, from the bud. It's not just from loving someone else. It's also from being loved. Sure, all the other human emotions probably help too; laughter and friendship and simple moments of happiness must have an effect. And the bittersweet moments, as well; pouring out one's own love, while not knowing if it'll ever be returned; pain, and sorrow, and loss; the sense of mortality... that all-too-human knowledge of the nearness of death, the flickering briefness of life, its terrible fragility. All that must count, sure. But Dean is absolutely sure right now that the human soul grows quite a lot too just from being loved. It must be like sunshine on a tiny seedling; like rain in the desert.

Dean pictures, then, Castiel's fragile new human soul, and all it's been through in the last eight months. What shape does that blossom have now?

Nice one, Chindi had said. Lot of love.

Dean figures a little more won't hurt.

"Love you a lot, T-bird," says Dean. "Love you a lot. Really do." The words flow out so easily that it seems insane he's never said any of this before. And, watching the shine in Cas's eyes, Dean thinks, I should've told him a hundred times by now.

I'd better make up for that.

"You're gonna get sick of me saying that," Dean warns him.

"I very much doubt that," whispers Castiel.

A/N - Please let me know what you think!

More as soon as I can.
When you're better

A/N - Proposal season took over my life, like I knew it would, and then I got sick (which I also should have known was coming). And I couldn't even take any time off work (sick days are not possible when proposals are due), so between staggering to work, staggering home and collapsing into bed, there's been no fic time. I can't describe how incredibly frustrating it's been having this fic SO CLOSE to done and yet... not done. To have to leave Cas & Dean in limbo. At least I'd managed to get them to the point where they had gotten a bit of time to reassure each other, but still!

But by Wednesday I was finally back on my feet and starting to wean myself off the meds that had been knocking me out so thoroughly. By Thursday both proposals were done (not submitted yet, but ready). Yesterday, Friday, I actually had a day off work - the first day of any sort, including weekends, in a month. And I worked all day on the fic, and I worked all day today too, and now I can report that the fic is DONE.

I was going to post the last bit all in one long chapter, but after thinking it over I'm going to split it into three parts, because each one needs its own little moment to resonate, I think. Here's the first. The next one will be up either later tonight or tomorrow, and the last on Sunday night.

"If you EVER," Sam's saying the next morning, a ferocious scowl on his face, "and I mean, EVER, pull something like that again—"

"I know, Sam, I know," says Dean. He's been bracing for this particular little talk.

"—EVER, I am gonna... I am gonna...." Sam trails off and slumps back in his chair. He doesn't even bother finishing the sentence; he just gives a heavy sigh, looking out the hospital window at the bright winter view outside. A fresh coating of snow overnight has turned the whole parking lot into a gleaming white snowfield. The Impala's presumably just one of the snow-covered lumps out there, one among many.

Dean's sitting on the edge of his hospital bed pulling his shirt on. He's already got his jeans and shoes on; Cas and Dean are both due to be released in another hour, and half an hour ago Sam had showed up with a change of clothes for both of them. (The nurses never had gotten around to separating them last night; instead Dean and Cas had ended up sleeping in side-by-side hospital beds, in this quiet little room on the sixth floor.) Though Cas then had to just take his clothes away in a little bag to change into later, for he's already been summoned downstairs by Dr. Flaherty for one last round of tests. The three of them had only really had a few moments for a quick chat, only just long enough for Cas to give Sam a quick run-down on what had happened in the Veil, before a nurse had come to whisk Cas away for his last batch of tests before release.

Which means Sam and Dean are now alone together in the little hospital room. This is the first time that they've really had a moment to talk, and it's becoming apparent that Sam really isn't all that happy about what went down last night.

Dean quietly gets his shirt buttoned up, sneaking another cautious glance at Sam. Sam's still just staring out the window at the wintry view outside.
I had to do it, thinks Dean. I had to go into the Veil. There'd really been no choice. With Cas so close to death....

Dean can't help glancing over at Cas's bed. He knows perfectly well that Cas is downstairs — Cas just left a few minutes ago — but it's oddly unsettling to see his bed empty. This last round of tests should be no big deal; it's apparently just to confirm that the intestinal bleeding has really stopped. Cas is fine now. (Well, "fine" in the short-term sense.) But it's hard to keep from worrying anyway. Last night, once they'd both finally ended up in this room, it hadn't really been all that easy to get any sleep — even despite the thudding sense of fatigue that had nearly been overwhelming Dean, even despite the draining ache in all his muscles, every time he'd drifted off he'd only ended up jolting back awake an hour or so later, gripped by a panicky certainty that Cas was in some kind of trouble. Half-formed nightmares had kept seeping into his sleeping mind. Scenes from earlier in that terrible day, mostly: Cas passing out on the trail, Cas on the white fur rug in the lodge, Cas in the helicopter... Cas choking up blood, Cas barely breathing, Cas's hand going limp.

Cas, dying.

There had really been no other choice than to go into the Veil, had there?

"I got that text from you," Sam says at last. He's still staring out the window. "I got that text and I didn't have enough cell service to place a call, dude. I couldn't call 911."

Dean's hands slow on the last shirt button. Oh yeah, right... he thinks, as he remembers that last text he'd sent to Sam. The one he'd sent from the halo statue. "I couldn't call 911, and you knew that," says Sam quietly.

Cas had been dying, yes. But Dean's starting to realize now what it must have been like for Sam.

"I was in this middle-of-nowhere highway with, like... tumbleweeds. Literal tumbleweeds," says Sam. The scowl's gone from his face; he's got an almost blank look now, gazing almost sightlessly out at the parking lot like he's been mentally transported back to that highway yesterday afternoon. "I was at this little stoplight in the middle of Bumfuck, Nowhere. Not a house, not a building, not a soul in view, not even a cow, nothing. Literal tumbleweeds, all covered in snow, and one lone traffic light and that was IT. There wasn't even a single other car at the light. And only just enough of a scrap of cell coverage to get that one text from you: hey Sam, I'm about to kill myself, let the docs know, could you?" A muscle twitches in the corner of Sam's jaw; his hands tighten on his knees. "I peeled right through that red light like a bat outta hell. Think I about broke the ground speed record just trying to get in range of the next frickin' cell tower."

"Damn, I'm sorry, dude," Dean says, and he means it. It's really starting to sink in what it must have been like for Sam. "I really am sorry," Dean repeats. "I was, well... kinda desperate. It was dumb, I know." But then Dean can't help adding, "But it did work, huh?"

"Frickin' barely," says Sam, and the scowl's suddenly right back in place as he glares back over at Dean. "From what Cas says he almost didn't get you back in time."

"But he did get me back," Dean points out. He tries for a grin. "And you did reach the docs, too. All's well that ends well, right?"

Sam doesn't grin back. "Seriously, Dean," he says, "if you ever do that again I'll... I'll..." But he doesn't finish his sentence; he just runs a hand through his hair, sighs again, and returns to staring out the window at the snow.
"You'll what?" asks Dean. It's an honest question; he finds he wants to know. Needs to know, even. "What would you do?"

Sam's quiet for a long moment.

"Oh, I don't know," Sam finally says, a little too vaguely. "Anyway, as soon as you guys check out, we can get back to the Airbnb and finally do that Christmas dinner, huh? I extended the rental for the rest of the week so you'd both have a chance to rest up. Isn't December 26th its own holiday in England? What do they call it, Boxing Day or something? We'll have a Boxing Day dinner."

It's a pretty abrupt change of topic.

Which means Sam doesn't want to talk about what, exactly, he'd do if Dean ever goes charging off into the Veil again.

Which tells Dean exactly what Sam would do.

If Dean ever goes into the Veil again, Sam'll do exactly the same, won't he? He'll chase after Dean's reaper, just like Dean had gone chasing after Cas's. Hell, Sam'll probably take on both reapers at once: Dean's and Cas's. Or all three: Dean's, Cas's, and Sam's. It's practically a family tradition by now.

It occurs to Dean, as he watches Sam gazing out the window at nothing, that just possibly it might be healthier if they could just somehow... let each other die. Just let go.

But we're all we've got, Dean thinks. Other people have families, children, jobs, buddies to hang out with; other people have... more people, a network, a community, a whole social circle. Roots. Dean and Sam have always really just had each other — and, now, Cas.

Not to mention that having to try to save the world repeatedly does put a bit of pressure on, about trying to stay alive just in order to get the job done.

Maybe someday they can let go. Someday when the time's right, when everything's over. But, Dean knows, that day is not today — not yet, not now, and especially not with the threat of "the Empty" still looming so mysteriously over both brothers.

All of which means... if Dean ever goes back in the Veil on another hare-brained desperate scheme, Sam'll just head right on into the Veil himself, with his very own hare-brained desperate scheme to match, hot on Dean's heels.

In fact... could Sam even have been considering that last night? Dean tries to picture the scene last night, that moment when dragon-Cas had been rocketing down the hallway, clutching Dean in his gigantic feathery paw. It had all been a pretty disorienting blur... but Dean had definitely caught one clear glimpse of Sam, and Sam had been standing there all alone, holding his head with both hands as he watched through that little window in the ER door. Sam, alone, watching his brother dying on that ER table... and he must've known Cas was dying too, or dead already. What exactly had Sam been thinking?

What would Sam have done later that night?

"Sam..." Dean says. "Were you gonna—"

"Anyway, I just drove like hell," says Sam, talking right over Dean. "Made it back to three dots of cell strength in less than a minute, in the end. Called 911, called Sarah too in case she had any advice, and then just drove like two bats outta hell and came ripping on in to this hospital parking lot
— did you know this hospital's only like twenty-five seconds from the turn-off from the highway, if you really floor it and run all the lights? So it turned out I wasn't really that far away — made it to the hospital in only like ten minutes or something overall, not bad, huh? They already had CPR going on you by then, so they'd bought you some time."

Dean just listens. He decides not to press Sam, not right now, about what exactly he'd been planning to do when he'd been watching through the little window.

Sam finally looks back at Dean and says, "Look. I get it. I know what he means to you. I really do. He means a lot to me too. But... please, at least, if you're gonna do that again, let's at least... " He gives a harried-sounding sigh. "Let's frickin' plan it better, okay? I mean, what if I'd blown a tire or something? What if I'd skidded out on the ice and just plain got stuck in the snow?"

"I know," says Dean, truly chastened now. "I do. I'm sorry, I get now it was a huge risk. But, last night, I just..." All he can do is give a tired shrug. "I just had to do it. It felt like there just wasn't any time to plan anything else. He was so borderline, Sam, you have no idea."

"I have an idea," says Sam drily.

"Right, right," says Dean. (Oh, right; Sam had helped carry Cas into the lodge....) "Yeah. But... I had to try."

Sam nods. Then, unexpectedly, he laughs. "At least I know where I stand now, huh?" Dean blinks at him, and Sam says, "You never tried to bargain with a reaper for me!" He laughs again — it's clear he's just trying to crack a joke to break the tension, but Dean's confused, for of course Dean's done exactly the same thing for Sam, and not all that long ago. (In fact, that's where Dean got the idea.)

Slowly Dean remembers that he'd never quite got around to telling Sam about all the little details of that particular day.

That terrifying day last year, back when Sam got shot by that werewolf.

"Uh," says Dean.

Sam looks at him.

"Wait," says Sam. He sits up a little, and his gaze sharpens as he studies Dean's face. "What? You didn't... Did you?"

Dean shifts on his bed a little uncomfortably, lacing his hands together in his lap. "Well...."

"When?" Sam demands, leaning forward a little now.

"That time you were shot," says Dean sheepishly. "Last year."

There's a little pause while Sam processes this. "Holy shit," he says at last, shaking his head. "Thought you said you knew I wasn't dead?"

"Yeah, no, I totally thought you were dead," confesses Dean, "and I went straight to that hospital and took a overdose. Barbiturates. Met up with Billie, actually. By the way, Chindi's way nicer. But anyway, it turned out you weren't dead after all. I think Billie was really diggin' the irony there; like, savoring it, y'know, that you weren't dead at all but now I was dying, and so then she was about to reap me, but then the docs revived me. So, um..." He gives Sam a faltering smile. "Worked out fine then, right? So I thought it'd probably work again."
There's a long pause. Sam's just staring at him.

"You... are a piece of work," Sam says. "Worked out 'fine'. Right."

"At least you know now where you stand," points out Dean.

Sam shakes his head again, and, finally, he gives a weak little chuckle. "So I'm still right up there with Cas after all?"

"Yep," says Dean, "Still able to inspire totally suicidal moves of complete stupidity. Congratulations."

"I, uh, I was actually thinking of doing the same thing, last night," Sam says then. And there it is.

Dean stays quiet, watching him. Sam's silent a long moment, staring down at the floor and tapping one hand on his knee, like he's assessing how much detail to go into. Finally he says, "You didn't use everything in that vial you had, did you know that?"

Dean grimaces and shakes his head. He'd clean forgotten about the vial.

"It still had quite a bit left," says Sam. "5cc vial and it looked like you only used 2cc or so. So after I dug it out of your jacket pocket and showed it to the doc so that he'd know what you'd taken — this was while the CPR was still going on, by the way — anyway, somehow I ended up with the vial. They were so busy getting you into the ER that they forgot to take the vial, and I... well, I put the damn thing in my pocket and so I still had it. By the time you finally were slowly getting around to putting your lazy-ass soul back in your damn body, I had that vial in one hand and my phone in the other. I was just looking for a syringe." (Dean very much wants to lay into him right now, give him a really good talking-to about what a stupid plan this was, but of course Dean's totally lost the high ground on this one.) "I was even about to text Sarah, just like you texted me. And I'd already totally freaked her out with the phone call earlier, from the road. Anyway, the only thing holding me back was, I couldn't find a syringe immediately. But I was looking through this little window in the door and I saw there was a whole of box of syringes right inside the door and I was about to try to... well, sneak in and grab one. But then you woke up."

Dean's just staring at him.

"We're damn lucky Cas is a fast flyer," says Dean at last.

Sam snorts. "Yep, twenty more seconds and I'd've done it. You know how they are at hospitals, they keep CPR going a solid thirty minutes, and they'd only been going on you for fifteen minutes or so, so I thought there still might've been enough time to get you back. And Cas too. Honestly, I was just trying to figure out how to time my end of it, like, where exactly to lie down so they'd find me soon, but not immediately, and when to text Sarah exactly."

"Yeah, the timing's tricky," agrees Dean, nodding. "I thought I had things all set up perfect, but then the second I got into the Veil I realized I'd landed wrong in the snow and probably couldn't breathe right. And I know I miscalculated where you were, and how it would be for you — I know I messed up on that, I do." (Sam just shrugs, like by now they're at the point of just improving the protocol for next time.) "And also then I totally lost track of time. Luckily Chindi warned us. But just barely in time — I think Cas definitely kind of panicked when he realized how long I'd been out of my body. He really went into overdrive at the end there, trying to fly me back in time."

"So he really did fly, huh?" says Sam with a grin. "He mentioned that just now, but I wasn't sure if it was, like, metaphorical or what."
"It was just Veil-flying," Dean says, "Which isn't really the same thing as flying in reality, I guess, but it sure felt real! I mean, from my perspective, seemed like he sure as hell flew. Fast. With wings. Damn, Sam, you gotta see his true form—" (Dean's starting to smile again, at the memory) "— it's awesome. HUGE wings. I mean, again, those were his Veil-wings, which means kind of... his own memory of his wings, I guess. But damn, Sam, they were cool looking. And, you know what, the real wings are pretty kickass too. I got a look at them too, the real ones that he has now. They're smaller now, but they fit the vessel really well, and they've got this gold edging. And they're warm. He was putting a wing over me in the ICU last night, and man it felt good —"

"Is this conversation gonna get x-rated any time soon?" says Sam.

Dean has to stop and think about that. "Not immediately," he says.

"Because, I'm just an innocent little kid brother, remember," Sam says. "I don't know anything about such things."

"I gotta keep your innocent kid-brother ears from burning off?" says Dean, grinning at him. "Don't worry, we were both too exhausted last night to do anything but sleep. All I meant was, his wings are warm. Like, literally warm. The feathers must radiate heat somehow, across the dimensions."

"Oh! That reminds me," says Sam, and he sits up very straight in order to pull something flat and bulky out of his jacket pocket. It's a wedge of folded cardboard, and when he opens it up there's carefully folded wad of paper towel inside. He sets the whole thing in his lap, gently unfolds the paper towel, and plucks out two feathers, a black one and a white one, and he holds both out to Dean.

Cas's black alula-feather. And the white feather Dean had given him in return.

Dean takes both of them, slowly, and stares at them.

For a long moment he has to just stroke Cas's little black feather.

He's a little surprised to find that his eyes are stinging. Cas is all right, he reminds himself, he's fine (in the short-term sense...) — everything's all right now. But Dean's almost shaky, his breathing actually getting a little ragged, just to find that little black feather safely back in his hands.

Sam's watching him. "It was in your shirtpocket," Sam says quietly. "Last night after the two of you conked out up here, I went on this feather-quest. Both your clothes had gotten all messed up and I realized you both must have had those feathers somewhere in your clothes, right? So, you had the black feather, somewhere, but it wasn't in your jacket, but then it turns out they cut your shirt off in a huge hurry when you were in cardiac arrest. Right up the middle with a huge pair of shears and right down both sleeves. It was totally in ribbons. I asked for it back — told them there was something in the pocket — and the nurse, she was so confused, she was all, 'I checked the pockets already and there's only this little crow feather' and I was like, 'Yeah, that, thanks'." Sam chuckles a little at the memory. Then a little smile quirks the corner of his mouth, as he watches Dean continue to stroke the little black feather.

"He's fine," says Sam gently. "Feather's fine, Cas is fine. His scans are probably done by now actually; we'll meet him downstairs in the lobby pretty soon. He's fine."

Fine in the short-term sense, thinks Dean yet again.

"Right, right," says Dean, finally forcing himself to put the feather away. He tucks it into the pocket of his new shirt and buttons the flap safely closed. But his eyes are still watery enough that he has to
rub a sleeve over face. Sam's still watching, so Dean jokes, "Just bummed about that shirt! I gotta stop ruining so many shirts."

"You go through like twenty a year, it's ridiculous," agrees Sam. "So, the white feather took even more work to find."

"Oh, right, it was in his vest!" says Dean, "Which was..."

Which was jammed in a sticky bloody mess in a plastic bag, dropped at the base of the halo statue, and half-buried in the snow.

"You found the bag," Dean says, grinning at Sam.

"Found the bag," Sam says, grinning back. "Cas didn't have the vest on any more, of course. They'd stripped him totally. Finally the doc said he'd given all Cas's stuff back to you. But you didn't seem to have any of it, and you didn't have the white feather on you, only the black one. I even made the poor nurse dig out your shredded shirt again just to be sure there wasn't a second feather in the bottom of the pocket. I'd about given up but then, at two in the morning, I suddenly thought, I bet it's where Dean was lying in the snow. Went all the way out there in the middle of the night and crawled around where you'd been lying. It was snowing again by then, just by the way. About froze my hands off."

"Damn, Sam," says Dean. "Thanks."

"I guess you could've just found another feather, huh?" says Sam.

"I could've," says Dean, twirling the little white duck feather around slowly between his fingers, "but I kind of think he'll like having this one back. Hey, how'd you get it so white again? Wasn't it all bloody?"

"Turns out Sarah knows even more tricks than we do about getting bloodstains out of stuff," Sam says. "She did something with hydrogen peroxide, I think. Came out pretty good, huh?"

"Wait, Sarah?" says Dean, frowning down at the feather. "Sarah washed this? What'd you do, Fedex it to her?"

"No," says a familiar voice from the door — a woman's voice. "He didn't Fedex it. He just called me. Probably the weirdest phone call I've ever gotten in my life."

Dean spins on his bed, and there's Sarah herself, grinning at him from the door. She's pushing an empty wheelchair, and as Dean stares at her, she maneuvers the wheelchair over to the foot of the bed, leaves it there, walks over to Sam and leans down to give him a quick kiss.

On the mouth.

"How," says Dean slowly, "are you here?"

"Like I said," says Sarah, straightening up and looking over at Dean, "I got a really weird phone call last night."

