The Last Archangel: Ouroboros

by inukagome15

Summary

Over the years, Gabriel thought he’d seen it all. But it seems that life still has some surprises in store even for archangels. Such as a dimension that none of them have seen before. But once awoken, some things can’t be locked away. And some things are better left forgotten.

Notes

Okay, FIRST off, I want to preface this by saying THIS IS GOING TO HAVE A HAPPY ENDING. Okay? Okay. Because those tags? Namely those "character death" tags? They're the reason I chose not to warn. But I promise there's a happy ending at the end. That said, this is probably NOT AT ALL what you guys expected for a sequel to Redemption, but this is the sequel! This is it! And I'm really nervous about sharing this because this is a LOT that I've not done before, and it's really blasphemous. Like, guys,
SUPER blasphemous. All I can say is that this is fiction, and so please don't come into my Inbox ranting about religion. I know this is fiction; these are fictional characters.

And, yes, I recommend tissues. Especially if you cry when reading stories. BUT HAPPY ENDING.

Also, relationships are complicated. More details to follow later, but just know that no one's in any romantic relationships. It's just...complicated. There's a reason I didn't tag the relationship specifically since there's really only 3 scenes in the entire story that deal explicitly with it (and even then not EXPLICITLY, if you know what I mean) and I know I hate it when I go into a relationship tag to find a story and then that relationship ends up being a footnote in the bigger thing.

In any case, the gloves are off! The stage is already being set in this prologue, not the middle of the fic like the last one.
Prologue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As was normal, time passed. The years trickled by (much like sand through an hourglass if one was feeling poetic) and before one knew it, centuries, millennia, and millions of years had passed in what seemed like the blink of an eye.

That all depended entirely on one’s perspective of the matter. To him – to his kind – time had a funny way of passing. He was both all too aware of its existence and yet not. The turn of the Earth; the consumption of the sun’s limited resources; the passage of night to day and back again; the deaths and births of new stars; the slow and steady expansion of the universe; the collision of distant galaxies and formation of new ones; the beating of billions of hearts and air flowing rhythmically through lungs.

From the big picture to the small, he was aware.

And yet…what was time to a being who simply was? It was simultaneously the easiest thing and the most difficult to keep track of time and how it passed. A glance to the other side of the universe and back to the planet could mean that a century had passed, but one wouldn’t know unless they were paying attention.

Or if one were friends with humans – their lives all too short and like mayflies in the grand scheme of things. When it came to that…he was all too aware of how fleeting time was, no matter how much he bent the rules for his family.

Because the rules could be bent and time delayed, but not for forever. Not with how humans were designed and how they took in the world around them. Immortality wasn’t a gift to those unused to the weight it put on their shoulders, even if it gave them a chance that they hadn’t had before.

As an abstract notion, the Fountain of Youth was attractive to humans. Living forever? Who wouldn’t want that? For young adventurers still drunk on their youth, the idea of being forever young and mobile was incredibly enticing. But there was always a catch with living forever and not aging.

Not that humans necessarily thought of it instantly.

“You mean that’s a thing you can do?” The words were disbelieving, Clint’s eyes narrowed in suspicion. “Jeez, who am I kidding? The normal laws don’t apply to you.”

“You’d do well to remember that.” He flashed a brief smirk before sobering. “It’s not done often. Everything has a place, and even we don’t deny death easily. But it can be done in certain circumstances. And…” He took a breath, remembering permission given. “This is something I want to offer. You can accept, or not at all.”

“Why are you offering this now?” Rhodey asked. “Why not earlier? You’ve never even hinted at this before.”

Too many close calls. Too many times when death had been narrowly skirted by inches. Too many times when he hadn’t been enough and could only fix the aftermath.

And he’d been scared. This wasn’t an offer made or accepted lightly. There was every possibility
that they wouldn’t go for it, and he hadn’t wanted to face that rejection.

“Why not?” he said instead, voice carefully modulated. “I’m not getting any younger.”

“You mean we’re not getting any younger,” Clint said pointedly. “It’s okay; we can take it. We’re all adults here.”

“Speak for yourself,” Natasha said, flipping her hair over her shoulder with a small smirk. She looked as young as she had when he’d first met her, two decades ago, due to the genetic modifications from the Red Room.

“What would this mean?” Steve looked directly at him. “What would you have to do?”

“It’s simple, really,” he said, ignoring the glances Sam and Gadreel shot him. “It’s just a little extension of my Grace in each of you. It won’t hurt you,” he added in a fit of dark humor. “But it’ll keep you at the age you’re at right now. You won’t get sick, and any injuries you get will be healed, too.”

“Are we still going to be able to go to the bathroom?” Clint asked sardonically, shooting side glances at the AIs.

“You’d still be human,” Sam said first, voice soft. “That won’t change. But you’ll be slightly…more. You can still sleep, eat, and go to the bathroom all you want.” She raised an eyebrow as she said the last bit, grinning slightly.

“This isn’t something you have to decide today,” he said, seeing the indecisive looks on their faces. He managed a smile, hoping it didn’t look as strained as it felt. “There’s time.”

His siblings kindly didn’t voice the question lingering between them. The one that said time was all too fleeting.

They’d accepted. Most of them, at least.

It was more than what he’d hoped for. That he could keep most of his family for years more? That he didn’t have to say goodbye at the end of a human’s normal lifespan?

It was a gift, and not one that he took for granted.

Pepper hadn’t said yes. She didn’t want to outlive her children. She didn’t ask him if he would extend them the same gift, knowing that he would say no.

It wasn’t as if he was being deliberately cruel, withholding it from them… But it was a slippery slope. One generation would have it, and then the next would need it as well, and then on and on… It was a slope he wasn’t willing to go on. And, to be entirely honest, he didn’t love her children the same way.

“You are slightly human now, you know,” Samael had told him one day. “Favoritism is to be expected.”

Although he tried. He did like to think he mostly succeeded at it, juggling his responsibilities with his human wants. Gadreel helped, and Samael as well once he regained his Grace.

But he hadn’t extended the offer to Pepper’s children, and she didn’t accept it.

She was the first to die, asking him to let her go in peace. “You did say reincarnation exists, didn’t
you?” she said, smiling at him.

“That’d be your choice.”

“I’ll be back, Tony.” She’d touched his cheek, fingers gentle. “Will that be all, Mr. Stark?” Her tone was fond.

He didn’t think he quite succeeded in keeping the grief out of his. “That…will be all, Ms. Potts.”

Hel had been there to see her off, giving him a gentle smile all the while.

He’d held her soul briefly while saying goodbye. It was the first and only time in her life he had done so, and it was as bittersweet as it was joyful.

Pepper had been ninety-five when she died. And the clock ticked loudly in the back of his mind.

He’d never been so starkly aware of time until most of his family was made up of fragile humans. Humans who were all too mortal.

It was easy enough to forget that humans were temporary when he was also human, but it would come slamming back with every close call. Until he’d finally extended that offer and had it accepted.

But he knew. Immortality was a gift that could be given, but it could also be taken away if asked. And they’d ask eventually. They were human, and humans weren’t designed to live forever.

Souls lived on, but humans?

“You know, I kind of get what Bilbo was talking about when he said he was feeling ‘stretched.’”

He stilled, turning away from the stars to look at Clint. “Yeah?”

Clint’s response was a weary smile. “Yeah. I thought I knew what he meant before. On the days when I did too much, when I was tired from the job. But it was something completely different he was talking about.” He looked over the skyline, different and yet still the same even hundreds of years later. “It’s that feeling of too much. That feeling that you’re not quite…settled in your skin. That everything’s stretching out before you and you can’t see the end.”

He was thankful that he’d already had his arms folded across his chest, since it meant Clint couldn’t see the way his hands were tightening into fists. “Are you looking for it?”

“Well, I think I heard?” Clint laughed. “We’re all looking for the end. Or, well…” He glanced askance. “Most of us are.”

He took several deep breaths, not quite ready to answer just yet. Then, “Do you want to look for it?”

Clint also didn’t respond immediately, eyes dark as he looked at the stars above them. Finally, he said, “Yeah. I think I do. Is that all right?”

He reached out to rest a hand on Clint’s shoulder, feeling the touch of his own Grace in Clint’s soul reach out for him. “It is.”

It wasn’t as if it happened immediately. Clint was perfectly willing to live out the rest of his life naturally, letting injuries and illnesses be cured angelically. But he aged, until one day he asked to
"You know I’ll be back," Clint told him brightly, eyes bright and sharp as they had always been. "I’m just too good to be down permanently. This is just...a really long nap." He grinned broadly, laugh lines crinkling with the motion.

Hel was there again to personally take Clint, laying a gentle hand on her father's arm when she did.

Clint was three hundred and nine when he died.

The clock kept ticking in the back of his head.

It wasn’t just humans that passed. Stars did, too.

Eventually came the time when Earth was left behind, humanity taking to the stars. They’d joined them, perhaps more literally than most, Asgard taking them in with open arms.

But not at first. There was a whole universe to explore, and he’d always loved seeing new things. So he had.

But when Earth was gone and most of his family as well, there was really only one home he had left, and it was there he returned. His kids loved it, both AIs and gods, and it was nostalgic being back in Asgard. Even if it was a different version than the one he was intimately familiar with.

Gadreel wasn’t as interested in exploring the universe, and Sam had done her time in the years after regaining her Grace. But it wasn’t as if he was alone, since his kids were always willing to join him on new adventures.

It was just...different.

A different he still wasn’t sure how to handle.

A voice called out in the dark.

Once there were three…

Chapter End Notes

Riiighht. Anyway, like I said before, there's going to be a happy ending! The ride there is just going to be a little bumpy. But it'll work out!

The actual Chapter 1 will be up sometime tomorrow, probably around the same time as today's post was. And since the entire story's complete, I can probably post twice a week on Monday/Friday. This story's longer than The Last Archangel, although shorter than Redemption, so there's quite a bit more in store!

And, um...tissues.

Please let me know your thoughts! :D
Hey! :D This chapter brings us into the present (or at least the present for the characters). It's got fluff, angst, and various updates! Also some characters that haven't been in the series before, although the stories behind their introduction are planned. And ONE character that I think you guys...are going to like. ;)

I've got pictures for everyone inserted at the beginning before the chapter actually starts. For those wondering about the other Avengers, I'm not going to leave you hanging for long on that front. I do have the "flashbacks" tag for a reason!

Happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
“Anyone have any idea what these are?” Dummy held two pieces of brightly colored fruit up. “I want to say apples and oranges, but I know they’re not.”

Butterfingers granted him a cursory look, occupied with another merchant’s wares. “Some kind of fruit,” she said.

“I know that, but what kind of fruit is it?”

Butterfingers shot the amused merchant a look. “Ask the seller. He’s standing right there.”

With a sigh, Dummy turned back and did that, stumbling slightly over the syllables of the alien language.

Jarvis discreetly covered his mouth to hide a smile, returning his attention to perusing the books of this particular stall. They were all written in this world’s language, though he could see a few that
were off-world. None of them were particularly valuable, but he wasn’t looking for value.

“So, apparently none of it is good for a cake,” Dummy said loudly, rolling one orange looking fruit around.

“Then why did you buy it?” Butterfingers held a mirror up, squinting. She checked her braid, making sure everything was still in place.

“I like it.” Dummy tucked the fruit away, glancing over to where You was lurking at the other side of the marketplace. “You’d think it’d get easier with time, not harder.”

“It’s been a long time,” Butterfingers said. “Like…a really long time.” She didn’t seem to want to estimate precisely how long it had been.

Flipping through a book to distract himself, Jarvis rather shared the sentiment. Even so, he was unable to stop himself from calculating the years. Nine hundred and ninety million years. He could do it down to the second but that…

Well.

It wasn’t exactly useful, not when one was dealing with such large numbers.

“But it’s not like we did anything last year,” Dummy said. “Dad was at that planetary thing.”

“You mean the one with the explosions?”

“And the year before that he wasn’t even in this dimension.” Dummy made a face. “I bet no one threw a party.”

“It’s not like he’d throw a party if we didn’t do it for him,” You said, coming back into earshot. He was holding a projector that could transmit memories, something that they had gifted Father the first time they had come out. However, as technology was always advancing, they usually tended to purchase another to put more memories in.

The last projector had been gifted a hundred years ago. It was about time for a new one.

“He doesn’t count the years as we do,” Jarvis reminded them gently, closing the book to put it away. He started walking through the marketplace, aware of his siblings following him.

“You mean he doesn’t keep track at all,” Dummy said.

Butterfingers snorted. “It’s not as if anyone else keeps track of the years the way you do.”

A faint tinge of pink dusted Dummy’s cheeks, a visible sign of his embarrassment. “It’s not my fault my programming is so picky!”

“He’s offered to help update you three thousand times,” You said.

“Who else is going to help keep track of things, then?” Dummy folded his arms across his chest. “No one else knows the Earth’s calendar anymore!”

Except for them, but even then it wasn’t automatic the way it was for Dummy. His systems had never recalibrated themselves to the newer timekeeping methods. While that wasn’t necessarily a bad thing, it did mean that time ran very differently for Dummy than it did for them.

“That is true,” You conceded. “There’s a certain nostalgia to knowing the exact date of when he was
“Yes!” Dummy pointed at You.

“But that isn’t why you don’t update yourself.”

Dummy glowered, shoving his hands into his pockets. “It’d be silly doing that every time something advances when it comes to artificial intelligence. Besides, it’s not like there’s anything else quite like us.” He flicked his eyes to an artificially intelligent robot on the outskirts of the marketplace, their uniform that of a police officer.

“There’s no one like us,” Butterfingers said, flashing a proud smile. “Even Ultron had to admit that.”

“It’s not like Dad made Ultron. That was all Hank.”

“Which is why he was a dick.”

“He’s still a dick,” You pointed out sensibly, flicking a finger over his phone.

“Anyway,” Dummy said loudly, “this is going to be great. Because Dad’s going to be there and no one’s told him anything’s up.”

Butterfingers tilted her head. “You think he knows? He probably knows.”

“He doesn’t,” Jarvis said, “though he likely suspects something is happening. It isn’t every day that Asgard is unusually quiet.”

Dummy shot him an injured look. “We’re not that loud!”

Jarvis couldn’t resist a small smile. “Perhaps not by yourself, but with the others? It’s a wonder anyone can hear themselves think.”

“You know if that were an issue Loki would just magic the whole place silent.” Dummy paused, giving Jarvis a narrow-eyed look that said he knew exactly what Jarvis was trying to do. “Which he’s done before.” He folded his arms across his chest, pursing his lips. “And he’d better not do anything to my cake this time!”

“There’s no proof he did anything last time!” Butterfingers protested.

“I saw him! He was in the kitchen!”

“Just because he was there doesn’t mean he did anything!”

“The cake exploded!” Dummy said waspishly. “I know I didn’t put anything explosive in it. And you guys weren’t there, so he’s the only one who would’ve thought it funny!”

“Dad thought it was funny,” You said, shrugging.

“Dad thinks anything to do with explosions is funny.” Dummy tilted his head in thought. “Which, yeah, I guess it is, but it was my cake.”

“Maybe ask him not to explode it?” Butterfingers said eventually. “It’s not like he would’ve done it just because. Everyone likes cake.”

“Right!” Dummy nodded. “It’s not like I mix up the salt and sugar anymore!”
Jarvis, Butterfingers, and You exchanged knowing glances when Dummy wasn’t looking. Dummy had, in fact, mixed up those two ingredients just several days ago when he’d put together an Asgardian omelet. Father hadn’t the heart to tell him of the mistake, although Jarvis had seen Loki and Thor discreetly shoveling their own omelets into the nearest plants.

“So are you going to bake another cake this year?” Butterfingers asked instead.

“Well, yeah.” Dummy sounded like it was a ridiculous question. “No birthday’s complete without a cake!”

“There wasn’t any cake last time we had a party,” You said.

Dummy shot him an aggrieved look. “Because Loki exploded it.”

“There wasn’t any the year before that either.”

“Fenris ate the whole thing.” Dummy paused. “And then he was sick.”

Given previous trends, the likelihood of another cake mishap this year was extraordinarily high. “Why not ask the staff for help?” Jarvis suggested.

“It’s not the same!” Dummy scuffed his shoes along the ground. “Besides, it’s not like they’ve got any Earth recipes downloaded onto their servers.”

“It’s not like we’ve got Earth ingredients anyway,” You said. “Or stoves. I think the cook cringed last time he saw one. Something about a fire hazard?”

“Dad was fiddling with it,” Butterfingers said. “And then Sam confiscated it before he could do anything else.”

Jarvis was relatively certain he had seen that stove lying somewhere in Sam’s room in a dusty corner, shielded from view by a bunch of plants and a garishly colored blanket.

“We can help you with it,” You told Dummy, reaching out to touch his shoulder. “That way nothing will happen.”

Dummy didn’t respond immediately, clearly mulling it over. He usually tried to bake the cakes, having taken it upon himself to provide them at every birthday party. It frequently ended in disaster, although occasionally he turned out a good cake. The best results occurred when he allowed his siblings to help, and Jarvis hoped he would let them help now.

It would mean fewer explosions and upset stomachs on everyone’s parts.

“All right.” Dummy nodded in acceptance. “But only because this needs to be really great. So everything has to be just right!”

“I promise not to mix up the salt and sugar,” Butterfingers said solemnly.

Dummy didn’t seem to understand the joke. “You’d better not! Since we couldn’t find anything, this cake needs to be extra special.”

“I’m sure he’ll love it,” Jarvis assured him. Father always did, even if something was salty instead of sugary or vice versa.

Dummy gave him a lopsided smile. “I hope so.”
They drew into sight of Gadreel, who currently appeared to be in a staring match with this world’s equivalent of a horse. He did stop upon noticing their arrival, giving them a fond smile.

“I trust you found what you needed?” Gadreel asked.

You simply held out his find in answer, although both Butterfingers and Dummy made faces.

Jarvis shook his head. “Nothing here,” he said. “You can take us back now if you’re finished.”

“Of course.” Gadreel shot the animal a look, most likely telling it goodbye.

Before they were whisked back to Asgard, Dummy looked up to the sky. “Samael, I hope your group’s having a little more luck.”

Samael’s group was not having more luck.

Although the prayer was appreciated, thank you, Dummy.

Sam was currently trying to tell herself that she was not nursing a giant headache because AIs/angels didn’t get headaches. It wasn’t possible.

And yet Fenris, Sleipnir, and Jormungandar all seemed to want to prove her wrong.

Pinching the bridge of her nose, Sam told herself to take a breath and just…be.

It wasn’t that bad. She wouldn’t have to twist reality to make it so that none of this had happened. Because then Uncle would give her the eyes and a disappointed face and she really didn’t want to have to deal with that.

Even though snapping her fingers and making it so that disasters never happened was a lot easier than repeatedly apologizing and offering bribes so that they wouldn’t get kicked off the planet and banned.

They’d already been banned from too many planets.

Not that it really mattered because they could all shape shift and sneak through customs, but it was the principle of the matter. Sam didn’t like being banned from places she wanted to go to. It was a pain in the ass.

“Boys,” she said slowly, “please.”

The three actually stopped bickering long enough to give her identical woebegone looks. Not that it worked on her.

“And wipe that look off your faces,” Sam said, unimpressed. “You’re going to get us kicked off the planet at this rate. Again.”

“It wasn’t our fault last time!” Fenris protested.

Sam snorted. “The building didn’t collapse by itself.” The three had been left unsupervised for ten minutes and they’d destroyed an important historical monument. That Sam had managed to fix it meant nothing to the government since it had been destroyed in the first place.

And she’d really liked the climate on that planet.
“It’s not like we meant to break it,” Jormungandr said earnestly, yellow eyes wide.

“So we don’t actually need a chaperone,” Sleipnir said.

“Ha ha, very funny.” Sam tapped Sleipnir on the nose before he could blink. “Nice try, squirt, but you guys are stuck with me until we’re back home. You don’t want Uncle finding out you’ve been banned from another planet, do you?”

The three all shared sheepish looks, shaking their heads.

“Why couldn’t it have been Gadreel, though?” Fenris turned back to the statues he had been inspecting before. “He wouldn’t be judging us…”

“Oh, really?” All Sam could picture was Gadreel hovering by them like a hawk, having been forewarned due to too many horror stories from Uncle and Sam. “Are you sure about that?”

Fenris paused, evidently reconsidering his statement. “Never mind.”

With a satisfied nod, Sam returned to her post of discreetly hovering on the edges. She kept half an eye out for something interesting, but this particular store had practically nothing but weird looking statues and pictures.

She could see Uncle having a laugh at that statue with too many tentacles, but she also knew that he had a collection of tentacle statues from previous occasions. There came a point when one had too many tentacle statues.

Now, a good old tentacle story on the other hand…

Unfortunately, she had yet to find a decent one that met her standards, and she wasn’t desperate enough to stoop to time travel just yet.

“You could at least give us some suggestions,” Fenris said thirty minutes and two stores later. “You’ve been around longer than us.”

“Birthdays are a mortal thing,” Sam said, shrugging. “It doesn’t matter what you get. Uncle’ll like it so long as it’s from you.”

“He always gets something for us,” Jormungandr said, making a face. “It’s the same issue every year.”

Sam shrugged again, pushing her hands into her jacket pockets. “You’ll find something. You always do. He liked what you gave him last time.”

“I gave him a necklace of scales. Scales. I gave that to him before!”

“I knit him a hat,” Fenris said, looking down at his hands. “Not that it looked like a hat. I’m never going to get knitting down.”

“At least you have limbs in general. I’m limbless in my normal form.”

“But you can go everywhere! Wolves don’t blend in easily.”

“And eight-legged horses aren’t exactly natural, even in Asgard,” Sleipnir agreed.

“Well—” Fenris cut himself off, something catching his eye. “Is that chocolate?”
Sam wasn’t ashamed to admit that she turned just as quickly as the others to see what Fenris had.

Apparently it was chocolate. A confectionary store filled to the brim with sweets – Earth-derived and alien – and it carried chocolate.

Chocolate was a rarity nowadays, given that the cacao bean had really only been found on Earth. Humans had taken some with them when they’d eventually left, but that had been millions of years ago. Pure chocolate of the kind that they’d had on Earth didn’t exist anymore, but there were variants that were almost like the real thing.

And from what Sam could tell, this store carried one of those variants.

“Damn, it’s expensive,” Jormungandr muttered, peering at the price.

“It’s imported,” the merchant said testily, pink antennas waving in irritation.

“If you want chocolate, I could take you somewhere else,” Sam said slowly, relatively sure she knew of someplace cheaper.

“So you know someplace else that sells chocolate?” Sleipnir asked, turning to her.

On second thought, her knowledge of confectionary stores was probably several hundred years out of date. She hadn’t known about this one, otherwise she would’ve come before to get some for Uncle’s off days (or periods, really).

“That’s what I thought,” Sleipnir said, sighing. He turned to his brothers. “We can split it. Maybe the others will be willing to share as well.”

Sam took a moment to mentally send a question to Jarvis, receiving an affirmative answer several seconds later. “They will.” She paused as another message came in, blinking. “J said to get as much as you can.”

The merchant brightened at the implication of a large sale. “How much will you be wanting?”

As the brothers started talking, Sam took a moment to slump in relief. Once this was over, she could bring them back to Asgard with the knowledge that no one had gotten banned anywhere.

And with the entire store’s stock of chocolate, since evidently no one was taking chances of this store closing down within the next decade.

Asgard was way too quiet. There was still noise, but it was quiet in all the ways that counted.

Meaning his kids were up to something, and Sam and Gadreel were colluding with them.

And Loki was involved, too, since he’d just given Tony an innocent look and claimed he had work and maybe Tony should check the blacksmith out since he had some new materials for forging.

The blacksmith did have new materials (most notably some sweet new metal he hadn’t seen before), but that wasn’t the point.

Holding out a hot piece of metal for Jagrfelm to inspect, Tony wondered if there was anything he was forgetting. There had to be some reason for his kids to be planning something secret, but nothing came to mind.

“A sword, do you think?” Jagrfelm asked him, tapping the metal with a hammer.
Giving the metal one last look, Tony nodded. “Yeah, why not. Or maybe a shield. It’s got the strength for that.”

He set it down, vaguely indicated he was leaving, and walked out. None of the other Asgardians paid him any attention, well used to his frequent visits to the blacksmith.

Tony took a slow path through the city, no particular destination in mind other than “not the palace.” It was too bizarre without his family making the usual noise, and he didn’t really want to spend the day cooped up inside.

With a slow exhale, he let his consciousness briefly skim over the most troublesome areas of the galaxy, checking that things were still the same as he’d left them. The Guardians weren’t in the same sector as before, but everything seemed all right. He did find where Sam and Gadreel were, but both of them pushed him out before he could get a closer look at what they were doing.

Coming back to his body, Tony found himself at the edge, a vast expanse of clouds spread before him. The Bifrost wasn’t too far off, a gleam of rainbow-colored light that shot off into the distance.

Taking a flight was an option, but he didn’t think it was the best idea considering whatever his kids were planning. It was too likely that he’d be gone longer than expected, coming back to disappointed faces because he’d missed something important.

Which, for the record, had only happened, like, a hundred times. Maybe.

Scuffing his shoe against the ground, Tony gradually sat down, staring out at the horizon, the edges where space didn’t quite look right. And he just…sat.

If Pepper and Rhodey could see him now – hell, if anyone from his old team could see him – they’d be laughing their asses off because Tony Stark didn’t do quiet. And yet…he found that he was doing it more frequently nowadays.

He wasn’t entirely sure why, only that he could just sit or stand and…look. Listening, too. He’d caught Sam and Gadreel a few times doing the same, but less often for whatever reason.

Closing his eyes, Tony focused on the sound of air pumping through lungs, on the life flowing through every inch of Asgard. And yet…there was just something…off.