"And then I kind of made a crazy second call too," says Sam, "Right after you woke back up—"

"—so I decided to fly out here and wash the feather myself," Sarah concludes. She laughs at Dean's baffled look and she says, giving Sam's shoulder an affectionate little squeeze, "We were having a super slow day at the clinic in Denver. Christmas Day, you know; and thing is, you never know,
sometimes the holidays are crazy at the clinic and sometimes it's totally quiet. This Christmas was so quiet we were going nuts just from the boredom. Until Sam called. My supervisor was right there, so, she kind of heard the whole thing, and by the time Sam called back the second time she'd already cleared me to take off if I wanted; we had enough other staff. I thought I might be able to offer some home-care assistance, or at least emotional support, if I got here quick." At Dean's astonished look she shrugs and adds, "Hey, I had the miles. Flew stand-by and they squeezed me in. Not many people fly Christmas Day, did you know that? Absolute best time for last-minute trips. And I was scheduled to work anyway, so what the hey, it's not like it was gonna be much of a holiday either way. It's a short flight, too; Flagstaff's not very far."

She's trying to make it sound like no big deal. But she'd dropped everything and flown in the middle of the night, on Christmas, after getting just a couple phone calls from Sam.

"Got in just before ten," she adds, still sounding all casual, "and Sam was like, 'so, looks like they're both alive' but he was obviously a total wreck, so I made him eat something and we came up and sat with you both for a while— you were both sleeping and stable by then but I wanted to just, you know, check out the situation. Not to mention make sure the staff here are good. Which they are, turns out. So then later we're sitting right over there—" (she gestures over at a pair of chairs against the wall) "— a couple hours past midnight and I'm trying to convince Sam to go get some sleep and all of sudden Sam goes I KNOW WHERE THE FEATHER IS and I'm all, what feather? why are you trying to find a feather? Next thing I know we're crawling around in the snow at two in the morning."

Dean looks at Sam. And Sam's gazing up at Sarah with... that look. He's got that look. All puppy-eyed and with maybe the dopiest smile Dean's ever seen on Sam's face. Like he can't take his eyes off her.

"You know what, Sam," says Dean. Sam finally drags his eyes back to Dean, and Dean says, "My first dates are more like, meet for a drink, maybe a burger, maybe a fun game of pool. Gotta admit I never really tried the 'Why don't you fly five hundred miles in the middle of the night and then let's crawl around in the snow together and look for my brother's lost feather'. Not till the third date usually. How'd it work out for you?"

"Worked out great, since you ask," says Sarah with a laugh.

And Sam's suddenly blushing like crazy.

Sam clears his throat and glances up at Sarah again. "Was that our first date?" he asks.

"Technically, yes," Sarah says (by now she's leaning one elbow casually on Sam's shoulder, grinning down at him). "But, you know, it kind of feels like we leapfrogged straight to fifth or sixth date, doesn't it? All that caregiver bonding, maybe. What with the chemo and flu and all." She adds, to Dean (since Sam seems to be speechless at the moment). "Cancer does that, you know. Puts things in perspective. Even just for a caretaker, or for oncology staff like me, you get into this carpe-diem frame of mind. You see an opportunity and you jump. A door opens and you go right on through. Anyway," she adds brightly, "Looks like you're both miraculously out of the woods. Not the first medical miracle I've seen around Castiel, so I can't say I'm totally surprised, but maybe you could still use a little of that good ol' home-health care?"

"Definitely," says Dean. It's actually a huge relief to know that Sarah might be around for a few days; Dean's still feeling utterly wrung out, Cas must be too, and poor Sam looks like he's really been through the wringer. Dean adds, "Really hope you don't feel like you flew all this way for nothing, 'cause it'll be great to have you around."
"Oh, I'm already pretty sure it wasn't for nothing," says Sarah, and she and Sam trade the briefest of glances. (Sam seems to be blushing again.) Sarah turns back to Dean and goes on smoothly with, "Actually, I think it's only because I'm here that you're both being released so soon. Dr. Flaherty really brightened up when I told him I'm one of Cas's regular nurses, from Klein's clinic. He doublechecked with Denver, Klein verified everything and vouched for me, and I think that sped things up for getting you both released. Especially when I promised I'd keep you both under observation for the next couple days — if that's all right with you, I mean, Dean? Cas seemed pleased that I might stick around — I was just talking to him downstairs. Anyway, today's plan was, Sam came in a bit earlier than me so you guys could get some pow-wow time together, and then I was supposed to come in about now and help get you all back to your Airbnb. And then I help keep an eye on you both for a couple days. If that sounds good?"

Dean nods, a little numbly. Sarah smiles and says to Sam, "That reminds me, you can probably go pick up Castiel from Radiology; he should be done about now. But Dean, you've got some things to sign down in the lobby first, so I'll take you down there. Then Sam and Castiel will come meet us. I'm supposed to take you down in a wheelchair; ready?"

"Yes, ma'am," says Dean meekly.

Sam soon disappears to go fetch Cas from wherever Radiology is. Dean obediently clambers into his wheelchair — he'd been planning to insist on walking, but the second he stands up he finds he's rather shaky on his feet. And Sarah takes him by the elbow and steers him into the wheelchair with such no-nonsense effectiveness that Dean just follows her lead. Sarah tucks a blanket around his legs, again with that no-nonsense practiced air (like she's been a professional blanket-tucker for years. Which probably she has). Dean sits there as quiet as a mouse as she starts wheeling him to the elevator, still a little stunned that she's here at all.

They have to wait a few minutes at the elevator. Dean's soon trying to assess whether he's on casual enough terms yet with Sarah to be able to tease her a little bit, maybe about this middle-of-the-night traveling. Maybe by cracking another joke about the first-date thing? He's carefully planning out a little joke about it when Sarah leans over and whispers into Dean's ear, rather sternly, "You aren't gonna ever do anything like that to Sam again, are you?"

Dean's a little startled. Then he has to laugh. "This why you sent Sam to get Cas?" he asks. "So you could grill me on your own?"

"Absolutely," says Sarah, her head nodding right by his shoulder. "And don't dodge the question. It sounds like you pulled some really crazy stunts last night."

"Yeah, but, there was kind of a plan behind it all, I swear," Dean says. "It wasn't as crazy as it sounds."

"Well, good, because it sounded very crazy," says Sarah. "A deliberate OD to... what, to find a reaper? Did I understand Sam right? You actually went looking for Castiel's reaper?"

Dean twists around to look up at her.

She straightens up, giving him a wry little smile. "I work in a hospital, Dean," she says. "I've seen a lot of people die. We hear stuff. We see stuff. And, you know, the last few years..." She glances up
and down the hallway, as if checking to see if anybody's in earshot, and then she says, dropping her voice to just above a whisper, "Let's just say, things've been weird. Anyway, I know about reapers, if that's what you're wondering. And a few other things too. Just promise me you're not gonna do another _overdose_ to try to _bargain with a reaper_ again, okay?"

"I already promised Sam I won't do it again," Dean says. He can't help adding, "Or, actually, what I promised was, if I do it again it'll be planned better."

Sarah sets one hand on her hip, stares down at him for a long moment and bites her lip. Finally she says, "Okay. But just remember one thing. You don't only have Sam to deal with now. You've got _me too._"

Dean stares up at her. She meets his gaze levelly, her brown eyes dark and serious. The elevator arrives; it's empty, and Sarah wheels Dean in and neatly pivots the chair around. Once the door closes she moves around by his side, hunkering down on her heels so that she can get a good look at his face.

Sarah says, "I know I only just met Sam pretty recently. I know it's a new relationship, but... look, it feels good, somehow; it feels like there's some really good potential. But I know there's things going on here that you guys haven't told me yet. Some I've figured out. Some you can fill me in on later if you want. But even though I haven't known Sam or you very long, or Castiel even, I just have to say..." She sets one hand on Dean's shoulder, and her grip's like iron. "If you _ever_ make Sam sound again like he sounded when he called me last night, when he thought he was losing Castiel _and you_ in the same night; if you _ever_ make _me_ have to _listen_ to Sam sounding like that again..." She takes a breath, releases Dean's shoulder and stands back up. Dean gazes up at her mutely as she rubs the bridge of her nose with one hand. She finally says, "I know it might've been necessary. Don't get me wrong, I'm _really_ glad Castiel has pulled through this hemorrhagic crisis, and if you had anything to do with that, that's fantastic. But if you _ever_ put Sam, _or_ me, through that again, taking _such_ a risk, with no warning and without letting either of us at least help plan it — _you are going to regret it._" She pauses, looking down at him. "Clear?" she asks calmly.

"Crystal," says Dean meekly, and Sarah gives him a perfectly friendly pat on the shoulder. She's timed her little speech perfectly; the elevator doors open, and she pushes Dean out to the lobby.

Dean adds, as she wheels him across the lobby, "Hey, Sarah?"

"Yeah?" she says.

"Thank you. For coming out... for everything."

"I had my own reasons," is all she says. "But, you're welcome." Then she adds, "Oh, and...."

"Yeah?"

"You like pie by any chance?" Again Dean has to turn around and look up at her. Sarah smiles down at him. "Turned out Sam had all these Christmas dinner fixings. I know it's been a hell of a strange twenty-four hours, but if you and Cas feel at all up to it, we thought we could do a tiny Christmas dinner tonight, at your Airbnb. It's a day late, but it seemed a pity to let the turkey go to waste. Not a big sit-down thing — you guys can both eat in bed, or on the downstairs sofa, I've got a little plan for that — but, I already started the turkey this morning. It should be done about two hours after we get home. And I made a couple of pies. Pumpkin and apple."

Dean just blinks up at her for a long moment.
"When on earth did you make a pie?" asks Dean. "Two pies?"

"This morning," Sarah says. "Sam wanted to come here early and get some time with you both, so I made a couple pies."

"You made two pies this morning," Dean repeats. "And cleaned the feather...."

"I did the white feather last night at two-thirty, in the nurse's station," says Sarah. "And Sam already had all the pie stuff. Didn't take long. Easy as pie, you know?"

"Hey, you need any roommates, by any chance?" Dean says. "Like, three maybe? Back in Denver? Or, y'know, Kansas?"

Sarah just grins at him. "Early days yet," she says, "but we'll talk."

From ahead of them comes a cheerful "Yo, dude, over here." There's Sam, pushing another wheelchair; and there's Cas, beaming at Dean.

Two hours later Cas and Dean are safely back at home, curled up side-by-side on the sofa-bed in the Airbnb's living room. Sam's delivering plates of turkey, mashed potatoes, cranberry sauce and stuffing, Sarah helping him set each plate carefully on little rolling bedside-serving-trays that she's apparently managed to borrow somehow from the hospital.

Dean finds himself much more hungry than he'd expected; he scarfs down an entire plate and has started on seconds while Cas is still nibbling at his first plate. It turns out Cas still can only seem to take in fairly small portions, and after a little discussion, they all realize that fixing his blood-volume problem won't have magically fixed everything else — like, it seems, the digestive issues. But at least he stills seems to be nausea-free; he insists he's truly enjoying the small amounts that he's able to eat.

The dinner is wonderful. The pies are wonderful. The whole evening seems magical. And it's remarkable how well Sarah seems to fit in. Cas, of course, is already accustomed to Sarah being an intimate part of his chemotherapy life, and the two of them seem to have an easy rapport, even teasing each other like old friends. Even Dean's experienced some of her nursing skills recently too, during the flu bout. It all makes it very easy to relax around her.

And as evening drifts into night, it also becomes apparent that she hasn't gotten any other kind of motel room; apparently this is where she's going to spend the night. (Dean finally manages to get Sam alone for a second to ask, in as innocent a tone as he can manage, "So, is Sarah gonna be staying in the third bedroom? The empty one?" He already knows the answer; he's really only asking so he can enjoy watching that blush spread over Sam's face yet again, and the way Sam finally stammers, "Uh, no, she won't be in the third bedroom.")

It helps, a lot, that Sarah turns out to be quick on the uptake about reapers, angels and all the other supernatural aspects of the hunter lifestyle. Dean's used to having to hide all this stuff from potential partners, but not only does Sarah seem to have completely accepted that Cas is an angel, she even seems to get some of the health-and-cancer implications about him being housed in a human vessel. She's putting the puzzle-pieces together remarkably fast, and when Dean finally asks her outright "How do you know all this stuff?" she explains to them all what she'd hinted to Dean earlier: For some years now, it turns out, hospital staff across the country have had to deal with some highly unusual supernatural phenomena. Often enough so that they've even developed medical terms for
some of it ("Exploding-Patient Syndrome", "Black-Veined Plague", "Possession-Related Personality Changes" and many more). The medical community hadn't understood the core causes, of course, but apparently it had been obvious that there were some very bizarre things going on.

"I'm actually relieved just to know a little more about the truth," Sarah says, after they've filled her in on a few of the key differences between demon possession, angel possession, and the exploding-vessel phenomenon. She's flipping through *The Physiology of Angels* now, as Sam points out a few key chapters that are relevant for Cas's situation. "But, so, reapers are angels? That part I didn't know."

"A distantly related subspecies," Castiel says. (He's no longer eating; he'd only had a small serving, and a small piece of pie, but at least he's kept it all down. He's nestled now against Dean's shoulder on the sofa-bed.) "There's a sort of... evolutionary tree of angel lineages, you could say, and they're the most distant branch. There's some disagreement about whether they should be elevated to species status. But, yes, they're usually considered angels, for simplicity."

"So when you went to negotiate with Chindi," Sarah asks Dean, "you were trying to convince an angel to spare another angel's life?"

"Yeah, basically," says Dean. "But I didn't actually convince Chindi about anything. She was already planning to save Cas. You know... I don't know if my whole trip there even accomplished anything." (This is something that's nagging at Dean all day, since the talk with Sam; had the trip into the Veil, as dramatic as it had been, been a waste of time? Had Dean totally stressed poor Sam out about nothing?) "Chindi had already had the magic water," Dean points out. "Havasu had already sent Chindi there anyway. I didn't end up cutting any deals or making any bargains. So I'm not really sure if I did anything useful."

Cas's eyes narrow. "Weren't you listening?"

Dean glances at him. "Listening to what?"

"To Chindi," Cas says. "She didn't recognize me as an angel at first. She said she was about to give up and leave, remember? It wasn't until you told her I was an angel that she decided to stay and take a closer look."

Dean stares at him. He'd forgotten about that part.

Chindi had walked past Castiel originally, hadn't she? She'd been briefly puzzled by his wings, given him a bit of a double-take, but then she'd moved on to look at all the other patients.

It wasn't till Dean had spoken up to insist that Cas was an angel that Chindi had come back for a second look.

Cas says to Dean, "I believe Chindi would've given up and left if you hadn't been there. And I really don't think the hemorrhaging would've stopped on its own."

"Chindi said she wasn't sure if you were really about to die—" begins Dean.

"I was dying," Cas says.

Dean frowns at him. "How would you know for sure?"

"I saw my own wings," Cas says.

They all look at him. Cas explains, "When I was on the white rug, Dean. I realized I could see my
own wings. They were very clear."

Sarah says, slowly, "Emily always said she could see your wings..."

"Exactly," Cas says, nodding to her. "The dying sometimes can see into the etheric plane, which is where angels usually keep their wings. When an ordinary human, one without special abilities, can see an angel's wings, it's a sign that they're dying. It means the dying person's soul is beginning to separate from the material plane. Unless something else intervenes to halt the process, that is. Emily saw my wings because she was near death. Dean saw them too, last night. And ironically, I've been unable to see my own wings myself for many months, until last night, when finally I got a glimpse of them." He looks up at Dean with a little smile. "So, you see, you did save my life last night, Dean."

"Chalk one up in the win column," says Dean, his voice a little gruff. He's actually a little taken aback to hear Cas confirm, with such surety, that Dean saved his life last night. He slips an arm around Cas's shoulders, gives him a rough squeeze, and says, "Now we just gotta keep it that way. You just stay saved, all right? Just gotta fix up your wings, now."

But that night the nightmares return.

Dean's back on Bright Angel Trail. Cas slumps down from Dean's shoulder, blood pouring from his mouth. But Castiel falls right out of Dean's grasp this time, and despite Dean's desperate attempt to grab at hand, at his hat, anything, Cas somehow slips right off the stone bench. He seems to plummet down an infinite cliff, falling in slow motion, dropping through a cloud layer that seems a mile below, while Dean can only stare in horror. He can't even get enough breath to scream; all he can seem to do is whisper "Cas...no... Cas..."

"Dean?" comes an answering voice. "Dean. DEAN." It's Cas, and he's shaking Dean's shoulder, and when Dean finally comes awake he finds he's clutching convulsively at Cas's head and shoulders. They're not on Bright Angel Trail at all; they're in the big bed in the upstairs room at the Airbnb. It's late at night. "Dean, wake up," Cas is saying. "I'm okay. I'm okay. Everything's okay."

"Sorry," Dean gasps. He tries to make himself loosen his death-grip on Cas's shoulders. "Sorry, just a dream— sorry."

"Everything's okay," Cas repeats, and he kisses Dean's cheek. "Truly."

Dean can only give a ragged breath as he curls against Cas. This isn't even the first time; this is the third nightmare just tonight, by Dean's count. There'd been one where the helicopter had crashed; in another, Cas had died while Dean had been trying to carry him up the trail.

"It's ironic, you know," Cas says, stroking Dean's hair. "I feel so bad that I ruined your Christmas so completely, and made you go through what must have been a horrible ordeal. But what's ironic is..." His hand pauses on Dean's head. He finally says, "It would have been a perfect death. From my perspective, anyway."

Dean pulls back a little and looks at him. There's a silvery moonlight sneaking in past the curtains; it's glancing over Cas's face, outlining his familiar profile with achingly lovely lines of light and shadow.

"A completely peaceful painless death," Cas explains. "You know, I never thought my life would
end with anything other than pain and failure. I've been bracing for death for some time. Trying to accept that my death will be either... well, I was expecting one of two outcomes: Either a death so sudden that I have to leave everything unsaid and undone, leave you unprotected, everything incomplete... or, if slower, something painful and miserable, where I'd know that I'd failed. But, Dean, that moment on the trail... It was neither of those." Cas lets out a long sigh. His fingers start slowly tracing their way over Dean's face. "It was perfect. It was such a beautiful place, and I was with you. And there was no pain. No pain at all. All I felt was a sort of... wooziness."

"Wooziness?" Dean asks, frowning at him.

"I guess I should have told you," Cas says (he starts looking a little uncertain about this). "I'd been feeling weak and light-headed for several minutes. It wasn't just the coughing; there was something else, a light-headedness. I thought it would pass, and I didn't want to worry you, so I didn't say anything—"

"Goddammit," mutters Dean.

"I know, I know. But it was such a wonderful day. Such a wonderful evening, the night before; and such a wonderful day, all that day. To get to be in such a lovely place with the two of you. Sitting by your side like that with such a view...."

"And then it all went to hell," says Dean.

"For you," Cas says. And then, somehow, they're both laughing.

Cas finally says, as the laughter peters out, "I hope this hasn't ruined the Grand Canyon for you."

"Got to admit it was a bit of a downer to end the day on," says Dean. "Felt like I'd marched you to your death."

"If it makes you feel any better," Cas remarks, "Dr. Flaherty told me today that I might not have survived if we'd gone anywhere else other than the Canyon."

Dean pulls back and looks at him. "What? Why?"

Cas gives him a steady look. The blue of his eyes seems a deep indigo in the dim moonlight. He tells Dean, "The bleed came from the mid-intestine. Unrelated to any of our sexual activities, by the way — I asked — I knew you'd be worried about that, but he says it played no role." (And that's definitely a load off Dean's mind.) "And, knowing where the bleed came from, Dr. Flaherty now says it could have happened at any time. Dr. Flaherty asked me if there had been previous bleeds, and I realized there had been, in the motel, remember? I've had several like that, during chemo, and it turns out that patients who have repeated intestinal bleeds during chemo can have spontaneous bleedouts at any time. It could have happened right here in Flagstaff, just from the exertion of going up and down the stairs. It could have happened in the bunker, from, you know... our other activities. And if it had happened anywhere else... well, just think. Bright Angel Trail was just very close to that lodge, right? And I'm told the lodge had radios to call the EMTs, right?"

Slowly, Dean nods. Cas goes on, "And the EMTs arrived quite quickly, and they had oxygen masks on me right away, and there was a helicopter right there too, correct? And a regional trauma center that's accustomed to dealing with severe injuries? With a supply of donated blood?"

Dean realizes what he's saying: The Grand Canyon was set up for rapid medical response.

Cas had gotten to a skilled hospital in probably... sixteen minutes total. He's right; that never could never have happened if it all gone down in little Lebanon, Kansas.
"Would've been handier if you'd passed out in the lodge," points out Dean. "Not down that damn trail."

"But if it had happened in the lodge," Cas says calmly, "the raven wouldn't have seen me."

The raven.

The raven that had swooped right over them, and had given Cas such a searching look, right when Cas had been passing out.

"I think he came over to look at my wings," says Cas. "You know that ravens can see etheric plane, right? They're like cats, in that they can perceive the etheric plane even while they themselves are in the material world, at all times, even when they're not dying. Anyway, I've been thinking about it, and I realized the raven must have been able to see my wings, and I believe that's why it came so close. And then, from what Chindi said, I think that's got to have been the same raven who saw that I was bleeding. And if that raven hadn't reported to Havasu that I was losing blood — that my specific issue, the reason I needed help, was blood loss — Havasu wouldn't have known to work the blood spell or to send Chindi with the water. Havasu would have still been willing to help me, I think, but he wouldn't have known how." Cas pauses, thinking. "Interesting combination of human and divine assistance, in the end," he muses. "Chindi couldn't reach me immediately, but that was okay because you got me to medical assistance, and then the medical staff kept me alive. For hours. Just with human ingenuity, really. Maintaining a bank of donated blood from other individuals? That's such a clever idea! Let's see, how long was it, between when I passed out and when Chindi gave me the water?"

"About three hours," says Dean, slowly.

How many units of blood had Cas had by then?

How many people must have been involved, to donate all those bags of blood, and get them all to Cas? How many doctors and nurses and EMTs had helped? Dr. Flaherty, the med student, the nurses... and, earlier, the EMTs, the helicopter pilots, even those National Park staff with their radios who had called for help so fast. Dean had felt so desperately alone there on the trail, but really he'd been only a few dozen steps from help. And once he'd managed those few dozen steps on his own, there'd been a whole chain of human assistance from then on. All those people had somehow kept Castiel alive, against all odds, for hours.

And meanwhile the raven had carried that one critical message to Havasu...

"You saved me," Cas says, "And the doctors saved me, and I think the Grand Canyon saved me too." He adds, thoughtfully, "So, all in all, I think I was actually very fortunate that I was at the Grand Canyon when it happened. So I really hope you'll be able to think of my trail, of Bright Angel Trail, as a place of hope, instead of as a place of trauma."

Dean's thinking of the view from the trail, now. It's burned into his memory, of course: the view from that little stone bench, the stunning rock cliffs of red and orange, the distant gullies, the endless sky. And the sense of peace Dean had felt, sitting there with Cas. He can even remember the sound of the wind in the raven's wings.

The memory of this moment has been resurfacing in all the nightmares, of course, last night and now tonight. It's been an image of terror, a scene of panic and helplessness and tragedy. But now it shifts, in Dean's mind, from something painful and horrific, to something... lucky. Something unlikely and hopeful. Terrifying at the time, yes, but also very, very lucky.
"I gotta go thank that bird," says Dean.

"I've gotta go thank Havasu," says Cas. "He's got a pool down at the base of the Canyon, you know. A pool of bluish-green water. Someday I'd like to travel down there and give him an offering. Water elementals are fond of alcoholic drinks; maybe we could bring him an offering? A gesture of thanks."

Dean thinks about that. "Someday we're gonna be riding those mules down with a couple bottles of tequila in our packs, aren't we? The Bright Angel himself, riding a mule right down Bright Angel Trail?"

Cas laughs. "Those mules! Of course! Sam'll have to come too."

"Think Sarah likes mules?"

"Maybe we'll find out," says Cas, still chuckling a little. "Someday let's do that. When I'm better."

"When you're better," Dean echoes, and he leans his forehead against Cas's.

Neither of them speak for several long minutes. The "When you're better," seems to ring through the air, with all its hope... and all its uncertainty. Cas's hand starts moving again, and he strokes his fingers through Dean's hair; Dean kisses him on the forehead, and the nose, and the lips. Cas somehow manages to wriggle even closer, then, working a leg in between Dean's and an arm around Dean's torso, till they're wrapped as close as they can get. There's no sex; it's not that kind of an embrace tonight. But it's something that's maybe even closer, even warmer, even more necessary.

Several minutes later, Cas's breathing has slowed. He must be asleep.

"Love you a lot, T-Bird," Dean whispers, even though Cas probably can't hear.

But Cas whispers back, "Love you too."

Dean dreams once more that night, of the Canyon, and of Bright Angel Trail. This time though, when dream-Castiel passes out in Dean's arms, he doesn't fall down the dream-cliff, and he doesn't disappear into the dream-clouds far below; rather, he just seems to slide into Dean's arms and fall into a heavy sleep. There's a dim knowledge in Dean's head, now, in this iteration of the dream, that assistance is nearby. There's a sensation of dozens of people nearby, all poised and waiting, ready to help — Sam, the lodge staff, the EMTs, the helicopter, the doctors in Flagstaff. And there's also a faint awareness that Havasu, and Chindi, and the ravens, are nearby too. Castiel is not alone.

Maybe they've never been alone?

Maybe nothing ever truly goes unwatched or unwitnessed. Not on this trail, anyway.

Dean cradles Cas, in the ghostly dream-Canyon on the dream-trail, and this time the panic is gone. And it truly is a moment of perfect peace; this time Dean can finally look up at the raven that's still circling overhead. There's been raven a circling overhead in every one of these dreams, Dean realizes.

And as soon as Dean focuses on it, the raven seems to snap free from its endless circling. It swoops
down neatly, almost dancing down, side-slipping nimbly through the gusts of wind, and it lands on the very end of the stone bench, just a few inches away from Cas’s knee. It stares at Dean with bead-bright eyes, and it says, in a perfectly soundless voice that seems to materialize right inside Dean’s head:

*You’ve yanked me into this dream of yours six times now, human, between last night and tonight. And each time I’ve been trying to tell you, no angels die on Bright Angel Trail. Not on my watch, anyway. Havasu remembers your particular angel quite well, and besides, I like the look of his wings. Nice edgings on the coverts. (The raven winks at Dean.) Your angel is sleeping safe beside you. Now will you please let me sleep?*

A/N - Next part later tonight or tomorrow. Thank you so much for reading.
So how about that Expotition to the North Pole?

The dreams don't wake Dean again.

He only finally wakes, the next morning, when the floorboards creak slightly. Dean opens his eyes to find Castiel tip-toeing cautiously across the room. Cas is fully dressed, in that soft blue sweater of his, and the dark pants, with a pair of his new thick gray wool socks on his feet. He goes stealthily across the room, and pauses in front of the two large side windows — which both, Dean realizes, now have mounds of new snow heaped up picturesquely against the windowsills, big crescents of fluffy white that are stuck on the outsides of the windows in picture-perfect arcs. More snow's falling beyond, dense clouds of snowflakes drifting down onto the tree branches. It looks like it's almost glowing outside, the whole world shining softly, like the house is suspended in a gigantic snowglobe.

Cas pauses right there, framed by one of the snow-frosted windows as he rummages around quietly in his duffel bag. He finally pulls out his old cream-colored scarf, along with one of new extra-warm hats that Dean gave him for Christmas (even though he's already got the monkey-hat on) and a new pair of Christmas mittens too. He studies the mittens in the dim room, apparently trying to make sure he's got a matching pair, and as he does so he's outlined perfectly against the window. Etched in perfect silhouette, by the faintly glowing winter light.

Just as he'd once, long months ago, been outlined against a certain motel window in Denver. Angel, Tending to Houseplant, Dean had thought back then.

Dean thinks now, Another one for my angel series: "Angel, with Christmas Mittens".

I really gotta learn how to draw someday, he thinks. In lieu of that, Dean sneaks his phone off the bedside table, flicks it on, and snaps a picture.

The phone makes a little camera-shutter sound, and though it's quite faint, Cas jumps, spinning around. When he sees that Dean's awake, a smile instantly spreads over his face, and he lowers the mittens. Dean grins back at him.

"Mornin', T-Bird," says Dean. "Is it dawn yet?"

Dean already knows, from the even gray look of the light outside, that it's long past dawn. But he's rewarded with a little laugh from Cas. "It's almost noon," says Cas, still smiling at him. Cas comes over, puts the mittens, scarf and the winter hat down at the foot of the bed, and sits at Dean's side. Dean reaches up one hand and cups Cas's cheek.

"Still alive?" Dean asks. "All good? Blood still staying where it's supposed to?"

"Still inside all the blood vessels, as far as I can tell," Cas confirms, folding one hand over Dean's. "Havasu's blood spell seems to be holding strong. I must admit I'm feeling better."

Dean glances toward the Cas's little bundle of winter gear. "Feeling so much better you're going out on an ex-po-tition to the North Pole?"

"Expotition?" says Cas, frowning. "Do you mean expedition? The North Pole isn't anywhere near here. I was just going to go a few blocks."

Dean laughs. "It's from Winnie the Pooh," he says. "It's a kids' book. My mom used to read it to me. Back when I was a kid." Something about the snow on the windowsill had brought back the memory; a very faint image, from long, long ago, of sitting in a bedroom on the second floor of that
nice little house they’d once had in Kansas. Not an underground bunker, not a run-down motel, but a proper two-story frame house. With snow falling outside. Snow falling past the windows... And Mom sitting right next to Dean, on the edge of Dean’s little bed, reading Winnie the Pooh out loud to him.

Dean realizes, with a start, that it's pretty rare for him to remember something about Mom that's just a happy childhood memory. Nothing to do with her death; nothing about demons, or fire, or the painful years of watching Dad tear himself apart trying to find her killer, or trying to help raise little motherless Sammy. Nothing to do with all the years of missing her since.

Instead, just snow falling, and a peaceful house, and Mom reading Winnie The Pooh.

*Let yourself be happy*....

"It's a chapter in a kid's book," he says to Cas. He finds he even still remembers the chapter title, and he recites, a little wistfully: "In Which Christopher Robin Leads An Expotition To The North Pole."

Cas nods, a faint spark of recognition in his eyes now. "That sounds familiar," he says. "Since becoming human again, I've lost a lot of what Metatron put into my head. There was a moment when he'd stuffed all the stories of human history into my mind, you remember? A lot of it's faded now, but I do remember there was a children's book about a bear. A toy stuffed bear, right? I'd forgotten the details." He glances over his shoulder at the mittens. "I was thinking of going outside. Though not to the North Pole. Just to the coffeeshop and back."

Dean frowns. "You sure you're up to that?"

Cas nods. "It's only four blocks away. I really do feel much better today, and there's no wind; I already went out on the porch to check, and it's not even really that cold outside. It's actually quite lovely out. You weren't awake yet, obviously, so I didn't want to disturb you, but I was going to leave you a note. I was thinking of bringing back some pastries for you. Sam and Sarah went out to do a little more shopping, by the way — now that we're staying here a little longer, apparently they wanted to buy some more food. But I was getting restless just sitting around waiting for them."

Dean's frowning — he doesn't like the idea of Cas heading off on his own in the cold — but as he watches Cas talking, he has to admit that Cas's color really is better, and a lot of the fatigue seems to be gone from his actions. Maybe Dean doesn't have to hover over Cas like a nurse-maid every single second?

But some of the other tell-tale signs are still there: the slightly hunched posture, like Cas is maybe still a little sore all over; the terrible thinness (which also brings to mind the way he still hadn't been able to eat much last night); the dryness of his skin, the chapped lips. And of course his hair's still gone. He's still got a somewhat ghostly look from the loss of his eyebrows. And he's wearing the monkey-hat, which is at least lending its usual note of cheerful color, but it's a reminder that his hair's still gone. He's still not at full health, in a lot of ways.

But... at least he's not going to bleed out.

*Let yourself be happy*....

*Let Cas be happy too,* thinks Dean. Cas probably wants to see a bit of the world. Not stay cooped up inside forever.

Especially if another whole course of chemotherapy or radiation is going to come crashing down on him again in just a week or two.
"I'll come with you," says Dean. "We'll do an Expotition together. An Expotition to the Coffeehouse. But just one thing first."

"What?" says Cas.

In answer Dean lifts a hand up to Cas's monkey-hat. He takes hold of one of the tassels, then the other, winds both tassels slowly around his fingers, and then, very slowly, he pulls Cas's face down. Right to his own. Cas is smiling again before Dean's even started in on the kissing.

One thing leads to another.

"Bring my duffel over here," Dean says, about three minutes later. They're both in the middle of stripping down by now, Dean shrugging off the loose t-shirt he'd been sleeping in while Cas, who's stood back up to pull his sweater off, is now trying to get his pants off too. (By silent consensus, the Expotition to the Coffeehouse has been postponed for a little while.)

Cas grabs Dean's duffel by one handle and swings it over to the bed, as requested. "I already put the lubricant in your bedside drawer, though," Cas informs him.

"Not what I'm looking for right now," Dean says, as he rummages around deep in the duffel. Soon he pulls out a long, thin box. "There," he says with satisfaction, and he pries open the box, studies the contents thoughtfully, and lifts out a long, glossy white feather. "I brought some extras. Not alula-feathers, but I thought they might do the trick for... y'know... other stuff. If you feel up to it?"

He glances up at Cas to find him frozen still, his eyes wide and round.

Cas comes back to himself, finally manages to yank his pants off, and shucks off his boxers.

"I see you're feeling up to it," says Dean.

It's a heated, delicious time. Once more, as before, Dean starts by dragging the long, slender feather all over Cas's skin. It's a longer feather this time, but white like the little alula one. And it still seems to count as "Dean's" in some sense, for Cas can't seem to take his eyes off it. Dean brushes it everywhere; over Cas's bruises, over Cas's scars; even over the new IV scars he's just picked up in the last couple days; over everything. And even this new, non-alula-feather of Dean's seems to set Cas on fire. It's a thrill to see how his breathing deepens, and how he shivers, his hands tightening on Dean (one of Cas's hands is now on Dean's shoulder, the other softly grabbing Dean's hair), as Dean twirls the feather, slowly, everywhere. Over Cas's face and his lips, over his chest, across his nipples... Dean even flips him completely over just so he can drag the feather-tip down the middle of Cas's back, and watch him sigh in pleasure.

Dean even, very tentatively, tries a little rimming again. It's surprising how nervous this makes him — despite Cas's reassurances, Dean's somehow acquired a superstitious worry that Cas might suddenly start hemorrhaging from every orifice all at once.

"I won't bleed, Dean," Cas whispers, when Dean hesitates for about the fifth time. "I truly won't. You don't have to worry." As if sensing Dean's concern, Cas pulls away then, sits up, and gives Dean a long, thoughtful look. "I think it's your turn right now, if you don't mind," he says. "Time for you to lie down." Cas delicately plucks the white feather out of Dean's hands, reaches over to the bedside table (where The Physiology of Angels is also sitting) and gently sets the white feather down,
murmuring, "I'll get back to you later, I promise." And then he reaches for the book itself.

"May I?" he asks, his hand pausing on the book cover.

Dean doesn't quite get what he's asking, till Cas flips open the cover and picks up the little black feather that's tucked just inside. Cas's feather — Cas's alula-feather. Dean had carefully set it inside the book's front cover last night, just to keep it safe; he hadn't even realized Cas had noticed where he'd put it.

"May I?" Cas repeats.

"It's your feather," Dean whispers.

"It's yours too, now," Cas informs him. But he takes firm hold of his little black feather, moves over to Dean, flips Dean over and pushes him back, till Dean's lying flat on his back. Then Cas straddles Dean's hips.

They're both hard by now, and as Cas gets into position their cocks brush against together. Cas's cock feels almost burning hot against Dean's; without even thinking, Dean reaches down and wraps a hand around both their cocks. Meanwhile, Cas starts stroking the feather — his very own alula-feather — along Dean's cheek. Dean gazes up at him; Cas's eyes are dark and intent, his lips slightly parted. He's concentrating so hard that there's almost a scowl on his face.

There's a shimmer in the air on either side, a waft of warmth shifting into place along either side of Dean's hips.

"You've got your wings on me, don't you," Dean murmurs.

"I do," says Cas. "And someday, when I'm better..." He leans over then, very close, tucking his head down by one of Dean's shoulders so that his lips are right by one of Dean's ears. For a long moment he lets his body weight sink down on top of Dean, a delightfully heavy warm weight; their cocks press deliciously together. But Cas doesn't speak at first; Dean feels his hot breath against the side of Dean's head, but Cas says nothing. Instead he slowly traces the little black feather down the other side of Dean's neck. It feels like a line of fire.

Then Cas whispers, hoarsely, right into Dean's ear, "When I'm better, I'll pull my wings over to the material plane. I'll put my wings right on you, Dean, I swear it. I'll put them all over you, physically, right here here in the material plane, I'll brush my feathers over every inch of your skin—" Cas's voice is going even hoarser as he says this, as if this is the most forbidden, most erotic, absolute hottest thing he can imagine doing — and hearing that hoarseness in Cas's voice, it instantly becomes the most forbidden, most erotic, absolute hottest thing in the world for Dean, too.

"I'll drag my feathers all over you, Dean — just like I'm doing with this one —" Cas says again, and he sits up again, dragging that little black feather right down Dean's belly now toward his groin, and then pulling it, very slowly, right over the tip of Dean's cock. And now Dean's actually groaning with the thought of it, arching up trying to press his cock even harder against that little feather. The heated shimmer on either side seems to intensify, and Dean's amazed how much he loves the thought of Cas's invisible wings pressing close to him on either side, and further amazed how much he loves that little silken feather. My angel's got his fucking WINGS on me, Dean thinks, and it's an absurdly thrilling thought. He's got his actual ALULA-FEATHER on me! Dean almost laughs at himself — it's just a feather! But it's Cas's feather; and the look in Cas's hooded eyes now, the way Cas is gazing down at him, his lips slightly parted; the way he's starting to bite his lower lip; the way he's moving against Dean now, starting to thrust slowly into Dean's hand, his cock once again sliding deliciously against Dean's... and, yes, the way he keeps swirling that damn feather-tip around Dean's
cockhead, in slow, endless circles.

"Can't believe how... damn good that feels," Dean gasps.

"Oh, I'm just getting started," Cas says. Abruptly he shifts position, pulling away from Dean and removing the feather. "Roll over," he says. "Get on your knees."

There's a clear note of command in Cas's voice now, and Dean obeys. Dean scrambles around to get on all fours, just as Cas asks; Dean spreads a couple of towels under his hips like Cas asks; and when Cas asks for the lube, Dean hands it to him. There's an almost shivery delight in handing the reins over like this, in letting Cas take the lead, in ceding control so completely. And Cas takes his time, working just a few fingers in, as Dean had shown him weeks ago. But this time it's Cas controlling the pace, watching Dean like a hawk, assessing when he's ready. Dean doesn't have to say a word; Cas seems to have it all figured out.

And then Cas is repositioning, getting up on his knees. "Oh, yes," Dean mumbles, as at last there comes that feeling he's been waiting for, that blunt fat rod of hot pressure, as Cas pushes inside, slowly, slowly, filling Dean up.

Cas lets out a soft groan when he's all the way in. Dean can feel his hands trembling a little on Dean's hips. Cas pulls out a little; he pushes in again; and he moans, once again, as he goes in, his head dropping down onto Dean's shoulders.

And Dean groans too. It feels damn good, and soon Dean has to put a hand down to start jerking his own cock. Cas snakes one his his hands around under Dean too, still holding that damn feather, and he starts tickling Dean's balls, tantalizingly, with the feather-tip. The wings are all around; they're barely noticeable, just a shimmer in the air and a faint wash of heat, but they're there, and it's the thought of it, the thought that Castiel wants his wings on Dean, that's so astounding. Cas is still letting out those soft groans on every thrust, and soon the thrusts are accelerating, the bed starting to creak, Cas's groans shortening into hoarse, rough grunts. Each thrust somehow makes Dean's cock throb even harder, and unconsciously Dean speeds up his jerking, pulling on his own cock harder, faster, faster — he's close — he's so close —

"Gonna come," Dean grunts.