A sudden flare of energy from the Bifrost had him blinking, looking over to the flare of rainbow light that signaled its activation. He was relatively sure they weren’t expecting anyone, and he was also definitely sure that Ultron didn’t like Asgard.

But Ultron was here, along with Vision.

Tony only briefly considered going to ask him what he was here for before deciding that he didn’t really need the snitch fest that would result. If it was important, Ultron would find him.

Giving the view one last look, Tony headed back to the palace, taking the very long, scenic route.

Dummy was in the kitchen, but as there had been no incidents, there was no need to worry. Butterfingers and You were also in the kitchen, which was slightly perturbing since neither of them really liked to cook.

And Tony was pretty sure he’d seen Balthazar around, but Sam had come by before he could confirm, whisking him off to the library. Loki was also doing a good job of just lazing around and
getting his attention whenever he was about to wander off and was currently hovering by the
doorway with a book.

“You’re up to something,” Tony said for the third time.

“I’m always up to something,” Sam said. “Maybe be a bit more specific?”

“You and everyone else. You’re all up to something.”

Sam gave him an unimpressed look, eyebrows raised. “That doesn’t help either. The terrible three are
always doing something they shouldn’t, and the bots are too curious for their own good.”

Tony gave her a long look, but she just stared back, gray eyes inscrutable. Sometimes they were
hazel, usually several shades lighter than her brown hair, which was cut short in a ragged pixie cut.
“You’re not going to tell me.”

“Tell you what?” Sam’s lips twitched slightly, the only sign she wasn’t completely unaffected. “I
don’t know what you think is going on, but it’s nothing big.” She leaned back with her cup of tea,
pausing. “Well, no one got banned from any planets today.”

“That’s…” Tony looked down at his own tea, considering. “That’s pretty good.”

“I know, right?” She grinned, pride radiating from her Grace.

Tony tilted his head, briefly catching sight of Fenris slinking around the corner in wolf form. He
seemed to be carrying something shiny. “Did you at least have a nice outing?”

“It was.” Sam crossed her legs, then pulled a pack of cards out from her jacket. “Cards?”

Jormungandr flashed into view, slithering across the marble floor, but he was casually blocked from
view by Loki, who retrieved another book from the shelves.

“I’m going to find out what’s going on,” Tony said.

“Absolutely.” Sam held up a number three and held the rest of the deck out for Tony to take a card
from. “Take a guess: lower or higher?”

As the sounds of marked scuffling and shhing came from outside the room, Tony resigned himself to
being babysat by Sam.

If Sam wasn’t worried, then he shouldn’t be worried either. It was just his paranoia saying something
suspicious was up.

“You deliberately keep me in the library all day and now you want me out?” Tony gave Jarvis an
unimpressed look. “Did you guys blow something up without telling me? I could’ve helped!”

“No one blew anything up,” Jarvis assured him. “There may have been some smoke at one point, but
no explosions.”

“Dummy must be losing his touch if that’s all that happened.”

Jarvis looked pained. “Please don’t encourage him.”

“But that’s half the fun!” Tony let Sam pull him to his feet and start pushing him out. “I’m going, I’m
going.”
Loki had left about an hour ago when Jarvis had come in, both of them not being nearly as discreet with their secret looks as they thought they were being. At this point, Tony suspected the whole of Asgard was in on it.

Even Jagrfelm, as unlikely as that was. Jagrfelm still glared at Thor every time he came around.

He found his sight blocked a second later by a blindfold. “Wow, this is old school. Takes me way back.”

“They insisted,” Sam said, hands on his shoulders to guide him through the halls.

There was really one reason for a blindfold and that was a surprise. Also, Tony could remember a similar incident with a blindfold and a surprise party, but that had been a few thousand years ago.

“I know you know what’s going on now but please act surprised?” Sam whispered.

“I should be insulted that you think I wouldn’t be surprised. No, wait, I am.” Tony reached back to pinch her side.

“Stop that!” Sam smacked his hand away, guiding him with the other. “J, go ahead and tell me when.”

To be polite and better the chances of actually being surprised, Tony made sure not to pay attention to what Jarvis was doing. It was easier with Sam right by him, since it gave him something to focus on.

Still, it was difficult to miss the large crowd in the other room, their souls a bright mass in his senses.

“Maybe be a bit more subtle next time?” Tony suggested.

Sam just sighed, hand pressing into his back. “Okay, let’s go.”

They started moving forward again, and this time there was an audible hush. Sam pulled at the knot, letting the blindfold fall off.

At the same time, there was a loud chorus of “SURPRISE!” in various languages and tones. Ultron, off to the side, sounded the grumpiest, while his kids were the loudest.

And, to be fair, Tony didn’t even have to work to be surprised because this was not what he’d expected. Colorful lights were strewn up all over the ceiling and the railings, flashing cheerily. Orbs of light danced in the air, switching between different colors but clearly Loki’s work. There was a large cake set up on a table loaded with Asgardian specialties.

But it was the people he hadn’t expected. Ultron and Vision were only two of the guests. The bulk of the party was made up of Asgardians, but it was the unexpected sight of his siblings and friends that had him taken aback.

“Hey, bro!” Balthazar bounded up to him, grinning broadly. “A little bot tells me it’s your birthday! I hear it’s the big one-oh!”

Vaguely aware of Sam and Jarvis slinking off to give them some privacy, Tony reached out to touch Balthazar, unable to mask his shock. “I’m pretty sure I passed that a while ago, Balthazar.” He was glad his tone was even. He wasn’t even sure how long it had been since he’d last seen Balthazar in an unofficial capacity. “I’m also sure you were still in Bode’s last I checked.”
“We were,” Balthazar said easily, slinging an arm around Tony’s shoulders. “Spying on us?”

“It’s not spying. I was just checking up on you.” Tony waved off a handsy Asgardian who wanted to give him congratulatory smooches.

“You mean spying.” Balthazar gave him a crinkly-eyed grin. “Nah, it’s all right, Gabe. I get it. Have to make sure everything’s all good.”

Tony responded with a grin, shrugging. “How’s your team?”

“Oh, you know ’em, chugging along.” Balthazar looked slightly shifty.

After a quick look, Tony realized why. “Where’s Groot?”

“He…might be a little sprig right now. But no worries! Rocket’s got him handled.”

Rocket’s distinctive voice cut through the noise. “Fuck you, too, Quill!”

“Let me guess,” Tony said dryly. “Was there an incident?”

“It might’ve involved fire, but everything’s okay!” Balthazar stepped back, giving Tony two thumbs up. “I can promise you no diplomatic incidents were had. But some pirates may be missing some ships.”

“I’m sure.” Tony’s eyes flicked to the side where Vision and Ultron were waiting, Vision hovering rather anxiously. “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t.”

“You realize that’s a very short list, right?”

“Exactly.” Patting Balthazar on the shoulder, Tony made his way over to the two AIs. He was stopped briefly several times by well-wishers and by one person shoving a very large drink into his hands. He took the drink, mildly impressed by the size of the jug, and slipped through the rest of the crowd until he was standing by Vision and Ultron.

They’d found a quiet corner that was slightly offset by the colored lights and a large pillar. Ultron looked distinctly uncomfortable with the entire environment, his dirty blond hair hidden under a hat that looked like it might have been a present from Vision. It was too obnoxiously colored for Ultron to have picked it out.

“Happy Birthday, Tony,” Vision said, smiling anxiously. He bobbed up and down, cape fluttering.

“No need to be nervous, Vision.” Tony gave him an easy smile. “I’m not going to bite.”

“I am aware, but…” Vision tilted his head.

“It’s been a while, right?”

“Exactly.” Patting Balthazar on the shoulder, Tony made his way over to the two AIs. He was stopped briefly several times by well-wishers and by one person shoving a very large drink into his hands. He took the drink, mildly impressed by the size of the jug, and slipped through the rest of the crowd until he was standing by Vision and Ultron.

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“I am aware, but…” Vision tilted his head.

“It’s been a while, right?”

“Three hundred and twenty-five years and two hundred days to be exact.” Vision’s voice was neutral as he said it. “I believe we were discussing what to do with an unusual black hole.”

“That’s a nice way of saying that the black hole was trying its best to consume the nearest galaxy, isn’t it?” Tony remembered that black hole. It had been an unusual job, but at least it’d been interesting.

“As I said, unusual.”
Ultron gave a derisive snort, then tried to cover it up with a grunt. It failed miserably, but Tony decided to let him have it.

“So, what brings you to my neck of the universe?” Tony asked, gesturing to the room as a whole.

“Your son.”

“I have six sons. Which one are you referring to?”

“The one who looks like you.” Ultron paused, then added grudgingly, “He asked nicely.”

“Of course he did. Dummy’s nice like that.” Tony spotted him over by a table, waving a drink around and eagerly talking with Hel. “You didn’t have to come, though.”

Ultron shrugged, looking uncomfortable. “Vision wanted to.”

Vision didn’t seem at all surprised at being thrown under the bus. “I did,” he agreed.

“Thanks, Viz.” Tony reached out to squeeze his shoulder, flashing a broad grin. “Good on you for dragging your dad along like the grumpy old man he is.”

Ultron’s eyes flashed, electricity sparking. “If I’m *old*, then what are you? Prehistoric?”

“Well, if the shoe fits…” Tony let his smirk speak for itself.

Sensing defeat, Ultron turned away, muttering threats and curses under his breath.

Tony raised an eyebrow, mildly impressed at the creativity of said threats. “If you actually try any of those, you’ll be back on probation so fast your head will be spinning.”

“What, like the last time?” Ultron grinned. “And the time before that?”

“Maybe if you didn’t do it so often—”

“The threat’s getting old, angel, and you know it.”

Tony resisted the urge to poke Ultron in the chest. “Don’t think I won’t do it one of these days.”

“Of course you will.” The words were snide. “Don’t you have other guests to annoy?”

“Getting rid of me so soon?” Tony did take a step back when Ultron’s eyes flashed again. “But you do have a point. Enjoy the party, gents.”

He didn’t think Ultron would, but Vision was already eyeing a rowdy bunch of Asgardians in the middle of a drinking game.

Tony once again slipped into the midst of the party, but this time he cheated slightly so he wouldn’t get held up. Fudging the edges of people’s perceptions wasn’t exactly hard, and it meant he could wind his way to his destination all the faster.

He stopped messing about once he came within eyesight of Dummy, but he came to a stop and watched Dummy gesture and talk excitedly to Hel, spilling Asgardian liquor on the floor when he shook his drink.

“—and then it caught on fire,” Dummy finished, making the accompanying explosive hand movements.
“Again?” Hel couldn’t keep the amusement out of her voice.

“That was the whole point – Dad!” Dummy cut off, catching sight of Tony standing there. He dropped his drink onto the nearest flat surface and barreled into Tony for a full-body hug.

He’d long outgrown being able to jump into Tony’s arms, but he’d substituted those hugs for running headlong into Tony, forever trusting that he wouldn’t flinch. And Tony never did, arms snapping up automatically to return the embrace.

“Hey, buddy.” Tony pressed a kiss to the side of Dummy’s head. “I hear you’re the one who was gunning for this?”

Butterfingers snaked her arms around his neck from behind, a grin in her voice as she said, “We helped.”

“But it was Dummy’s idea,” You added from the left, mere inches from Tony’s side.

“No one else has track of Earth’s calendar,” Dummy said, arms tightening briefly around Tony’s neck before he let go, stepping back slightly.

Tony took the opportunity to pull You in for a side hug, pressing a kiss to his temple. “Thanks, guys. Consider me surprised.”

“We got you good, didn’t we?” Dummy grinned proudly, bouncing on his feet. “Oh, you haven’t even had the cake yet!”

“Weren’t we going to wait on that?” Butterfingers asked. “At least until people are less likely to throw it.” As if to punctuate her words, a roasted pig went flying over their heads and nearly landed on Fenris and Jormungandr. The two immediately started over to the culprit to give them a piece of their minds.

Dummy considered the sight. “Point.”

“A food fight is always imminent with this crowd,” Loki drawled, standing several feet off the side with a slight grin. His hair was more silver than black now and cut short, but his green eyes still held a ruthless intelligence. “I would have thought you knew this by now.”

“I can always hope, can’t I?” Dummy grumbled, rolling his eyes. He brightened a second later, jumping in for another hug. “Presents are for after the party,” he whispered into Tony’s ear, squeezing tightly before letting go and bounding away.

“You guys didn’t need to,” was all Tony managed to say, chest squeezing painfully.

“We wanted to,” Butterfingers informed him cheerfully. She linked an arm through You’s, giving Tony a beaming smile. “We’ll stop monopolizing your time!”

Tony wanted to tell her it was never monopolized by them, but she pulled You away before he could respond, leaving him with Loki and an amused Hel.

“It still amazes me how excitable and young they are, even now,” Hel said after a moment, smiling fondly.

“Yeah, uh…” Tony glanced back to where Fenris and Jormungandr had finished teaching the pig-thrower a lesson and were talking with Sleipnir, all of them glancing at the cake. “I think it’s because they’ve got each other.”
It definitely wasn’t because of him.

Hel put a hand on his arm, catching his attention. “Don’t sell yourself short. They’ve grown into fine young beings.”

There was no hiding the proud grin that spread across his face. “They have, haven’t they? But most of it definitely wasn’t from me.”

“That is patently ridiculous,” Loki said frankly, giving him an irritated look. “What are children without the parents? They may be their own individuals, but you helped guide them.”

Tony hummed slightly, unwilling to argue further. His Father hadn’t exactly won any parent of the year awards, but his siblings had turned out relatively all right. Or most of them, anyway. He wasn’t entirely sure what happened with some of them like Zachariah or Azazel, but he supposed that was the beauty of free will.

“Accept the compliment for what it is,” Hel said, patting his cheek. One side of her face stretched into a smile. “I’m sure my brothers would say the same. I know I do.”

He swallowed back the words that would only hurt her. The ones reminding her that he hadn’t always been there – that he’d been absent for too long. She’d forgiven him for that long ago.

“Yeah, well… We’re always our own worst critics.” Tony managed a smile. “How are things?”

“Same as always.” Hel shrugged, letting her hand drop. “I’ve managed to raise the temperature moderately, if you feel up to visiting.”

That was good news. “Anything…?” He couldn’t get the words out, hope rising despite himself.

“No,” Hel said softly. “Nothing. I’m sorry.”

His smile was painful this time, and he was grateful for his humanity that hid the worst of the agony. “Well… guess it was a long shot, anyway. That something might have changed…”

“It still might.” Hel inclined her head, mouth twisting. She seemed to take it as a personal affront that she couldn’t bring happy news on this front. “You never know.”

“It’s been too long…” Gabriel blinked, took a breath, and exhaled slowly. He put on a cheerier smile this time, voice lightening. “Well, let’s not dwell on it, yeah? You didn’t come here for that.”

“No, I didn’t.” Hel stepped in to kiss his cheek, the contrast between the two halves of her face startling against his skin. “Have fun, Father.” Giving him one last smile, she stepped away to mingle.

Closing his eyes, he consciously focused on taking a breath. It wasn’t until he felt Loki’s shoulder bump companionably against his left that he opened them again, meeting his eyes.

“Grief is a strange thing, is it not?” Loki said quietly, eyes seeing something else.

Tony dropped his gaze. “Yeah.”

“All we can do is move forward.” Loki gave him a half smile, the corner of his mouth ticking upwards. “Tonight is a night for joy.” His smile stretched into a knowing grin. “You forgot, did you not?”

Tony’s eyebrow twitched. “So what if I did?” He’d never been one to keep track of birthdays unless
they were his kids’.

“This is an excellent celebration!” Thor’s arm settled around Tony’s shoulders on his right side, squeezing him tightly. “Your children have outdone themselves this time, Gabriel.”

“They get their sense of style from me,” Tony said shamelessly, flashing a beaming Thor a grin.

Thor grinned back, eyes crinkling. His hair was entirely silver and bound in a Norse braid. His face was the same except for a deep scar bisecting his right eye, which had been saved only through angelic intervention. Wrinkles and laugh lines adorned his features, but he was still much the same as the young god Gabriel had grown to know.

“It is a good sense of style,” Thor assured him, propping his other hand on his hip. Mjölnir winked at Tony from his side, star metal gleaming brightly.

“That’s not what you said when they redecorated the palace,” Tony said dryly.

Thor looked pained at the reminder. “Glitter does not wash out so easily. I am still finding it in my bedchambers.”

Well, Thor had a point there. Tony was also still finding glitter in his quarters, and he knew for a fact that Gadreel had been decked out in the worst of it, going around with sparkly hair for days afterward.

“It was no small feat doing so under our noses,” Loki said, smirking.

Tony shot him a look. “And you had nothing to do with it, I assume.”

Loki’s expression was far too innocent. “I did nothing.”

Tony snorted. “Yeah, sure, that’s the point.”

Loki arched an eyebrow, shooting Tony a sidelong look. He didn’t say anything, though, eyes softening briefly. Then he glanced off to the side. “We shall leave you to it, I think. Enjoy yourself, Gabriel.” He brushed his fingers over Tony’s arm and was gone.

“He is right.” Thor’s squeezed once more before dropping his arm, inclining his head. “I shall attend to my friends before they decide it would be appropriate to smash something.” It was only the wink that told Tony he hadn’t become completely serious.

Thor’s regal cape had barely disappeared into the crowd before Fenris, Jormungandr, and Sleipnir were there, all of them beaming.

Tony briefly considered their faces. “Should I be concerned?”

“What – no!” Fenris looked insulted. It would have been believable if it wasn’t Fenris.

“You all have that look on your faces. I know that look.”

“We can’t just be happy?” Jormungandr tilted his head, yellowish eyes glinting as he flashed a hint of fang.

“We didn’t even get kicked off any planets this time!” Fenris agreed.

“That shouldn’t even be such an accomplishment.” Tony couldn’t hide how his lips twitched.
“Sam was there,” Sleipnir pointed out. “She wouldn’t let us do anything.”

Tony briefly skimmed over the room to check where she was, finding her off to the side with Gadreel and Jarvis. Her Grace was unusually shifty, and she batted his silent question away with a mental reprimand. “Then I owe her a drink. Wrangling the three of you couldn’t have been easy.”

“We’re not *that* bad!” Fenris protested, blowing out a loud gust of air.

“Which is why you guys have been kicked off five different planets.” Tony smiled, letting them know he was just teasing. “Did you have fun being nice?”

Jormungandr blinked at him. “We’re always nice.”

“Hel couldn’t come since she said she was busy, but it was fun,” Fenris added, shrugging. “No one stared, anyway.”

“It’s not like they’d stare if we didn’t break anything,” Sleipnir said. “And we didn’t break anything.”

All of them looked inordinately pleased with this simple fact.

And since them causing chaos (they really *were* his kids) was more of a common occurrence than not, them being pleased was entirely understandable.

Tony ducked his head in an effort to hide his grin. “I’ll be prepared for next time, since I’m sure the three of you will come up with something suitably chaotic.”

“Was that permission?” Jormungandr asked slowly. “Did you just give us permission?”

“I’m just saying…always good to be prepared.” Tony flashed the three of them a large grin.

Fenris’s responding grin was predatory, exactly like the wolf he was.

Even Sleipnir couldn’t quite hide a smile, teeth glinting briefly.

“We’re going to cut the cake!” Dummy shouted, darting in to snag Tony by the arm. “C’mon!”

Cutting the cake was an entire fanfare in itself considering how large it was. Tony just waited, vaguely panicking, because he could very distinctly remember the last time Dummy had baked a cake and presented it.

It had involved salt, cream cheese, and pizza base.

But Butterfingers and You were shooting him reassuring smiles, Jarvis was nodding, and Sam shot him a thumbs up, so Tony thought it would be all right.

And it was. Tony went back for seconds when he could, sneaking Dummy a hug when he wasn’t expecting it just for the happy grin Dummy gave him.

The party wasn’t over even after the cake was disbursed, although Tony found himself edging off to the outskirts in favor of some peace and quiet. He still enjoyed a good party, but the days when he’d be in the middle of it from beginning to end were long gone.

So he found himself just on the outside of the room, standing before a breathtaking view of Asgard at night. The heavens were clear, giving him unobstructed access to the night sky and the stars.
There was a slight wind, bringing with it a promise of rain in the morning. Thor would enjoy it.

Distracted as he was, the quiet voice was a surprise. “Gabriel.”

Tony turned, startled to see Castiel. “Castiel? When did you get here?”

Castiel smiled, pleased. “I was here from the start. Samael helped cloak me.”

Sam lingered in the back with Gadreel, both of them giving them privacy.

“How’s lover boy doing?”

“Dean is fine. As is Sam. They’ve done well with helping integrate Heaven.” Castiel’s smile was soft, eyes warm.

Tony chose his next words carefully, keeping his tone even. “That’s going well, then?”

“Yes. Unifying it has gone extraordinarily smoothly, but that’s in large part due to the hunters helping.” There was a faint pride in Castiel’s words.

“Good. Wasn’t expecting any trouble on that end.” Tony didn’t ask what he wanted to, though the words burned in his throat.

But Castiel knew. His smile disappeared, eyes darkening. “Nothing, Gabriel.” The words were quiet. “There’s been no sign anywhere.”

“No.” Gabriel’s answer was curt, grief and longing a stone in his chest and soul and Grace. He inhaled sharply, closing his eyes. *Damn it.*

“I’m sorry.” Castiel’s Grace brushed comfortingly against his.

Gabriel wasn’t quite able to bring himself under control yet. Grief was… It was…

He blinked, turning his face away so Castiel couldn’t read it.

“Your children are beautiful.” It was not quite an apology.
“Yeah.” Gabriel managed a proud smile. “They really are.”

Sam and Gadreel came closer now, both of them standing on Gabriel’s other side.

It wasn’t as if Gabriel had been alone all these years, but he also hadn’t had three of his siblings in such close contact either. It was strangely comforting, even Sam’s presence reassuring.

When Castiel spoke again, long minutes later, it was subdued. “I didn’t just come here because of the party.”

Sighing, Gabriel craned his head back to the sky. “I figured.” He rolled his shoulders, turning to the front and resting his hands on the railing. “You’ve sensed it, too, right? All of you.”

Samael tilted nir head, eyes dark. “Yes.”

“The Host has no idea what it is,” Castiel said quietly. “But we’ve all sensed it. Even the souls in Heaven…” He closed his eyes.

“Yeah.” Gadreel said what Castiel didn’t.

“It’s wrong,” Gadreel said what Castiel didn’t.

“Yeah.” Gabriel let his sight expand, looking past space and to the universe as a whole, searching. “Raphael’s still got no answers, huh.”

“None.”

Gabriel glanced at Samael, who shook nir head. “It puts me off as much as any of you, and I have no idea what it is.” Nir smile was self-deprecating. “Maybe Michael would, but…”

Gabriel didn’t touch on the unspoken insinuation. “It’s like…” He pulled in a breath, searching for the words. “An absence. Something that was always there before…isn’t.”

And none of them had any idea what it was.

The thought should be more terrifying than it was, but by this time Gabriel had pretty much seen everything. If it was something bad, they could handle it.

“Sir?” Jarvis’s voice broke the silence. “Is everything all right?”

Tony turned, seeing him standing there in the junction of light and shadow, face barely visible. He looked faintly nervous, eyebrows furrowed.

“Yeah, J.” Tony moved forwards, stepping close to Jarvis.

Jarvis reached out tentatively, one hand touching Tony’s shirt in a silent question. He’d gotten better with seeking out affection, but he still wasn’t entirely comfortable with taking it.

Tony wrapped him up in a hug, pulling his head down to kiss his forehead. “It’s all good. C’mon. Let’s join the others.”

Still keeping an arm around Jarvis’s waist, Tony led them back into the palace and to the party.

For a moment, he almost thought he heard whispering, but it was probably just the wind.
Chapter End Notes

Balthazar! :D And he's Peter Quill! If his characterization is a little off from the show, please keep in mind that there's been a HUGE time skip, so he's not quite the same as usual.

As for Ultron, I was picturing him as Brett Tucker, as my head canon for Hank Pym in MCU is as a blond, and Hank had a say in how Ultron's humanoid form looks (Ultron had no say, but this is a longer story). And, yeah, that means Hank Pym is Ant-Man, not Scott Lang. And that there's a Wasp, too, who's Janet Van Dyne, but that's in the past of this story. I'm not particularly happy with MCU on this front, so that part of canon's being chucked out the window.

In any case...please drop a note! :D Let me know what you thought! I'll have the next chapter up on Monday.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

I was informed by my best friend that she cried during this chapter. So, er, I'd recommend tissues?

Also, for those who aren't as into MCU or Marvel, Peter Quill makes his debut in the movie Guardians of the Galaxy. It's a lighthearted movie that's a lot of fun, so I'd recommend a watch. :D

I should also mention now (since I forgot before) that I haven't watched anything else of Supernatural after Season 8 and the first two episodes of Season 9. I know vaguely what happened in Seasons 10 and 11, but no specifics beyond someone named Amara and that Lucifer got out of the Cage and possessed Castiel's vessel. And God came back. In any case, nothing that happened in SPN after Season 8 is applicable here, since the idea behind this story came about before the seasons aired. And it hasn't been influenced by anything on the show. Just putting it out there.

Italics are flashbacks, and the regular font takes us into the present day.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“So…I was wondering…is there a reason you didn’t offer this to any of the others?” Bruce shifted his weight, arms folded across his chest.

He looked up from his project. “Who do you mean?”


No one else had asked, partly because he suspected they didn’t know how or wanted to. Even now, the topic of what he could do was rather…off limits. It was too much for humans, even if they were reminded on occasion. And it wasn’t like he advertised his showier abilities.

“I could’ve brought it up years ago,” he said eventually, tapping absentmindedly at the hologram before him. “But I didn’t. You know why?”

“Immortality’s a big gift?”

“That, and it’s not something given lightly. Until I made my decision.” He shrugged. “Even then, it’s not something I hand out like candy. It loses its shine.”

“That doesn’t answer my question. You offered it to us, but you didn’t bring in the others. If you’re still holding a grudge against Wanda and Pietro for what they did—”

He cut Bruce off before that could go any further. “They were kids. I’ve gotten over it, and they’ve learned their lesson. That’s not why. I like them. But…” He looked down at his hands. “They’re not family,” he admitted.

“What about Betty?” Bruce asked quietly. “You offered it to me, but you didn’t offer it to her.”
“I like Betty, big guy, but again…” He shrugged, giving a wry smile. “This isn’t something I give to just anyone I like. I’ve liked a lot of people over the years; it doesn’t mean I’d make this offer. And it’s an offer that can be refused. There won’t be any hard feelings if you guys don’t take me up on it.”

“You keep saying that, but…” Bruce ducked his head, brow furrowed. “You wouldn’t have offered it to us otherwise.”

“Okay, yeah, true.” He managed a smile. “It’ll hurt me a little if you guys all decide that nah, you’d rather live out normal human lives and die when it’s time. But it’s par for the course.”

“And it doesn’t have to be.”

“Death’s a part of life. Even I can’t put it off forever. I’ve died twice now, so take it from an expert.” It was a bad joke, and he wasn’t surprised when Bruce didn’t crack a smile. “But yeah. This is me being selfish, okay? This is me not wanting to say goodbye sooner than I have to.”

Bruce frowned. “I thought if you did this, we wouldn’t die. Isn’t that the point?”

He didn’t respond immediately, gaze fixed on something over Bruce’s shoulder. “If you guys decided to do it, but then backed out sometime in the future…that could be arranged. But both parties have to be willing; if one isn’t…” He shrugged, keeping his face impassive.

Bruce nodded slightly, considering. “And if I don’t want to do it?”

“Like I said, no hard feelings.”

“What if I’m already not aging?” Bruce asked. “It’s been two decades, Tony. I still look the same as when I met you.”

He looked at Bruce, going just beyond the physical limitations of human sight to see Bruce’s body. “You’re aging,” he said eventually. “Just…really slowly. You’ve got a few centuries left, all things considered.”

Bruce’s face twisted. “Well, that’s something, at least.” His tone was self-deprecating. “Is that something you could fix?”

“I’m not going to take the serum out. It’s part of you—”

“I’m fine with the Other Guy,” Bruce interrupted. “That’s not the issue anymore. The issue—” He cut himself off, taking a slow breath. His tone was calmer when he continued. “The issue is what if I don’t want to age like this? What if I want to live like a normal human, aging with my wife? Is that possible?”

“…Yes.” He stood, coming up to Bruce to look him in the eye. “If that’s what you want.”

Bruce nodded, resolute. “It is.”

He reached out, touching Bruce’s arm. “All right.” The words were quiet.

He might have cheated a little, stretching it out for longer than a normal human would have had, but death still came seventy years later. Bruce was one hundred and fifteen when he passed.

“Times like this, I do kinda miss my wings. And my immunity to alcohol.”
Tony startled, jerking around to find Balthazar standing several feet away and admiring the view from the roof of the palace. “How’d you get up here?”

Balthazar smirked, slowly walking down the slope until he was level with Tony. “Just because I can’t fly doesn’t mean I can’t climb, Gabe.”

“No one climbs up here.” Tony knew this for a fact after his kids had all dared each other to try and follow him up here without flying or using magic. There had been a lot of broken bones and cursing and after that no one tried again.

“Okay, fine.” Balthazar sat down with a small grunt. “I had Butterfingers give me a ride on that shiny suit.”

Tony must have been even more distracted than he’d thought if he didn’t even hear the repulsors. “You could’ve just called, you know. That’s a thing people with voices do.”

“Yeah, I know.” Balthazar leaned back on his hands, stretching his legs out. “I just wanted to see what’s so attractive about this up here, and I gotta admit I see the appeal. This is quite a view.”

And it was quiet. “Would’ve thought you’d be sleeping the hangover off. You could slip right off.” He tapped his fingers against the shiny golden surface.

“You’d catch me.” Balthazar shot him a shit-eating grin. “Besides, it’s not that bad. Gamora’s worse off than me, and Rocket’s still out cold. Asgardian liquor packs a hell of a punch.”

Rather than respond in what he knew would be a bitter tone, Tony turned back to the view. It wasn’t Balthazar’s fault that his friends were more better suited to living longer, even if Drax had decided to join his family long ago.

The Bifrost twinkled on the horizon, the rising sun catching on it just right.

“I did have a reason for coming out here,” Balthazar said long minutes later. “It wasn’t something I wanted to bring up last night.”

Tony shot him a sidelong look, smirking. “So it wasn’t because you were longing for my company?”

“You’re an ass, bro,” Balthazar told him cheerfully. “If I were after your company, it wouldn’t be on a rooftop fit for a romantic date.”

“Eh.” Tony shrugged, giving him that one. “What do you need, then? Diplomatic pointers? Did you insult someone to their face again?”

“That was one time, and it wasn’t even my fault. The guy was asking for it with the way he was ogling Gamora!”

“What about that time you punched someone in the face and yelled ‘freedom’? Or the time you decided blowing up the palace was a good way to conclude peace talks?”

“That’s why you shouldn’t hand me any jobs with tyrannical dictators.” Balthazar gave Tony an offended look. “My fist will eventually meet their face when they don’t listen. Or maybe I’ll blow up something they love.” He paused, then said fondly, “That one was all Rocket.”

Having seen Rocket’s bombs in action firsthand, Tony believed him.

Balthazar shoved at Tony, who moved with the motion so Balthazar wouldn’t slide off the roof.
“Stop distracting me. I see what you’re doing.”

Tony put up his hands. “No more distracting. Got it.”

With a huff, Balthazar pulled his legs up, propping his elbows on his knees. “So what I wanted to ask…you got your Grace back on Earth, right?”

Tony watched him, frowning. “You want to hear that story again? I thought we went over it.”

Balthazar rolled his eyes. “Yeah, when I saw you again for the first time, which was literally like almost a billion years ago. Human brains aren’t so good as to remembering every detail. Just remind me what happened. How’d you know?”

Looking up at the sky, Tony found himself back in the sand – back in that space of pain, exhaustion, dehydration, and pulling. “I didn’t,” he said finally. “I went to Afghanistan because it was my job.” He paused. “And because I had a feeling,” he continued slowly. “But it wasn’t until after I built the suit and broke out that I felt this pull.”

“Which led you to becoming all angelic again.”

Tony nodded in answer. “Not that I don’t like talking about myself, but why this topic? Your Grace hasn’t—”

“Nothing like that,” Balthazar said immediately, cutting him off. “But I was wondering – that’s all.” His eyes were distant. “What about the second time?”

“The second time I had my Grace handed to me by Loki. All I had to do was pop the cork out and voila.” He didn’t particularly like remembering that little bit; it was kind of bizarre remembering that conversation from two different sets of eyes.

“And the time you were divided into four—”

“That was a machine. There was no dying involved.” And part of him had still been an angel.

“Okay.” Balthazar didn’t say anything else, chewing on his lower lip. Finally, he nodded and carefully stood up, spreading his feet for balance. “Okay,” he repeated. “Thanks for answering my questions, Gabe.” He actually reached down and ruffled Tony’s hair.

Tony smacked his hand away. “I’m older than you!”

Balthazar grinned, eyes twinkling. “Then as my older brother, can you please get me down before I break my neck?”

Tony made a show of huffing, but he was grinning as he took hold of Balthazar’s hand and flew them both to safer ground. Talking with Balthazar always brightened his mood.

It had been a week since Clint’s passing when Natasha and James started spending more time around him, giving each other not-so-discreet glances and gesturing in his direction.

It wasn’t that he didn’t enjoy spending time around them, but there were only so many conversations about the weather, current politics, and philosophical discussions he could take. And when two notorious spies actually tried talking about the weather in a painful form of small talk, then it was bad.

He was about ready to just ask what they wanted when Natasha finally got to the point.
Funnily enough, she started talking at night, when the three of them were stargazing. He wasn’t sure if she did it on purpose or if it was just a coincidence.

“I’ve had a lot of chances,” Natasha started slowly, the wind sending her hair askew. She tucked it out of the way of her face. “More than I thought I would get. I didn’t think I’d live past the Red Room, and then I did. I didn’t think I’d live past being a free agent, but I did. I didn’t think I’d find a family, but I did.” She paused, craning her head back to look at the stars. “I’ve lived longer than I ever thought I had the right to.”

He didn’t do anything beyond making a slight noise to signal he was listening.

“And I’m grateful for every second,” Natasha continued, dropping her gaze until she met his eyes. “I’m grateful for everything you’ve given me – for all the chances that I didn’t deserve. I’m grateful for Clint for seeing something in me that I didn’t know was there.” She stopped, taking a few slow breaths. James touched her shoulder, eyes dark.

“I miss him,” Natasha said eventually, quiet. “We had so much time together, and I knew it was coming, but... I still miss him.”

“You’re not the only one,” he said, giving her a wan smile.

“But you expected it, didn’t you? At some point...you knew it was going to happen.”

“Doesn’t make it any easier.”

“No, I suppose it doesn’t.” Natasha turned slightly to James, letting him wrap an arm around her.

“What are you asking for?” he asked after a moment, looking between the two of them. “I get you’re a package deal, so what goes for one of you goes for both.”

“Both of us,” James said slowly, not looking away from Natasha, “we’ve lived longer than we expected to. It’s been amazing.” A smile flickered across his face. “But we’re thinking...maybe it’s time...to start letting go.”

“It’s not just because of Clint,” Natasha said. “But he was talking about it with me before he went to you, and...it’s true. That feeling of being stretched? The world’s amazing, but at the same time it just seems to be flying by with every passing year. I’m having trouble keeping track of the years now.”

“And months,” James added with a wry smirk. “Definitely months.”

“You talk about it with Steve?” he asked James.

James shrugged. “I still don’t know what HYDRA did to me, but way it looks I still have time left. This doesn’t have anything to do with Steve. I know what choice he’d make if it came down to it, and I don’t want him to feel guilty about it.”

He nodded, keeping his face blank. Natasha still shot him a look, eyes filled with sympathy. “Okay. I’m guessing you guys already know that you’ll probably still be around for another century at least.”

“Being enhanced has some perks,” James said nonchalantly. “But, uh...” He looked down, mouth twisting.

“Neither of us is the type who wants to grow old,” Natasha said, linking her fingers with James’s
free hand. “If something happens, if a job goes bad and we end up not making it...can you let us go?”

His chest tightened at the implications of that statement, of the knowledge that he’d have to let go even sooner. Missions had become more dangerous as the world moved on, and these two were all too prone to doing things on their own.

But he swallowed and nodded, managing a small smile. “Can do, Nat. If it’s what you want.”

James and Natasha smiled at each other. Not looking away, both of them said, “It is.”

It was fifty years before he felt their souls pass during a mission in the heart of Siberia. And although he wanted to, he didn’t interfere.

He was just glad that Steve wasn’t upset with him.

About half an hour after Tony left Balthazar to his own devices in the palace, the bots cornered him in the workshop.

It was a nice workshop. Spacious, shiny, retro in a way only Asgard could be, and crammed to the brim with cutting edge technology. The Iron Man suits had a place of honor along a wall, although it was just the earliest and most nostalgic models that were on display. By this time even Tony had lost count of how many he’d made, although he was certain Jarvis had a tally.

Still, as nice as the workshop was, he did miss his original one on Earth. That one was long gone, but the memory of it was there.

As familiar as this workshop was now, it wasn’t truly his the way his earlier workshops had been. Asgard was where he stayed and called home, but he did so with a pang.

But at least with this workshop, there was plenty of space for shenanigans. The bots tended to join him when he was down here for their own purposes, probably feeling as nostalgic as he did. They also liked to suggest updates to the suits or technology around the palace. Sometimes he even took those updates into consideration.

“You think these can be more sparkly?” Butterfingers asked, lifting her wrists to scrutinize the rose-colored bands wrapped around them. Miniaturized arc reactors were embedded into them, casting a blue glow.

“Depends on if you want glitter all over the place,” Tony said absentmindedly, pulling out the innards of an alien television that You had brought home.

“Not with glitter!” Butterfingers protested, scandalized. “But maybe...some kind of stone?”

Tony looked up at her. “Is this your way of asking me to make your suit sparkly?”

“I don’t think that’ll help a lot with stealth missions,” You said from his corner. He tossed a wrench over to Dummy, pulling the arm off the inanimate robot he was building.

Butterfingers frowned, looking down at the bands.”Maybe if it blinds people?”

Tony considered the idea. “Have to redesign the suit, but it’s probably time for an upgrade, anyway. Sure about this?”
She beamed, bouncing excitedly. “Yes!”

Dummy twisted around, eyes wide. “Are we all getting upgrades, then?” He fingered the wide bands on his wrists, which almost looked like the watches Earth had at one point, arc reactors glowing brightly. They were a silvery-metallic color. “I want rockets.”

“You have rockets,” You pointed out. His bands were a black color and as wide as Butterfingers’s.

“Bigger rockets!”

“I think that can be arranged.” Tony tossed aside the last bit of useless junk from the alien TV and let four separate holographs blink to light around him. “Call J down, and we’ll make it a family thing.”

His kids had put on the Iron Man suits a century after Tony had created the first one. It had been more out of fun and curiosity than anything else, but it soon became a convenient method of escape once the technology caught up. As AIs, they were able to sync with the suits in a way Tony couldn’t.

It also gave him fewer hypothetical heart attacks since all they had to do was activate the suit and they’d be protected from any attacks.

With technology being what it was now, the suits could be compacted into small wristbands in the case of Butterfingers and You, wristbands and anklets for Dummy, and a miniaturized arc reactor necklace for Jarvis. As Butterfingers was fond of saying, it was a fashion statement and protection at once.

It was also a fun way of seeing his kids’ creativity come into play. Butterfingers went for shiny, flashy looking stuff, and her suit was streamlined for speed. Dummy preferred the same flashy stuff Tony did. You was all for the high tech gizmos. Jarvis was practical as always, which usually led to Tony occasionally slipping in a “surprise” just to see the fond look on Jarvis’s face when he found it.

Tony had his own suit packed in a pocket of space around him, but he didn’t bring it out much now. Not like he did much avenging these days.

“Can we make it now?” Butterfingers asked some hours later, buzzing with excitement. “Can we? Can we go flying?” Her eyes were bright.

Tony didn’t even have to think about it, shooting Jarvis a fond smile. “How about it, J? Feel like firing up the fabricators?”

“We don’t have fabricators anymore,” Jarvis said in what was probably supposed to be a weary tone but fell short of the mark. His lips were twitching. “But by all means.”

It took minutes to make each of the suit and then to customize the bands that they would be wearing. By this time Tony had a little stash of miniaturized arc reactors ready to go since they were damn handy and made great nightlights (okay, Asgardians found them sweet, so he was always using them as party tricks).

There were a few Asgardians milling about the outside of the palace when they made their way to an open area, but the sight of several suits flying around wasn’t so uncommon as to get a large crowd. Tony zipped up his jacket, giving Jarvis a raised eyebrow at the tight-fitting suit he had his nanites turn into.

Jarvis shrugged, then stood still as the necklace he wore flared blue, the dark gold of his suit snaking
out and around his body, the arc reactor set in his chest. Butterfingers held out her wrists, rose-colored metal spreading from the bands until it enveloped her entire body, mini arc reactors glowing at her wrists. You did the same scant seconds later. Dummy clapped his hands to his wristbands, eyes closing to focus as red-and-gold metal spread out from his wrists and ankles, arc reactors placed at his wrists and ankles.

When his kids turned to look pointedly at him and the lack of a suit, Tony shrugged, grinning broadly. He took a step to the edge of the balcony they were on, flicking his fingers from his forehead in a mock salute as he let himself fall backwards.

With a small tug, he pulled the suit out of the negative space he’d had it in and let it click into place, faceplate already down and HUD on full display. He let his repulsors fire seconds later, shooting up into the air at the same time as his kids took off to join him.

“As showy as always, sir,” Jarvis said, his face popping into the visual feed in the right corner. Three other pictures popped up for Dummy, Butterfingers, and You.

Tony grinned, doing a loop-de-loop to come up behind the others. “Admit it, you like it.”

Jarvis didn’t respond beyond a small huff, but that was all right. The small grin he was wearing was more than enough.

_He was really growing to dread private conversations. It wasn’t even that every conversation ended with an emotional bombshell, but the ones that did were easier to remember for some reason._

_Not that he didn’t know what reason that was. Emotions hit him hard, especially as an angel._

_And this was his family. He didn’t like saying goodbye, even if he knew it was coming._

_But wasn’t it better to be prepared? To expect it? At least then he could somehow brace for it, even if every loss still left him feeling raw._

_Yet it had been about one hundred and fifty years since the last conversation. Humans were beginning to take to the stars. Mars had already been colonized two centuries ago and was by now thriving. Earth’s moon had been colonized at a similar time._

_There weren’t any other planets appropriate for humans in this solar system, but they were exploring and making contact with friendly civilizations out there. That Earth had its own reputation was definitely helpful._

_They were launching another exploratory rocket when Peggy came to see him, hair tied in a low ponytail. She wasn’t wearing makeup, which put him off his guard._

_She always wore makeup for serious conversations. It was her own armor, one that hadn’t changed through the centuries._

_And since she wasn’t wearing any, he hadn’t expected anything of her company._

_In fact, it wasn’t like she started talking immediately. She simply sat there, keeping him company as the news played and scientists talked about what they were hoping to achieve with this mission._

_So when Peggy spoke, it took him a long moment to register what she said. “You gave me a second chance.”_
His head slowly turned to her, something like dread settling in his stomach. He couldn’t help but look for Steve, but he wasn’t anywhere on this floor. That was surprising, especially considering what this conversation would probably be.

Peggy waited, eyes gentle as he searched for words. Finally, he settled on saying, “You know why I did.”

“I do,” she agreed, leaning back into the soft cushions. She crossed her legs, linking her hands over the top knee. “But still. You gave me something that I never expected.”

“You don’t regret it.”

“I don’t.” Peggy smiled fondly. “How could I? You gave me something I could never have dreamed of. A second chance with Steve. A second chance to live. How many people can say they’ve had that opportunity?” She laughed quietly, shaking her head. “No one, really. Even the others – they’ve never lived an entire life and expected to die, only to be given a new chance.”

He looked down at his hands, briefly shutting his eyes at the memories of Aunt Peggy when he’d been young and only human. In a way, she was still Aunt Peggy.

“But I’m tired,” Peggy said slowly, a hint of weariness slipping into her voice. “And I miss my children. I miss my grandchildren. I know why you didn’t offer them the same,” she added before he could speak. “I wouldn’t have accepted if I didn’t know what I was getting into. I had already made my peace with saying goodbye and leaving them, so that was never the problem. But…I could still see them. And now…” She looked away, face creasing in pain.

“I’ve lived longer than any human should have the right to.” She uncrossed her legs, reaching out to touch his hand. “I know it was your right to give this to me. But…it was never going to be permanent, was it? You knew that. I know that.” Her face was pained. “I said my peace with death once before, and I’ll say it again.” She wrapped her hand around his, squeezing. “Are you ready?”

He flipped his hand around to squeeze back. “You don’t have to comfort me.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. It doesn’t matter who you are now. You’ll always be Tony.” The corner of Peggy’s mouth tilted up in a small smile. “I was never very good at comfort. That was always Gabe’s job.”

“He was a good man.” He looked down to their hands. “You’re right; I was expecting this to happen. So it’s fine. But you… What about Steve?” The man was still nowhere on the floor the way Tony would’ve expected him to be for this conversation. In fact, he was off somewhere with Rhodey.

Peggy’s smile was fond, tinged with an old love that had lasted all this time. “He understands. And while I’m ready… he isn’t.” Her brow furrowed at something she saw on his face. “Don’t give me that look, Tony. You know he loves you.”

“Would’ve thought you’d be a package deal,” he managed, heart squeezing in his chest.

“We love each other, but we were never a package deal,” Peggy said. “I learned to live without him, and he did, too. What we’ve had for this time is something both of us were literally blessed to have.” She smirked slightly. “He isn’t that same young man you gave me a second chance for.”

There was nothing to say to that, since it was the truth. Peggy had always known that, and she’d never resented him for it.

Her smile softened. “But do your Aunt Peggy one last favor?”
“You don’t even have to ask.”

“But I do.” She touched his cheek, eyes dark with something he wasn’t willing to read. “Take care of him, will you?”

His breath stuttered briefly as he blinked, feeling all too human at the moment. Then, managing to sound amused, he said, “Really, Aunt. That’s a given.”

“Good.” She pulled him down slightly, leaning in to press a kiss to his forehead. “Thank you, Gabriel.”

Although he hadn’t wanted that conversation, Peggy still had another sixty years before she “kicked the bucket” (in her own words). This time she was fully in possession of her mental faculties, and she gave him a very pointed look and told him to keep his promise or she’d kick his ass from the grave.

Hel had seemed far too amused as she took Peggy’s soul.

Steve had cried, but there didn’t seem to be any resentment for what had happened. Steve did give him a long hug, warm and solid and alive. Rhodey was there, too, a solid rock as he’d always been.

But it was always a matter of time.

“We’d like to do something,” Fenris said.

“I’m down for hunting.” Jormungandr flashed a smile.

“You’re always down for hunting,” Sleipnir said.

“So? Fenris likes it, too.”

Fenris nodded, entirely serious. “I do.”

“Just about the only thing we’re liable to run into if we go hunting now are bilgesnipes.” Tony gave the three of them a pointed look. “Sure about that?”

As one, the three of them shrugged, none of them looking put off by the idea.

“Okay.” Tony looked out the window to the setting sun. “Then why not. It’s been a while since someone brought back a bilgesnipe.”

“That was me,” Fenris said. “I brought it back.”

“I brought back the one before that,” Jormungandr said.

There had been a bet going on at the time with the prize going to whomever brought back the biggest bilgesnipe. There’d been quite a few bilgesnipes brought back before Fenris settled it with his elephant-size one. “Then all of you can bring one back this time. Or two. Depends on how nasty they are.”

“They’re pretty nasty,” Fenris said noncommittally, eyes gleaming. “But that’s what makes it so much fun.”

Tony wasn’t entirely sure when he’d last gone hunting after a bilgesnipe, but he was relatively sure it was before the bet. “Well, you know the drill.” He let the armor slide into place, keeping the faceplate up so he could wink at them. “Let’s have some fun, huh? I’ll meet you out back.”
Technically there was no “out back” in Asgard, but they knew what he meant, meeting him by the woods that made up the outskirts of the realm. It was here that most of the animals were, particularly the bilgesnipes. They were primarily nocturnal, although they did sometimes see them out during the day.

That usually meant trouble.

“I’ll be up in the air like usual,” Tony told them, hovering ten feet above the ground. “You guys do your thing.”

Fenris’s ears twitched in acknowledgement, eyes glowing slightly in the dark. He bared his teeth. “Sounds good.”

Jormungandr’s tongue flickered out, tasting the air. He was larger than he usually was, easily twice the size of Fenris. “Let’s see if they’re still scared of snakes.”

“Probably.” Sleipnir shuffled slightly, huffing. “Am I bait again?”

“Why wouldn’t you be bait?” Fenris asked.

Sleipnir snorted. “Why am I always bait? Is it just because I’m a horse? That’s ridiculous.”

Fenris didn’t immediately respond, sharing a look with Jormungandr. “It’s because you’re a horse.”

“C’mon, boys. Don’t be speciest.” Tony drifted back until he was almost within the trees. “I can be bait if you’d like me to. I’m sure they can be attracted to something shiny.”

“That isn’t even a word,” Fenris complained, slipping into the shadow of the trees.

Tony shrugged, letting himself land and clunk as loudly as possible through the underbrush so as to attract bilgesnipes. “It is now.”

“You don’t just make up new words,” Fenris muttered under his breath, angling out to the right.

Tony refrained from pointing out that most words had been made up at some point, instead focusing on the readouts the HUD was giving him. There were life signs all around him, but nothing applicable to a bilgesnipe.

“There’s something over here,” Jormungandr said several minutes later, off to the left.

“I’m not bait,” Sleipnir grumbled from behind Tony, hooves silent.

Tony glanced back. “You willing to at least dance with ’em?”

There was an audible grin in Sleipnir’s voice as he answered, “Hell yeah.”

They ran into a bilgesnipe within the next ten minutes. It took fifteen for them to chase it to a place where Fenris and Jormungandr could take it down and five for the mate to find them.

It was an hour later when they returned to Asgard, two bilgesnipes in tow, and no injuries aside from mild scrapes and a dent in the suit where a bilgesnipe got a lucky shot.

It had been a good day.

“I still don’t believe you’re actually an angel.”
“Most people don’t.” He looked up at one Carol Danvers, giving her a bland smile. “But you didn’t come here just to give me snide comments on whether I’m an angel or crazy.”

Huffing, Carol folded her arms, leaning her weight on her right leg. The red sash tied around her waist fluttered with the movement. “You’re right. I didn’t. In any case, you’re probably a mutant.”

“That’s what most people think.”

“Most people would probably be right. Wolverine’s still around, as is that merc Deadpool. Goes to say that you’d fit right in with them.”

He grinned slightly. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“Of course you would.” Carol’s lips pursed. “But that doesn’t explain your friends. It’s not like they’re mutants or had their DNA spliced with an alien.”

“My kids are artificial intelligences and Norse gods. Human lifetimes don’t apply to them. Same for Sam and Gadreel. Steve and Rhodey are special circumstances.”

“So James’s explained.” Carol looked down at the floor. “So what happened with the others…”

He turned away, looking down at his project. “They wanted to go,” he said quietly. “So I let them go. Rhodey hasn’t yet made that decision.”

“But you think he will.” Carol’s jaw tightened.