"No!" Cas gasps. "Not yet, wait—" He freezes still, and grabs Dean's wrist, hard holding him still too, forcing him to slow his pace. Dean hears Cas panting. Then Cas reaches under Dean, a little awkwardly, with both hands, grabbing something, repositioning something — Dean barely understands till he feels a thin line of pressure on his cockhead. He looks down; the black feather. Cas now has one hand wrapped firmly around Dean's cock, and he's got the feather in his hand too, lined up right along the underside of the cock, and he's actually bending the little feather-tip with two fingers so that it's curving right over the hole in Dean's cockhead.

"That's, ah, kinda in the blast zone," Dean gasps, trying to warn him.

"I know," says Cas. He squeezes the feather even more firmly against Dean's cock. "That's the point," he adds.

"You sure?" Dean gasps. This is THE black feather, after all, the only alula-feather Cas has left, the one he'd given to Dean.

"You can.... say no...." Cas manages to get out. He's gasping too, now, like he's struggling to hold himself back. "It's your... feather too, now..."
Dean has to grin. There is no way Dean is going to say no, is there? Not with Cas sounding so desperately eager.

"You want me to come on your feather?" Dean whispers over his shoulder. "That what you want, angel? You want me to jizz all over your feather?"

"Oh, yes." Cas groans, panting harder now. He starts thrusting again, shaky little short jerks, like he just can't help twitching his hips at the thought of what Dean's just said. "Yes, Dean... It'll clean up... fine.. don't worry, they're... tough.... ungh... yes, oh, Dean, please—"

Dean reaches down a hand so that he's holding the feather even more firmly on his cock, wrapping his hand right over Cas's, pressing Cas's fingers right down on the feather, so that Cas can really feel what's happening.

"You want me to come... on... your.... feather, angel?" Dean says, deliberately dragging out the words, emphasizing them. There's just a "nnNNNgh..." in reply from Cas, like he's beyond words now. Dean says, "Then you better fuck me. Fuck me hard—" The words are barely out of his mouth when Cas is moving again, thrusting harder. Soon he's downright pounding Dean. Dean's cock is granite-hard now, almost aching, and every thrust of Cas's seems to make all the sensations double, and triple, jolts of exquisite electricity searing through his whole body, a sensation of heat ballooning deep inside. Dean's hips are jerking now too. He says, "Watch out, you're gonna make me come on your feather, Cas—" Cas groans and gives a huge thrust, burying himself to the root. Dean feels his own cock stiffen; he feels his balls draw up; he can barely talk now, just blurring out incoherently, "Ah— yes — nNgh! ah, ah, Cas, yes — YEAH—" and then his cock's pulsing, shots of semen streaming out, through Dean's fingers, through Cas's — and right onto the feather-tip. Cas mewls; his whole body seems to spasm, his legs locking up hard. Dean feels Cas's cock twitching, deep inside; Cas is coming, hard, his whole body twitching on top of Dean, and he's groaning with every pulse. And Dean's still spasming too, right along with him, while Cas clutches the little black feather to Dean's cock with a shaking hand, and the heated shimmer in the air wraps Dean all around.

Dean's arms and legs finally buckle, and they slowly collapse into a trembling heap together. They lie there limply, Cas flattened out on top of Dean, as the last twitches run through them both.

It's a long while before either of them manages to move again.

"Damn, Cas," Dean finally says, some minutes later. "Now I'm getting a feather kink. Where did I go wrong?"

Cas chuckles; it's a slow, vibrating rumble against Dean's back. "Where did I go right?" he murmurs back, and he ruffles one hand through Dean's hair and kisses the back of his neck. "And we didn't even get to your primary-feather. I'm saving that for later." He lets out a long, slow sigh, and adds, thoughtfully, "You know, I don't know that I'm able to explain quite the connotations that all has, to an angel."

"I'm starting to get an idea," says Dean.

"I appreciate you going along with it," Cas says. "I really do. I know this must seem a little unusual, to a human."

"Oh," says Dean. "I'll manage. The earthshaking orgasms definitely help, you know."

Cas wriggles around a little bit, till his mouth is right up against Dean's ear again. "Someday I will put my wings on you," he whispers. "I will. Someday when I'm better. I'll put my wings on you all you want. All night, every night. And there'll be more than this one feather. I'll grow a whole new
set. And I'll take you flying, Dean... " His voice is starting to get a wistful tone. "Flying for real, I mean, not just in the Veil. I'll show you what the whole world looks like from above; it's so beautiful, Dean, I can't wait to show you." But there's a little uncertainty in Cas's voice now, a hesitation, as he adds, once more, "Someday."

"Damn straight you will," Dean echoes, trying to sound more confident than he feels. "You'll fly again, T-Bird, for sure. Someday."

They lie there a while longer, in a pleasantly limp heap. Gradually Cas rouses himself and announces he's going to go clean his alula-feather. Dean, of course, has to come along to watch (this involves the two of them squeezing into the shower together). It turns out Cas just shampoos it up, rather the same way he would for washing his hair (well, if he'd had any hair). The only difference seems to be that he takes some care to always stroke the little feather-vanes in the same direction. He washes the feather twice, and rinses it off, and he's right, it's good as new in the end.

"It's not, like.... tainted or anything?" Dean asks hesitantly, once they're both back in their room, toweling off and getting dressed. "For you, I mean? I mean, this doesn't de-sanctify it or something?"

Cas just grins at him. "More like, now it's really sanctified." He nods toward the bed and adds, "How much more human can things get, than what we do together here? I know this might sound strange, but for me, that's actually a sanctification." He's all dressed now, and he spends a little while patting the little black feather dry on a corner of his towel, and then he actually disappears back into the bathroom to blow-dry it for a minute.

When he returns he twirls it around in the light, inspecting it closely. Dean comes over to look at it too; it seems spotlessly clean, glittering now with iridescence. When Dean gives it a cautious sniff, there's just the feathery scent it's always had, that faint wild mixture of cedar and heather and open air.

Cas explains, "Flight-feathers clean up just like your own skin or hair does. So if you're okay having sex, and then showering, and then going out into the world again... well, my feather can be cleaned up just the same way. So... " Dean's in the middle of buttoning up his shirt, and Cas reaches right over and tucks the feather into Dean's pocket, "Bright and clean and ready to go out into the world again. I mean, if you still want it there in your pocket."

"Absolutely," says Dean, buttoning the pocket-flap closed. "Besides, there's nothing like carrying around some good memories." There's actually kind of a sweetly illicit thrill in knowing, now, what that feather's been used for. And it's also coming clear to Dean, as it hadn't quite before, that Cas still views this feather as a part of himself. Just as Cas is Dean's partner for sex, so, too, is the feather.

Cas just grins at him; Dean grins back.

"So how about that Expedition to the North Pole?" Dean suggests. "Me and you and the alula-feathers. All four of us. We could go for a walk in the snow." Cas nods, eagerly.
Dean texts Sam just to let him where they're going: four short blocks to the local coffeehouse. Sam and Sarah both text back within mere moments, with strings of worried advice and instructions — "Be sure you stay warm," "Text us as soon as you get there," "You better swear it's really only four blocks," "Take it slow" "If we don't hear from you in fifteen minutes we're sending out the search dogs."

"It's truly four blocks away, guys, Dean replies. Four LITTLE blocks. But he dutifully agrees to all of their worried requests. Though it then turns out Dean and Cas are at least as protective about each other as Sam or Sarah is about either of them — before they've even headed out the door Cas insists on checking every item of Dean's clothing, right down to the socks, to be sure all the layers are sufficiently thick and warm. Dean's doing just the same for Cas, fluffing up his black vest for him (it's now newly cleaned, thanks again to Sarah, but in Dean's judgement it still needs some re-fluffing). Dean insists that Castiel wear his warmest jacket and the thickest of his new Christmas hats, and helps him wind not one but two scarves around his neck.

And it's all worth it, once they get out there. It's ridiculously gorgeous out. It's the kind of snowfall that clings to every twig and fencepost and street sign, turning the whole world into an almost achingly beautiful work of art. Every branch and tiny twig on every single tree is capped with its own delicately perfect frosting of snow; every window on every building has one of those picture-perfect crescent-shaped arcs piled up on the windowsill, every brick with its own personal snow-spatter clinging artistically to its little bumps and ridges. And more snow's still falling. It's unbelievably beautiful. And it's peaceful, too. There are no cars at all; this particular street hasn't been plowed yet. But some Good Samaritan has shoveled the sidewalk recently, so the walking's pretty easy. The shoveled path is even wide enough for two. Dean links an arm through Cas's elbow and they stroll along in silence, side by side.

"This is such a wonderful day," Cas remarks.

"Especially that last part, huh?" says Dean.

Cas laughs. "Why, yes. Especially that last part, now that you mention it. Dean, seriously—" and he pauses, pulling Dean to a halt, and he turns to face Dean. "Whatever happens," Cas says, "Even just one more day is so precious. And I don't just mean the sex, though that's part of it. Everything is so precious, to me. Even if it turns out we don't have too much longer—"

"Hey, none of that," says Dean. "You just got magically rescued! Just two days ago! You're coasting on Havasu's magic water for at least another month! If not two. Let's just think happy thoughts, huh?"

Cas gives a faint smile. "Meaning, no talking about the cancer?"

Dean sighs, and he tugs at Cas's elbow, pulling him even closer. They begin walking again, slowly.

"You probably can't help thinking about it, huh," says Dean.

Cas nods. "It's always on my mind. I didn't mean to bring it up, but... well, I do have to call Dr. Klein tomorrow, about rescheduling the tests. And so... Well. Yes, it's on my mind. But, really, Dean, I mean it—" He turns his head to gaze at Dean. "Even one more day is such a gift."

"Well, then," says Dean resolutely, "If one more day's so awesome, just think how great one more night will be. And another day. And the day after that."
Cas smiles.

A tinny burst of music suddenly echoes through the air:

Won't you fly-yyyyyy freeeee birdddd....

Cas jumps, dropping Dean's arm and looking all around. Dean stifles a chuckle; Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Free Bird" is blaring through the air. It's coming from somewhere extremely close — and Dean knows where from. There's a little pause, and it repeats:

Won't you fly-yyyyyy freeeee birdddd....

"What is that?" Cas says. "A song about a... bird?"

"It's your phone," says Dean, totally unable to hide the smile that's spreading over his face.

"My phone?" says Cas, looking over at him skeptically. The Won't you fly.... refrain goes echoing through the air again, and Cas actually does a three-sixty this time, spinning in a complete circle right in place as if he's still trying to figure out where it's coming from. "My phone doesn't sound at all like that," Cas complains.

"It does now," says Dean, laughing openly now. "I changed the ringtone on it while you were blow-drying your feather." Cas gives him a quizzical look, and Dean shrugs. "The song seemed appropriate. And T-bird rhymes with free bird, right?"

"Free bird...." Cas repeats slowly.

"Free T-bird," Dean says. "Seemed like a good idea at the time. Actually it still seems like a good idea. Anyway, it's your phone, and it's ringing. You gonna answer it?"

Cas finally starts fumbling in his pockets while the phone starts in on a fourth Won't you fly refrain. "It's probably my boss," he says as he finally manages to extract the phone from his pocket. At Dean's puzzled look, Cas reminds him, "The Gas-n-Sip. I have a job, remember? Technically I still have it, to the end of the year. They know I'm on disability but they're always short on the holidays." He's trying to answer the phone now but he's got it upsidedown; Dean turns it around for him and presses Answer Call, and Cas finally answers, with a cryptic, "Hello, this is me, on my bird phone, though I am not, strictly speaking, a bird."

Dean shakes his head with a chuckle, and they begin strolling forward again. They come to an unshoveled section of sidewalk where the snow's quite a bit deeper, and Dean moves in front to break trail so that Cas can concentrate on his call. Cas falls in line right behind Dean, following Dean's tracks in the snow as he listens to the call.

I forgot all about the Gas-n-Sip, thinks Dean. He's angling his head to the side as he forges a path through the snow, trying to subtly overhear what Cas's conversation is about. But Cas's side of the conversation seems to be mostly silence.

It's amazing, now, to remember now that Cas had actually been trying to hold down a full-time job right through all the chemo...

Oh, and, now that a new calendar year is coming they'll have to do all the insurance stuff all over again, won't they? What had Cas meant, just now, about "at the end of the year"? Wait — does his disability coverage end next week?

Dean grits his teeth. He knows it all has to be faced. Next week it'll all start up again: some kind of
horrible new treatment, not to mention a new year of insurance and disability forms, and the co-pays, and the annual deductibles.... What happens when the disability coverage ends? Can Sam somehow finagle an extension for another year? Did Colorado ever do that Medicaid expansion thing? Did Kansas? Will Cas qualify for any kind of health care at all?

But much more significant than any of that, the next round of treatment is going to need to be faced. This cancer thing just isn't going to stop, is it? Cas'll have to get his new round of scans (which were supposed to happen yesterday, but obviously that must've been postponed) and then he'll meet with Dr. Klein and then they'll get whatever... news.... comes.

Dean's deep in these worrying thoughts when he realizes that Cas is no longer right behind him. He turns to find that Cas has stopped still several paces back. He's standing motionless in the falling snow, with the phone pressed tightly to his ear; he's even got a gloved finger pressed to his other ear, and his eyes are closed, as if he's concentrating with all his might on what he's hearing. Dean hurries back to him, suddenly certain that this is not the Gas-n-Sip boss at all.

"Are you sure," Cas is saying as Dean draws close. "Are you sure?" Dean's right next to him now, and he set one hand on Cas's shoulder in what he hopes will feel like helpful reassurance — though about what, he doesn't know. Cas opens his eyes and looks right at Dean, and his blue eyes look shocked — confused, even.

Cas's next few phrases are too vague to glean any clues. "Okay. I will. I will," he says. "I'll call you when I get back." He adds a rather numb-sounding, "Thank you," and then Cas ends the call. He stares blankly down at the phone with an utterly confused look on his face.

"It wasn't the Gas-n-Sip?" says Dean quietly.

"It was Aaron," Cas says.

Aaron.

"Dr. Klein," Cas adds slowly. "My oncologist."

"I know who Aaron is," Dean reminds him.

"He called to cancel my appointment next week."

"What?" says Dean. "Why? Oh, because... because the scans got cancelled, because of the hemorrhage and everything? He's just postponing the appointment?"

"No, cancelling it," says Cas. "He called to cancel my appointment... because...it turns out Dr. Flaherty sent him all my scans. Did you know, the scans they do to look for abdominal bleeding are the same kind of scans they do to look for abdominal tumors. Did you know that?" Cas glances briefly at Dean and then stares down at his phone again, as if he might glean some helpful advice from its blank black screen. "They scanned my torso, too, to look for any lung bleeding, and that's the same scan they would have done to look for lung tumors.... It was the same scans they were going to do anyway, just a day earlier, isn't that funny?" He's staring vacantly ahead at the snowy sidewalk now. "They even went ahead and did the blood tests they were going to do. I'd already had the order placed; the lab thought they were supposed to go ahead and do those tests, so they just... did them."

The air seems to have tightened. The world seems to go dead silent, as if the very trees and bushes are leaning close to listen, even the mountains holding their breath.

"And?" says Dean at last. He's barely able to get the word out.
"And Dr. Klein says there are no signs of cancer."

Snowflakes drift gently down all around.

"Wait, what?" says Dean.

Cas looks at Dean. He looks completely confused, and for a moment they just gaze at each other in mutual bewilderment. Cas says, very slowly, like he's trying to make himself believe it, "He said there's no need to meet to discuss the next round of treatment, because there doesn't need to be a next round of treatment. My lungs are clear. The lymph nodes look fine. Everything looked good. And the blood markers are undetectable."

A soft puff of winter breeze floats by overhead, and a skein of ice crystals comes floating lightly down from the snowy branches overhead, sparkling in the light. Dean can only seem to stare at Cas. The ice crystals float lightly around Cas's face like a shower of diamonds, like an aura, like some kind of ethereal halo, as Cas says, "Dean, he says the chemotherapy worked. He says I'm in remission."

In a tiny town in the woods, in a high mountain forest in winter, a very small scene plays out: two people embracing together on an empty street in the snow. They're all alone there, just two little figures in a silent scene. The rest of the street's empty. The whole town's in a hush, the pale light faint and dim as it filters through the thick clouds of drifting snow. The snow falls as it has fallen here for centuries, for millennia, drifting down in skeins of heavy flakes; it veils the distant hills, it coats the trees. It blankets the all little houses and cars, till it seems that humans have never been here at all. Just the snow has always been here; just the trees, under their thick coats of winter white; just the mountains, that stand so quiet in the dim distance. Amid this timeless scene the two figures seem infinitesimally small as they stand there, arms tight around each other, snow falling down all around them both. Whatever faint sounds they're making don't travel far (laughing? Or is it sobbing? Or some mix of both?); all sound seems swallowed up by the quiet drifting veils of snowflakes. Why do they bother to care? Why bother to embrace? Why bother at all, why care whether one little human life will last a little shorter, a little longer, when either way it's only a blink of an eye? The trees reach their silent branches to the sky, as they always have; the mountains stand still and watchful, as they always have; and human life is just a brief spark of flame. Here, and then gone.

Yet still the two little figures laugh and cheer, yet they embrace, yet they kiss, just the same. To get one more year together, or two, or ten, seems something greater than the whole forest, somehow; greater even than the mountains. To get any time at all is something larger, and deeper, and wider, than the entire world.

A/N - Please, please please let me know what you think.
One more final chapter to come, later today. I'm doing one last polish now.
You can keep holding on

It's some time before Dean can pull free. He's totally unashamed to find he's crying. So's Cas.

"Told you you were gonna fly, T-bird," says Dean, wiping the tears roughly from his eyes. "Told you."

"Well, actually, I still can't fly," protests Cas. "Not unless you mean metaphorically—"

"Metaphorically is good enough for now," Dean says, laughing. "One step at a time, dude." He dusts some of the snow off Cas's head and shoulders. "C'mon, you're practically turning into a snowman. Let's call Sam and Sarah. Goddam, I love this town!" The handful of snow that he's brushed off Cas's shoulders is so light and fluffy that Dean can't resist flicking a loose fistful of it at Cas's nose, and then Dean can't stop laughing at the startled look on Cas's face.

"Welcome to the land of the living, T-Bird," Dean says. "Cold. Hot. Food. Sleep. Sex. All of it. All of it, all the time. For years! Years and years!" Dean reaches out his mitted hand again, this time planning just to brush the snow off Cas's shoulders again, and he's totally startled when Cas, completely deadpan, raises one hand almost casually and lobs a handful of snow right up at Dean's face.

Dean whoops, "Oh, no! Oh, now look what you've started!", and he lunges down to grab a soft handful of fresh snow from the drifts on the ground and fling it all right back at Cas in a messy two-handed throw. And all of a sudden Dean's eight years old again, running around playing in the snow, while Cas, remarkably, seems to be channeling an inner eight-year-old too. It turns into a rather soft, fluffy snowball fight — Dean finds he's got no desire to actually pummel Cas, and no interest in packing those wicked ice-balls he used to make back in high school. But lobbing soft fluff-balls of very loose snow at Cas turns out to be incredibly fun. Cas, somewhat surprisingly, is rising to the challenge, pelting Dean with surprising accuracy right in the chest with a number of loose fluff-balls of his own.

Then Cas discovers a much better strategy of pelting a (much firmer) snowball directly at a tree branch right over Dean's head, which unleashes a mini-avalanche of snow right on top of Dean. And on top of Cas, too, simultaneously.

They play in the snow all the way to the coffeehouse. Through the snowy streets of wonderful Flagstaff, in wonderful Arizona, near the gorgeous Grand Canyon, on the best day in the world.

Dean finally remembers to send a hurried text to Sam and Sarah. Ten minutes later while Dean and Cas are in line for drinks in the coffeehouse, both still breathless from the snowballs and giddy with disbelief, the Impala skids up outside in a flurry of snow, and Sam and Sarah pile into the
coffeehouse with cheers and laughter. The four of them are all excited enough that even the barista asks what's going on. Fifteen minutes later they're all ensconced at a cozy round table in the corner, all sipping at mugs of hot mulled cider, provided totally free, courtesy of the barista and her boss.