He glanced at her, reading what she wasn’t telling him. His throat tightened. “He’s talked to you about this.”

“He—” Carol blinked, surprised. “Of course you’d know that.” She took a breath. “Yes. He did. He wanted me to know in case something happened because…I’m going to be around for a good while longer.”

He spun the holograph before him aimlessly, thinking. “It’s the energy absorption that’s increasing your lifespan, not necessarily the Kree DNA that was spliced to yours. Even then, something could be arranged.”

“And you’d do that. Of course.” Carol’s skepticism sounded forced. “Maybe I’ll take you up on that, but not now. I wanted to ask about James.”

“If he wants to let go, he’ll let me know.”

“And you’ll do it.” Carol was frowning. “He’s your best friend.”

“Which means I respect his decisions. I’m not going to keep him around against his will.”

“…Right.” Carol’s blue eyes were suspiciously shiny. “Okay, then. I’ll leave you to it, then.”

She left without another word, leaving him sitting before a project he didn’t have any desire to finish. No, what he wanted was to see Rhodey.

What Carol was saying…it sounded too much like Rhodey was actively thinking about possibly…

It had been around six hundred and fifty years since he’d made that offer to his family. And since Peggy died, Steve and Rhodey seemed to be engaging in some sort of war where they were aggressively enjoying life. Neither of them joked about dying in front of him, but he could tell that
they were probably sniping about it in private.

But although Carol’s talk had sparked his suspicions, Rhodey didn’t actually talk to him about it. It was about a month later when Rhodey joined him in the kitchen, taking the closest seat.

“Carol talk to you?” Rhodey asked. “You’ve got that look on your face.”

“I have no look on my face.”

“It’s that ‘oh God, not another one’ face. Without the blasphemy.”

He paused, frowning. “Do I really?”

“Don’t worry; it’s not that obvious. I just know you.”

So did everyone else in the place. “Maybe we should just skip the chitchat and the rationalizations and get to the point.” He was tired of hearing the same thing coached in different words.

“Tones…” Rhodey’s voice was subdued. “What rationalizations are you expecting?”

“You’re feeling stretched as per one Bilbo Baggins. Tired. You can’t keep track of the time anymore. You’ve lived longer than you expected to. You miss your nonexistent kids.”

Rhodey nodded. “Huh. Well, all good points – minus the kids because yours are more than a handful – but I wasn’t really going to be talking about any of that.”

“No? Then you weren’t going to be asking me to let you go?”

“I…” Rhodey drew in a breath, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Fuck, I miss the others. It’s been weird around the place without them.”

He didn’t say anything to that, watching Rhodey.

“Have you seen them at all?” Rhodey asked. “I know Hel took them.”

His answer was curt. “No.”

“Why not?”

“It’s…” He leaned back in his chair, running hand over his face and into his hair, pulling sharply. “No need to. Not now. Hel’s got domain over the dead; it’s the living I’m paying attention to.”

“But seeing them would make it easier, wouldn’t it?”

“Dead’s dead, Rhodey.” He grimaced, suppressing a shudder at the reminder of how cold that place could be with Hel ruling over it instead of Hela. “Maybe it’d be easier, but it’s a crutch. It’s not the same thing.”

“So when, then?”

When they were all dead. When all he had left were his close family. When he couldn’t turn and see his family living and breathing around him.

Call him a coward, but he didn’t want to go to Niflheim more than he absolutely needed to. He was a being of warmth and light from Heaven, not one of cold. He’d gotten better with the cold, but that didn’t mean he wanted to be in it. More than that, he didn’t want to be surrounded by the dead.
Although souls went to Heaven, they felt alive there. Alive in a way that the souls in Niflheim didn’t to him.

“Right,” Rhodey said quietly when he didn’t respond. “I get it.”

“Do you?”

Rhodey gave him a lopsided smile. “Kind of.” He scooted his chair over, knocking their knees together. “You have an amazing family, Tones. Your kids are brilliant – all of them. Even if I still almost accidentally sit on Jormungandr and Sleipnir has too many legs for a horse. You’re never going to be alone. And you can see us whenever you want. Hel’s your kid; she’s not going to shut the gates to you.”

He managed a wry smirk. “She might if I bug her too much.”

Rhodey grinned, leaning forward. “So you’ll bug her?”

Huffing, he folded his arms across his chest. “Maybe.”

Rhodey snorted. “Yeah, yeah. You can’t lie to me, you know.” He sobered, grin disappearing. “This isn’t something I necessarily want to do. Hell, it kind of bugs me that I’m going to you first instead of Steve, but that guy’s ridiculously stubborn. And his brain’s wired differently, but you didn’t hear that from me.”

Well, it was. They’d long since figured that out. Not just physically, but emotionally as well. Steve just processed things differently than a normal human.

The words slipped out before he could stop them. “Then don’t.”

Rhodey’s face twisted. “Tones…you know I love you. But this…we both knew it wasn’t going to be permanent. And…okay, I did say I wasn’t going to hit the highlights, but I’m tired. Not so much feeling stretched like old Bilbo, but I’m tired.”

He knew. He could feel it.

“But you already knew that, didn’t you?” Rhodey scooted closer, their chair legs knocking together as he clasped his shoulder. “It’ll be all right. You know that. You can see me whenever you want. Besides, I’ve got at least another forty years left in me. More if you get rid of any illnesses.”

Fuck, he was selfish. “I’ve got that leeway?”

“Yep.” Rhodey gave him a warm grin. “So buck up. It’s not the end. Never thought I’d be saying that to an angel.”

He managed a smile, eyes stinging suspiciously. “Not just an angel.”

“Yeah, that’s right.” Rhodey’s smile was watery. “C’mon, Tones.” He reached in to pull him into a hug, warm and solid.

He pressed forward, holding how tightly he wanted to hold Rhodey to him. He could do this.

He told himself that fifty years later when Rhodey finally bit it.

He told himself he could do this, even when he reached up to find his face wet with tears.
Asgard’s library had books even he hadn’t read in all his existence. But that particular collection was limited, so he took his time with reading them. Today was one of the days that Tony had sequestered himself in the library.

He’d been alone for a few hours, but around noon Jane came in, huffing and carrying a stack of books and papers that almost hid her face from view. She dropped all of them on a desk, clearing off the unwanted books and papers to dump them in an armchair.

“You’re going to help me grade this,” Jane told him, quickly unbraiding and redoing her hair so it wouldn’t get in her face. “And then we’re going stargazing.”

Tony was mildly alarmed. “Am I? What happened to your usual graders?”

“You should know, since two of them are yours.” Jane gave him an unimpressed look. “Any ideas where they went?”

Tony resisted the urge to glance out the nearest window to where they were doubtlessly still testing everything on their upgraded suits. He did go over to join Jane at the desk, sitting on the nearest empty armchair and flicking through the papers. “What’re your students studying right now?”

“History, science, how magic and technology are one and the same and yet still distinct. I pulled Loki in for a lecture on that.” Jane poked his hand with a pen, letting him take it. “And now these are the papers I assigned for a discussion on that.”

“On actual paper?” Tony made a face, scribbling through a horrible grammatical error and writing NO next to it. “How archaic.”

“Less chances for certain people hacking into it and changing things after the fact,” Jane said pointedly. “And give constructive feedback; don’t just write ‘no’ everywhere.”

Tony carefully scrubbed out the latest NO he’d written and replaced it with a NOPE. Then he added a smaller sentence on how to amend the mistake. He could be nice like that if he wanted.

They worked in companionable silence, broken intermittently by the ruffling of papers and small disgusted noises (mainly from Tony). With two of them working, the stack of papers to grade was annihilated in two hours, and Tony’s pen was almost out of ink. He’d probably gotten too carried away with the number of snide jokes and commentary he’d put down, but grading wasn’t fun.

Now, stargazing was fun, and he was looking forward to hitting the telescopes with Jane. She wasn’t the same brash woman that he’d first met on Earth, having matured and grown more patient over time.

…Okay, she was still rather brash. But there was patience to go with it now, which tempered the worst of the “ra-ra” moments when things didn’t immediately go her way.

Physically, Jane hadn’t changed much either aside from the visible signs of aging. Her hair was a darker gray than Thor’s, and there were wrinkles and laugh lines on her face. Thor still found her as beautiful as she had been in her youth; the two of them were one of those rare couples that argued, made up, and loved each other intensely.

It was rather sweet, if also nauseating at times.

They had a kid, too, although he was currently off with the Dwarves learning about smithing techniques. Sooner or later he’d come back with some badass weapon that would probably explode an entire wing of the palace, but that wasn’t going to be for some years yet.
Módi was different than Tony would’ve expected, probably because there was no brother for him to get into escapades with. Thor had been all for a second kid, but Jane had put her foot down after one.

Jane took a small detour on their way to the observatory, slipping into a small sitting room for several moments before coming out with a pleased look and two cats in her arms. She promptly handed Suzie off to Tony, keeping Dustin to herself.

“I see how it is,” Tony said, not even pretending to be affronted as he stroked over Suzie’s head. “Give me the fur that’s going to be on technicolor display on my clothes.”

“You can zap it off practically immediately,” Jane said, cooing at a loudly purring Dustin.

Tony let Suzie up on his shoulders. “Are these two going to be accompanying us today?”

“Why not?” Jane held Dustin up to nuzzle his face. “They’re quiet and innocuous. And they could use some fresh air.”

“If they fall off the roof and hurt themselves, I’m going to tell everyone it was your idea.”

Jane snorted. “As if you’d let them be hurt.”

Since this was entirely true, Tony just made a disgruntled sound and fell silent, keeping track of Suzie’s balance so she wouldn’t fall off. She hopped off once they were outside, jumping onto the nearest flat surface and then stalking up the slope to get to a beam, tail high.

Jane set Dustin down on a railing by the telescope, immediately turning to the device and fiddling with the settings.

“Any reason we’re doing this in the daytime?” Tony leaned back against the railing by Dustin, letting him sniff his fingers.

“I have something with Thor this evening,” Jane said, carefully turning the telescope away from the sun. “And you and I both know that whether it’s daylight matters little to you.”

“I see how it is. You just want me for my magic.” Tony wiggled his fingers in her face, grinning.

“Nothing you do is magic,” Jane said, absentmindedly smacking his fingers away. “But, yes. That’s certainly a pro.” She flashed him a sly smile, then pulled him over to look into the eyepiece. “Do you remember what we were looking at last time? Can you narrow in on it?”

“Do I remember? What am I – senile?”

“An argument could be made considering your extremely advanced age,” Jane said primly. “Didn’t you just have a birthday the other day?”

“That’s what the party was for, wasn’t it?” Tony turned the telescope a few degrees, zooming in several hundred percent until he found the cluster of stars that they’d been looking at last time. They were surrounding an unusual black hole, which was what had caught Jane’s eye when she saw the light being sucked into nothing. “I look fine for my age, huh?”

Jane made a noise that more or less meant “eh,” though her lips were twitching. “Found it yet?”

Tony stepped back, grandly gesturing towards the telescope. “Have at it.”

Jane shoved a pad at him, which seemed to appear from literally nowhere. “Take notes.”
Briefly wondering where she’d stashed this on her person, Tony resettled against the railing, absentmindedly scratching Dustin’s ears as he waited.

An hour and copious notes later, the topic ended up turning to something other than space.

“That was your brother, wasn’t it?” Jane asked, not looking at him. “One of them?”

“Castiel, yeah. I’ve mentioned him before.”

“I’ve never seen him show up for a party.”

“Yeah, parties and Castiel… Dean tried his best, but Castiel’s still kind of stoic for the party scene.”

There was a pause, then Jean said softly, “He seems nice.”

Tony snorted. “He is, until you piss him off. Same could be said for others, though Castiel’s nicer than most. I think it’s the Winchesters’ influence.”

Jane looked up now, meeting his eyes. “They were humans, too, weren’t they?”

“Hunters of the supernatural.”

“Did…” Jane hesitated, biting her lip. “Did Castiel extend their lives, too?”

Breath hitching, Tony turned away, looking out at the expanse of Asgard. “No,” he said eventually. “They didn’t want it. And…well…Castiel’s got access to Heaven around the clock.”

Jane kindly didn’t press further, reaching for the pad and looking through the notes.

It was like poking at a bruise. It was something he’d never asked her before, but he really wanted to know. “What about you? How are you feeling about the whole immortality gig?”

“It’s not really immortality,” Jane said automatically. “But…I suppose it’s close enough.” She continued scrolling through the notes for a few moments. “I feel fine, actually. Am I not supposed to?”

“However you’re feeling is fine.” Tony looked down at his feet. “It’s… How they all felt could be summed up as ‘tired.’ I guess I’m slightly surprised that you’re not.”

Brow furrowing, Jane tapped her fingers against the edges of the pad. “I think if I’d been on Earth, I would be. But here on Asgard…everyone is practically immortal. And our lives are slowed down to adjust for that. On Earth, I’d be meeting new generations every century, having to learn new faces, new politics, and new customs. Here it’s… easy?” She tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear. “I think that’s the best way I can put it.”

He closed his eyes, letting his chin drop to his chest. His next words were quiet. “If I’d brought them here, do you think it’d have been different?”

“I don’t know,” Jane said apologetically. “But it’s different for me. You didn’t extend my life; I was given the golden apples. And it hasn’t stopped my aging; whenever I saw your friends, they looked the same as the last I’d seen them. You practically just placed them in a sort of stasis, didn’t you?”

He hadn’t known anything different. Angels were practically the same physically from creation to whatever end they had. They could change, but that was through incredible extenuating circumstances. And he’d done the same for his family, knowing only that way of extending their lives.
Had he effectively doomed them because of his own ignorance?

“Don’t go blaming yourself.” Jane’s tone was sharp, and the hand she laid on his arm was tight, pulling him out of his thoughts.

“I’m not.”

“You are. That’s the same look Thor has whenever he’s beating himself up.” She scoffed. “You two are more alike than you think.”

Tony managed a thin smile. “Blasphemy.”

“Nah. Just calling it like I see it.” Jane pushed the pad back into his hand. “Ready for more stargazing?”

Pushing his roiling Grace back, Tony inhaled through his nose, nodding.

There was nothing he could do about it anymore.

He didn’t let Steve start, speaking over whatever he might have said. “Let’s just get to the point, Steve. I know what you want.”

Steve stopped, blinking. “Really?”

“Been through this with the others.” He smiled tiredly, leaning back against the table. “And I recognize the feeling. You’re tired, right? You miss the others. You’d like to see the next adventure.”

Steve was quiet for a moment. Then, “I love you. You know that, right?”

“I do. But I also know that it doesn’t change anything for you. I knew this was coming from the start.”

“Then did you know that even if you’d never offered us this, that it wouldn’t have changed anything? I already suspected what the serum was doing even before that.”

“I know. But you wouldn’t have lived this long.”

“And I don’t regret a single second. But I do regret having to say goodbye. I don’t like this, but I know…I know I might resent it.” Steve swallowed. “Might resent living and not…dying. And I don’t want that. I don’t. So I’m being proactive. I can live for however long my body’ll let me naturally.” His smile was weak. “I know you won’t be alone. And you can see me – us. We’ll be there. I’ll always be there.”

That was just about the only tolerant thing about the whole sorry affair. “I know. And…thanks.”

Steve ducked his head, cheeks pinking. “It’s not goodbye just yet, Tony. I’ll still be around for a while.”

But a while for someone like Steve was virtually a blink of an eye for him. And when Steve was gone…he didn’t go immediately to see them.

Even though it had been eight centuries since Pepper had died. Even though he hadn’t seen any of them since they passed.

He needed the time. He needed to know that this wasn’t everything. He’d been around before
finding this family, and he’d be around afterwards as well.

In the end, he wasn’t entirely sure how much time passed before he made the decision to see them. But he never actually managed it because he was too late.

Hel was there in his living room, her living half paler than usual. She was unusually still, and both Samael and Gadreel were tightly restrained.

Dread filled him. “Hel, what is it?”

“I…” Hel swallowed, hands curling into fists. “I don’t know what happened, but…” She met his eyes, stricken. “They’re gone.”

He blinked, uncomprehending. “What do you mean ‘they’re gone’?”

“Your friends. Their souls… They’re not in my realm.”

He glanced at Samael and Gadreel, but they wouldn’t meet his eyes. “Do you mean they reincarnated?” But Pepper’s soul had never rejoined the cycle, and the others hadn’t either. Why would they do it now?

“No, I mean they’re gone.” Hel’s shoulders pulled in. “It’s like I blinked and… I carried all of them. I know their souls; I know how they feel. None of them were lost on the way. I personally ensured that. But… I can’t find them. Not in the living realm and not anywhere in mine. Father, I’m—”

“Hel.” He wasn’t entirely sure what was happening, but his ears seemed to be ringing. “I’m going to see.”

Hel might have nodded, but he didn’t see, already on the outskirts of Niflheim. For once he didn’t mind the cold, too busy searching with every sense at his disposal. He knew their souls inside and out in a way Hel didn’t. He could find them if they were here – if Hel had somehow missed them.

But they were nowhere.

And they were in none of the other realms either.

When he finally returned to the others, he was dimly aware that he was shaking. That Gadreel was supporting his weight and Samael was trying to talk to him. That Hel was apologizing for something that wasn’t her fault.

“It’s not your fault,” he managed, reaching to take hold of her hand. “I know you.”

Hel ducked her head, sorrow and guilt radiating from her. “They were my responsibility.”

“As they were mine.”

When angels loved, they loved fiercely, absolutely, with their entire beings. He’d always loved his Father’s creation, but he’d never loved certain beings more than others. And if this was the emotional result of doing so and then losing them…

There was human grief, which could be processed and dealt with in time. And then there was the grief of an angel, as absolute and fierce as anything else they felt.

And it was a grief he couldn’t handle.
Chapter End Notes

Yeah, Thor and Jane have a kid! I pulled his name from Norse mythology, but he's not going to be popping up in this story because I already had too many characters without having to deal with another. But rest assured, he's a cool kid and gets into too many shenanigans with Tony's kids.

The basis of Rhodey's and Carol's implied relationship is based off the comics (for the few panels I saw of it), although I've no doubt that Carol and Jessica Drew (also known as Spider-Woman) had a romantic relationship first before Jessica passed. And then Carol and Rhodey got to know each other better. I see Katee Sackhoff as Carol Danvers. :D

Also, um...yeah, this was a difficult chapter to write. You'll notice that Tony/Gabriel isn't very good at dealing with his emotions. It's a thing. It's a Tony thing, and it's a Gabriel thing. It's also an angel thing. It's just a thing (I'm going to stop now).

Please let me know what you thought! I love reading all your thoughts. :D
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

I’m going to be upfront and say that some of my favorite lines and exchanges are in this chapter! Also, I don’t think I need to advise tissues for this one.

By the way, all the speculating you guys are doing as to WHAT is going to be happening is great. :D I love it!

I will also say that now there are some hints as to the pairing I mentioned in the prologue. Towards the end of the chapter, anyway.

Happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When humans finally explored past their galaxy, they didn’t do it in search of new life. They’d already met aliens on their own home turf.

In another timeline, the Chitauri would have been humans’ first introduction to alien life. But that hadn’t happened here.

No, they chugged on for another decade or so, still wondering and dreaming about space. Until the Skrulls invaded.

Tony’d be the first to say that he wasn’t prejudiced against other species. That’d be weird considering who’d created such species. But even he had to admit that he didn’t have a lot of favorable feelings towards the Skrulls. They’d tried to invade Earth and would’ve gotten away with it, too, if it wasn’t for the Avengers and other enhanced individuals.

Now, almost a billion years later, the Skrulls were still around. They were still as green as before and could still shape shift. They still liked picking fights and invading other planets, though they’d done less of it as time passed and other civilizations started hitting back.

It was a funny thing about sentient beings. They always wanted better and more. It wasn’t a trait isolated to humans, and it got pretty damn tiring seeing it happen again and again.

Just because the trait came in different forms didn’t change the core of it.

But, thankfully, they learned. Slowly, but they did. It got painful when the more advanced civilizations were able to travel to different galaxies and tried conquering them, because then it didn’t just affect one planet. There’d been a lot of that happening when humans were on Earth.

Less so now, thankfully. Largely in part because of diplomatic endeavors on the part of Samael, Tony, Gadreel, and even Balthazar. Gabriel had made a big splash on the galactic front, which in turn cashed into respect and fear on the part of warlike civilizations.

Yet memories were short-lived, and people forgot why certain treaties were in effect or the consequences if they were broken. Longer-lived species did better on that front, but others – such as the Skrulls – conveniently “forgot” every couple of generations. Or lost the documents.
Even digitalized documents.

Tony’d be impressed if it didn’t mean he had to keep going out there to renegotiate and tell them “no, you can’t do this thing because you’ll be put under a blockade and isolated until you sort your crap out.”

It wasn’t even that he was instigating the rules. That’d be a pretty egregious misuse of his abilities and squashing free will, but there was a council now and everything. And he was one of the “ambassadors,” simply because there was little that could affect him and people tended to listen to beings that could kill them with a pinky finger.

His siblings and he tended to pull straws to figure out who’d go next to the Skrulls. He suspected there was cheating involved, since he’d gotten the short straw the last so many times. It just wasn’t statistically likely he’d get selected so many times without cheating.

“Statistics don’t apply to us,” Sam told him, legs swinging back and forth. She was sitting above his head on a ledge. “So stop grumbling and do your thing.”

“Statistics don’t apply to us if we don’t want them to apply to us,” Tony said, definitely not grumbling. “Otherwise they do.” He smoothed out the fabric of his shirt. “And do you really want me to do my thing?”

Sam bonked him gently on the head with the tip of her shoe. “It doesn’t matter how much you pretend you’re bad at diplomacy, I know it’s not true. You haven’t ‘accidentally’ started any wars like Balthazar, and you’re good with words.”

“But what kind of words? It could be the bad kind. Maybe I’m just really good at putting my foot in my mouth and everyone’s too busy laughing behind my back to go to war.”

Sam shrugged. “If that’s the case, then go and do that.”

“Don’t worry, sir,” Jarvis said, nonchalantly bumping shoulders with him. “I can help smooth over any potential difficulties.”

Tony slung an arm around his shoulders. “You’re sweet, J. But let’s go with the subtly threatening look today, hm? This is the fastest they’ve ‘lost’ their documents since…er…”

“One thousand and ten years ago,” Jarvis said when Tony didn’t finish.

“Since then,” Tony continued, nodding a thanks. “I think it’s about time for a small reminder as to why they don’t want to mess with the council.”

“Shall I stand in the back and glare disapprovingly at them?”

Tony grinned. “Yeah, do that. Add some noises to the whole thing as well.”

“You’re enjoying this,” Sam said dryly.

Tony looked up at her. “If you’re going to keep sticking me with the Skrulls, then you can damn well bet that I’m going to try and get some fun out of this. If you disapprove, then you can do it.”

“Nah,” Sam said. “I’d rather not tempt fate. I might accidentally start a war if they piss me off.”

Tony raised an eyebrow. “I know your temper isn’t that bad.”

Samael’s eyes darkened. “Now.” Ne shook her head, mood lightening. “You’re the best being for the
job, Uncle. You and J have this in the bag. Gadreel would just stare them down and probably stroke his sword menacingly.”

Across the room, Gadreel dropped all pretenses that he hadn’t been listening. “Is that supposed to be an euphemism?”

Sam’s grin was wicked. “You’re the one who thought of it!”

Gadreel looked vaguely insulted. “Stroking my literal sword would do nothing other than antagonize the Skrulls. I would never do such a thing.”

“But you’d pull your sword out and stab it in the table, right? Just to show you’re serious?”

“The point of a diplomatic mission isn’t to antagonize the other party!”

“It’s the Skrulls! Doesn’t matter what you do; they’re insulted.”

Jarvis nudged Tony’s shoulder, voice a low whisper. “If we want to be on time, we should leave now.”

Seeing that Sam and Gadreel were now in the middle of a snark fest that could easily go on for hours, Tony nodded, tightening his grip around Jarvis’s shoulders and taking them both to the Skrulls’ home world.

If he had to do this diplomacy shtick again, he was going to have some fun.

He and Ultron didn’t get along. It was kind of a mutual antipathy thing where both sides were aware of each other’s feelings and just acted cordially around each other when necessary.

And considering Hank Pym was Ultron’s creator and Hank was on the roster of Avengers, they saw each other relatively frequently.

It was awkward.

Especially since Ultron was aware of what he could do and that he would do it if pressed. He still wasn’t off probation, although he was getting there.

Jarvis actually got along well with Ultron. Something about both of them having been coded to help their creators with their tasks and then gaining sentience along the way. There was also the maturity level factor there; Ultron tended to look at Dummy, You, and Butterfingers as if they were particularly slow children.

And they were children, but he didn’t really appreciate Ultron looking at them that way. Especially since Ultron was technically younger than them.

There were only a few sentient artificial intelligences with souls on the planet, and Ultron was one of them. Anything else like Siri was a pale imitation at best, although his kids got a kick out of trying to coax Siri to learning more.

One of these days Apple was going to realize Siri wasn’t quite what they’d coded it to be, and it’d be their fault for not securing their data properly.

But Ultron wasn’t a Siri – had never been a Siri. For all of Hank’s faults, he wasn’t stupid. Sure, it was his fault that he’d ended up coding an AI that went rogue and tried to kill everyone, but that’d
been taken care of as soon as possible. Which led to Ultron being on probation and talking with Jarvis.

He wasn’t the biggest fan of Ultron, but that didn’t mean he’d stop Jarvis from making a friend. He had faith that Jarvis wouldn’t go off and start killing people for being humans, and maybe Jarvis could work Ultron around to the good side instead of the such-a-dark-gray-it’s-almost-black side.

He wasn’t actually involved in whatever discussions they had, so when Ultron came into his workshop one day looking reluctantly sullen, his curiosity was piqued. Ultron didn’t like coming to him for stuff; he didn’t even like going to Hank, seeing him as a weak human.

“What brings you to my parlor?” he asked when Ultron didn’t say anything.

Ultron sniffed, shoulders stiff, eyes gleaming in the light. “I…would like your assistance.”

“Oh?” He stifled a grin, simply raising his eyebrows. “That’s new.”

“I have been working on something with Jarvis’s help, and they are practically finished.”

The pronoun had him even more curious. “J hasn’t told me anything. I’m guessing it’s a surprise? I like surprises, so long as they don’t end up going on killing sprees.”

“That…is why I would like your assistance,” Ultron said slowly, the words sounding like they were being dragged out syllable by syllable.

“Wait…” He leaned forwards. “Are you telling me that you coded an artificial intelligence? You created an AI? And Jarvis helped?” He was slightly hurt that Jarvis hadn’t told him anything, but… In retrospect, he had been rather secretive as of late, something like excitement brimming under the surface.

Ultron scowled, eyebrows coming together until they were almost one unbroken line. “Yes,” he bit out. “Is that a problem, angel?”

He sat back in his chair, slowly spinning back forth in small half-circles, considering. “Depends. What kind of ‘assistance’ are you asking for?”

Ultron gave him a look that said he’d heard the hidden quotation marks and didn’t appreciate it. “I want a soul.”

His foot slipped on the floor, sending his seat in one full circle before he managed to bring it to a stop. “I must’ve misheard. You want a soul?”

Ultron’s jaw tightened. “That’s right.”

Coming from the AI who’d hadn’t been at all happy at finding himself saddled with one, this was utterly bizarre. “Why? I don’t just hand souls out like candy!”

“Because…” Ultron paused, visibly conflicted. “I want them to learn,” he admitted grudgingly.

“If this AI of yours doesn’t learn, then they’re not really an AI. You don’t need a soul to learn.”

“I want them to feel,” Ultron said. “Feel as I do. As Jarvis does. As his siblings do. My creation will not be lesser than I am.” He stopped, gaze dropping to the floor. His dirty blond bangs briefly hid his eyes from view. His next words were so quiet that it was almost impossible to make them out without enhanced hearing. “I want them to have the capacity to grow that I was initially denied.
What I was before…it was less than I am now. So if at all possible, I want them to have a soul.”

He bit back the witty rejoinder on the tip of his tongue. This wasn’t the time or place for that. If Ultron wanted his kid to have a soul (and for all the right reasons), then he’d give his request the consideration it deserved.

“Does J know you’re asking me this?” he asked instead.

Something flashed in Ultron’s eyes. “He suggested I ask you.”

He suspected there was more to it than that, but Ultron wasn’t liable to tell him more. “Okay.”

“Okay?” Ultron frowned. “Okay what?”

He smiled, standing to be level with Ultron. “Okay, I’ll do it. Where’s this kid of yours?”

Ultron’s face twitched, probably at the inclination that his AI was his “kid,” but he didn’t say anything. “They’re not online yet.”

“No problem. Lead the way, buddy.”

Although giving Ultron’s kid a soul wasn’t a problem, the fact that Jarvis had a hand in the coding had him curious: Did that mean he was kind of a grandfather now?

The Skrulls’ previous home planet was long gone. From what Tony knew, there’d been an incident with a planet-devouring entity. Said entity was now no longer devouring planets after having been given an alternative. The original planet where the species had originated had creatively been named Skrullos, but that planet hadn’t been their base for a long time.

There were a few other planets that the Skrulls had inhabited, but due to their warmongering ways, those planets had also met unfortunate fates. The latest planet the Skrulls lived on – called Tarnax X (they really weren’t creative with names) – hadn’t even been theirs originally. They’d nicked it from the previous race living on it.

Well, “nicked” was a very polite term for “invaded and killed almost every original inhabitant.”

It was around that time that the intergalactic committee had decided they were now thoroughly fed up with the Skrulls’ antics. It was what led to the creation of the Council of Intergalactic Affairs (or CIA), which strictly monitored the Skrulls’ actions and other bloodthirsty civilizations.

It was a good setup, all things considered.

Even if it meant Tony was once again on Tarnax X for another diplomacy session after which the Skrulls would once again do their best to “lose” the papers.

Maybe he should permanently stick the damn things to their emperor’s face. There wouldn’t be much they could do after that.

Or they’d probably just kill the emperor and put another on the throne.

“Please try to look less murderous?” Jarvis murmured.

Tony quickly rearranged his face to a bland smile. But this seemed to freak their guide out even more, green skin paling to an alarming shade.
“Is that puke green?” Tony asked Jarvis in a low whisper.

There was a hollow cough that was definitely Jarvis trying to suppress a laugh.

Their guide was taking them on the shortest route possible to the throne room. It was also the route that coincidentally avoided any large windows. Not that Tony needed windows to know what was going on outside.

There were vague whispers in the hallways, nothing that he could make out for certain, but it seemed the Skrulls were in a tizzy at having a CIA ambassador here. It was actually weird that he couldn’t understand what they were saying.

He turned to Jarvis to ask in old Norse, “Hey, J, are your sensors picking up on what they’re saying?”

There should be no possible way for a blank faceplate to look surprised, but Jarvis somehow managed it. “I’m picking up nothing aside from basic life form readings. Are you hearing something?”

The whispering had stopped when he called attention to it, but it was strange that Jarvis hadn’t heard it. “No. It’s nothing.”

They stopped in front of a large gray door, the Skrull that had escorted them scurrying inside to announce them.

Another Skrull came out a minute later, giving the two of them an unimpressed look. “Emperor Dorrek will see you now.”

“Awesome!” Tony elbowed Jarvis gently in the stomach. “Such great service, huh, J? We don’t even have to wait!”

He didn’t wait for the Skrull to move, pushing past and into the throne room. It was the same room as the last time he’d been here. Although last time they’d at least put a table in here so everyone was on equal footing. Now Dorrek was sitting on his elevated throne, giving Tony a disgusted look.

“No need to get up on my account,” Tony said cheerfully, striding forwards. Grinning, he snapped his fingers.

A second later, they were both sitting at the table Tony had materialized, although Tony had made sure Dorrek’s chair was particularly uncomfortable.

“Everyone comfy?” Tony didn’t wait for an answer before throwing a data disc on the table, holographs of the treaty popping into view. “Great, because there’s a lot of ground to cover, and I’m sure you’d like me out of here as soon as possible. I’d like to be out of here quickly.”

There was a few seconds of utter silence, Dorrek visibly gaping, eyes wide. And then it was broken by loud mechanical breathing.

Darth Vader’s breathing, to be more precise.

Dorrek’s eyes widened even more as he looked over Tony’s shoulder to Jarvis, who was doing a marvelous impression of a mechanical statue with a glowing heart and eyes.

Biting back a mirthful grin, Tony stared Dorrek down. “The paperwork’s all there. Give it a look through and let’s talk about it.” The corner of his mouth lifted in a small smile. “Some negotiations
are acceptable depending on circumstances, but for the most part this is the copy of what you ‘lost.’”

Dorrek found his voice, baring his teeth briefly. “There was a fire that regrettably destroyed many valuable historical artifacts – including the documents you mention.”

“Aw, that’s a shame… But that’s the great thing about this one! Fireproof! And you could literally drop a house on it and it’d be all right.” Tony paused for maximum impact, then added, “But I wouldn’t recommend it. It’d probably end up teleporting itself somewhere inconvenient, like your underwear.”

Dorrek was turning that lovely shade of puke green, eyes flickering between Jarvis, who was still pulling a terrific Darth Vader impersonation, and Tony. “Thank you for ensuring its longevity,” he ground out.

“No problem! Wouldn’t want any more accidents, would we? Last time I think someone accidentally dropped it in a volcano.”

Dorrek actually looked curious. “Where was this?”

“Funny thing!” Tony beamed. “It was here! About – oh – a thousand years ago? Yeah, I remember it. So the next set was guaranteed volcano-proof, though I guess not necessarily fireproof…”

Dorrek avoided his eyes, reaching out to pull the holographs closer and inspect the text. “Then you were the one to last arrange a treaty with us?”

Tony shrugged, setting the chair back to lean on its back legs. The guards at periphery eyed him suspiciously. “I’m the sorry sap who keeps coming here, yeah. It’s not bad as far as planets go… I mean, if one disregards the fact that your ancestors murdered almost everyone who was here before you.”

Dorrek’s hand clenched on the holograph, inadvertently fuzzing the visual before it cleared out. “A regrettable incident, I assure you.” He managed a smile that didn’t look dangerous. “We have turned over a new leaf.”

“That’s awesome news,” Tony said. “So does that mean the large ships I saw on the way in are just for vacationing? And I thought I saw something like energy rays…”

“Cruising is still acceptable, isn’t it?” Dorrek asked tightly.

“Well, sure. But those ships of yours look a lot like the ones you used when invading other planets, killing people, etc. Or is that just a design choice?” Tony kept his tone easy, widening his eyes innocently.

Jarvis took the moment to up the volume on the menacing breathing, tilting his head with an audible mechanical whir as he did.

Dorrek’s shade of green was so pale that it couldn’t even technically have been called green anymore. Possibly an artichoke-green if Tony was feeling generous. “I don’t know what you’re insinuating.” His voice wobbled slightly but was otherwise steady. “If we were wanting to expand, what would be wrong with that? You humans are still finding your way into every corner of the galaxy!”

“Can’t blame humans for being curious little things, can you?” Tony folded his arms across his chest, shrugging loosely. “Now, the expansionist thing I’ll give you, but that’s largely been curbed since the council formed. In any case, humans never systematically went from galaxy to galaxy instigating
a practical purge of the resident inhabitants. Not after the numerous genocides on their home planet. Think you guys would’ve learned something from your past, huh?"

Dorrek’s right hand curled into a fist. “Don’t your people have a saying? Innocent until proven guilty?”

Tony paused, inclining his head in acknowledgement. “No one’s accusing anyone here of anything, though. All we’re doing is going over the terms of the contract. Once it’s signed and stamped, I can be on my way and you can keep on building those pleasure ships. There’s nothing wrong with exploring the universe, after all… But”—he hardened his tone—“if it turns out that those ships of yours are the ones that were used to wage war, things will quickly become unpleasant for you.”

Dorrek dropped all pretence of niceties. “And who will enforce this? The council? Who cannot even be bothered to come themselves rather than send a figurehead?”

Tony’s smile twitched. “So, here’s thing, your Royal Emperor, you know the thing about diplomatic missions? And the whole ‘don’t kill the messenger’ thing? Which, historically, people haven’t been too great at, so what’s the solution? How about someone you can’t kill?” He grinned sharply.

“Simply because you have the Iron Man at your disposal—”

“What – you mean this?” Tony reached back to rap his knuckles against Jarvis’s stomach. “Guess you should brush up on your history. Twenty-first century, planet Earth, Anthony Edward Stark. The suit’s not Iron Man; I am. With or without it.” He raised his eyebrows. “Do you want to test how I got that name?”

As if cued, Jarvis shifted, flexing his gauntlets with a menacing whirl of repulsors. The breathing didn’t let up.

Dorrek took one look at Tony, glanced at his hapless guards, stared at Jarvis, and said, “What would the terms of the newest contract be?”

Tony let his grin soften to something a touch more manic than fierce. “So glad you asked! It’s virtually the same as the last one you ‘lost,’ but I think we can add some stipulations for pleasure cruises, hm? As long as they’re just for pleasure.”

One guard slipped out of the room, presumably to make sure that Dorrek’s not-so-subtle order for aborting the mission was followed.

“Wonderful,” Dorrek said. “Where should we start?”

“I’m trying really hard not to laugh at the thought of sending you on this thing,” Clint told him. “So hard.”

“What? I can be diplomatic.” He sounded affronted. “That was my gig. Messenger. I carried all the messages to people.”

“I still remember you telling me what you told Mary,” Steve said, unimpressed. “That wasn’t the height of diplomacy.”

“There aren’t many ways you can tell someone they’re pregnant with a prophet. Sue me.” He shrugged, rolling his neck. “They’re not expecting me, are they?” he asked Loki.

Loki’s smile was split between mischief and frustration. “I decided that since they were disinclined to
listen further that perhaps they should be pleasantly surprised by your arrival. However, my 
mother is expecting you.”

He grinned. “She’s there because she’s less likely to throw a punch than you.”

“I never punch.” Loki raised an eyebrow, then added delicately, “I throw curses.”

“Considering that,” Clint said, “I can see why you’re the one going. Still, trying really hard not to 
laugh.”

“Laugh it up all you want once I’m out of here.”

“I should be the one going,” Samael said, quiet.

“They’ve got some idea of who you are, but they don’t know me. Besides, you think this is your 
fault? They were planning this for a while; Loki just can’t stall them any longer.”

“I could,” Loki said, “but it would be rather…shady? And it would likely not last. Their memories 
are short.”

“So let’s make them last until we’re ready,” he said. He checked his suit jacket one last time, 
loosened his tie, and gave his family a grin. “Ciao.”

Within a literal blink of an eye, he was in a darkish room. There wasn’t much natural lighting except 
for the stars outside the windows spanning the walls. Blue lights flickered on the ceiling, but they 
didn’t offer much illumination.

There were voices in the room just ahead, accompanied by the blue glow of holograms. None of the 
people here were physically present, although that could be changed in a heartbeat if he wanted.

Despite the impression he had given off to the others, his usual “diplomatic missions” involved more 
talking and occasionally blowing stuff up if things didn’t work out. He’d tried with Thanos and had 
ended up smiting him. His talk with Odin had been marginally more successful. And that had largely 
been it.

His job as a messenger hadn’t given him much aside from a way with words. He could use that and 
rely on force if needed.

He was the one who held the cards here.

And it didn’t seem like the people assembled here would be very bright considering the current 
argument.

“What were we called here for?” He identified the voice as belonging to Y-Gaar, a Badoon.

“Ask Frigga; she was the one who called us here, did you not?” This one was J-Son, king of the 
Spartax empire.

“We were all called here,” Frigga said noncommittally. “Each of the ambassadors of the galactic 
empires.”

“All of us in one place,” another woman said acerbically – Veranka of the Skrulls. “Where is your 
son, All-Mother? The one with the silver tongue? He was the one dealing with us.”

“Spinning his lies,” a low, gravelly voice hissed. This one didn’t have a name so much as a title: 
Queen of the Brood. Loki hadn’t seemed impressed.
“He probably arranged the entire thing,” a male voice said, scoffing. Another title rather than name: Gladiator of the Shi’ar.

“Damn,” he said, walking into the room and cutting off anything the others might have said. A fanged being with spikes on the shoulders – Young Annihilus of the Negative Zone – glared sharply at him, baring his teeth. “You guys remind me of another group of people I used to hang out with. Which, eh, isn’t a compliment.”

The large ball-like being known as the Supreme Intelligence of the Kree empire narrowed his eyes at him. “Who are you?”

He grinned sharply, setting his feet apart and squaring his shoulders. “Name’s Gabriel from the planet Earth. The one that you guys have been squabbling over for the last so many years.”

“No, I know your face,” J-Son said. “Anthony Edward Stark, patron of the Avengers and Iron Man.”

“Oh, you know how to read. Good on you.” He raised an unimpressed eyebrow. “That’s one of my names, but to you? I’m Gabriel. And I’m Earth’s representative.”

“As the All-Mother, Frigga is the All-Mother of the nine realms, which includes Earth,” J-Son said, giving him a skeptical look.

“Yet he is Earth’s representative,” Frigga said, sounding slightly amused. “In any case, Gabriel has more answers for you than Loki or I.”

“Then perhaps you will be willing to answer for what the earthling Samael is doing?” Y-Gaar demanded, turning to him to glare fiercely. “That cretin has been all over with the aid of those Guardians, wreaking havoc along the way!”

“Sam’s family,” he answered easily. Even if everything else was still unsure, that much was for certain. “She wanted to go out, see the sights… There isn’t much you can do to hold her back, not that I’m inclined to try. Is there a problem with her busting illegal shipping and mining operations? I’m pretty sure that trafficking of any kind of life forms is as illegal out here as it is on Earth.”

“That is not the present concern,” J-Son said, giving Y-Gaar a sharp look. “What of the second Infinity Gem? The Space Gem was returned to the original guardians”—he glanced at an impassive Frigga—“but Earth still holds the Mind Gem.”

“Ahhh, so that’s what the problem is?” He hummed, rocking back and forth slightly on his heels. “You’re all of a tizzy since you don’t know where one of your shiny rocks is. And it really burns you to know that Earth has it.”

“The Mind Gem shouldn’t be in the possession of a race that hasn’t even achieved space travel yet,” Gladiator snapped. “Better be in the hands of someone worthy—”

“Like you?” Y-Gaar interrupted, scowling furiously.

“We could have it,” Veranka said.

Y-Gaar spun to her, teeth bared. “And wage war with it! We know your kind, Queen.”

“How about none of you,” he said evenly, getting their attention. “Because – to be entirely honest – you guys are all as shady as hell. Except you,” he told Frigga. He turned back to the others. “Those gems that you guys keep arguing over nearly fell into the hands of a power-hungry madman who
wanted to court *Death*. A madman none of you did anything about even though you knew full well what his intentions were. And you think Earth is going to hand the *Mind Gem* to you?"

“Thanos is dead,” J-Son said. “We all noticed his passing and that of the Chitauri.” He shot Veranka a glance. “Your cousins, were they not?” He smirked slightly at the answering glare Veranka sent him.

“Just because he’s dead doesn’t mean the gems are any safer,” he said. “I know exactly what power does to those who seek it, and none of you are the type I’d trust with my kids let alone an *Infinity Gem*.”

“And you’d trust Earth with one?” the Supreme Intelligence asked skeptically.

He couldn’t help but snort. “Hell no. I’m sure you’re well aware of how bloodthirsty humans can be. But there’s really only one person I trust with one, and that’s me.”

All of the Supreme Intelligence’s eyes narrowed. “You hold the gem, then.”

“Maayyybeee,” he drawled. “Even so, you guys aren’t getting it from me. But I see why you’re concerned about little ol’ Earth having possession of it. And I know that if something isn’t done about it, you guys will happily come along and invade Earth despite my warnings to *back off*.” His eyes flared white for a split-second, words sharp. “I’d rather not deal with the fallout, so here’s the deal. I’ll get the gem and hand it over to a nice neutral party that some friends recommend. What happens after that is up in the air, but Earth is *out* of the equation.”

“What’s there to say this isn’t a trick?” Veranka folded her arms across her chest, scowling. “If we pursue Earth after all to find that this is a ruse?”

“You come after Earth?” He gave her a flat look, eyes hard. “Then I come after you. And *trust* me, you don’t want that.”

“And what will you do?” Y-Gaar sneered. “You’re an *earthling*.”

“I can do a lot of things. But for now, I think I’ll just do this.” He snapped his fingers, and in an instant all of them were physically in the room, stumbling with the sudden change in location. “Thanos threatened the Earth, and he’s dead. You think you guys will be any better off if you try the same? I don’t care if you’re the rulers of your respective empires; I don’t give a fuck other than making sure that what I’m protecting *stays protected*. If you try coming after Earth, *you’re all dead*.”

J-Son stared at him. “You killed Thanos?”

“Guilty as charged.” He shrugged, putting his hands in his pockets. “And I won’t hesitate to do the same to any of you if you cross me. I’ll hand the Mind Gem over as I discussed, but it won’t be to any of you. And in return, you guys can do whatever it is shady rulers of galactic empires do in your off time and leave Earth out of it. Understand?”

Y-Gaar looked slightly wary now but still asked, “And of your relative?”

“Sam’s going to do what she wants. If any of you try anything funny with her…well…you’ll see why she’s related to me.” He offered a lackadaisical shrug. “Now, I think that’s everything. Questions? Comments?” He raised an eyebrow. “Concerns?”

“We will leave Earth alone,” J-Son said, looking remarkably composed. He was about the only one
who did, which deserved kudos. He looked around briefly at the other rulers, seeming to see something in their faces. “You have our word.”

“Great.” He gave them a broad grin. “If that’s all, you guys can be on your way.” With another snap, he sent them back to their home planets, although slightly spatially displaced because he wasn’t feeling that nice.

Frigga was left standing there, giving him a placid look through her helmet. “Did that go as expected, Gabriel?”

“Oh, more or less.” He went to stand by her side, turning off the flickering holo-projectors with a flick of his fingers. “A good show of force was all that was needed. But…”

“They will come after Earth,” she said, finishing his thought.

“Yeah. Not now but… All I can say is they were warned.” He gave her a sunny smile. “Thanks for showing. You were great.”

“All I did was stand there and look imperious.” Frigga sounded amused. “That is not a difficult task.”

“Still, thanks. Always good to have an official representative backing up an official one.” He touched her arm, giving her a more genuine smile. “I’m going to go smooth over what else needs to be done before I can hand over the gem.”

“Before you do…” She looked around pointedly. “Could you perhaps give me a ride back?”

The snide way she said it startled a snort of laughter out of him.

All in all, this hadn’t been a bad diplomatic mission. He’d gotten what he wanted after all.

When he wanted quiet, Gabriel flew through the universe. There was something calming about just drifting in the empty space between entire galaxies. Even now, the sight of nebulae, the birth and death of stars, and the multitude of colors that space held could awe him.

The universe now was very different from what it had been after he’d been created. It hadn’t necessarily been small, but it was definitely more compact than what the universe was currently. There was so much empty space between galaxies that wasn’t there in the beginning. Of course, it wasn’t necessarily empty.

There were stars all around him, pinpricks of light that he could see. Sometimes he drifted close to one, enjoying the light and evaluating how old it was.

One time he’d sat through the birth of a red star, that crucial moment when a star just expanded. But he’d panicked the others with the length of time he’d been gone, so that hadn’t been something he’d done again.

Still, he occasionally stepped out to see what new things he could find. He’d soared through an entire solar system made up of nothing but planets of ice or cold fire. There’d been another limping on its last legs with the central star swallowing the closest planets. And then he’d seen two galaxies colliding, beginning the process of birthing a new one.

And then there were the planets.
Planets made of crystallized ice. Planets with a core of diamond. Gas giants larger than Jupiter. Planets with literal fire storms. Planets brimming with life; planets just on the verge of creating life; planets that were dying, splintering into pieces because of a fault.

His favorite – and his destination now – was a doughnut-shaped planet. It was similar to Earth in atmosphere and oxygen, although its gravity and weather was kind of wonky because of its weird shape.

When he flickered into solid existence on its ground, Gabriel made sure to increase his weight to compensate for the weak gravity. Then he started walking, seeing what had changed from the last time he’d been here.

The trees had grown taller, leaves a gentle purple color. The grass was also purple, and it went past his knees.

What passed for water on this planet was almost black, and he walked along the shore, occasionally picking up rocks.

“Are there any shells on this planet?” Gadreel asked, stepping into view on Gabriel’s right.

“Haven’t really looked.” Gabriel tossed him a smooth stone that was slippery to the touch. “If there are, it won’t be like what developed on Earth.”

Gadreel didn’t say anything, studying the unusually smooth texture of the mineral.

Gabriel let the silence stretch for a few minutes, keeping his face turned to the water. “So what brings you to my neck of the woods?”

“I was curious to see where you went,” Gadreel said, slipping the rock into a pocket. “This isn’t a place that I’ve been to before.”

“Not like there was any reason for you to. Intelligent life here hasn’t yet gotten to the point of interstellar travel.”

Gadreel shot him a look. “Intelligent life here consists of insects and whatever is in that water.”

Gabriel tried not to grin. “Exactly.”

Gadreel sighed. “Your sense of humor is the same as always, brother.”

Gabriel did grin now. “By which you mean totally awesome. C’mon!” He didn’t grab hold of Gadreel’s arm, but it was a close call.

Turning off into the grass, he headed away from the water. “The cool thing about this place is the funky gravity. The magnetic poles are also different, which leads to some neat weather phenomena. I’ve seen similar in other planets, but this is the only one with life.”

“That it’s shaped like one of the confectionaries you used to eat on Earth has nothing to do with your preference for this planet.”

Gabriel waved dismissively. “A bonus. Earth scientists speculated something like this could exist, but they didn’t think it could happen naturally. But, y’know, voila! We’re standing on one.”

“I do recall reading such an article,” Gadreel said slowly, following after Gabriel.

“You and every person on the Internet that was remotely interested in space.” Gabriel paused,
looking up at the sky. “The outer edges of this planet have got the sun. But it’s shaped like a doughnut, which means there’s an inner circle. Which doesn’t get any sun. Also, the magnetic poles and the gravity? It’s like a completely different world on that side.”

There was a sharp breeze that ruffled the grass, sending ripples through it like an ocean. Something like words carried on the wind, but it was nonsensical. Like the whispering in the palace.

Glancing at Gadreel revealed nothing. He didn’t seem to have heard anything amiss. Just like Jarvis.

It merited investigating, but not now.

“Wanna check it out?” Gabriel asked after a moment.

Gadreel didn’t even hesitate before nodding, wings flaring in preparation.

Gabriel took the lead, stepping through space and out on the other side into darkness. Lightning lit the sky up, illuminating everything in bright light for a brief moment.

“Constant lightning storms,” Gabriel said a few minutes later, seeing Gadreel’s awe. “Pretty neat, huh? And, believe it or not, there’s actually life on this side, too.”

“Amazing.”

Gabriel grinned, eyes adjusting automatically in-between the intermittent bright flashes of lightning. “Yeah. Take a look.” He pointed off to the distance where a craggy rock could be seen.

There was something like a reptile perched on it, starkly outlined with every flash of light.

“Nothing gentle, of course,” Gabriel said. “And it’s not much, but it’s there.”

“In a place where you wouldn’t expect anything, yet it’s there.” Wonder radiated from Gadreel. “I see why you love this place, Gabriel.”