Sam's ebullient; he keeps calling Cas "Brighty of the Grand Canyon", and he's soon proposing toast after toast to "Brighty here", with such enthusiasm and high spirits that Dean starts to wonder if he's spiked the cider somehow. Sarah's overflowing with excited comments about how she'd had a hunch this was going to happen ("I knew it, I just knew it!"). Dean's actually starting to have trouble taking it in; it's almost unbalancing, the way the future has just blown wide open again. And Cas, too, seems almost in shock.

"I didn't dare to hope," Cas says, as they finally begin to settle down a little bit, after about the sixth "Brighty" toast from Sam. "I thought for sure there'd at least be another round of chemo, if not radiation too. I was braced for the worst news of all, when I realized who was calling."

Sarah says, "This is what I expected, actually. I didn't want to jinx it, so I didn't say anything, but — you've been looking good, Cas."

The others all look at her.

"Y'know," says Dean, "I could've sworn that dropping fifteen pounds just in the last month, and puking up every other meal, not to mention losing just about every ounce of blood out of every orifice possible, and y'know, nearly dying two days ago, is not exactly 'looking good'."

Sarah gives an almost embarrassed little laugh. "Of course, of course, I know. I'm not belittling the bleedout — that was very serious, yes. I'm not belittling any of it; I know how awful it's been. But, you see..." She leans forward a little, looking around at all three of them. "I've been in this field a long time. Treating cancer is a race: a race between how fast the treatment is killing the cancer, and how fast it's killing the rest of the patient. It's been a neck-and-neck race sometimes for you, Cas — Christmas Day especially! — but for the last two cycles I've had this sense that you were going to win the race. That if you could just hang on through the worst of the chemo, you'd be okay." She pauses, and takes a sip of her cider.

"How'd you know that, though?" asks Sam. "What was the hunch coming from?"

Sarah tips her head a little to one side, thinking. "There's two very subtly different sets of symptoms," she says at last. "One set is symptoms from the cancer itself — certain types of pain, certain kinds of organ failure, certain kinds of edema. The other set of symptoms are purely from the chemo, not really from the cancer at all: nausea, hair loss, skin issues, the anemia and fatigue, even the bleedouts."

"So..." says Castiel slowly. "You're saying I had all the chemo symptoms but not the cancer ones?"

Sarah nods. "Recently, yes. I mean, this isn't an exact science, because the two sets of symptoms overlap quite a lot. But... I don't know, sometimes I just get this hunch. And I just had this feeling, with you, that your scans were going to come back clear." She adds, with a bit of a bemused look, "I actually thought I was imagining it. Because of... well, you being an angel and all. I thought I might be imagining you were turning the corner, just because I felt like you really ought to have some divine luck on your side."

"I thought my angelic nature might be a negative, actually," says Cas. "I wasn't sure the chemo would work at all. Some drugs don't really work on me, remember?"

Sarah blinks at that, like it's something she hadn't considered. "Interesting," she says. "But the drugs
that don't work on you were the ones that affect the brain, right? The neurotransmitter-based ones? I noticed that a while ago. Which sort of makes sense, since you're sort of... half in your vessel's brain but half not, right? And, see, anti-emetics rely on affecting brain areas." (Cas tilts his head back a little, nodding slowly, like this makes sense to him.) "But chemo's not a brain thing," Sarah goes on. "Chemo affects the whole body, and you had all the classic chemo symptoms. Nausea, hair loss, anemia — those are all symptoms that chemo is working. It means cell division's stopped, and that's chemo's job. Stop the cancer cells from dividing. If the intestinal lining and the hair follicles and the bone marrow all stop dividing too — that's where you get the nausea, the hair loss, the anemia — that's a pretty good sign that things are going according to plan and that the tumor cells have probably also stopped dividing. I mean, it's a crude approach, pretty brutal really, but it means the chemo is working." She adds, as they all take that in, "Cas, do you know how your blood markers looked? I haven't seen the last set."

"You mean all the letters?" Cas asks.

Sarah laughs. "Yes. AFP, hCG, LDH." She says to Sam and Dean, "There's several blood markers that tend to elevate with testicular cancer. Klein tracks them all weekly. About a month or two ago Cas's had started to tick downward — slowly, but in the right direction. But I haven't seen the most recent couple rounds of tests."

"I'm supposed to go pick up a complete set of all the results from the hospital today," says Castiel. "A full paper chart, they called it? Aaron recommended I get a full copy of everything so that I could..." He pauses. "Keep it for comparison, I guess," he says. "Apparently, cancer patients in remission are tracked for another five years before they're considered officially cured, so, wherever we go I'm supposed to carry the file with me. So that future doctors over the next five years can have something to compare to. After five years I can put it away, but he says I should always hold onto it."

*After five years,* thinks Dean.

All of a sudden Cas is planning five years ahead.

Till now the future's seemed like a tiny, locked track; a narrow forced path, like those metal chutes that cattle have to walk along on their way to slaughter. Everything pre-scheduled, with a limited horizon that stretched only a month or two ahead. The whole world had shrunk — Denver and back, Denver and back, Denver and back. The sense of the future had constricted down to just a few months: a chemo or radiation cycle in January, another in February, *maybe* March... if they were lucky enough for Cas to even survive that long.

Now it's all blown wide open, the metal chute demolished in an instant. Instead of a grim path to slaughter it's a wide open road, stretching clear to an endless horizon that goes *years and years* into the future. With branches going to every possible direction.

No Denver trips. No crawling-paths on a motel floor, no nights of endless awful nausea on the bathroom floor. Just... living.

And not just for a few more days. Not just one more week, not just Havasu's two or three months, as wonderful as that had seemed. *Years.* Years, now. They've got years.

Dean leans back and takes a long sip of his cider. "Now we just gotta tackle the wing thing," he says.

Cas nods. But Sarah gives Sam a puzzled glance, and she leans over to Sam to mutter something barely audible. Dean just picks up: "... his wings?" Sam leans back over to whisper something in her
"Oh... but..." she whispers to Sam. "Can't he just heal the feather-roots?" Dean and Cas exchange a glance.

She's trying to keep it quiet, but it's clear she's confused, and Dean realizes, then, that one piece Sarah hasn't heard yet is the exact nature of Castiel's wing-damage. Dean's wondering if he should try to steer the conversation somewhere else — he doesn't want to dwell too much on a negative right in the middle of all this amazing news. But Cas speaks up on his own.

"My feather-roots were damaged, Sarah," he explains. "Some years ago. My flight feathers were burned out when I was thrown out of Heaven by another angel. It's a long story, and that angel's not around anymore, but... well, I don't have any Heavenly power anymore. As you may have noticed. That's why I couldn't just heal myself. And the thing is, without certain kinds of flight feathers I can't store any new power, either. And it takes power to heal feather-roots."

"Remember that stuff from Chapter 6?" Dean says to her. Sarah nods; she'd spend much of yesterday evening hunkered over The Physiology of Angels, paging through it in fascination — it had seemed to appeal to her medical side (and it had occurred to Dean, then, that it's really sort of a medical book. A medical text about angels.) Dean reminds Sarah, "It takes power to heal feather-roots, and he can't grow new feathers without feather-roots... but he needs feathers to store power. Catch-22."

"But I thought human souls had power," says Sarah. "Can't he use that?"

Castiel looks over at her, frowning. She looks right back at him quizzically.

"Sorry, I know there must be something basic I'm missing," she says. "I'm new at all this, remember. But it seems like, from what I read in that book and from what you all told me last night, it seemed like angels have to get their power from that ether stuff, right?" Cas nods. Sarah goes on, "But human souls already have their own internal source of power. Or that's what the book said. Isn't that, like... one of the major differences between humans and angels? Humans carry their power in their souls, angels soak theirs up from the ether?"

Cas nods again — much more slowly this time.

"So..." says Sarah, a little uncertainly, "Why can't you just kinda... tap the power of your own soul, now that you've got one I mean, to fill up your grace or fix the root bits or whatever needs to be done. Use the soul's power to heal your wings, I mean, instead of the Heavenly power that you'd normally use. Would that work?"

Now Cas is just staring at her silently.

"What am I missing?" Sarah says, looking around at Sam and Dean. "I must be missing something, right?"

They're all silent a moment.

"Cas?" Dean says, turning to him. "Could that work?"

"I'm... not sure," Cas says slowly. "Honestly that didn't even occur to me." He stares down at his cider, a very thoughtful look on his face. "I mean, I've never had a soul before, obviously.... I don't know any other angel who's ever had one, and I only just found out two days ago that I had one myself. All along I knew something felt different, but I didn't know it was a soul! And I haven't really had a chance to think about the possibilities yet. Using the soul's power..." He pauses. "It seems so obvious when you put it like that, Sarah, but...." He sets one hand on his chest, fingers
spread wide like he's trying to feel his own soul, somewhere deep inside. "It's certainly true that human souls do have tremendous power. Power that can sometimes be tapped for certain things."

"Wait," says Dean, an idea starting to dawn on him. "Could you have... could you have tapped someone else's soul?"

Cas shakes his head. "I thought of that early on. I tried all sorts of things, you know, when I was still on my own — holy-oil, holy-fire, all kinds of spells, ways to enhance grace. You name it, I tried it. All sorts of stuff... And I investigated using power from human souls, yes. But I discarded that idea, because at that point I thought it would involve transferring power from someone else's soul into my vessel. Transferring that amount of power from one body to another would be insanely dangerous. It's difficult enough with angel-grace; it can be catastrophic with power from human souls. You see, it's the transfer that's so dicey."

"But now you know you don't have to transfer it from one body to another," points out Dean. "You've already got it. Inside you. You just need to access it."

"Right, right...." Cas says. He pauses, thinking. "Contained right within the same vessel... just steered slightly... maybe just a reshaping might do it? A tiny extension... like, a fingerlet, aimed over toward the wings? Or aimed toward one feather-root.... I've no idea if it's possible. I've no idea how to do it."

"Okay, we're gonna take this slow," Dean says. "No blowing yourself up, and that's an order."

"Of course, of course," says Cas, nodding. "But theoretically, it might be possible..." He's frowning, thinking hard; Dean can almost see him rummaging through his mental back catalogues of information about souls and how to access them. "It might work," murmurs Cas. "It might... yes.... with appropriate preparation... there'd have to be some training... It might take some time, cautious approaches... Normally a soul as new as mine wouldn't even have much power yet, but... from what Chindi said, it might just about have reached that point by now... You know, there's certain containment spells that might help. Maybe one feather at a time? I should probably wait till molt-season to even try, and then just try one feather-root. This'll take some time, and some practice. And a lot of research first, but... " He finishes with an uncertain, "Maybe?"

"Is this why thunderbirds are supposed to have so much power?" asks Sarah. Cas looks up at her again, and she says, "Didn't that reaper lady tell you something like that, about this thunderbird category, whatever you are now, being a really powerful type of angel? So, if, let's see, if thunderbirds can learn how to tap the power of their own soul, then they'd never run out of power. Like, as long as they love, and live, and have all those human moments, their soul always is full of power, and so they'd never run out. They'd be totally independent, too. They wouldn't need Heaven at all for that etheric-type power anymore. Even if they got kicked out of Heaven totally, like by that angel who booted you out — well, it wouldn't matter. Because thunderbirds would carry their own power with them. Have I got it right?"

Again Cas just stares at her.

"You know what, Sam," says Dean, "You should really keep this girl around."
(Sam wants to immediately start in some human-soul-power-transfer library research), or launching Cas right into soul-power experiments, or even heading right out on hunts again. "Hey, I'm still supposed to be the home-health-care person here," Sarah reminds them all, "and I'm afraid it's my job to remind you that Castiel is over the cancer, but remember he's still not over the chemo. He's still got to heal up. Put on some weight, grow his hair back, regain his strength." She glances at both Dean and Sam. "Not to mention that you two both need some time to rest up too. Several more days of rest here, is what I'd prescribe — at least through New Year's, before you all do another long drive. Then maybe we'll all head on back to our respective lives, but even them you guys need to take it easy for at least another month. You all need time to recover before you jump back into anything strenuous. That includes experiments!"

They agree, a little reluctantly, to take it easy for a while.

Though that night, "taking it easy" turns out to involve a huge meal of Christmas leftovers, a giddy round of heavily-spiked eggnog (Dean's managed to get hold of some rum by now at a little corner liquor store, and he gets a little carried away). Then there's a rowdy viewing of Die Hard — the all-time-great Christmas movie as far as Dean and Sam are both concerned, and it seems like this whole week is turning into one long extended Christmas. There's even a second round of present-opening. This round includes a replacement for Cas's white Christmas scarf (this turns out to have been the only unrecoverable casualty of the Christmas-Day bleedout, so Dean's bought an exact replacement); along with Lynyrd Skynyrd tape for Cas, containing the all-time classic live performance of "Free Bird". Sarah and Sam turn out to have accumulated quite a generous amount of thunderbird-themed mugs, bumper stickers and the like; and a hiking guide to the Grand Canyon appears (this, interestingly, is Sam's gift to Sarah), complete with a highlighted trail that apparently leads to a certain bluish-green pool of water. There's one last present too, one from Castiel to Dean: a lovely old vintage copy of "Winnie The Pooh" that he'd found in a secondhand bookstore.

Let yourself be happy, Dean thinks, gazing down at the charming Winnie The Pooh illustrations on the cover.

I am, Mom, he thinks at last, looking up at Castiel. I am. I promise. I really am happy now.

That night the dream changes yet again.

Cas and Dean are in the Grand Canyon again; they're back on Bright Angel Trail, and once more Castiel slips from Dean's arms off the stone bench and plummets right down a sheer cliff. But this time Dean knows, this time he's sure, that everything's going to be all right. And this time there are no clouds obscuring the view below, and Dean can lean forward and watch Cas's whole dizzying fall downward — which leads, it turns out, straight to a pool of bluish-green water far below. Dean waits, watching, as Cas's little human form vanishes smoothly into the water. There's only the tiniest little splash, a little fleck of white far below, and he's gone.

There's a long moment of stillness. Dean watches, crouched now on the edge of the stone bench on his hands and knees, peering over the edge down to the green pool far below.

A great feathered dragon bursts up out the pool, roaring, in a shower of sparkling spray. It rockets straight up, shaking the water free, sparkling drops flying from its glittering wings. The dragon roars again, a bellowing, trumpeting sound that echoes off the distant rock walls as the enormous beast banks out over the canyon in a wide circle. There's an unmistakable sound of joy in that throaty
sound, and the dragon trumpets again as it wheels around, making extravagant loops and serpentine
and barrel rolls, the glittering wings spread wide, the golden crescents catching the sun. Its joy is
infectious; Dean's standing now, jumping, and cheering too, yelling, "YEAH! YEAH! FLY,
BABY, FLY!"

Castiel swoops over to Dean, reaches out a silver-taloned front foot, plucks Dean up, and they go
sailing up into the sky.

Dean wakes to find that Cas is spooning him from behind. One of Cas's hands is wrapped around
Dean's waist; the other is tucked under Dean's neck. Both his arms are twitching as he sleeps, and
Dean knows he's dreaming of flying.

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Dean and Cas both sleep late again the next morning. They're woken at about eleven o'clock when
Sarah comes knocking gently at the door with fresh mugs of coffee.

"Is that coffee?" Dean mutters, sniffing the air. "Then definitely come in."

"Are you decent?" she asks before entering. "I don't want to interrupt anything."

"I'm never decent," Dean says, as Cas stirs sleepily beside him. "But I need my coffee. And we're
covered up, if that's what you're asking."

Sarah's laughing as she finally comes in.

"I'm supposed to check both your vital rates anyway," she says. "Part of the deal I cut with Flaherty,
remember? I really am supposed to be playing home-health aide for the rest of the week. It's almost
noon and I promised I'd get a morning pulse on each of you. I should've done this yesterday, but you
both seemed so tired." She hands them both their coffee mugs, and then perches on the side of the
bed to do a quick pulse check on both of them.

"I feel like I could sleep another day," mutters Castiel, and Dean nods beside him, sipping at the
steaming coffee.

"It's almost like severe hemorrhage and cardiac arrest and hypothermia and major life-changing news
tire you out a little bit or something," Sarah says. "Like I told you yesterday, don't overdo it. You've
both got to take it easy for a few more days."

She then focuses on Cas's pulse, one hand on his wrist while she watches a stopwatch app that's
running on her phone. "Damn," she says after a moment. "I lost count, sorry. Gotta start over."

Cas narrows his eyes and sits up.

"What's wrong?" Cas demands.

Sarah flicks him a cautious glance. "What do you mean? Nothing's wrong."

Cas insists, "You only lose track of pulse counts when you're distracted about something."

Sarah sighs. "This one," she says to Dean, nodding toward Cas, "was always too perceptive. He'd
always pick up if I was worried about another patient—"
"But what are you worried about now?" Cas insists. "Did Dr. Klein call back?"

"Oh, no, nothing's wrong. No word from him—"

"Dr. Flaherty, then? The Flagstaff hospital? Did somebody call?"

"No, nobody called—"

"Something in my file?" says Cas, and Sarah goes silent.

The air seems to go ice cold all around Dean. He looks at Sarah — she's now protesting weakly, "Nothing's wrong, it's all fine —" But Cas is right, she's unsettled about something.

Dean sets his mug down on the end table, flips the covers back and swings his legs out of bed. Cas, still looking at Sarah, does the same.

"Look, it all looks fine to me," Sarah says. "Honestly I don't see anything wrong at all. I mean, I already told Sam the histology results were a little odd, I mentioned that ages ago— No, Dean, wait, I told you to take it easy — will you at least slow down? I haven't got your pulses yet!"

Dean's already trotting down the stairs, in his bare feet, clad just in a loose t-shirt and pj's. He's downstairs in just a moment, Cas hurrying down behind him. And there's Sam sitting on the sofa, and sure enough he's got Cas's file spread out of him — a big bulky three-ring binder that they'd picked up at the hospital yesterday, full of endless notes about chemotherapy cycles, lab test results, nurse's notes and doctor's orders. It's the file that Cas is supposed to hold onto for the next five years. They've seen pieces of this before, of course, but they've never had it all compiled in one place before. Sam's reading something way at the back of the binder.

"What is it?" Dean demands, striding over. Sam jerks, and tries to flip the binder closed.

"I'm not sure," Sam says. "Maybe nothing. Probably nothing. It's nothing. I don't think it changes anything. Just—"

"It's my chart," Cas says. "Let me see."

Sam looks at him a moment, nods, and slowly he pushes the binder over toward Cas. Cas sits on the edge of the sofa, pulling the binder closer as he gives Sam an inquiring look.

"Lab Results," Sam says at last, with obvious reluctance. "Near the back. Under Histology. I think you should just look at it yourself. I don't want to bias you. Dean, stop panicking—" (Dean's bouncing restlessly from foot to foot, gnawing on the corner of a thumbnail) "—nothing's wrong, I swear Cas is still cured. It's just one of the old test results."

Cas gives Sam another piercing look, and then he spreads the big binder out on his knees and flips to a "Lab Results" tab.

"Um, so... what's histology again?" Dean says, a little desperately.

Both Sam and Sarah start to answer, but Cas beats them to it. "Histology is the study of tissues," he says, in a very steady, even tone of voice. He's now in the Lab Results section, flipping through the "histology" parts one page at a time, scrutinizing some pages of text. Dean finally perches on the sofa arm next to Cas, leaning over his shoulder so he can see the pages too.

There's lots of pages of text that seem to be just Dr. Flaherty's original requisitions for biopsies and scans, from way back in May. Backed up shortly after by some identical orders from Dr. Klein in
June. Cas says, paging through them all, "I believe histology involves taking thin cross-sections of tissues — pieces of organs — and looking at them under a microscope, to examine the cells individually. Sarah, would this about be my biopsy results, then?"

"Exactly," Sarah says, quietly. "Histology's when they slice up biopsies — little pieces of an organ — and look at the slices under a microscope."

Cas slows when he reaches another page of text. This one seems to be results. One section is highlighted, and Dean leans over Cas's shoulder to read it.