“Eh…” Gabriel shrugged, casually sidestepping a streak of lightning that came too close. “It’s definitely my favorite.”

“Not just because it’s shaped like a doughnut.”

“Well…I’m not saying that played a part in it…” Gabriel tilted his head, winking. “But maybe it did.”

There was a small laugh from Gadreel, rare even nowadays. After a moment, he asked, “What else is there here?”

“So much, bro. So much.”

Outside of ambassadorial duties (which he didn’t do that often) and errands that he ran for others or for himself, there were periods of downtime where Tony didn’t have anything pressing to do. That usually meant he could kick back and do something fun, but he’d been gone longer than expected on his trip to the doughnut-shaped planet (dubbed “Krispy Kreme” after some discussion with Gadreel), and he didn’t want to leave again so soon.

It wasn’t as if his family wasn’t used to long absences by now, but Tony felt rather guilty whenever he came back and realized it had been longer than the few hours he’d intended.
It was just…so difficult keeping track of time now. It slipped right past without him noticing (case in point: his birthday).

His normal state of being was disregarding time except for those instances when he interacted with short-lived people, so it wasn’t even that he was used to noting time. In the grand scheme of his existence, the span of time where he’d been so hyperaware of every passing second was a miniscule fraction.

But it was a fraction he’d been extremely aware of. A fraction he was still missing even though it was entirely normal that time passed and things changed.

Tony was grateful that some things still remained the same, such as his kids. It would’ve been an entirely different affair if something had happened and they’d died as well. He didn’t even know where AI souls would go after death. Would that be something he’d have authority over as the creator?

Shaking his head, Tony turned his attention back to the book he’d been reading, relaxing into his sprawl across the dark green settee. It was more comfortable than it looked, which was why it was his go-to lounge chair when he was in the mood for reading.

Despite getting back into the book (a sappy love story between a Jotun and Asgardian that he suspected Loki had his hands in), Tony noticed when Loki came into the library. The other didn’t immediately acknowledge Tony, instead browsing the shelves for his own reading material.

When he had it, Loki went to sit at Tony’s feet, lifting them out of the way before setting them back down. He then proceeded to prop his book on them, all the while ignoring Tony.

Tony didn’t blink, adjusted his feet more comfortably, ignored Loki’s indignant huff, and continued reading.

He’d gotten to the point where the Asgardian protagonist was renouncing his love for the Jotun-in-hiding (and thinking this was definitely something written by Loki in his off time for shits and giggles) when Loki started giving off the air of wanting to talk.

Being who he was, Tony ignored it. Loki’d bring it up when he wanted, and Tony wasn’t going to pull it out.

He’d read twenty more pages by the time Loki lost his patience and spoke, not looking up from his own book. “We have not spent much time together as of late.”

Tony warily lifted his eyes to Loki’s face, wondering what his point was. “I guess?”

Loki turned a page. “You have trouble tracking time now, do you not?”

Setting his book face down on his chest, Tony frowned at Loki. It would’ve had more effect if Loki was looking at him. “What brought this on?”

“A few things. Your birthday the other day. When you leave and come back looking startled that so much time passed. You try to hide it, but I do know how to read you.”

Tony turned to studying the ceiling, considering how much he should share. “Don’t tell me you keep track of every minute and hour of every day,” he said eventually.

Loki did look up at that, eyes flickering in surprise. “Ah.”
“Yeah.” Tony tapped his fingers against his book’s spine. “Without a reason to, I don’t keep track. There’s no need to, not if you have eternity at your fingertips.” He smiled wryly, shrugging as best as he was able to. “It’s probably less noticeable for you considering your relative age.”

“No, I have noticed it.” Loki frowned down at his book, fingering the edge of a page. “But it is less for me, perhaps because I have duties that I must attend to.”

“You’re just that kind of guy.” Tony had his own duties, but they weren’t time-intensive ones. Except for the diplomatic missions. Those sucked. “You worried about that?” he asked, since there was really no other reason for Loki to ask him about this.

“No,” Loki said promptly. “Simply…expressing a concern.” He dropped a hand to Tony’s ankle, resting it there.

Tony decided to give him that. “Express away. It’s no skin off my nose.”

Smirking, Loki shut his book, setting it aside to turn towards Tony and lean forwards. “Indeed it isn’t.”

It took only a heartbeat for Tony to recognize what he wanted, familiar with the signs by now. “Feeling it, are we?”

“I am feeling something.” Loki arched a suggestive eyebrow in a way only he could.

Tony stared at him. “That was a horrible line.”

Loki’s smirk widened. “But it worked, yes?”

Tony threw his book into Loki’s chest. “No. That line was so bad it deserves to be put in timeout.”

Loki dropped the book off to the side without a second glance. “As bad as the book you were reading?” His eyes glinted.

“You wrote that book.”

Loki didn’t confirm or deny the assumption, which was as good as a confession. “Surely it was not that interesting.”

“I dunno. It was getting pretty good about the time the Jotun was threatening to eviscerate the Asgardian for slandering her name.”

Loki shifted, snaking his way out from underneath Tony’s feet to hovering above him. “Perhaps I could entertain you otherwise?”

Grinning up at Loki, Tony tugged at his robe, about to pull him down when a noise caught his attention.

A whispering.

The same kind that he’d been hearing before, and just as nonsensical as it usually was. Something on the cusp of his supernatural hearing and impossible to make out.

Loki was still, brow furrowed. “Gabriel?”

“Do you hear that?” Gabriel asked.
“Hear what?”

“That – it stopped.” He frowned, trying to see if he could pinpoint where it had come from.

Loki drew back to just over Gabriel’s legs, knees on either side of him. “What is it?”

“I’ve been hearing it on and off for a while, but I can never—” Gabriel broke off, making a frustrated noise. “I don’t know what it is.”

“You will be finding out,” Loki said simply, like it was a foregone conclusion.

“Yeah.” Gabriel sat up, one hand going to the armrest as he twisted. “Rain check?”

Loki inclined his head in agreement, not moving as Gabriel withdrew his legs and stood. “You will let me know what it is?”

“If it’s something bad—”

“I want to know regardless,” Loki insisted, standing as well.

“I…” Gabriel studied him for a long moment. Loki just stared back. “All right.”

Relaxing, Loki nodded. “Do what you must. I will let the others know if they ask.”

Gabriel nodded, already on the way to the door. “Great, thanks.”

He found himself eventually on the edge of Asgard at the precipice overlooking the Bifrost. There was no sign of the whispering he’d been hearing, but he had the feeling he was on the verge of something.

Funnily enough, closing his eyes helped. It was a human thing, and yet it helped focus his senses on what he was searching for.

Samael joined him a while later. “Gabriel—”

Gabriel didn’t turn, just put a finger to his lips to shush nem. He continued listening, reaching for that place he sank into when receiving messages.

And…

There.

He opened his eyes, no longer needing the crutch now that he’d pinpointed it. Gadreel had joined him as well and was looking as curious as Samael. “You guys can’t hear it, can you?”

Samael frowned, glancing out at the Bifrost. “What are you hearing?”

“Whispers – nothing concrete.” Gabriel turned his back to them, on ear on the whispers. “You guys really can’t hear it?”

There was a noticeable change as both Samael and Gadreel focused, their Grace expanding outwards as they did what Gabriel had.

But when they turned back to him, it was with visible frustration.

“There’s nothing,” Samael admitted, frustration and something like shame curling through nem. “Just
“You say you’re hearing this? Do you know where?”

“Not quite, but…” Gabriel narrowed his eyes, looking through space. “I can follow it.”

“You’re not going by yourself,” Samael objected. “We don’t know what this is.”

“That’s fine.” Gabriel glanced at Gadreel. “You coming, too?”

Gadreel shot him a look that strongly suggested Gabriel should reconsider his life choices if he had to ask that. “Of course.”

Samael tilted his head, eyes going vaguely fuzzy as he sent a message to the other AIs. “I just let the others know what’s going on. J wishes us luck.” He snorted. “And the others would like a souvenir if possible.”

Gabriel shook his head, lips twitching. “Don’t know about that.” He turned to the edge, glancing over his shoulder to the others. No words were needed for this.

With a breath, Gabriel turned his full attention to the whispers and flew.

Chapter End Notes

The Skrulls are too much fun to pick on. Also, all those people Gabriel met while being "diplomatic" are actual characters in the comics. In this case, I drew their appearances and names from the Guardians of the Galaxy book I have, which was incredibly convenient given what I needed it for.

And, well...I guess that relationship isn't too out of the ballpark? Also, like I said, it's not quite that simple. Or like it seems. More will be revealed later, although not in the next chapter.

No, I recommend FLASHLIGHTS for the next one! >;D

Let me know what you thought!
Chapter Notes

Have you guys got hold of your flashlights? Yes? Okay! I'm sure you'll figure out when to turn them on.

This is a big chapter, but there's a lot going on. I'm also SUPER excited to share this! Because this is one of THE pivotal points in the story. So I'm both kinda nervous and excited to hear what you guys are going to say after reading this.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It wasn’t difficult following the whispers to their source. Now that he was in the right mindset for listening, the whispers were always right there.

He still couldn’t make out what they were saying, but baby steps.

When Gabriel finally pinpointed the place where the whispers seemed to be coming from, he had to stop for a moment, hovering just out of the physical realm as he took in the sight.

It was Earth, no longer inhabited by humans or any other large sentient beings. The planet had once been mostly blue, but it was primarily brown now. There wasn’t any way to determine where the continents had been, not without a particularly close look at the crust. There was still some white and blue at the poles, allowing for smaller forms of life such as bacteria, but that wouldn’t last much longer.

The moon still orbited Earth, but the orbit was larger now. Not that it mattered, as there wasn’t any water to be affected by the decreased gravitational pull.

And the whispers were coming from somewhere on that planet.

Within a second, Gabriel stepped onto the dry, dusty ground of Earth. It was riddled with cracks, bone dry from lack of adequate moisture. The air wasn’t much better, hotter than it had ever been before. Above his head, the sun shone brightly, its heat unforgiving.

“Here?” Samael asked, doing a slow circle. Ne sounded surprised.

“From Earth, yeah.” Gabriel frowned, focusing on the tree that was standing several dozen feet to their right. It was his tree, the one where he’d regained his Grace from, and that was the only reason it was still alive and vibrant.

To be entirely honest, he was slightly surprised that it was still standing. Humans hadn’t been kind to Earth, and the climate had changed several times over the years.

But there it was. As green as it always was and branches gently swaying with the wind.

Gabriel stepped closer to it, head cocked as he focused on the whispering. It was louder from the tree but…that wasn’t where it was coming from.

As his focus drifted and his eyes remained on the tree, Gabriel could almost feel scorching sand
beneath his feet, pain radiating from his chest, and his dry tongue sticking to the roof of his mouth. And he could see himself staggering to the tree, pulled by his Grace, until the image touched the bark and it whited out.

“It’s louder here, but this isn’t where it’s from,” Gabriel said finally, turning away to focus elsewhere.

“But why here?” Samael looked around, kicking up dry dust with every step.

“Let’s find out.”

Giving his tree one last look, Gabriel stepped through space and out on the other side.

Maybe he was feeling particularly nostalgic, since there was no other reason for him to go to where New York City had once stood. There was nothing there now aside from rubble and faint traces of the last of humanity before they’d taken to the stars. In any case, the actual earth where the city had been wasn’t technically on the surface anymore.

But this was the closest approximation to it.

Samael didn’t say anything this time, lingering with Gadreel a little behind Gabriel as he walked through the rubble, rocks, dried out branches, and ancient fossils that littered the ground. Dust kicked up with every step he took, and the air was hot in his lungs as he breathed.

And yet he couldn’t help but see what it had been like before.

Towering skyscrapers, flashing billboards, the heartbeats and souls of millions of humans in one space. He could practically see their ghostly images around him, accompanied by the shadowy figures of the buildings that made up New York City’s skyline.

His tower – the one that he’d gone back to and called home for a time – was also there, brighter than the rest of the vision. There was faint laughter and a lingering sense of warmth surrounding it, but it vanished with the rest as he blinked, discarding it into the past where it belonged.

It wasn’t as if he didn’t have a physical representation of New York as it had been in its heyday. Tourism was still a thriving business, and there was an entire museum dedicated to how Earth had been through the ages. The era of the Avengers – when the world’s first official superhero team had formed – was one of the exhibits.

The fact that an entire planet made up the museum just made it easier to have everything to scale. Gabriel hadn’t been there since the first visit, too struck with how wrong it seemed to have everything there but none of the life.

Coming to a stop, Gabriel dropped his gaze to the earth, pulling in a deep breath of hot air. He didn’t even know why he’d bothered coming to this place. There was nothing here, just memories and ghosts. And none of the ones he was looking for.

“Sometimes I miss it,” Samael said unexpectedly.

Gabriel stopped moving, glancing over his shoulder to see nem staring longingly at the spot he had seen the vision of the tower. “Earth?”

“Not Earth, just…” Samael’s shoulders slumped as ne exhaled. “Growing up here – the childhood you gave me.” Ne met his eyes, quirking nir lips wryly. “The good old days when everything seemed so simple.”
Gabriel dropped his chin, gaze falling to the dry ground. He got what ne meant. Things hadn’t ever been simple but…they’d been easier to deal with in a way.

“It’s ridiculous, really,” Samael continued, voice stronger. “It was just a miniscule fraction of my life – my existence – and yet I miss it. So much of who I am now is because of you.” Ne was looking right at him, eyes piercing. “Because of the chance you gave me.”

Gabriel shuffled his feet, averting his eyes. “Look, it…” He sighed, rubbing his face briefly before going to rub the back of his neck. “It’s no biggie. Really.”

“Isn’t it?” Samael’s smile was bitter. “I didn’t deserve it, yet you gave it to me.”

“It’s not about deserving——”

“You were better than me,” Samael cut him off. “And this…who I am now – what I’ve done – is because of you. I don’t even know…” Ne shook nir head. “How can so little do so much?” Ne glanced back to where the imaginary tower had been. “Such a small thing, and yet I miss it.”

Discomfited, Gabriel shot a look at Gadreel, who was carefully not looking at either of them. Seeing no help from that section, Gabriel shoved his hands in his pockets, managing a smile. “Yeah… I get that. It was the same for me.”

Samael inclined nir head. “I know.” Ne closed nir eyes, taking a long breath. “In any case…that wasn’t planned.” Ne offered a wry smile. “Just…seeing this place – being here again… I needed to say it.”

“I know what you mean,” Gabriel murmured, looking away before the ghosts of the past could materialize again. “Everything about Earth…” It had been his home for so long when no other place had been.

“Let’s keep moving.” Samael spun on nir heel, kicking up a cloud of dust with the movement. “We didn’t come here just to mope.”

“Hey, you’re the one doing all the moping.”

“As if. I’m doing, like, maybe twelve percent of it.”

Gabriel barely restrained a wince at the number, but Samael didn’t seem to notice. “Right. Keep telling yourself that.”

Unable to help one last look at where New York City had once stood in a different age, Gabriel turned and took another step, this time chasing after the ever present whispers. When he came out at the other side this time, the whispers were louder than before – louder than they’d been at his tree.

All around him, nothing but a dusty desert stretched out for miles and miles. A short distance before them, a deep crevasse split the ground.

“What an ocean,” Samael said dryly, kicking the ground and watching the dust rise into the air. “So much water.”

Gabriel didn’t comment, instead approaching the edge of the crevasse to look down. It was deep, the edges jagged in a way that spoke of earthquakes. If he went beyond human sight, he could see the ground several miles down, but otherwise it was dark. The sun, even as bright as it was now, couldn’t pierce the shadows that far down.
“Feel like spelunking?” Gabriel asked. “’Cause whatever we’re looking for is down there.”

“Sure,” Samael said, sharing a glance with Gadreel. “Always wanted to go spelunking down a trench in what used to be an ocean.”

“I still can’t hear anything,” Gadreel said after a moment, frowning. He’d come to Gabriel’s side, peering into the crevasse. “What do you think it is?”

“I honestly haven’t the faintest clue,” Gabriel said, shrugging. “It might have something to do with what we’ve been sensing, but I haven’t heard it before. And if it does have anything to do with it, why can’t you hear it?”

“Because you’re the Messenger,” Samael said, sober as a brick now. “Whatever this is, you’re the only one who can hear it. And what that means…” Ne shrugged, not having an answer.

Giving nem a small grin, Gabriel rolled his shoulders. “Well, into the abyss. Down we go.”

He shifted into the realm just next to the physical, slowly going down into the crevasse. At this point he couldn’t make out where the whispering was coming from exactly, since it was all around him.

It was probably at the bottom of this, but just in case…

Gabriel shifted back into the physical realm once his feet touched the ground. There was literally nothing but rock under his feet and around him. Light came from above, but it was faded, barely enough to illuminate his surroundings. The shadows cast by the walls of the crevasse were too deep for the sun.

But he didn’t need light to see.

“No, Gabriel, a rock’s been whispering to you, I think we need to reevaluate our lives,” Samael said a second later, sounding and looking completely unimpressed.

“It’s not a rock.” He couldn’t help but glance at them suspiciously, though. He made a face at Samael when ne smirked at him. “Shut up. It isn’t.”

“I didn’t say anything.” Samael put on an innocent face, eyes wide. With nir vessel, it actually worked. “Maybe your hearing’s going.”

Gabriel kicked a rock at nem, uncaring of how large it was.

Laughing, Samael dodged it, letting it crash into the wall behind nem. It splintered and broke apart into pieces with the force of the impact. “Good thing you never played soccer!”

“I was too busy inventing stuff.” Gabriel turned his back to nem, pointedly ignored Gadreel’s grin, and carefully made his way over the rocks.

“Yes, stuff,” Samael said, a foot behind him. “Amazing stuff. What was it – pillows?”

This time the rock Gabriel picked up and threw at nem did hit its mark, but ne just shrugged it off, wiping off the dust it left on nir forehead.

“My bad,” Samael said. “They were fantastic pillows. Truly, they were glorious things.”

“Just for that, the next thing I make is going to be a pillow, and you’re going to be the first tester.”

“It’ll go well with my décor.”
Considering Samael’s room was filled with an eclectic mix of things including old TVs, a stove, garishly colored blankets, bright lights, and various plants, this was actually true. A sweet pillow wouldn’t even be the weirdest thing in it.

Turning away so ne wouldn’t see his smile, Gabriel jumped over a large boulder. There was nothing in sight that could be the origin of the whispers, but they were so loud now it was difficult to tell.

And yet there were no words he could understand. Just whispers.

They kept walking along the bottom of the crevasse, stepping over and around the rocks littered on the ground. They were piled against the walls, and on occasion they blocked the way entirely.

It was nothing like the Grand Canyon of old had been. It was too deep, too dark, too dry, and too treacherous. And with the wind cutting through the space, occasionally causing short howls above their heads, the entire place had an air of haunting melancholy.

When Gabriel saw a blank stretch of wall that was clear of debris, his suspicions were aroused. There were other stretches where there hadn’t been any rocks against the sides of the crevasse, but this stretch wasn’t just clear – it was also smooth.

Stepping to the side, Gabriel placed a hand on it, feeling nothing but smooth stone beneath his skin. Even when he brushed Grace against it nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

Yet there was something about it…

“Samael, are you getting something from this?”

Frowning, Samael did the same as he had. “Nothing.”

Gabriel pushed against it, but there was no give. There didn’t seem to be any sort of illusion woven either. And he didn’t particularly feel like blasting a hole into it.

But…maybe…

He pulled out a knife, one that had been a gift from an old friend, and slashed his palm. Blood splattered the ground, and he placed the open cut against the rock, holding the gash open.

It took only a few seconds, but suddenly there was an opening where there had been none.

Pulling in a sharp breath, Gabriel curled his fingers in, letting the cut close. He tucked the knife back where it had been, rubbing fingers over his palm to wipe the blood off. “Well…”

“This is it?” Gadreel asked, peering suspiciously into the dark.

“I’ll give you this,” Samael said. “It’s not a rock.”

Gabriel let nem have that, feeling the wariness radiating off them. Truth be told, this had him rather nervous, too.

It wasn’t just a cave hidden by a spell that required blood. It looked more elegant than that, the opening rather square-like. Hewn into the rocks by the opening were what looked like pillars, and above the opening were obscure decorations.

It was also a slightly different color from the rest of the rock around them, a shade paler than anything he’d seen on Earth so far. And inside…
Gabriel couldn’t see anything, even if he stretched his sight. It was that more than anything that had him nervous.

But the whispering was coming from in there. That much he was certain of. It had stopped being all around him and was streaming out from this weird hole in a trench in a dried out ocean on Earth.

If he was a human, Gabriel would very likely be turning the other way and saying nope to everything.

As it was, he was only part human, and he did have a duty. A duty that involved ferreting out the mysterious whispering that only he could hear.

Samael lightly touched his shoulder, careful to keep the touch only physical. “We’re right behind you, Gabriel.”

Gabriel didn’t shake the touch off, appreciating the reassurance. “Still can’t hear it, huh?”

“No, but that doesn’t matter.” Samael shared a glance with Gadreel. “Whatever’s in there needs to be investigated. We’ll follow your lead for now.”

Gabriel paused, glancing back into the impenetrable darkness. “You’re not getting the money if I die.”

Samael briefly squeezed his shoulder, then let nir hand drop. “Oh no. However shall I live?”

“You’ll manage somehow.” Squaring his shoulders, Gabriel took a breath and walked into the strange cave.

Instantly, silence fell. Earth hadn’t been loud, but there’d been wind and skittering sounds as they kicked stones aside. Now that background noise was gone. Disconcertingly enough, even the heartbeat of the universe was missing.

Gabriel went to take another breath and promptly found he couldn’t. There wasn’t anything like oxygen here. He quickly stopped, keeping the air he still had captive in his lungs.

“Hey,” he said, or tried to. Nothing came out except for a small hiss as the remaining oxygen left his lungs.

Behind him, Samael and Gadreel looked similarly bewildered at the sudden change, both of them having halted their breathing as well.

Gabriel turned, walking back out of the cave that was even weirder now.

Noise filtered back instantly, along with the whispering. There was air as well.

Samael and Gadreel were both still in there, staring at him questioningly as he slowly circled around.

Shrugging in response, Gabriel joined them, this time better prepared for the sudden cessation of all noise and the lack of oxygen. Thank fuck none of them technically needed to breathe, or this would’ve gotten awful fast.

No oxygen, and the whispering’s stopped, he sent over their angelic link. There was no Host here, but that didn’t mean they were disconnected from each other. But Earth’s still normal.

This isn’t physically possible, Samael said, glancing back at the hole that led to the crevasse they’d been in.
No, it wasn’t. If there was no oxygen in here originally, then the oxygen outside should’ve rushed in to fill the void. That hadn’t happened.

And then…

The whole place just felt off. Completely different from Earth.

*It’s a portal,* Gabriel said. *Only thing is…I’ve never seen a portal like this before.*

*Where are we, then?* Gadreel asked, frowning. He peered further into the dark, which wasn’t as impenetrable as it had been on Earth. *This is nowhere I’ve been before.*

Gabriel shot Samael a questioning look, but ne shook nir head in denial. *This is as new to me as it is to you.* Ne quirked nir lips, arching an eyebrow. *Fancy that. Something we haven't seen before.*

Fancy that, indeed.

He almost went to take a breath to calm himself down before remembering the whole lack of oxygen thing. Shaking his head, Gabriel reassured himself with the feeling of his siblings before facing the darkness.

There were no light sources, but he didn’t need that to see. He could actually pierce the darkness now, seeing what was hidden in the shadows.

After spending so long in a primarily human spectrum, it was kind of weird shifting to his natural eyesight. Things were a lot sharper with it, and he could see *more,* down to the atoms and the essentials of what composed things.

And what he was seeing was really weird.

It was almost like a cave had started growing in a building. The walls were craggy and natural in some places, but in others it was like someone had come along and built it. The ceiling arched above their heads, wet with some kind of liquid that clung to the surface.

As Gabriel moved further into the space, he realized it was like some kind of vestibule. The entire place was one long hallway, albeit a really large one. Turning back revealed a white speck in the dark that led back to Earth, but that wasn’t really making him feel better.

*Look at the walls,* Samael said, meandering to the side to pause.

*You mean the weird architectural style?* Gabriel asked.

*No, I mean look. There’re…carvings in it. Pictures.*

Instead of just skimming over it to get the bare basics, Gabriel took a moment to look. He trusted Gadreel had an eye out for possible danger, so he went to stand by Samael to see what ne had.

The carvings were faint, but now that he knew what he was looking for he could see them.

Figures dancing across the walls, something like pictorial shadows surrounding them, and…indents where something might have been embedded in the walls at one point.

Gabriel was beginning to have a faint suspicion as to what this place might have been, but he needed to see more.

*Come on,* he said eventually. *I get the feeling this place is bigger than it looks.*
There was a faint grumble from Samael but nothing distinct, the equivalent of a mumble over the link.

If Gabriel was right about that being a vestibule, then this arched opening was a doorway to the next part. There were pillars on either side of it, both as plain looking as the ones outside.

Stepping through it yielded an even larger chamber, this one with a left wall that looked like a cave out of a horror movie and the right smoothly polished stone. At the far end was a flight of stairs that went down, although he couldn’t tell where to.

If it was even possible, the entire place felt even more oppressive than the vestibule had. It was like the further away they went from the entrance to Earth, the more alien this place became.

Gabriel kept moving, some inner sense telling him that the source for the whispers was deeper within. He was no longer certain he wanted to know what it was, but he was in it now and his curiosity was too strong.

There was little that could surprise him now, and this was definitely a surprise. If he didn’t investigate further, he’d forever wonder what the hell this was.

_I think this is this place’s water_, Samael said, sounding rather perturbed. Ne was standing at the left side, right before a small groove in the wall, holding nir hand up. Something viscous and dark clung to nir fingers, almost like blood. And nir hand was glowing as nir Grace leaked out.

_What have we said about touching strange things?_

_Not to do it, Elder_. There was nothing but dry sarcasm there as ne reminded him that he wasn’t the oldest anymore. Samael’s eye roll involved nir entire body. _It’s not dangerous. I think._

_Your Grace is leaking. How is it not dangerous?_

_I… Ne peered at it, rubbing nir fingers together. I can’t tell what it’s made of. Ne definitely sounded perturbed now. And I don’t know why it’s doing that._

_Some kind of liquid, albeit a viscous one_, Gadreel said, coming over to take a closer look. _Not one that I’ve seen before._

_Yes, I figured that out myself_, Samael rubbed it off along the wall, making a face. The traces that were left on nir hand burned away with the light of nir Grace. Once nir hand was clean, the light faded. _I can’t imagine it tasting particularly good._

_Try not to touch anything else unless you’re certain it’s safe_, Gabriel warned. _Ugh, never thought I’d be the one advising basic safety protocols._

There was a faint snicker along the link, although there was also a sense of acquiescence.

Reassured that Samael wasn’t going to do anything really off the rails, Gabriel continued moving towards the stairs.

It was easier to see the pictures on the right wall. They were as faint as the ones in the vestibule, but he knew what he was looking for. There were swirly lines that could have been the wind but instead he kept thinking _shadows_, much like the darkness that clung to every inch of this place.

There were figures as well, something like people but nothing that he recognized. Since this was a different dimension, it was possible that it was a species he’d never seen before.
There seemed to be rituals depicted through the pictures, but as there were no colors it was difficult to make anything out beyond the shapes. Buildings were there– grand majestic buildings that were utterly unfamiliar in their architecture. At points, there seemed to be dances, and one set of pictures seemed to tell a story. But without context, it was difficult to tell what it involved other than erecting a lot of buildings.

He came to the end of the hall, standing at the head of the staircase, peering down. There was something like light down there, but he wasn’t sure because of the ever present darkness. At this point it was almost like a physical weight on his shoulders, and he was rather glad that there wasn’t anything to inhale here.

At this rate, he’d be breathing in darkness as well.

*How nice,* Samael said, standing at his right. *This definitely isn’t like every horror movie I’ve ever seen.*

*Nothing’s going to jump out and eat us,* Gabriel said. *We’re a bit too big to eat.*

*That depends,* Gadreel said from his left. *How big is this hypothetical monster?*

Gabriel paused, trying not to consider what could be hidden down there. There weren’t any signs of life to his senses… *Let’s make it the size of the average human.*

When neither of them argued, Gabriel took the first step down, bracing himself in preparation. The next step went as easy as the first, and so did every subsequent one.

And yet the darkness weighed on his shoulders, pressing in on every side. On Earth, being somewhere pitch black wasn’t like *this.* That kind of darkness was amiable, just something to be weathered. *This* darkness…it was like walking through something that didn’t like strangers.

When he was almost at the foot of the stairs and nothing had happened, Gabriel forced himself to relax, reeling his Grace in from where it was trickling out defensively. It was like a defensive mechanism to such oppressive darkness: turning the light on.

Except he wasn’t a damn light bulb, and lighting up like one wouldn’t be smart in an unknown space.

Once he was on level ground again, Gabriel assessed the area. There wasn’t any light –what he must have seen earlier had probably been a trick of the eyes (which was damn strange) – and the room was even larger than the one they’d left behind. The ceiling practically disappeared into the shadows, and there were rows of pillars supporting the weight of the roof.

The entire place looked like there should’ve been pews for people to sit on, but there was absolutely nothing but smooth stone.

Gabriel had little idea of how big this place was, and why it was going deeper rather than staying level. Someone had an eye for aesthetics, and it wasn’t the good kind.

*Are you following the whispers, or are we just exploring now?* Samael asked.

*I…* Gabriel wasn’t sure, but there was *something.* *There’s something here. Don’t know what but… can you feel it?*

*Just about the only thing I’m feeling is this dark.* Ne waved a hand as if trying to brush the shadows away. *I’ve been places I never want to be again, and this is right up there.*
I feel the same, Gadreel agreed, looking about warily.

Gabriel turned away, knowing full well what they were talking about. Squaring his shoulders, he started moving forward, mindful of the fact that they were entirely out of sight and on an entirely different level from the portal to Earth.

Sure, they could always fly there but…

Better be cautious.

Gabriel could still see down here, but there wasn’t much. Images were inscribed on the walls, but they seemed to be…dripping with that viscous liquid Samael had touched earlier, making it difficult to tell what they were about. The pillars were likewise coated with the stuff, the liquid clinging to and sliding down the stone like a murder scene. It didn’t even seem like water, but…

It better not be blood.

There was an opening at the left corner at the far end and what seemed like another flight of stairs going even deeper down. But to the right of that and the centerpiece of the entire hall seemed like what had at one point been a statue.

Or maybe it was still a statue. As far as Gabriel could tell, it was a hunk of smoothly polished rock.

I think this is a temple, Samael said, giving voice to Gabriel’s earlier suspicions. Just look at all this. The images on the walls, the architecture, and that.

A temple to what, though? Gabriel ignored the unsettling statue/lump of rock, heading to the opening he’d seen.

Not to our Parent, Gadreel said quietly. Or any god I’ve seen.

None I’m familiar with, yeah. Gabriel restrained the urge to glance at the worshipping area. He’d met a lot of gods through the years, but this definitely wasn’t a temple he was familiar with. There were gods that liked the dark, but this place didn’t feel like it belonged to any of them.

How different was this dimension?

And how old was it?

Gabriel walked past another pillar, intent on the next flight of stairs.

Something slammed into him, sending him flying and scraping over a pillar before he hit the ground, skidding further as he struggled.

Gabriel! The scream was in both Samael’s and Gadreel’s voices, but he couldn’t tell where they were.

There was nothing but dark in all his senses, and he couldn’t see. Something was smothering him, clawing at his skin and trying to jump down his throat. It didn’t seem to care two hoots about the way he was trying to throw it off, rolling over and pressing it to the ground underneath him.

As soon as he had, though, the mass of dark just surged up and knocked him back into another pillar, breaking it into pieces with the force of the impact.

His Grace was flaring like a sun, burning the dark of whatever creature this was. A creature that was a blank spot of horrific nothing to his senses.
And yet it was somehow devouring his Grace?

Gabriel braced his wings, trying to fly but hitting what felt like a brick wall. It left him stunned, temporarily paralyzed as he reoriented himself. He was still holding the creature off from clawing at his face, the nanites of his clothes self-repairing as quickly as possible, but he wasn’t able to do more than that.

He was burning the creature – he could feel what felt like pain (pain, what an absent notion) – but it wasn’t doing anything other than angering it, its ferocity growing stronger. Grunting, Gabriel tried focusing his Grace to smite it, but the energy went to burning away the dark before he could get it together.

Samael slammed into it, feet skimming over Gabriel’s body as ne jumped, sword in one hand and the other blinding with Grace. Ne snarled, teeth bared as ne fended the being off, pressing it away from Gabriel and towards empty space. Nir Grace was rapidly cooling, chilling to the ice that still had fear skittering through Gabriel.

Sam – Samael, please, he choked out, scrabbling away and to his feet. His own sword slipped instinctively into his hand.

Samael didn’t flinch, didn’t seem to hear, hacking away at the creature that had attacked him. Now that he wasn’t pinned to the ground beneath it, he could see that it was a creature of nothing but darkness, even blacker than the shadows surrounding them. His sight didn’t pierce it.

With an eye-searing flare, Samael slammed the creature into a pillar, shattering the stone and embedding nir sword in the creature’s body as nir hand touched its body. Grace seared from every inch of the creature, and within seconds it collapsed, sizzling, to the ground.

Even with the creature masked to his senses, Gabriel could tell that it was very dead.

Samael shook, Grace radiating cold and body glowing. Nir knuckles were white around nir sword’s hilt.

Samael, Gabriel tried again, telling himself to move closer. His body didn’t want to move. Samael. Please.

It was Gadreel who approached nem, glowing faintly and his sword also in his hand. He slowly reached out to touch nir shoulder, bowing his head close in a private conversation that Gabriel didn’t eavesdrop on.

He was glowing, too, he realized with a faint sense of shock. Not as brightly as Samael, but brighter than Gadreel. With a shudder, he managed to reign his Grace in; he kept hold of his sword, though.

It took a few minutes, but Samael’s light dimmed slightly, nir stance relaxing. Nir Grace began to warm, coming out of that cold place it had dipped into. By the time it was back to normal levels of warmth, ne’d also managed to pull nir Grace in properly.

Slowly, Samael turned to Gabriel, eyes apologetic and entirely nem. I’m sorry. That...I didn’t mean for that to happen. Ne grimaced, fingers tightening on nir sword. You had me scared, ne admitted, sounding like Sam.

Gabriel would have laughed if there was sound. As it was he grinned, hoping it didn’t look as strained as it felt. I had me scared. He looked down at the creature ne’d killed. What the fuck is that?

I don’t know. Samael sounded lost but angry. But I don’t like it.
Hesitantly, rather shaky from the unexpected struggle, Gabriel approached the creature. Despite himself, and feeling horribly guilty about the stricken expression flashing across Samael’s face, he went to Gadreel’s side. Then, forcing himself to focus, he inspected what had attacked him.

It was difficult to ascertain what it was other than – well – dark. It was still a blank nothing in his senses, and he wasn’t even sure it had been alive except Samael clearly smote it so it was dead. That meant it had been alive, only that it wasn’t visible to his senses.

Which was scary as heck and really bizarre.

*It’s bleeding,* Samael said after a long moment, crouching to point to what he had seen. *And…it’s the same thing that we thought was water.* Ne looked up at them, frowning. *Why the hell is this place covered in blood?*

Gabriel took a moment to evaluate what this meant about the place. Nothing in the vestibule, but the first sign of what was probably blood in the next chamber. In a hole in the wall where something could have been possibly killed. Followed with the pillars here dripping with it and the walls covered in a similar liquid.

It was bad enough that he couldn’t see what images lay underneath the dripping liquid.

But…the ceiling of the vestibule had been covered in something liquid-like that he hadn’t bothered to get a closer look at.

And now this…thing. Whatever it was.

Gabriel would have taken a breath if it was possible, but he was rather glad it wasn’t. He didn’t think he could’ve managed it without his lungs seizing on him. *We…might have to consider the possibility that this is one of the beings that lives here.*

Eyebrows high, Samael and Gadreel looked skeptically at the creature.

*Possible,* Samael conceded. *What else would be living in a place like this? It’s nothing but shadows and this…dark. If life – some kind of life – would develop here, this’d be a likely result.* Ne looked rather like he wanted to kick the creature.

*And the blood on the walls…* Gabriel paused, not entirely willing to give voice to what he was thinking.

Gadreel did. *Remnants of the beings who were here last?*

*However long ago that was.* If there was one thing Gabriel was certain about when it came to this place, it was really old. There was that sense to it – that sense of time having forgotten it that clung to every ancient place. The universe had it in certain select places where you could hear echoes of the Big Bang, and so did other places.

But this dimension…

Gabriel had no sense on how old it was other than ancient.

*It’s all as fresh as if it was just yesterday that it happened,* Samael said, eyes flickering around. *And that thing… I felt something that could have been its mind when I smote it. It wasn’t sane; it wasn’t thinking at all beyond wanting…* Ne swallowed, not looking at Gabriel. …*wanting light.*

*We’ve seen a lot of things,* Gabriel said evenly. *It’s not that inconceivable that something magical’s
I think you mean supernatural. Samael’s smile was strained. Fuck…I don’t like this. I don’t like this at all. And yet… Ne shot the statue/hunk of rock a look. We need to figure this out. There was a portal on Earth to this place with something only you could hear. There’s a reason for this, and we can’t just let it go.

I wasn’t going to suggest that. Gabriel glanced towards the opening he had seen, so much more ominous now than it was before. But let’s be on our guard in case more of these guys are hanging out. I can’t sense them – I’m guessing you can’t either, otherwise you would’ve given me a head’s up – so we need to be careful. And… He hesitated, remembering that brick wall he’d flown into when trying to escape. I don’t think flying’s possible here.

Gadreel’s eyes widened while Samael’s narrowed. There was a brief flare of Grace as ne tested that assumption.

A split-second later, ne staggered in place, ashen. Fuck, ne gasped. You’re right. And it’s not a spell or a warding.

Whatever this place is, it doesn’t follow our rules, Gabriel agreed, subdued. Let’s keep moving, but be careful.

There was no response from the others aside from a wordless agreement. They all tightened their grips on their swords, keeping them out in the open where they could be useful.

If no one got stabbed with one, that was.

Shaking his head, Gabriel made his way to the opening. He was cautious this time, carefully edging his way through the pillars in case of another attack.

Nothing happened, and his shoulders relaxed slightly once he made it to the stairs without another incident. The darkness seemed even more oppressive in the stairwell, and it was even heavier just standing there.

Well, he wasn’t chump change. And he wasn’t scared of the dark.

Bolstering his resolve with a last check at Gadreel and Samael, Gabriel made his way down. The stairs were uneven and chipped in places, signs of wear that hadn’t been present at the other flight. The walls were at least clean of the liquid-that-was-possibly-blood, so Gabriel was counting his blessings.

And then there was – strangely enough – light.

Blinking, Gabriel registered the lightening in the darkness. It wasn’t any light that he’d seen before, but it had an orange cast in his vision, giving enough illumination to see the room that the stairs led to —

He froze, eyes wide.

Gabriel, what— Samael froze as well, horror washing through nir Grace. Next to nem, on Gabriel’s other side, Gadreel was undergoing something similar.

The entire room looked like a literal bloodbath. Only it wasn’t red. It was whatever color the blood here was. And it bathed every wall except for the one on the far end. Even the floor and ceiling weren’t free.
It was like someone (or people given the amount) had been in here and…exploded.

There was an altar at the clean wall, something plain and understated given what they had seen in the previous room above their heads. A ledge jutted out before it, a bowl set on it with something in its depths. The stone was probably gray, shaped a bit like a large tombstone. There was writing on it, the words swimming in Gabriel’s vision.

The room wasn’t that large, probably fifteen feet at its widest, and the altar was at the furthest point, five feet on either side of it devoted to blank wall that was covered with writing.

Gabriel slowly stepped forward, feeling Samael and Gadreel following his movements with reluctance.

The liquid kind of squished with every step he took, sinking under his weight. He was rather glad there wasn’t any noise. He didn’t have a squeamish stomach, but something about this had all his instincts reeling with fear. Something told him to *run*, leave this place behind, but that wasn’t him.

He needed to find out what this was.

Whispering touched the edge of his senses, tickling at his mind but not making any sense. Yet it was louder and clearer than it had ever been before, words just at the tip of his tongue.

Samael went up to the wall on the right side of the altar, giving it a healthy berth. Gadreel was on the left, similarly avoiding it.

But Gabriel… There was something about that altar. *I don’t recognize this writing.* Gadreel sounded confused.

*It’s…like Enochian but…not? I can’t read it.* Samael sounded utterly bewildered and just a little affronted. *I can’t read it. That’s…ridiculous. Gabriel?*

Gabriel was kneeling now, uncaring of the liquid seeping into his pants, inches from the base of the altar and eyes on the writing, hewn roughly into the rock and jagged in places, almost like it had been carved in by fingernails. It wasn’t any language he’d ever seen before in his existence and yet… *He could read it.*

His mouth opened, almost without his bidding, giving shape to the whispers in his head. And this time, there was sound. “Once there were three. There was the Light, magnificent and bright, bringing life to all. There was the Dark, deep and overwhelming, antithesis to all. There was the End, lonely and silent, closing the circle.”

*Gabriel, you can read this?*

*How the hell are we understanding this?*

“Once there were three, siblings in arms.” He shook, hand coming to hover above the bowl. His mouth kept moving, voice working. “Now there are two, betrayers in arms. *And death will come to all.*” His fingers brushed whatever was in the bowl.

Abruptly, Gabriel found himself standing in empty space, hand still outstretched and kneeling. He barely had time to register the change of location before there was blinding light. His hand went instinctively to cover his eyes, but it took only a moment before he realized that it wasn’t hurting him. Slowly, he dropped it, finding light all around him.
But darkness came in, pushing through the light and—

Dancing?

They were swirling together, two halves of a whole, simply dancing. Where they touched, they simply meshed together, dark filtering into light and light thinning the dark. It was a mutual relationship, and the sight was so beautiful it had his breath catch in his throat.

Which, wow, he was actually breathing?

After so long of consciously holding that body reflex back, it was bizarre to be doing so again.

Gabriel’s attention returned to the dance of light and dark, surprised to see the two separating. They were still circling around, touching each other, but there was a small circle forming in the middle.

And something was in it. Not light or dark but…

Somehow, he knew it was the End.

It was smaller and more compact than the light and dark swirling around it, but that didn’t mean it was less than the other two. Gabriel had the feeling it was just as large and inescapable as the light and dark but it was also…different. It was completely other, and yet it was still the same.

There was something about the light, something familiar and like home that Gabriel was intimately acquainted with. He hadn’t sensed it so long, but it wasn’t something one forgot.

It took a little bit before he realized that it felt like his Father. In fact, it kind of looked like Him, too. It was a lot brighter, seeming almost…young.

What the hell was this?

Gabriel took a moment to see if he could find Gadreel or Samael, but all he could see was the white space around him. He called out, but there was no response.

Abruptly, he found himself lying on solid ground, something soft tickling his nose. There was no pain or a crater from landing. It was as if he’d always been lying here, even though he’d been floating in empty space scant seconds ago.

Slowly pushing himself to his knees, Gabriel saw that he was surrounded by vibrantly green grass. The ground was soft beneath his knees, the dirt rich and minerals unlike anything he’d seen before. The grass smelled different, too, not like what he was familiar with.

Getting to his feet, Gabriel craned his head back, eyes skimming over the too-blue sky and the sun that was just the wrong shade of yellow. He seemed to be in a meadow, white-capped mountains on the horizon and large trees at the edge. Everything was bright and over-saturated, kind of like someone had gone crazy with a painting and was still figuring the colors out.

Rubbing his face, Gabriel focused on what he could feel.

Still no sign of Samael or Gadreel, and he couldn’t reach them either.

Taking a shaky breath and mentally noting that the oxygen was a hell of a lot richer than Earth’s, Gabriel took stock of himself. All in one piece, completely healthy, and not even a little bit freaked out by what was happening.

Nope.
Shaking his head, Gabriel did a slow circle of the place and settled on a direction to walk. He catalogued his surroundings, registering that excepting the vibrant plant life, there wasn’t any other life around. Which was strange, since this planet had all the optimal conditions for it.

Eyes catching on something that could have been the sun glinting off water, Gabriel almost didn’t notice that he wasn’t alone anymore.

With a yelp that he would adamantly deny making later, Gabriel jumped back, startled at the appearance of three beings that hadn’t been there a second ago.

They weren’t human. They weren’t even alive in the strictest sense of the word. They were – they were. They were part of the surroundings, part of everything that was around him.

One was light, so bright that if he weren’t an angel he’d have been blinded. The second was dark, sucking in everything light around them except for the being of light. And the third was… Gabriel didn’t actually have a description for the third beyond an ending. It literally seemed to be the end of everything.

They didn’t seem to have heard his yelp (that he hadn’t made). They didn’t seem to notice him at all, even though he was standing ten feet away and in plain sight. There wasn’t even anywhere to hide; he’d be in plain view even if he laid down flat in the grass.

*Do you like it?* the light being asked, the words somehow touching Gabriel’s mind. It was no language Gabriel had ever heard before, and yet somehow he understood every word. *I wasn’t entirely sure what to do.*

*Are you done with it?* The dark being sounded slightly intrigued.

*Not quite. There’s still something missing; I’m figuring it out.* There was what could have been a shrug. *This is a first, after all.*

*Something living,* the third being said simply. *Something for a beginning.*

The words struck a chord in Gabriel, and he realized who he was seeing. The Light, the Dark, and the End.

*You’re right,* the Light said slowly. *Something to join us, but not quite…* There was a pause, the Light seeming to turn inwards. It was an instant, and then something popped into being before Nem.

It was…nothing Gabriel had ever seen before. Also, it was kinda cute. In a “so-ugly-it’s-cute” way. Like a bug-eyed Chihuahua.

If he had an approximation for the animal wiggling its way in the grass, it’d be a bunny. But there weren’t any eyes, and the nose was too pointed. It didn’t even look like a nose, just a hole in the face, but he knew it was supposed to be a nose. Possibly.

The ears were floppy and too long, touching the ground. They looked like sad noodles. *Fat* noodles.

And the legs were floppy and boneless, only serving to let the animal move across the ground.

All in all, it was a good attempt at an animal. Especially if it was the Light’s first shot.

Oh fuck. Gabriel just realized he’d been criticizing his Dad’s handiwork.

…To be fair, it was really bad.
He should be grateful He’d gotten better at it, but that begged the question… What had happened afterwards? He’d never known about this, and Samael had never brought it up either. Maybe the topic hadn’t been on the menu, but he would’ve thought it’d be worth talking about. Particularly at the beginning, when things had still been good.

The three beings watched the sorry animal slowly flop away, each of them radiating a faint sense of wonder and curiosity.

_What are you going to call it, sibling?_ the Dark asked.

_I don’t know yet,_ the Light said, clearly watching the animal make its way to where Gabriel was standing. Ne didn’t seem to see Gabriel. _But it’s a first – the first of its kind._

_As we are,_ the Dark said.

Gabriel was just struck by the word “sibling.” He hadn’t known that his Dad had siblings.

But what was this even?

Kneeling as the animal came closer, Gabriel reached out to touch it. He could touch it, actually, and the animal pushed into his hand curiously, the nose hole twitches. Stroking it slowly, Gabriel watched the three entities, who didn’t seem to notice him.

_Will you make more?_ the Dark asked.

_Yes._ There was faint pride from the Light, and Ne seemed to glow. _I will._

Gabriel was still stroking the animal, which was radiating pleasure, when the scene shifted to sudden blackness.

There was suddenly _nothing there._

He staggered, falling forwards and finding nothing to brace himself with. That wouldn’t normally be a problem but the fact that there was absolutely _nothing_ had his brain frizzling. It was the _absence_ of everything – light, life, everything that Gabriel had ever known.

He called for Samael and Gadreel – _screamed_ through the link – but there was no answer. There was no response, just echoing silence.

He was utterly alone in his head in a way he had only been a few times.

But it wasn’t cold. There was no other light in this place, just him.

And his Grace was – his Grace was flaring with light, trying to burn through the darkness.

_He couldn’t see._

It was ridiculous. He could _always_ see. He wasn’t limited to human sight. He could see past what humans could.

But there was nothing to see here. It was… _nothing._

He tried to pull in a breath, but there wasn’t even oxygen. For the sake of his lungs and not taxing his healing, Gabriel stopped, letting his body just… be.

But he was panicking.
Something about this place…

It felt primordial. So old, older than him.

The darkness pressed down on him, ignoring the light of his Grace leaking through every pore until he was a miniature star.

Whirling, Gabriel tried to move, tried to see if there was a way out. There had to be a way out. This couldn’t be it. He couldn’t be stuck here.

_Samael! Gadreel!_ Still no response.

Gabriel was probably moving, but he had no way to tell. There was no sense of distance here, no way to mark how far he was traveling. He couldn’t shift through space. There was literally nothing but the _absence_ around him, swallowing all the light he was giving off and hungering for more.

It was beginning to seem almost _predatory._

For the first time, Gabriel had some appreciation of what it felt like to be prey. It wasn’t a nice sensation.

_So bright…_ The words whispered in his mind, like the ones that had led him to that cavern in the crevasse and to this place.

Gabriel whirled, but there was no way of telling where it had come from. Only…everywhere.

_Little star, how bright you shine._

The language was alien, yet he understood it. And he knew he could _speak_ it now.

But he didn’t want to, trying to pull his Grace in so he wasn’t such a beacon in this nothing. It failed, something in him rebelling and shining all the brighter, pushing the dark _out._

_You remind me of someone I once knew._

How nice, Gabriel wanted to say but didn’t. Nothing good would come of courting this voice – this utterly ancient _being_ he was facing.

_Someone I once called sibling._

Fuck, _fuck._ This darkness – this _nothing_ – that was sucking in the light he gave off—

_You look like them, feel like them, but you're much smaller than they ever were._

It was the _Dark._ The one that he’d seen with the other two beings, the entity that had been dancing with the Light.

He was surrounded by the freaking Dark, the one that had called his _Dad_ their _sibling._

_Ah, I see. You’re their child. One Created in their own image. I wonder why?_ There was something like a chuckle brushing Gabriel’s mind, and he cringed away from the slick sensation. _Don’t be frightened, yeğen. We are family after all._

Gabriel felt like throwing up, nausea and disgust roiling through him, every instinct rejecting the touch of the Dark.
So bright... And yet... The Dark touched the light of Gabriel’s Grace, easily swallowing the energy he gave off like it was nothing. There was a slight sizzle, but they didn’t seem to notice. Not bright enough. Your Parent failed you, yeğen.

They didn’t, Gabriel snapped, the words coming out without thought.

So you do have a voice. I was wondering. The Dark sounded amused. There is some fire in you yet.

They were acting like Gabriel was some kind of pet, something to fondly admire and pet on the head. It would be utterly insulting if it wasn’t so terrifying how outclassed he was.

Where the fuck were Samael and Gadreel? How did he get here?

Little star, little star, how brightly you shine. The darkness seemed to swirl around him, even though there was nothing to see. What will it take to dim your spark, little star?

Gabriel would have run if he could, but there was no escape from the absence of everything that was around him.

Something slammed into him, going straight through him and out the other side, sucking light and energy out of his Grace.

And then his back hit something, head knocking against something hard. There was no sound, but Gabriel was sure he cried out.