"Anomalous acellular necrotic filamentous masses," Dean reads aloud. The phrase is vaguely familiar; Dean's sure he's read this test result before, some time ago.

"See, I'd read that," says Sam, suddenly more animated. "I read the text of your results, Cas, months ago, I swear I did, I read every word, so did Dean. But we never saw the actual slides! We only had a text printout, but this is the complete file, and see, next, the next page has the color printouts of the slides — I paid extra yesterday to get the color glossy versions of everything, I figured Cas should have all the originals in high-res—"

Cas turns the page. Next are half a dozen photographs. Cas studies a few and then he goes very still. Dean, still peering over his shoulder, freezes still too.

Dean knows he's not a doctor. He doesn't know a damn thing about "histology," or what cells are supposed to look like, but this looks familiar. Terribly familiar.

Black threads.

The cells are riddled through with snaky-looking, twining, jet black threads. Dean and Sam have both seen that before, on a much larger scale. They've seen it on Sam himself. They've seen it on other people.

"That's the Darkness," says Dean, very quietly. (Cas, beside him, is absolutely still.) "That's... that's the Darkness. The virus that it causes, the disease... it had exactly the same look."

"It's only on the first scan," Sam says quietly. "If you look through them all, you'll see it's only from the original tumor."

"The left testicle..." Cas murmurs.

"Yeah," says Sam, "So, see, they removed that. It's not in you anymore."

"But by then the cancer had taken hold," whispers Cas.

There's a dead silence, Cas, Dean and Sam, all staring at the glossy photo of the little black threads.

"What does it mean?" says Sarah quietly. "We all thought it was just some unusual-looking necrosis. But... you guys recognize this?"

It's Cas who answers.

"Amara," he says, very quietly.

"Amara," Dean echoes. "I don't believe it. Amara..."

And then it clicks. "God-level power," says Dean in almost a groan. "That's what Crowley said, right? God-level power. But that doesn't mean only God, does it?"
Cas says quietly, "Amara's definitely god-level. In fact, I think one thing we learned last year is that she's actually slightly stronger than Chuck. She had him beat."

Sarah's looking totally baffled now. Sam whispers to her, trying to explain, "We thought Cas's cancer was from God. But... it's looking like it wasn't God at all."

"A lot of patients think it's a judgment from God," she whispers back.

"No, I mean, like, we literally thought it was from God," Sam tries to explain. "I mean, we met God —"

"You... met... God?" says Sarah slowly. "You mean, like... metaphorically?"

"No, literally," says Sam again.

"Literally literally," Dean clarifies. "Back when the sun was going out, remember that? He was hanging out with us in Kansas for a while there. Kind of a funny guy actually."

Sarah just stares at Dean, eyes round. "Funny... guy?" she murmurs.

"And," says Castiel, "we had reason to believe my cancer might have been from him. It was so confusing, though... it never made any sense to me. And now that I know he gave me a soul, I just couldn't figure out, these last few days, why he would give me cancer and also a soul."

"But, it wasn't God, so drop that whole theory," says Dean. He can't stand to look at the histology picture anymore; it's too deadly familiar. Dean finds he's rising to his feet, and he starts pacing back and forth, running one hand on his hair. "It was Amara," he repeats, trying to grasp it. "It was from Amara... it wasn't from Chuck at all... the cancer was from Amara..."

"Oh, damn, we should've known—" says Sam. Dean stops his pacing, looking at him, and Cas looks up too. Sam says, "Whatever caused the cancer, it was dark! We knew that! We saw it! That time when Crowley tried to get it out of Cas, remember? It's the only time we ever got a glimpse of it, really, and..." He hesitates.

Dean lets out a soft little groan. "The room went dark," he says, rubbing his forehead. "Dark. It went dark. How could I not have noticed?"

"Dark? It was dark?" Cas asks. He sounds shocked, and Dean remembers, then, that Cas had been knocked out by Crowley's little experiment back then. Cas had never seen that weird burst of blackness billowing out to fill the bunker library. Cas says now, "I assumed that if Crowley touched the source of the cancer, there must have been a flash of light. There would have been some Heavenly radiance. There was no white light?"

"Dark cloud of blackness," Sam says grimly, shaking his head. "Ballooned out and kind of filled the whole room, remember, Dean? Everything ended up covered in that jet black soot."

"I do remember the soot..." says Cas softly. "I should have thought to ask...."

Dean wants to groan. "I should've noticed!" he says. "Jet black sooty clouds of smoke — that's totally her thing! That's how she first looked when she showed up way at the beginning! Clouds of black smoke! How could we have not noticed?"

"Well, we were all rather dizzied," points out Cas. "In fact, I was worried you two might have gotten minor concussions, that day. It was quite reasonable to be a little distracted."
"No, I really should've noticed," says Sam — apparently he's not going to let himself off the hook so easily. "Divine power is always bright. I mean, there's a reason I've been calling Cas Brighty all day, isn't there? Bright Angel Trail... angels are bright. *God* is bright."

Dean could groan, then, thinking of the bright white light that's always accompanied Castiel's various displays of power in the past — his wings glowing with light, his smiting powers nearly blinding everybody (sometimes *actually* blinding everybody) with blazing white light. Even his gleaming-white angelic essence, blazing so brightly whenever he'd switched vessels. Heavenly things, god-like things, shine white. Dean's known that for a long time.

Cas has one hand on his chest now, a distant look on his face; it's the same introspective position he'd had yesterday when he'd been thinking about his new soul, one hand splayed wide on his chest, like he's trying to actually feel it. "Yes. Yes," he says. "This fits. It's right. It makes sense. It fits with what I've been feeling all along. I just didn't understand till now. The cancer always felt dark, you know... like something dark eating away at me. It felt... like an invader, something foreign. But at the same time there was this spark of light, a spark of... it's hard to describe. A point of brightness that was expanding. That was the new seed of the soul." He pauses, and adds, "And what I'm realizing now is that the two sensations have *never* been coming from the same source. They've always felt very distinct. I should have realized long ago that I'd been affected by *two* entities, not just one."

"Well, there's not much we could have done about it anyway," points out Sam. "Either way, once the cancer settled in, it became a mortal problem. Cas, you said you even tried holy-fire, right?" Cas nods, and Sam says, with a look of something like relief, "Okay then. At least we don't have to feel like we missed a big obvious cure opportunity or anything. I'm guessing what Amara did was... set it in action? Then it kind of ran on its own." Cas nods again, and Sam says, "Then I don't think there's anything we could've done differently."

"But *why*?" says Sarah. "I mean, I guess it's nice to know that God isn't the one who sent the cancer, but... why would this Amara person smack Castiel with cancer? Was she coordinating with God? What was the plan?"

Sam suggests to Cas, "Maybe some way to make your soul grow super fast? Plunk in a soul-seed or whatever, then give you a scary mortal challenge to make you... I don't know, soul up faster?"

Cas shakes his head, slowly. "I've been thinking it over, and I'm sure now that Chuck must have given me the soul-seed the last time he saw me, in that little bar. I felt something, then... And that was when he and Amara were still at each other throats, weren't they? I very much doubt they planned it together."

"Those two couldn't coordinate their way out of a paper bag if the entire planet depended on it," Dean agrees. "It's a frickin' miracle they didn't blow the whole damn sun out. I'd bet a thousand bucks that neither of them bothered to check with the other about what they were each gonna do to Cas. I mean, maybe he *did* soul up faster, but I'll never buy that those two managed to *plan* that."

"But then... why give him cancer at all?" Sam asks, bewildered. "Why would Amara do that? Just to spite Cas? To get back at him? For... what? Cas, did she have some grudge against you or something?"

Cas looks bewildered. "Not that I know," he says. "Not more than anybody else. We'd met, briefly, but she bested me easily. I certainly wasn't a threat. She didn't view me as an enemy worth bothering with; what little attention she turned to me was just disdain, or scorn. Just another little angel, to her, I think. Though..." He gets a contemplative look on his face. "She did spare me. She obliterated quite a few other angels but she let me live. I never was sure why, actually."
Sam's baffled. "But why spare you and then give you cancer?"

"She just loves messing with people," says Dean.

Sam protests, "But didn't you say Amara was almost nice to you at the end? You said, she even wanted to give you a gift. Didn't she bring down Mom as a kind of a gift? Why would she resurrect Mom but then try to kill Cas?"

Dean's jaw drops.

"What?" Sam asks, and both Cas and Sam are staring at him now. But Dean doesn't even see them now; all he's seeing is Chindi, in the Veil, telling Dean a stray tidbit or two about his mother.

Oh, yes, your mother, Chindi had said. She'd been planning that little escape-from-Heaven for quite some time. Quite a clever one she is; picked a moment when everybody was completely distracted by the Sun going out.

But she was found and returned, soon enough.

Dean says, slowly, "Amara didn't send Mom down. Mom came down on her own."

"What?" says Sam.

"For months now I've been assuming that it was Amara who sent Mom down," Dean says. He's still on his feet, but he's no longer pacing; he's staring out the window at the snow, thinking back on that strange scene with Amara and Chuck, all those months ago. "Amara said that she wanted to give me a gift, and then Mom showed up, and I assumed that was the gift. But... Chindi told me something... she said that Mom broke out of Heaven on her own." He turns to meet Sam's puzzled gaze. "Chindi said Mom'd been planning a break-out for a long time, and that Mom picked that moment herself, for the breakout. Mom picked that day because everyone in Heaven was distracted by the big High-Noon showdown with the sun going out." He goes silent a moment, thinking. "If that's true, then..."

"... then Amara had nothing to do with Mom coming down," finishes Sam.

"Which would mean the gift wasn't your mother at all," says Castiel. There's something odd in his voice, as he looks at Dean.

"So... the gift wasn't Mom," Dean says slowly. "The gift was..."

What I needed most.

Dean falls silent.

Dean looks at Castiel. And Cas is gazing steadily back at him. There's a hint of a smile on his face, like he finds all this to be a little bit amusing.

"Her gifts have always been rather dark in nature," Cas says, "Haven't they?"

The blood's pounding in Dean's ears.

Cas continues, "I don't think Amara's capable of giving a gift that doesn't have something twisted about it. Something dark. Even if she had the best intentions. So, I imagine that even if she were trying to do a good thing for you, she might just naturally have gone about it in a rather... dark way. So to speak."

"What are you guys talking about?" says Sam, glancing back and forth between them. "I don't get it.
What was the gift? What does that have to do with the cancer? Dean, what did Amara say exactly?"

"She said," says Dean, and his voice has gone so hoarse he has to clear his throat and start the sentence over. His face is heated, his hands trembling, and still he can't take his eyes off Cas. "Um, she said she was going to give me the thing I needed most."

There's a long pause.

For an endless moment the only sound is the whisper-soft murmur of the winter wind outside.

Cas rises, walks over to Dean, takes Dean's hand and leads him over to the sofa, where he pulls Dean down to sit beside him. He clasps Dean's hand (which is shaking) between both his own. Numbly, Dean sits by Cas's side. He's thinking of how desperately ill Cas has been for so many months; how much pain and nausea and misery poor Cas has been through. He's thinking of the Grand Canyon, of Cas choking up blood, nearly dying in that terrifying helicopter ride; of Cas so terribly helpless and vulnerable, as he lay naked and bloody on that hospital bed. He thinks of Cas during Week 1 earlier in the month, curled in the clinic bed so ill and sore he couldn't even bear to be touched. He thinks of Cas tumbling out of the Impala to the gravel, vomiting helplessly at the side of the road; he thinks of Cas collapsing in the Chemo Motel, blood dripping from his mouth.

The surgeries, the scars, the lost weight, the lost hair, all the miserable nights...

All that pain. All that suffering. All that fear.

Sarah says uncertainly, "Um, I really don't mean to pry, but, so, are you guys saying... um... does this mean... that..."

Dean says numbly, "Amara gave Cas cancer so that I'd finally...."

He can't even say it.

"So that Dean and I could come together," says Cas at last.

Sarah's so bewildered by now that Sam takes her outside for a walk. Partly to give her a chance to adjust, Dean thinks, and to fill her in on some details; but, clearly, also partly to give Cas and Dean some time alone.

They sit for a long time on the sofa. Eventually Cas stands, still holding Dean's hand. He tugs, gently, till Dean stands too, and he leads Dean upstairs and pulls him onto the bed. Dean's too stunned to even take his clothes off; they lie down on top of the covers, fully clothed, in their stockinged feet, and Cas drags a quilt over them both. They lie there silently for a long time, curled together, Cas's arms around Dean.

Cas says, quite thoughtfully, "You know, to give her the benefit of the doubt here, Amara really has no idea what mortal suffering feels like. She may have thought it to be utterly trivial." He goes on, "We've got to think of it from her perspective. To Amara, and to Chuck too I suspect, six or seven decades of mortal life is truly just the blink of an eye, a fleeting little prelude to an infinite afterlife, which I think they view as the true life. I've often wondered if this mortal world's just a playground for them. Almost like one of those videogames that I've seen you play, Dean; when you play one of those games, do you worry what happened to the game characters? Do you worry that they might be
suffering? It's not real to you; it doesn't truly matter. I think they view the mortal world as something similar."

"D'you think she knew you'd live?" Dean says, his voice hollow.

Cas actually laughs, then, and he shakes his head. "No. Beings like Amara, and Chuck... they don't understand what death means to the rest of us. It's a trivial change, for them. A phase change, like water turning to ice, or to vapor. I'm quite confident she didn't think that part through in the least." Cas pauses again, hands tightening around Dean as he thinks. There's a shift in the air, a soft hovering of warmth, and Dean closes his eyes and turns his head into Cas's shoulder, savoring the feel of the wings. Cas says, "She very likely only saw that we had a potential to come together, and she... saw... well, she saw a path that would make that happen. The fact that the path involved suffering likely didn't even register for her. If anything, she may even have thought of it as... natural, appropriate, or even inevitable. Suffering and darkness are her mother tongue, after all. It's the only way of being that she knows. She very likely couldn't even think of any other way to bring about.... (Cas's hand is starting to stroke along the back of Dean's neck) ".... affection, and love, other than through some sort of dark passage, some sort of suffering." He thinks a moment longer and adds, "She may even have assumed that I would in fact die. And that you would be left bereft. But that wouldn't really register for her either."

"But..." says Dean. "If she wanted you to die.... then why did you live? Was it Havasu?"

Dean's still got his head burned in Cas's shoulder, but he can hear a smile in Cas's voice when he answers: "There's something that both Chuck and Amara keep forgetting about," he says. Dean pulls his head back a little to look at him, and Cas meets his gaze calmly. "Something they keep underestimating. Something quite powerful. They should have learned this lesson many times by now, but it seems to keep taking them by surprise."

"What?" says Dean. He's thinking the unknown element is elementals, or reapers, or some pagan magic. But Cas leans in, pressing his forehead against Dean's.

"You," says Cas. "You, Dean. Sam. Sarah. Dr. Klein. Dr. Flaherty. The EMTs who helped us at the Grand Canyon. All those people in the hospitals... the assistants who run the scan machines, the people who must have trained the cat, the lab workers, the scientists. The people who came up with the idea for sharing blood. Jody, and Claire, and Alex." He takes a breath and adds, "The chemotherapy. The people who designed it, and tested it, and built clinics like Dr. Klein's."

"Humans," says Dean.

Cas nods. "If you want to get right down to the nuts and bolts of it, I truly believe the chemotherapy is what cured me. You heard what Sarah said: my symptoms indicate it was working. My test numbers were already ticking downward, long before Chindi and Havasu. The chemotherapy is what worked, Dean. Human medicine worked, and all my human caretakers who've done so much for me, and you and Sam. And I think that neither Chuck nor Amara had the least idea how much that human element was going to come into play. Amara gave me the cancer and probably simply assumed it would kill me — and, likely, didn't really care. Chuck gave me a soul, but likely thought it would take eons more for it to develop, if it took root at all. But..." Cas looks at Dean, and squeezes his hand. "The human element, again."

"Cas, if this all happened to you because of me—"

"It happened because of Amara," Cas corrects him. "Don't you dare blame yourself. Besides, what did I just tell you? You saved me, Dean. Amara assumed I would die. You, and Sam, and everybody, made sure I would live." There's a long pause, Cas studying Dean's face. He says, "And
in the end, you know, looking back.... I can't say I've exactly *enjoyed* having cancer. But it's undeniable that something very wonderful did come from all this."

Dean looks at him. At his blue eyes, so forthright and direct.

Cas says, "Would either of us ever have found a way to make this happen on our own?"

"We were both such frickin' morons," Dean whispers.

"I must say I agree," says Cas. "And, however we got here, whatever role Amara played at the start, *we got here in the end. We're here*. And that's all that matters. I really just have one question."

"What's that?"

Cas asks, a smile quirking up one corner of his lips, "Was I really what you needed most?"

Dean starts to laugh. He can't help it; it's one of those laugh-or-cry moments, and it turns out that it's the laughter that takes him over. He laughs harder, and harder, till Cas starts laughing too.

"You better believe it, T-Bird," Dean says at last.

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On New Year's Eve, Sam and Sarah carefully shepherd Dean and Castiel the few blocks to downtown, to the tiny little town plaza. And there, on the corner of the plaza, is the Weatherford Hotel — the rustic little two-story wooden hotel that now has a gigantic fake pine cone suspended from its second-floor balcony, peppered all over with hundreds of bright white lights. Sam's decided they all need to see the giant pine cone. Dean's not exactly sure about this whole plan, but Cas and Sarah are both curious, and once they get there it turns out to be a surprisingly festive scene. There's an amazingly large crowd crammed into the little town square below the pine cone. Bands are playing, people are selling hot chocolate and cider and coffee (a lot of it spiked with a fair amount of not-very-discretely-hidden booze). Crowds of people are singing "Auld Lang Syne" in drunken overlapping out-of-key bouts. The crowd seems to be all the Flagstaff locals, and it's a friendly bunch — all those skiers and hikers and mountain bikers gathered together at last, all of whom also turn out to be local businessmen, and shopowners, and auto mechanics, and teachers. And doctors. The whole town seems to be here; Dean's startled to run across Dr. Flaherty, accompanied by a university-professor wife and a couple of gawky looking pre-teen kids; and, a few minutes later, they meet one of the EMTs from the helicopter; and, a few minutes after that, one of the nurses from the ER, and then the barista from the coffeeshop. (It seems it really is a small town.) They all greet Dean and Cas with a big round of hugs, and they all seem genuinely thrilled to hear about Cas's good news from Dr. Klein.

Sam, though, has vetoed any plan that involves Dean and Castiel standing for too much longer in the freezing cold outside; he's already arranged (at god knows what cost) to reserve a tiny table at a teashop that's right on the corner, with a perfect view of the huge pine cone that's looming practically overhead.

The teashop's absolutely jammed. The table's really only big enough for two, and the chairs seem to have mostly disappeared. So of course Sam and Sarah insist that Dean and Cas be the two that get to sit down. They wedge in together side-by-side on a little padded bench right by the window.

There's a perfect view of the ridiculous-looking pine cone. Dean takes Cas's hand under the table,
and Cas squeezes back.

Sarah and Sam soon end up chattering with some of their new-found friends from the crowd, some of whom have also wedged into the crowded teashop. Sarah's soon talking shop with the EMTs; Sam seems to be asking advice about making reservations for the Grand Canyon mule rides (at which absolutely everybody within earshot starts chiming in with advice - "The mules also go along the new East Rim Trail, did you check that out?" "You really oughta head to the North Rim, boys." "I'm telling you, rafting is the way to see it. Two week rafting trip, and leave your phones behind. Bucket list item for sure.") The conversations are all flying over Dean and Cas's heads, quite literally; they're the only people in earshot who are sitting down, and it's like they've got their own little bubble of silence here at the little table by the window.

Several glasses of eggnog somehow materialize on the little table. Dean manages to sneak in a little dash of booze. He clinks glasses with Cas, and with Sam, and with Sarah, and with a large number of strangers, and then Cas and Dean settle back to drink their (spiked) eggnog together. Cas leans comfortably against Dean's shoulder.

A new year, Dean thinks. It seems a daring thought. A whole brand new year, spreading out before them. They can work on Cas's wings first, figure out that thunderbird-soul angle that Sarah had suggested. Then if that works out, they can go back to hunting — and if Cas really levels up to actual thunderbird status, that's going to make a whole lot of things a whole lot easier! Maybe they can zip through the hunts so fast that they can actually get some time at home. It occurs to Dean that maybe they could even build a little frame house on the bunker property. Nothing extravagant, just a nice little two-story thing. There could be a couple bedrooms... it'd be nice to have a real bedroom, wouldn't it? With windows that frame the snow, and a tree outside for the snow to fall on... Or maybe a house in Denver... they could drive back and forth from wherever Sarah is... This thing with Sarah better work out. Sam's deserved something good for a long time now, and Dean realizes he's even willing to consider relocating to help Sam work it out.

Or, hell, how about a little vacation getaway right here in Flagstaff? Why not? It's such a cute little town... He could take Cas to the Grand Canyon and visit that pool....

He thinks of Dad, wanting to give little Sammy a ride on the mules.

He thinks of Mom. He thinks of how she'd tried so hard to come down from Heaven, all by herself, all on her own, just to tell her two sons she was proud of them, and loved them; and just to tell Dean to let himself be happy.

He smiles. He tightens his grips on Cas's hand.

"Dean," Cas says, squeezing Dean's hand back. Dean checks the time, thinking Cas is trying to get him to pay attention to the pine cone; sure enough, it's almost midnight. Only a minute and a half to go. The whole crowd is chattering now with anticipation.

But Cas has something to say. He edges a little closer on their little padded bench, squeezes Dean's hand again, leans in and says quietly, "This past year...." He hesitates, and begins again, "This past year has been both the worst and the best, for me. But, this next year, if I remain in remission, we may find that..." He pauses again. "We'll find life returning to normal. Such as normal is, for hunters like yourselves. You'll be hunting again, with Sam. I'd love to assist, of course, as always, but... well, you've given me so much time and effort, these last months, and... now that we know that Amara had a role in all this—" (Cas makes a gesture, pointing back and forth from himself to Dean, as if tracing out an invisible bond in the air between them) "I'm quite settled in my mind about it myself, but I know you might need a little time to think it all over. I know it's been a very strange year for you, and I hope you don't feel like you were... well, forced into this, I guess, or manipulated into it in
some way. Anyway, I just wanted to say, if you find you'd like to return to the way things were, for a while—"

"Do you want that?" says Dean, with a pointed glance at the carefully zipped-up pocket of Cas's vest, where Dean's little white feather is. "Do you want to return to the way things were?"

"Oh, no," says Cas, and his hand goes to the pocket immediately. "Not in the least, no, not at all," he says, one hand now pressed over Dean's feather, the other tightening again on Dean's hand. Outside the pine cone's starting to drop, slowly lowering, its strings of white lights blinking festively, as a digital clock mounted to a balcony just above it ticks down. The crowd all around the tea shop, and jammed outside on the streets and in the little plaza, all start to count down: "TEN! NINE! EIGHT!"

But Cas just gives the pine cone a distracted look; he barely seems to notice the noisy counting. Through the "SEVEN! SIX! FIVE!" he just leans closer to Dean and says, "I truly don't care what role Amara played; I just care that we found a way through it. But I just want to make clear—"

The crowd reaches "ONE!!!", and then everybody's screaming "HAPPY NEW YEAR!" Behind them, Sarah and Sam get lost in a long, deep kiss. Noisemakers squeal from everywhere; a spray of confetti bursts over them, a thousand sparkly bits of glittery paper falling right down over Cas's and Dean's heads. Cas, unfazed, finishes his sentence with"— that if you wish some, ah, some freedom, if you would rather I... well, step away a bit, as it were...." He takes a deep breath and sits back. "I'll understand."

"You're new at this New Year's party thing, aren't you?" says Dean.

"This is the first one I've been to, yes," says Cas.

"So, when the clock strikes midnight," explains Dean, "you aren't supposed to give a speech to your partner about how you'll back off and give the other person more space."

"I'm not?" says Cas. "Wait, partner?"

"Partner," says Dean, nodding. "What you do when the clock strikes midnight is, you're supposed to kiss your partner, not give them a speech. Like this."

Forty-five seconds later (it had turned into one of those kinds of kisses), Cas is a little out of breath, and so's Dean.

Dean says, cradling Cas's face in both hands, "When I said I loved you, T-bird, I frickin' meant it. Besides, I gotta keep that soul of yours all bright and shiny, all powered up, don't I? So you can fix up each feather, right? Feather-root by feather-root. You got that?"

"Okay..." says Cas, sounding a little dazed. His eyes have gone that dark shade now, the blue so deep and liquid that looking into his eyes feels like falling into a deep blue sea. Dean leans in, planning to kiss Cas again, but as he does so he shifts one hand, running his fingers up under Cas's monkey-hat, and he pauses. Something feels different. A fine, soft fuzz, all along Cas's scalp.

Dean gently pulls off the monkey-hat, and runs a hand over Cas's head. Yes; fuzz. It's barely visible, just a sparse, thin layer of soft dark hairs, just starting to grow in. It's patchy, just the very first day or two of growth... but it's been two weeks since the last round of chemo, hasn't it? Dean runs his hand over it again, in wonder, and Cas, watching Dean's eyes, puts his own hands to his head. His eyes widen in surprise.

"Looks like you're feathering up, T-bird," Dean. "Right on schedule. And there is no way I'm gonna let you ditch me just when you're starting to heal up."
Cas starts to protest, "I wasn't going to ditch y—"

Dean talks right over him with, "One last thing. This BS about crowding me? About letting go? Yeah, so, no dice, Cas. I don't give a crap about Amara." (And as Dean says this, he finds it's true.) "She probably thought we'd have, like, one week together and then you'd keel over dead and poof into nothing and that'd be that. Just like her to think that was what I needed. Well, that might be her idea of a gift, but you've given me a much better gift: you stayed alive. And anyway— " Dean pauses there, and he takes firm hold of both of Cas's hands. He tightends his grip, very deliberately, squeezing both of Cas's hands with each his own. And he feels Cas's grip tighten back. Cas is gazing at him now with shining eyes, as Dean tells him, "I've said this to you so many times now, T-Bird, and I'll keep saying it till it sinks in: You can keep holding on."

The end

A/N -

I cannot sufficiently express my gratitude to you all, the readers who have stuck with me through this entire year-and-a-half journey. To be honest I thought this fic was going to break me, several times, and you all kept me going. It's the hardest thing I've ever written, and I've been so incredibly touched by your own stories. I hope I did it justice.

I'll leave it there. Please let me know what you think! I so hope the journey has been worth it. Next week there'll be one more "chapter" - not really a chapter at all but just the Materials & Methods, a postscript about the writing of the fic. Till then I'll just leave you with a few last images.

Castiel's trail:
The stone bench (in foreground). This is the site of Dean's recurring dream.
My photo of Misha & Jensen, JIBCon 2017. (I'd asked Jensen: "Given the events of the season 12 finale, could you just give this guy [gesturing to Misha] a hug? Like you just got your best friend back.")
Materials & Methods (NOT A CHAPTER)

My dear readers - This has been the most difficult fic I've ever written, and I'm so grateful to you all for sticking with it all this time and giving me such encouragement to keep going.

Here's my usual Materials & Methods chapter. This isn't a formal part of the fic, it's just my traditional way of wrapping up. Science habits die hard and I always feel like there needs to be a section on how the work was done, just in case anybody is interested. In no particular order:

**Why a cancer fic?**

I knew going in that this was a brutal topic to tackle, one that would dredge up terrible memories for many readers. It seems my fics have gotten darker and darker. (I get these comments now and then about "When are you going to write something funny again like A Room Of One's Own?" Hopefully someday....) I thought I had reached a nadir of darkness last year with "Into The Fire", in which Cas actually dies, but I think this fic was even worse in some ways.

Ultimately I'm a sucker for angst fics, and angst involves facing a terrible crisis and thinking there is no hope. The genesis of this fic really occurred when I was thinking about "what could be the very worst crisis that the boys could face?" In canon the boys have already faced multiple Apocalypses, multiple ends-of-the-world, all kinds of demonic and supernatural (ha) beings... what worse thing could they possibly face? It seemed clear that the worst disasters for them are actually the emotional ones, particularly the threat of losing each other. And because I love Castiel, naturally the most gut-wrenching plots involve something happening to Castiel. I had already explored a supernatural death for Castiel in "Into The Fire," and while writing that fic occurred to me that it could be really interesting to see how the boys would deal with a completely ordinary, mundane, everyday threat that wasn't supernatural at all: physical illness.

**The universal threat.** And so I picked cancer as the worst challenge they could face. Many of you have asked if I had personal experience with cancer. At my age the answer has to be "of course". My sister especially, who had two serious cancers in a row; both my grandmothers, a work colleague who went in for an MRI for some hip pain and came out half an hour later with a diagnosis of terminal metastatic pancreatic cancer, another work colleague who was diagnosed during the writing of this fic and is in radiation right now. Many of the specific medical details were also drawn from my time working in hospitals (I used to work in human health, ages ago.) As for me, I have not been through chemotherapy myself (not yet I mean!) but I had not one but five cancer scares during the last couple years. Four of the five potential cancers have either been removed or turned out not to be malignant after all, but all were scary. One resulted in discovery of an inoperable aneurysm that apparently could pop and kill me at any moment, but as it causes no pain and nothing can be done about it, I've decided to ignore it. The fifth potential cancer is still undiagnosed (I'm scheduled for more MRIs in a few more weeks). Que será, será; I'm getting old, and you get to a point where you just feel each bullet whiz by, and as the initial panic fades as you begin to accept that inevitably one of the bullets will eventually hit you, but you just keep on every day putting one foot in front of the other.

We'll all die eventually. The only people who have no experience with terminal illness are the young. With cancer particularly, virtually everybody will face it with time, whether themselves or via a loved one. Anyway as I went back to a hospital last year for test after test after test, it began to
seem interesting to me that such a universal and terrifying threat, one that we all will face sooner or later has never been addressed in the show. In one way we live in a world that is actually worse than Sam and Dean's. Sure, we don't have monsters and shapeshifters and vampires to deal with, but also we have no certainty of an afterlife. We have no miracles, no way back from death, no magical cures. Supernatural's such a dark show in many ways, and yet it also has this bright spark of unlikely hope: magical cures exist, death is not the end, angels definitely exist, God definitely exists, and there is indeed a Heaven (as messed-up as Heaven is shown to be in the show, as dickish as the angels are, as frustrating as Chuck's actions are, at least they definitely exist.) In fact I think I first got hooked on the show originally because of that spark of hope that it retains underneath all its darkness: the idea that Apocalypses can be averted, that death can be evaded.

But what about the rest of us? What about when death really is an inevitability, and the afterlife only an unproven myth?

It struck me, too, thinking about all that, that if there is indeed a God, cancer has to be regarded a fundamental flaw in his creation. Cancer is an inevitable outcome of multicellular life — all organisms, of all species, will get cancer if they live long enough. Cancer is what happens if nothing else kills you first. How could God have let this happen? It seems like such a terrific flaw in the universe, and it began to seem that this was the worst crisis the boys could face. So I wrote a cancer fic.

Making peace with present tense - To spend a moment on writing mechanics: the cancer then led to this being my first, and still only, present-tense fic. ("Dean says" instead of "Dean said", etc.)

I'm sure you all know that present tense is unusually common in fanfic. (My theory is that this is because fanfic is intimately related to, and in a way is derived from, screenplay writing. A work of fanfiction is essentially a proposal for a new episode for a TV or movie series, a type of screenplay ultimately, and screenplay stage directions are traditionally written in present tense.) But as someone relatively new to fanfic who has spent most of her life reading traditional mainstream fiction, I found present tense to be very jolting at first. It even felt gimmicky, like a cheap way to try to evoke immediacy and urgency in lieu of actual writing skill. However, over the last few years of reading some truly excellent present-tense fanfic, I realized that most of my objection to present-tense was simply unfamiliarity. It felt unusual at first, and so its very unusualness drew my attention; now it feels normal and it doesn't stand out so much anymore. And I began to feel that maybe it does add a sense of immediacy.

Yet I still thought of myself as a past-tense writer. When drafting the first eight chapters of this fic — the path up to the reveal that Cas has cancer — it was all originally written in past tense. But around when I was writing chapter 8 I happened to read an excellent novel that was written in present tense, and I finally concluded that present-tense can be effective for certain stories. I realized then that I wanted the cancer to feel very immediate and real and urgent, as if it were unfolding in real time. Finally I thought: You know what, this is the kind of plot that present tense is for! So I converted chapters 1-7 from past to present and kept writing in present after that.

Past tense was a really hard habit to break, though, and a few past-tense verbs slipped through at first. Sorry about that. I had continued struggles with how to write flashbacks (I kept vacillating between putting them in simple past tense - "Mary stepped closer" - or past perfect - "Mary had stepped closer"). Technically, flashbacks in a present-tense fic should be in simple past tense, but past perfect still "feels more past" to me! I also had continued glitches with "then/now", "this/that" references to present moment ("Then he realizes Cas needs help" vs. "Now he realizes Cas needs help".... "That's when Dean knows that..."/"This is when Dean knows that..."). Anyway,
forgive me the errors, and I hope the choice of tense worked for you.

The first twist - A lot of my fics have a twist. I grew up reading mysteries and I still tend to tuck a mystery into every story, even if the story is technically a fantasy - a JK Rowling sort of approach actually (if you've noticed, almost all her Harry Potter books are actually structured in classic mystery format, straight out of Agatha Christie). This one had two twists: the cancer, and Amara.

Honestly I didn't originally plan for the cancer twist to be concealed in quite the way that it ended up. My original plan had simply been that Cas would try to hide that he had cancer, and that Dean would figure it out, that's all. But the idea that Dean might actually misinterpret all Cas's actions in terms of Cas having a romantic partner — that arose organically. Which is to say, Dean came up with the "Erin" interpretation pretty much on his own. I was about 3-4 chapters in by then, into the section where Cas had gone away and was losing weight and taking trips to Denver, and Dean just started jumping to the wrong conclusion! It slowly became clear that health problems can appear oddly like new relationships in some ways. I've actually had that happen in my own life (people thinking I have a new boyfriend when really I was struggling with an illness) and there's a logical reason for the mixup: in each case the person becomes more concerned with health and appearance - losing weight, changing clothes, taking more care with diet. I really hadn't planned this for the fic, though, but Dean just stumbled into the mixup on his own and I went with it.

Hiding a bigger twist underneath a smaller twist - Once I realized that Dean was going to completely misunderstand what Cas going through, I deliberately decided to hide the coming twist (Cas has cancer) beneath a red herring of another, smaller twist (female Erin is actually male Aaron). This is another technique from mystery novels that I first picked up from the great mystery writer Dorothy Sayers. The idea is that readers are sharp and will expect twists, and they will often be actively searching for a twist to discover. But if you give them 1 twist that is relatively small and simple, they will (sometimes) relax and think they've "found it" and you can then surprise them more thoroughly when the second twist is revealed. it's tricky to pull off, though, because the first, more easily discoverable, twist has to be genuine. It also has to connect in a meaningful way with character motivations and character development. In this case Aaron/Erin mixup connected naturally to Dean's own slow acceptance of his bi tendencies and his feelings toward Cas so I thought it might work. At least one of you sniffed out the cancer from the very beginning, though, and at least two others were worried about Cas's general state of health.

"I'm going to lose all my readers" - I deliberately did not tag this fic as a cancer fic and I also deliberately kept it vague about whether Cas would survive. I kept worrying about both these decisions, because I knew there would probably be some readers with personal history with cancer who might be hit very hard by the reveal in chapter 9 that Cas is in chemotherapy. And also, more generally, some readers simply don't like having big surprises sprung without advance warning. Oh, how I worried over this! There's a whole philosophical discussion we could get into here, about whether writers have an obligation to warn readers of what is coming, about why fanfic has developed a tagging culture, and what it means to have a readership that is accustomed to serious themes being tagged. There's a larger discussion here too about artistic freedom, about whether trigger warnings and safe spaces can or even should be provided in an inherently dangerous and unpredictable world.... anyway, skipping over all that, in the end I tend not to tag the twists in any of my fics because I feel that stories can have much more emotional power if readers don't know what's coming. And in this particular fic, I felt too that, well, this is how cancer DOES hit in real life — it is
never tagged in advance! It always seems to hit completely out of the blue like this! Ultimately I wanted readers to experience what Dean experiences, to go through all the shock and surprise right along with him. I also felt that Cas's survival at the end would be all the sweeter, and much more meaningful, if it were not telegraphed in advance.

But I also knew that the price might be that some readers would find it too rough and would bail. I felt genuinely bad about doing this to people (and yet I did it anyway... sorry....) I can't tell you all how terrified I was when I posted chapter 9. I thought for sure you'd all stop reading. I was picturing maybe twelve readers or so continuing on, and I had a private bet that the fic wouldn't break even 50 kudos. (It's at over 3000 now.) I made my peace with the idea that it would be a very little-known, poorly read fic with only a few kudos and comments; I decided that even if only one reader continued, I would finish the fic for that one reader.

So I was really surprised, and incredibly touched, at how many readers kept going past infamous Chapter 9. I think there are only about three people who told me they would have to stop reading, and at least two of those resurfaced in later comments saying "I had to come back and see it through". (There was only one reader who sent me a truly angry comment about the lack of tags. And I understand, really, I do, and I still feel conflicted about my decision. I wrote back with as honest an explanation as I could put together about the reasons for the fic being untagged, and wished the reader well, & thanked them for reading as far as they did.)

**The second twist** - The second twist, planned all the way from the very first scene in Chapter 1, was that Amara's gift to Dean, all along, was Castiel and not Mary. Amara gave Cas the cancer, purely in order to prod our two beloved fools into finally acknowledging their own feelings for each other and giving them the impetus to actually act on it. I loved the idea that "what Dean needs most" would be Cas; the moment I saw that Amara scene I kept thinking "there's a fic idea in here somewhere in which the gift turns out to be Cas," but it took many months before I began to see the shape of how this could happen. It occurred to me that Amara would naturally go about this in a dark way, and then it connected to the vague images I had of Cas ill, Cas crawling to a bathroom alone, and I began to see how this would connect together in a fic plot.

But something that caused me unbelievable difficulty was when to reveal the Amara twist. I've never before written a fic that had such a key reveal in the very last chapter and I kept doubting that this placement of the reveal would work, so I kept trying to do it earlier but it kept not working when I put it earlier. You all noticed that this fic suffered through multiple several-week delays, even month-long delays here and there, and two of the longest delays were caused by me testing radical rewrites about when the Amara twist would be revealed. For various reasons I ultimately did spring it right at the end, *after the cancer has been solved*, after Cas is okay. I still was unsure though and the very final delay in the fic, the two weeks before I posted Chapter 52, were consumed with three gigantic flip-flopping rewrites in which Sam finds the black threads on the pictures in Cas's file BEFORE Cas learns he's cured. (This one change involved an ridiculous amount of rewriting because it affected when they get hold of Cas's chart, which for various reasons affects when Sarah arrives, which affects Sam's trajectory with Sarah... etc. etc.)

But in the end I flipped it all back, because it turned out the emotional tone of the fic took too much of a near-suicidal nose-dive if Dean starts blaming himself for Amara's actions (i.e. blaming himself for Cas's cancer) *while still thinking Cas is going to die*. It became very difficult to keep Dean from doing increasingly radical, desperate, suicidal actions. Dean being Dean, you know. So after what must have been 60 hours of rewrites I ended up right back where I'd started, with the Amara reveal in the very last chapter. It ended up being kind of fun to have it there, one final plotty punch just when it seemed like it would be just a happy fluffy wrap-up.
Cas going through a health crisis alone

A lot of the initial angst of the fic comes from the thought of Cas trying to go through chemotherapy all alone. I have to admit this came from personal experiences and particularly a nadir moment in 2015. Skipping the health details, long story short I was very ill in the middle of a winter blizzard. I was all alone and I had indeed laid out a "crawling path" to the bathroom (I've done this a few times and it is is the real-life origin of Cas's little trail of pillows in the Chemo Motel.) Anyway, I needed a certain medication and my doctor had called the prescription in to the nearest pharmacy, which was only a mile away. But the city snowplow had actually gotten stuck at the base of my road and was itself snowed in, and I realized that not only could I not get my own car out of the snow, even an ambulance wasn't going to be able to get through because my whole section of the city was unplowed. I have been alone for years now and I'm used to taking care of myself, but there was definitely this moment of realization that I was going to have to hike a mile through 2' of snow in a winter blizzard, while shaking with fever and barely able to stand, because there was nobody else. I had to do it alone.

I got there, I got the meds, I got back, I ended up fine and in retrospect it seems like I made a big deal out of nothing: it was only a mile, after all. But when you're out on the snow just muttering to yourself, "One more step, one more step, one more step" struggling to even lift your foot high enough to clear the next drift, there is this eerily clear, calm awareness that things could turn very bad, very fast. You start thinking over every little detail, aware that one wrong decision, one little lapse — wearing the wrong clothes, forgetting your hat, losing your keys, taking a wrong turn — could actually be the end. (Even when I was putting on my boots I remember thinking, "Are these the best shoes for the conditions? If these are the wrong shoes I could end up dead. Think very clearly now, think this through"). So when planning out this fic I actually spent a long time considering Cas's side of the story, exactly what he had to do and when; getting the diagnosis alone, going through the surgeries alone, going through the first three rounds of chemo alone. The drives, the job, the prescriptions, the co-pays, all of it. He had a brutal time of it, poor guy. This fic stays almost entirely in Dean's POV (with one lapse, described below) but I hope it came through clearly how desperately relieved and grateful Castiel was to finally have Dean's (and Sam's) assistance. Cas hates to be a burden, and he hates to be seen in such a diminished state, but it was also such a tremendous relief for him to finally have Dean to lean on (literally as well as figuratively). There's a reason that Cas develops that habit of always having a hand in contact with Dean, and a wing draped over Dean too, whenever they're lying together.

No ride home - The first assistance Dean offers to Cas is a ride home. There is a reason for this as well. Back in 2015, while at a hospital for one of the longer tests involving one of those potential cancers (the one that's still unresolved), the doctor asked who would be picking me up after the test. The test involved a sedative and they couldn't let me go home alone, and it turns out a taxi or Uber driver won't cut it because it needs to be somebody who will actually walk you into your house. When I explained there was nobody to pick me up, the doctor did a visible doubletake. It turned into this big problem. She had to go ask the nurses "for that agency that can drive people home." And then none of them could remember where the phone number was for the agency, and they had to go rummaging around in some back files to find it. It took a while. I waited for some time out in the lobby.

Up until that very moment, I had actually been feeling pretty self-sufficient. Resilient about being alone, pretty much unfazed about it and even kind of proud of my independence. I mean, I still do wilderness hikes, I work in the Arctic, I've faced grizzly bears (and, as of this year, polar bears). I
like to think of myself as kind of tough, or that's my little fantasy anyway. But in that moment, when it became clear that it was apparently so unusual to have nobody to pick me up that the medical staff actually wasn't sure what to do about it .... I swear, I had been perfectly fine till that moment. I stayed cheerful but when I left the doctor's office I started to cry. It has dogged me ever since; it's two years later now but even just this week, that feeling keeps resurfacing, that sensation of not being proudly independent but rather of being in some way pathetic, an outlier and an outcast - it has haunted me since. And it all seemed to boil down to this tiny little moment about who would drive me home. Anyway, later when I decided to write this fic, that's why I decided that the very first gesture of assistance that Dean would offer to Castiel would be to drive him home from the clinic.

**The worst writer's block I've ever had** - I've actually never had writer's block before. But man did I hit it with this fic.

Partly this was related to an exceptionally brutal real-life work and travel schedule. During the writing of this fic I've been to: Italy, Alaska, Maine, Arizona, Boston, Arizona, Utah, New Orleans, Brazil, Boston again, Seattle, Italy again, Alaska again, Seattle - somewhere in here I missed a flight to a tropical island in the West Indian Ocean and was actually relieved - then California, Wyoming, Oregon, Nova Scotia, and here I am. Mixed in there were four cross-country drives and three moves to different houses. (Coming up in the next eight months: Utah, San Francisco, Brazil, Boston, Hawaii, Italy, Alaska, Argentina, spaced about one trip per month, each trip at least a week.) I know it seems ridiculous to complain about traveling, and getting to do fieldwork in incredible places like Alaska, Hawaii and Patagonia, but oh my god I am so incredibly tired of traveling. I have not had three weeks in a row in the same place for over two years now. (Side note, I have so much sympathy for Jensen, Jared, and Misha — sure they have a plush life and are very successful, and yes they get paid for their travel, but there's no denying that traveling that much is exhausting. It doesn't matter how pampered you are in your first-class seats or whatever, it's inherently tiring. It speaks very well of all three of them that they continue to make such efforts to connect with the fans - especially when you consider that none of them really probably need the con money all that much anymore.)

Anyway, the sheer fatigue of that work schedule slowed this fic down tremendously. But of course another reason for the writer's block was that it was just such an emotionally draining fic to write! It made me keep confronting all these real-life terrors about my own medical situation, coupled with the fact that it also kept bringing my own isolation into exceptionally keen focus. With previous fics I've generally kept to a very steady Friday-posting schedule and I'd even taken some pride in being a fast writer and a steady poster, but I had to utterly abandon that posting schedule with this fic. I felt so bad about it! Every single Friday, as the evening slipped past me, I felt guilty! The writer's block was worst of all during the mid-fic section when Dean and Sam are helping Cas through the weeks of chemotherapy. At the end of a long grueling work day it was just... so frickin' hard sometimes to sit down and write about poor Cas being so ill, and Dean being so worried, and try to get them both through a specific sort of trauma that I feared I would soon be facing myself. And every time I'd write a scene with Dean comforting Cas I would have to consider the fact that there was nobody comforting me.

So, hello writer's block. But I got through it in the end. I can only thank you all for your patience.

**Sam's role** - A number of you commented that you enjoyed seeing Sam being such a good friend to Castiel. BUT OF COURSE, right? This has always been a theme in all my Destiel fics, that the
Dean-Cas family unit is not complete unless it also has Sam!

It also seemed logical that Sam would take on a lot of the medical research — he's typically been more the researchy type — and then that meant Sam would naturally be talking a lot with certain medical staff. Gradually I found that I wanted Sam to have some long discussions with the "night nurse" and develop a friendship. I honestly wasn't thinking of this as being Sarah originally, but very early on several readers pleaded for the night nurse to be Sarah, and suddenly that seemed like it made a lot of sense. I'd already made a decision that this fic was essentially in the same universe, with the same angel head-canons, as my previous fics. All the fics have "The Physiology of Angels" and Knut Schmidt-Nielsen, all have a motif (whether explicitly stated or not) that angelic true form is something akin to a feathered dragon. So I thought, well, this universe must have a Sarah too, then, right? She must be somewhere, whether or not the boys meet her!

So enter Sarah, and enter the Sam-Sarah relationship once more. I couldn't resist; I wanted Sam to have a happy fluffy ending too.

The return of dragon-Cas - And that also led me to the key scene where dragon-Cas shows up. This fic really has two emotional pivot points, one early on when Cas turns out to have cancer, and the second being the Grand Canyon / Veil pair of chapters in which dragon-Cas ultimately appears. It's the same true form he had in "Into The Fire." The interesting thing about this chapter, I found, was that it felt like a happy, exuberant moment, almost like a happy ending, despite the fact that Cas still has cancer! The whole emotional tone of the fic changes here even though the cancer is not fixed yet. It is when we learn that Castiel has a soul, it is when we learn he might survive to some sort of an afterlife, and it is also when we learn that Dean and Cas are officially soulmates. But also, it's simply when we see his beautiful dragon form. The glory and drama of that form, and even the humor of it, somehow take the fic to a whole different place.

Chapter titles - Every chapter title is a direct quote of something that Dean says to Castiel during the course of that particular chapter. (The only exception is Chapter 1, in which Castiel is not present, but even then it's a statement that Dean makes about Castiel.) There are two chapter titles that repeat, "Thunderbird" and "You can keep holding on," each one shifting in meaning when it turns up the second time. In case it wasn't clear, all the chapter titles are are really ways that Dean says "I love you" without necessarily using those words exactly.

And then Dean says it - And then he does say "I love you"! I've never had Dean say "I love you" in any of my fics before this one. I used to think there were no conditions under which he would naturally say it. He tends to show his love in other ways, in his acts and behaviors, but he doesn't normally state it flat out. But in this fic he finally came to a place where it was natural for him. This surprised me; I'd originally planned that he would never quite say this to Castiel, not in those specific words I mean; but with the threat of Cas's imminent death looming so close, Dean ends up just blurting it out. This was one of those cases where the character just kind of did it on his own.

You can keep holding on - Which brings me to the title of the fic. It's yet another way of saying "I love you," of course, and it also occurs as a chapter title twice. Very early on I had the idea that the emotional journey of the fic is about Dean and Cas both becoming more and willing to hold on to
each other, and willing to do so openly. The phrase occurs not just once but over and over during the fic, and its meaning shifts. The very first mention of holding on is when Dean tells Cas to stop holding on (this is when Cas grabs him in a long hug when they first find him in Flagstaff, and Dean, though he secretly loves the hug, is still shy about physical interactions). After that it starts shifting in meaning. First it's a physical meaning; Dean telling himself to keep holding on to a nearly-passed-out Cas in the Chemo Motel, and tells Cas that it's okay to keep a hand holding on to Dean's arm in the bed at night. Later it refers to holding on to life; when Cas comes closest to death along Bright Angel Trail, he stops holding on to Dean's hand, and Dean is soon pleading with Cas in Bright Angel Lodge to "keep holding on." And finally at the end the fic the phrase has come to refer to holding on to each other emotionally, as partners; the final sentence of the fic is essentially Dean telling Cas, "please hold on to me forever."

Flagstaff and the Grand Canyon - So, funny story. When I first started this fic I had never been to the Southwest, never been to Flagstaff and never seen the Grand Canyon. But I loved the idea of some kind of dramatic climax occurring at a national park. Grand Teton National Park is featured in my earlier fic "Forgotten," and Zion National Park in "Flight." (Mount Shasta is featured in Into The Fire - Shasta's not a national park, but should be!) Sometimes I feel like I'm writing a national park series, and if I ever do write the book series I'm planning, it'll center on the national parks as places where supernatural creatures still exist.

Anyway I lit on the idea of the Grand Canyon being featured at a key plot juncture for this fic. I had decided this already in Chapter 1. At that point I was living on the East Coast. In what was the first of several eerie coincidences, three months after starting the fic I got a job offer in Flagstaff! And I'm sitting now in the coffeehouse in little Flagstaff, the coffeehouse that Dean and Cas walk to in the snow near the end. I visited the Grand Canyon for the first time around the time I was writing the first chemo chapters. I've visited about five times since. I soon discovered that the Grand Canyon actually has a trail called Bright Angel Trail! (I hadn't known about this!), and that the local tribes here speak of an enormous mythological flying beast called a thunderbird, and that the Navajo tell of a "demon who devours souls" called Chindi, and that the Havasupai worship a sacred pool of bluish-green water down in the Canyon that is said to be inhabited by some sort of water spirit. And every day I see the ravens.

All these plot elements fell into place with spooky precision, scenes feeling like they were writing themselves. Reinforcing elements began to pop up in real life. When I wrote that scene of Cas being carried into Bright Angel lodge and being laid down in front of the lobby fireplace, I didn't actually know if Bright Angel Lodge has a fireplace (at that point I'd only seen the lodge from outside). The sudden realization that Cas not only has a soul, but that an angel-with-soul = "thunderbird", came to me like a thunderclap (ha) from the blue during the writing of that chapter. I wrote and posted those chapters all in a wild string of writing in a single week. A couple days after posting all that, I returned to the Canyon and this time did I actually did go all the way into the lobby of Bright Angel Lodge. It turns out that Bright Angel Lodge does have a fireplace. Directly above the fireplace is an enormous painting of... a thunderbird! There are many park lodges in the Grand Canyon, and in the many other national parks that are scattered throughout the southwest, but so far Bright Angel is only lodge I've seen that has a thunderbird painting above a fireplace in the lobby. We all laugh about Supernatural-related coincidences, right? But this one really took me aback. I'd already been spooked just by the discovery that there is a "Bright Angel Trail".

There was a similar moment when I was scouting around the Flagstaff hospital for a place for Dean to lie down in the snow, some kind of a handy landmark, and I discovered that the one and only outdoor sculpture that they have is a sculpture of an angel halo.
The whole Flagstaff/Canyon segment of this fic seemed to write itself, to a degree that got rather eerie. There are times when this fic has made me reconsider my understanding of the real universe.

**No supernatural cures** - Despite all the above eeriness, ultimately this fic involves Dean and Sam failing to find anything supernatural that will help. They spend the whole middle portion of the fic searching for a magical cure, a healing spell, angel grace, Crowley's assistance, Rowena's magic.... None of it works. Havasu's blood spell is the only magical element in the fic, and even that was limited strictly to a water-based intervention (this seemed logical, since Havasu is a water elemental) and it did not cure Cas's cancer.

Instead it is humans who cure Cas's cancer in the end — via the everyday mundane approach of chemotherapy. So in the end the chemo, which seemed like such hell during most of the fic, turns out to be Cas's salvation. Because, isn't this the whole theme of the show, really? That humans, weak and small as we are, crude as our methods are, can make a difference?

And also I suppose I wanted to leave a practical message that traditional human medicine CAN work. Chemotherapy saved my sister's life. We little humans, and all our crude tools and hard-won skills and clumsily designed chemical drugs CAN make a difference.

**Loose ends** - In the end I couldn't wrap up absolutely everything. I left Cas with un-healed wings — but with a clear thread of hope and an obvious path about how to heal them. (He will indeed heal them eventually, never fear.) To those who were begging for more scenes with stoned-Castiel, that was the plan originally but I just ran out of time! In the interests of time and getting the fic actually finished, I also had to leave a few other stray scenes unwritten that would have brought certain characters back into the loop. I wanted a scene where Jody et al. find out that Cas is okay; I wanted Claire to find out about Cas's new thunderbird status, and for Emily to find out that Cas is okay too, and I wanted Claire and Emily to meet again and develop their own friendship. I wanted Dean, Cas, Sam and Sarah to all travel down into the Grand Canyon and visit Havasu's pool. But the fic was already over 300,000 words and I had to wrap it up, so I decided to leave those stray ends hinted at but not fully resolved. Gotta leave some room for sequels, right?

**The message** - There's only one scene in the whole fic that breaks from Dean's POV and shifts to third-person omniscient, and it's at the end of Chapter 51 when Cas learns he's in remission. The POV shifts abruptly to a high overhead viewpoint with an omniscient narrator. This is actually the raven's POV — that raven is still around! (In actuality this is a raven that I see every day in Flagstaff, around Thorpe Park for those who know the town). I ended up not explicitly stating that it was the raven, and you can interpret it any way you want, but that was the idea in my head.

And in some sense this is the moment when the point of the entire fic is reiterated. We all will die. In some cases rather soon. (My perpetual fear throughout this last year and a half was actually that I might die without finishing the fic! I felt such a terrific responsibility to make sure that fic-Cas and fic-Dean were okay before anything takes me out of commission myself. I don't want to overdramatize this — I'm more or less fine actually — but it was definitely on my mind.)

There is no point in fearing death; it will come for us all. In a way the fic is not about defying death, but about accepting death. But the deeper point is that even though we will all die, getting any time on this planet, any time at all, even a single more day, is the greatest gift possible. I feel this way
every morning.

The fic is framed in terms of: more time with each other is precious. But to leave one last message to those of you who are single and feeling alone (several of you wrote to me about this, about wishing you could "have what Dean & Cas have"), take heart; I have no partner myself, I know what that's like. I face every day alone and I have for years, but still I am happy every morning when I rise. Just to see another lovely sunrise, just to have another meal to eat or a hot cup of coffee, just to be able to drive to a park (any park, it doesn't have to be the Grand Canyon) and experience all that natural beauty and see a bird flying by... every single day is a treasure. And I am starting to believe that what I wrote about the ravens might actually be true, that nothing goes unwitnessed, that we are never truly alone. More and more I feel there is something witnessing everything, maybe not something exactly conscious but something sympathetic, something that permeates all the trees and hills. When that You Are Not Alone campaign first started I remember kind of laughing about it (I was thinking "well actually, some of us ARE alone"). But maybe it's true.

Anyway, I know it's a cliche, but, cherish every day.

You left such amazing comments!! - Such heartfelt comments you all left, such deeply moving and touching stories, such thoughtful analyses of the fic and of cancer and of life. I wanted to reply to each and every one but was so desperate for time that I kept putting it off till later. Basically I had to prioritize writing the fic over writing replies - I'm so sorry!! My plan now is to start replying, at the very least to the comments on the last chapter, but please forgive me if it takes a while.

Also what often happened was that I would first see the comment on my phone (from which I can't easily type replies) and then could never find that comment again once I got back to my laptop, because it had by then been tagged as "read" by the phone and had disappeared from the unread queue. In particular - could whoever drew that beautiful piece of cover art with the flowers please write back to me again?? I saw it on my phone and loved it, but I literally cannot find your comment again! I would like to link it to the fic. :) (while I'm at it, could those of you who sent gorgeous dragon-art for Into The Fire also write back? Same thing, I saw those first on my phone and couldn't find them later) I promise some day I will get my act together about how to archive the wonderful fanart, and how to keep track of what comments still need replies.

What's next - I have to turn my attention to my science papers for the next few months. (It's not a coincidence that I started falling behind on my science papers exactly when I started writing fics!) After that, I am contemplating the idea of then (next spring/summer) tackling three new writing projects that could potentially be put up for sale. The three are:

I want to write the full Physiology of Angels. :)

I want to write a whole book series about a pair of siblings criss-crossing the country and having supernatural adventures in national parks. Essentially reshaping my fic universe for a mass audience. It would have to be de-Supernatural-ized to be legally sellable, of course, and I have a lot of ideas about that, but never fear, there will still be a pair of siblings (their sex remains to be determined...) and there will be a dragon-angel, and you will know who they all really are. (I'd probably be pitching it to editors as something like a cross of Supernatural and the book series The Dresden Files.)

Third, I have a long-tabled fantasy series that I might work on as well. It's the one that I
posted one chapter from a few months ago. I got a good reaction to that chapter so I hope to work on this series too; it's already mostly written. This one will be pitched as a four-volume fantasy/sf series. (Short hook: "Angels vs. velociraptors," ha.)

I may have to spend 2018 working up these non-fanfics for sale because I'm actually going to be in a pretty serious job crunch soon. My current science job relies on funding that will run out in mid-2018. The lack of funding is directly due to Trump policies. The combination of looming unemployment, the gutting of funding for science in general, and also the looming collapse of health care for the unemployed in the US has me, frankly, terrified for my future. I was putting in job applications just last night. And panicking about the new tax bill, which is worsening all of the above. I foresee not only having to leave science but having to leave the USA permanently.... Anyway, if any of you might be interested to spend a few pennies for serial chapters now and then, or a few bucks for a full book of mine, by all means let me know. Despite everything I find I still have dreams of being a writer....

But I'll come back to SPN fanfic in some way, sooner or later. I love these characters too much to leave them forever! There's an A/U I've long wanted to write set in northern Alaska... and there's a short Thurber-style comedy I'm dying to tackle too. Stay tuned.

So the eighteen-month journey is at a close. The giant pinecone was lifted into position at the Weatherford Hotel the other day. I sat at the table in the teashop on the corner and watched the hotel workers lift the New Year's countdown clock into position. I'll be heading back to the Canyon soon, and I'm going to sit on the stone bench on Bright Angel Trail and watch the ravens fly; I'll be bringing my little Dean and Cas funko pops (an anonymous secret santa bought me a Cas funko pop last year! So of course I had to buy a Dean one too to keep the Cas one company) and I'm gonna put them on the stone bench and take a picture of them looking at the view together. And then I'm gonna hike down Bright Angel Trail and see the gorgeous world. I hope someday you all can come to Bright Angel Trail too.

Thank you so much for staying with me all this way.

much love to you all,

sparrow

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