Gabriel! Can you hear me? Gabriel! Sibling, please!

Someone was holding his face, repeating his name in frantic tones. Repeating Gabriel’s name in blessed Enochian through the link that all angels had. Gabriel could have cried in relief.

As it was, he wasn’t sure that he wasn’t crying. It was difficult to feel much of anything except for the familiar Grace surrounding him, holding him reassuringly.

Opening his eyes, it took Gabriel a moment to adjust to seeing something, and that something was Gadreel hovering over him, clutching his face and surrounding him with his warm Grace.

Samael was hovering at the side, Grace tightly restrained but worry in every inch of his frame. His eyes were tight, mouth a thin line, and his hands in fists at his sides.

Here, Gabriel managed, reaching up to try and grab hold of Gadreel’s hand. But his fingers wouldn’t work; they slid right off Gadreel’s skin. He clenched his hand into a fist, willing the trembles to stop.

Present. I— He couldn’t manage anything else, his mental voice as shaken as his physical self.

Gadreel’s voice was saturated with relief, and it soaked into Gabriel. Gabriel. You weren’t responding. What—

Gabriel’s eyes landed on the altar, at the innocuous bowl sitting in front of it, at the words in that ancient language, and the blood saturating the room. He felt the Dark all around in the shadows, watching them the way they had from the beginning. Their presence was in every inch of this accursed temple – this temple dedicated to them.

He needed out. He needed out into the light. He needed away from this. He found the strength to clutch at Gadreel’s shirt, cutting off what else he was saying. Out, he managed. Out, please.

Gabriel—
Please, Gadreel, out. Gabriel wasn’t managing more words, panic roiling through him. His Grace was shaky and weak, whatever the Dark had done before kicking him out still affecting him.

Gadreel was clearly indecisive, attention torn between Gabriel and Samael, as if expecting some sort of explanation for what had happened.

Let’s go, then, Samael said, eyes flickering between the altar and Gabriel. There’s nothing else here.

Gadreel helped him to his feet, but Gabriel’s legs wouldn’t support his weight. They gave way, but Gadreel caught him before he could hit the ground and touch that viscous blood further.

What were those creatures and what relation did they have to the Dark? What was this place?

Out, Gabriel repeated, shaking and clutching at Gadreel’s arm. Get him the fuck away from this.

They staggered up the stairs, Gadreel supporting Gabriel’s weight. Samael was several feet behind them, Grace contained within nir vessel and carefully not touching Gabriel’s. It was something he would appreciate later, but for now he had no words.

And then they were walking through the worship chamber, Gabriel’s eyes fixed on the next flight of stairs and not on that thing. Not on the blood coating the place.

The darkness pressed in, and Gabriel’s Grace flared in reaction, weaker than it usually was. Gadreel still flinched in response, arm tightening reflexively where it was wrapped around Gabriel’s waist.

Gabriel shook his head in mute apology, pressing the panicked reaction down where it couldn’t hurt anyone. It roiled in response, his own instincts battling against his mind.

It was dangerous. He needed to protect himself.

But they were almost out, almost to the first level.

His legs were steadier now, feet finding each step and not tripping over them like before. He still stumbled once they were on level ground, but Gadreel had his weight.

They rushed through the chamber, not paying attention to their surroundings. Yet Gabriel felt every inch of the temple, keenly aware of the eyes in the darkness that were watching. Eyes belonging to them.

A spot of light appeared in the distance, that portal to Earth. Gabriel almost flew to meet it, but he felt the wall before hitting it and restrained himself.

Almost, Samael whispered, slightly strained.

The portal was right there, several feet away. Two feet. One foot. And then they stepped through and Gabriel pulled in a breath of air.

Noise rushed in – normal noise. The wind of Earth and beyond that the life of the universe itself beating. A noise that hadn’t been present in that temple in the other dimension.

The dimension that Gabriel wished he’d never entered.

Gadreel was holding his shoulders now, still half-supporting his weight. His eyes flew over Gabriel’s face. “What happened, Gabriel? What is it?”

Gabriel shook his head, unable to find the words. “I – I—” He clutched Gadreel’s arms, bowing his
head as he tried to calm his racing heart. The problem with a vessel that was also his body…

“You saw something,” Samael said evenly, somewhere off to the side. He couldn’t tell where yet. “You understood that language. You read it to us. And then you stopped responding. What did you see?”

“Nothing.” The word was gasped out, fear coating every syllable.

Both Samael and Gadreel paused, confusion radiating off them.

“You saw nothing?” Samael asked carefully.

Nodding, Gabriel was unable to stop a shiver at the memory of that absence. The absence of everything. At the utter nothing that had been all that surrounded him.

At the nothing still staring at them through the portal.

He moved before Gadreel could react, his speed surprising even himself.

Gabriel didn’t want to look into that abyss, terrified of what would be staring back, but he was more than this. And the patronizing tone of that voice was something that insulted him to his core. He was more than a little star; he was more than the echo of his Creator; and he wouldn’t be cowed by the dark.

Glaring into the dark with every bit of courage he could muster, Gabriel slammed his fist into the side of the cavern, sending Grace sparking through the stone.

There were startled exclamations from Samael and Gadreel, but neither moved to stop him as he brought the rocks down onto the entrance, sealing it. He pulled at space, sewing it together with little finesse but pure strength.

And the portal – the hole into that dimension that shouldn’t exist – was shut.

Now that the opening was shut, that the Dark had no eyes to see him with, Gabriel found himself sagging, tremors wracking his body anew.

He staggered back, nearly tripping over his feet, fell to the ground at the far wall, and buried his face in his hands.

Terror still streaked through him, and he could scarcely think for how it clogged his mind. His Grace roiled within him, wanting to strike out a threat that wasn’t there anymore. A threat that had dismissed his power with a casualness that spoke of terrifying strength.

But the whispering was gone.

And he was out.

Now, safe as he was, Gabriel allowed himself to break down.

Chapter End Notes

A note: pronouns. If you go back and reread, you'll notice a difference between what
they're using here, largely because of the different languages. The languages are different, so the pronouns are different, even though we're reading it all in English. I tried to make it somewhat clear, but in any case, it's all gender neutral. Including the term "yeğen," which is a Turkish word for "niece/nephew" that doesn't have any gender linked to it. The only word I could find in English that's gender neutral is "nibling," which is a rather weird word to use. So I went for a different language.

In any case, that's a wrap for this chapter! What are your thoughts on what's been revealed so far? I'd love to hear feedback! :}
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Before anyone wonders, I would like to reiterate the fact that I haven't seen the later SPN seasons, so if there're any plot similarities, that's by coincidence, not design. The Dark isn't Amara; I was rather put off by the fact that the show did something similar after I conceived this plot, but well... It's anyway going to be different.

In any case, I am THOROUGHLY enthused by the fact that I nailed the horror! :D I don't have a head for it, so the fact that I could scare some of you guys? Super glad about it!

On to the chapter!

Gabriel was still trembling by the time they returned to Asgard. He hadn’t managed to fly himself, barely responding to Samael and Gadreel as they tried to talk to him. It was embarrassing, but he didn’t have the energy to care about it right now.

He’d be embarrassed later, most likely. Having to be flown back like someone who didn’t know how to use his wings. Even newly created angels knew how to fly.

But there was no disgust from Gadreel, simply worry as he did the work of flying the two of them to Asgard. Samael didn’t follow immediately, remaining behind to do something. Gabriel wasn’t paying attention at that point.

Gadreel landed lightly on the balcony to Gabriel’s room, rightly assuming that he wanted privacy.

Gabriel closed his eyes, shuddering lightly as he felt the life saturating everything around him. After so long spent trapped in the dark of that dimension, it felt rather like a human staring into the sun without sunglasses.

Without further ado, Gadreel helped him to his bed, laying him out on top of the covers. It was a relief to feel the soft weight of the mattress under his body, a further reminder of how different things were here compared to that dimension.

He let his left hand fall to the blanket, running fingers over the soft fabric of the cloth. His right hand went up to his face to cover his eyes, and he could feel his fingers trembling lightly against his skin.

Gritting his teeth and trying to still the tremors did absolutely nothing other than frustrate him that his body was so uncooperative. It had been ages since he’d been so out of sorts, but he still remembered some of the tricks he’d used to calm himself down.

Slowly exhaling, Gabriel forced himself to sink back into the mattress, letting his body do what it needed. At the same time, he focused on his breathing to let his physical body calm. Once that settled, his Grace would soon follow.

As it was, he should count his lucky stars that it wasn’t trying to leak through his skin and burn everything around him anymore.
He wasn’t sure how much time passed before Samael came in, only that it was long enough for his breathing to steady without him concentrating on it. His trembling had also lessened until it was just slight shaking every now and then.

“I checked,” Samael told Gadreel quietly. “There aren’t any other portals to that place on Earth. Gabriel shut the only one.”

“Do you know where it was?” Gadreel asked just as quietly.

“No, and I’m not exactly willing to go prodding around space to figure out where it’s located either.” There was a rustle of clothes as if Samael was folding nir arms or shaking something. “Whatever that place was, it can go rot in the corners of the multiverse. Why the hell wasn’t it involved in that whole universe implosion thing back then?”

“Perhaps because Gabriel interfered before it could become an issue?”

“Or maybe because it wasn’t an Earth. It was only on focused on Earths, after all. Fuck, that Stark and Rogers were assholes.”

“Samael.” Gadreel’s voice was low, chiding.

“Right, right. Calm down.” Samael inhaled loudly. “I’m calm.” Ne sounded calmer at any rate. “How is he?”

“Fine,” Gabriel said before Gadreel could answer. “He’s just fine. Peachy.” He was proud of how even his voice was, only the slightest of wobbles at the first “fine.”

“If you’re talking about yourself in the third person, I’m going to reserve judgment on that,” Samael said, voice closer now. The bed sank under nir weight as ne sat by his head.

He spread his fingers enough so he could see Samael looking down at him, face creased in visible concern. “I am. Fine, that is. Now, anyway.”

Samael’s eyes scanned his form, both physical and beyond. “You’re still dimmer than usual.”

Gabriel snorted, the sound more a huff. “Gee, thanks.” Honestly, he still felt dimmer.

“What happened?” Samael asked, the words hesitant. It wasn’t like nem, but Gabriel excused the uncharacteristic behavior because of nir worry.

Gabriel slid his hand off his face, letting it slide through his hair until it rested above his head, fingers curling in. He considered his answer, unsure of where to start. “I’m…not sure.”

“Let’s start with the nothing that you were talking about,” Samael said, sounding every bit like the older sibling Gabriel had learned everything from. It was startling. “What did you mean?”

“The—” Gabriel’s throat locked as he thought back to what he’d experienced, where he’d been. “I… Did I really not go anywhere?”

“No. You were right there all along, just not responding. You went completely radio silent.” Samael wasn’t quite touching him, but ne rested nir hand close to his shoulder. “We couldn’t hear you, and you weren’t listening to us.”

“Same for me.” Gabriel closed his eyes, then rethink it and opened them to look at the ceiling. He needed something solid to focus on. “The absence of everything,” he said eventually, voice
wavering slightly. “That’s what I meant.”

“And that was…nothing.”

Samael didn’t understand. It didn’t surprise him, since it had to be experienced to believe it. And the
experience of being a messenger – receiving and giving messages – it was something that none of his
siblings had understood.

And yet it frustrated him that ne didn’t, considering their previous experiences.

“It was the absence,” Gabriel said, trying again. “That…sense of absolutely nothing there. There’s
always life here, no matter where you are. And where I was…there was nothing.”

“You were with us,” Gadreel said slowly, hovering at the foot of the bed.

“And I wasn’t. Not…mentally. Wherever I was.” Gabriel pinched the bridge of his nose, fisting the
blankets with his other hand.

“And the language?” Samael tilted his head, frowning. “Neither of us could read it, but you did.”

“I don’t know,” Gabriel said honestly. “I really don’t. I didn’t know it either, but…now I do. It’s
right there.” He paused, feeling the taste of those words on his tongue. Yet…he didn’t want to voice it here. It would be like giving form to the Dark, to what he had seen in that horrible place. “I don’t think I should use it.”

“That’s your decision,” Samael assured him. “But…” Ne hesitated, eyes flickering to Gadreel in a
wordless conversation before returning to Gabriel. “The whispering? Did you…find out what was
doing it?”

_The Dark_, Gabriel wanted to say but didn’t. There was no way either of them would understand
what had happened. _He_ didn’t even understand it. And without that, anything he said wouldn’t make
any sense.

Besides, it was in the past, wasn’t it? Everything that he’d seen, that had happened… It was long
over, and the Dark was in that dimension alone for whatever reason. They were his Father’s sibling,
but they were _alone_, no sign of his Father anywhere in that place.

Gabriel didn’t understand why, and he couldn’t think of an explanation either. Family was _family_.

The Dark was locked in that dimension, and they weren’t coming here. So there wasn’t any reason
to tell his siblings about it now, when he barely understood it himself.

Better he wait and try to figure it out.

He could do that.

“The altar,” Gabriel said, glad when no suspicion showed on Samael’s or Gadreel’s faces.

“Whatever was there had something to say…and it did.”

“What you said…” Samael nodded. “Some kind of legend belonging to that place?”

“It didn’t give me any answers, but I’d guess that’s as close as it comes.” Gabriel managed a weak
smile.

“And who was the temple dedicated to?” Gadreel asked.
Beings who – for whatever blasted reason – worshipped the Dark, a literal absence of nothing. “A god that isn’t around any longer. That whole place was dead – as dead as the dodo.”

“That doesn’t work anymore,” Samael said. “They brought the dodo back, remember?”

“Fine, it was as dead as a burned out husk without a soul.” Gabriel waved a hand, letting it drop to his stomach. “Point is, there wasn’t anything there. Aside from that maniacal creature that attacked me. Which is also dead now. Deader than a dodo.”

Samael sighed, nodding once. “You’re fine. He’s fine,” he said to Gadreel. “If he’s making bad jokes, he’ll recover.”

“Excuse you, my jokes are great.” Gabriel didn’t bother sitting up, watching him stand and move away out of the corner of his eye. “You should be delighted at my wit.”

“I am,” Samael said dryly. “So delighted that I’ll leave you to an audience of zero.” He did pause at the door, sending him a concerned look. “Rest for a bit, okay? I’ll let the others know.”

Gabriel nodded, looking up at the ceiling. “Yep, do the thing.”

There was another sigh, and then Samael let the door fall shut behind him.

Gabriel continued staring at the ceiling for several minutes before saying, “When ne meant an audience of zero, ne didn’t mean an audience of zero plus one, bro.”

“I know.” Gadreel leaned forwards, bracing his hands on the ornate frame of the foot of the bed. “I just… I wanted to say that I’m glad you’re all right, brother. You had me worried.”

“I know.” Gabriel wished he could say something more, but Gadreel knew him well enough – knew his Grace well enough – that he couldn’t be fooled easily by simple platitudes. Unfortunately, Samael could. “I’m sorry. I didn’t intend for that to happen.”

“None of us did.” Gadreel bowed his head. “But it was certainly enlightening.”

Gabriel couldn’t help a snort. “Bro. One thing it wasn’t was enlightening. It was darkening.” He winced a second later, reminded of that darkness.

“That was terrible,” Gadreel said a moment later, thankfully choosing to ignore the wince.

“Sue me.” Gabriel gripped the edges of the blanket, promptly beginning the process of turning himself into a blanket burrito. “I’m a little out of sorts.”

“I know.” Gadreel’s tone softened. “I’ll leave you be for now. You know where to find me.”

Tony didn’t bother poking his head out of the completed burrito blanket, taking comfort in the fact that his human soul wasn’t half as traumatized and shaken as his Grace. “Yep. That I do.”

It wasn’t until after Gadreel left the room that Tony discreetly activated some spells that gave him privacy from the other supernatural eyes in the palace. Once assured that no one would come rushing in a panic at the sudden surge of violent emotions, he let his eyes close and the rest of the panic he’d pushed back do what it wanted.

The absence of everything wasn’t so easily forgotten, and it was something he never wanted to experience again.
Samael wasn’t entirely sure where ne was going, only that ne needed to be somewhere else. Somewhere where the frustration boiling over within nem wouldn’t affect Gabriel negatively.

Ne was aware ne was making a bit of a ruckus, storming through the halls the way ne was. But at this point Samael simply didn’t care, wanting out and far away from Gabriel.

Really, all Samael wanted was to make sure that Gabriel was really all right. He wasn’t, ne knew that. But he should be fine given time. Whatever he’d seen – whatever had happened in that other dimension – it had badly shaken him.

And Gabriel wasn’t telling them everything. He might not think Samael knew how to read him anymore, but ne did. Samael had taught Gabriel practically everything ne had known, had once known all of Gabriel’s little quirks and tricks and nuances. Just because Gabriel was different now – because ne was different now – didn’t change a thing.

Samael found nemself on nir balcony, having somehow found nir room and stormed through it. The doors were surprisingly unbroken. Which was good, since fixing them if ne had broken them in a fit of pique would’ve been annoying.

Now, outside and away from Gabriel, Samael could let nemself feel, let nir Grace thrash the way it had wanted to. It was practically impossible to hold back the chill, so ne didn’t try, letting it happen.

Samael focused on the feeling of the railing beneath nir hands, tightening nir grip on the marble. It was an effort in will not to simply crush the stone, but that was all the better.

Losing that much control wouldn’t be good.

There was a slight crackle of energy in the air. With Samael’s senses sharpened as they were, it felt like a lightning bolt against nir skin. An instant later, it dissipated, but ne could tell what the energy had been for.

Gabriel’s Grace/soul – previously a beacon in nir sight – was muffled from prying senses.

Samael’s breath caught at the implications, and ne bowed nir head, squeezing nir eyes shut. Gabriel needed privacy, so ne would give him privacy. Besides, if Samael was the one to see him… Better it be Gadreel if someone had to disturb Gabriel’s privacy.

“Samael.” Gadreel’s presence wasn’t a surprise. Nor was the stern tone he used.

“What.” Samael’s tone was flat. “I’m not going to destroy anything. It wouldn’t do anything except make me feel better for five minutes.”

Gadreel’s answer was short, as if it said everything. “Your Grace.”

Well, Samael supposed it did. “It’s my Grace. Go somewhere else if it’s disturbing you.” The anger/fear/distress pounded through nem.

“It doesn’t,” Gadreel reassured nem, though he still had a slight distance put between them as he also came out onto the balcony.

“Sure it doesn’t.” Samael pointedly looked away, fingers digging briefly into the railing. Ne could feel the stone denting under nir fingers and forced nemself to relax, smoothing the dents out with a whisper of Grace.

Gadreel didn’t apologize or make any explanations, which Samael appreciated. But he also didn’t
leave, which was rather annoying.

Neither of them spoke for a while, but the silence and steady companionship did help Samael calm down. Without conscious thought, nir Grace warmed as nir emotions steadied.

Samael’s grip relaxed on the railing, until ne was no longer in danger of cracking it into pieces and letting everything fall on some unsuspecting Asgardian’s head. “He’ll be all right,” ne said, more to nemself than Gadreel.

“He will be,” Gadreel said, looking out at the view of the city.

“But he isn’t now.” Samael pressed a hand to nir forehead, turning until ne was leaning back, the railing pressed against the small of nir back. “But of course he’s trying to be,” ne muttered.

“He isn’t dying,” Gadreel offered after a moment, smiling wryly.

“If he were, I’d drag him back and kick his ass,” Samael said, folding nir arms across nir chest. “And then make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

“I’ve no doubt.” There was no humor in Gadreel’s voice, which meant he was serious. Then again, Gadreel rarely joked even now. Whatever this situation was, it wasn’t one for humor.

“He was lying,” Samael pressed, eyes fixed on a warped piece of glass on the balcony door. “He isn’t dying,” Gadreel said eventually, eyes fixed on a warped piece of glass on the balcony door. “He saw more than he’s telling us.”

Gadreel inclined his head in confirmation, which didn’t make Samael feel better at all. For once, ne would’ve liked to misread the situation.

“There’d be a few reasons for that,” Samael continued, crossing nir legs and leaning more weight against the railing. “One – he doesn’t want to worry us. Two – he’s still making sense of whatever he saw. Three – he’s being a self-sacrificial idiot. And I can’t tell which one it is.” Ne glanced askance at Gadreel, reading his impassive expression. “And you can’t either.”

The way he avoided meeting nir eyes said everything.

Samael bit back a curse, biting nir lower lip until ne could taste blood. It didn’t make nem feel better; all it did was remind nem about the blood from there. “An absence,” ne said slowly, forcing nemself to breathe. “The absence of everything had him so shaken.”

And although Gabriel had tried to hide it, he’d seemed so frustrated that they hadn’t understood. And, try as ne might, Samael really couldn’t.

Even…even in the Cage, locked up and cut off from the Host, Lucifer had been able to sense life all around. What Gabriel had described, Samael hadn’t experienced, and ne suspected it was something that could only be understood through experiencing it.

“Was it because that place was dead?” Gadreel asked, frowning.

“…Maybe.” Samael hated that ne didn’t have a definitive answer. Ne didn’t like not having an answer. “I didn’t know a place like that existed,” ne admitted. It galled nem to have to say that, but that was the truth of the matter. “And, to be honest, I don’t feel like going back there.” There was no way that ne was going to poke through the dimensions to see where it was located.

“I feel the same,” Gadreel said, lifting a shoulder in a small shrug. “That place…everything about it felt wrong.”
Samael turned his attention towards Gabriel, almost without thinking. The spells were still up, although he could break them with enough energy. All that would do was piss Gabriel off, and Samael had no desire for a fight.

“He’ll be fine,” Gadreel told him, repeating his earlier words.

“I know.” Samael grimaced, yanking his attention away. It was like poking at a bruise – never mind that he hadn’t bruised in ages. “I hope he’s willing to tell us something. Whatever that was…”

It had been absolutely terrifying seeing Gabriel go so still. One second he’d been reading from the altar, in that strange language that Samael had never seen or heard before in his existence, and the next he’d gone radio silent.

Samael hadn’t been able to reach him through their link, no matter how loudly he had screamed. He hadn’t even responded to his Grace, remaining utterly still in some kind of trance.

And then something had seemed to fling him backwards, and all Samael had felt was sheer terror through their link. No explanations, just a plea to leave and absolute terror. That Gabriel had promptly destroyed the portal without a warning after leaving the dimension hadn’t helped matters beyond telling Samael that he was really freaked out.

At this point, nothing much could freak Gabriel out. The last time Gabriel had even remotely freaked out was…

Samael flinched minutely, squeezing his eyes shut at the memory.

“Gabriel. You seem to be in fine form.”

“So do you.”

“I’m surprised at you, Gabriel. That you would summon me like this…”

“I’m going to try this one last time. What happens after is entirely up to you.”

“Or what? You’ll kill me?”

“If I have to.”

Lucifer hadn’t cared, had actually been vindictively pleased at the sheer terror he could elicit. One time he would’ve cared – would have been horrified at how low he could fall – but at that point there’d been no hope.

He’d stabbed Gabriel, almost killing him again, and yet Gabriel had tried again, actually trapping Lucifer to talk with him. He’d been absolutely terrified but still fiercely determined to do the right thing.

But Samael hadn’t seen that kind of terror since then. There’d been other times where Gabriel had frozen due to flashbacks, but that kind of terror? To the point where he hadn’t been capable of thinking rationally?

Gabriel hadn’t even been scared of Samael this time beyond the lingering memories of the pain inflicted by Samael’s Grace. No, he’d been scared of something else.

He was tempted to go back to that dimension just to investigate further, but that wasn’t a good idea. Admittedly, as an archangel there wasn’t much that could hurt him, but he had thought the same for
Gabriel and… That creature hadn’t seemed to care about the energy Gabriel had put off.

Gadreel hadn’t been able to come close for fear of getting hurt, although Samael hadn’t noticed until afterwards. Ne had dispatched the creature easily enough, but that an archangel had so much trouble with it?

Samael wasn’t so prideful as to think ne could handle everything on nir own.

“Thank you,” Samael said, looking over at Gadreel. “Thank you for taking care of him.”

Gadreel looked startled, eyes widening. “Of course.”

“You’ve been good to him.” Samael closed nir eyes, turning away. “Better than I have.” That ne hadn’t been able to help him – couldn’t even touch him – was frustrating.

“I owe him much,” Gadreel said, “but that isn’t why I help him.”

“I wasn’t saying that.” Samael’s lips twisted. “Even Michael and Raphael… Gabriel’s been on his own too long. I’m glad he had you.”

Gadreel looked distinctly uncomfortable, shoulders hunching. “He has you as well.”

“It isn’t the same,” Samael said. “It won’t ever be. I know he’s forgiven me but….” But ne hadn’t forgiven nemself – never would. It was much better now than it had been in the past, but their relationship was different. Not simply because Gabriel had partly raised Samael, but also because of what had happened.

Something like that couldn’t be erased within a few decades and a new upbringing.

Samael was grateful that Gabriel had forgiven nem. If something like that had happened to nem… there would’ve been no forgiveness. Ne was self-aware enough to know that much.

“He forgave me as well,” Gadreel said quietly.

“There was nothing to forgive there,” Samael said sharply. “That was on me. You trusted me, and I used that.” Ne’s hands fisted on nir arms. “I’m sorry.” Ne had said it before, but it was always worth repeating.

Gadreel shifted, turning to face nem with one hand on the railing. “You’ve already apologized. I forgave you.”

A forgiveness Samael didn’t deserve.

Gadreel seemed to hear the unspoken words. “Forgiveness isn’t something one deserves, it’s given,” he reminded nem, repeating something Gabriel had said. “I’ve long since made my peace with what happened. What happened was…terrible, and I’m still not sure I understand your motivations, but I have forgiven you.”

Swallowing thickly, Samael nodded, forcing nemself to meet Gadreel’s steady gaze. There was no pity in his eyes or any sign of a lie, like the last time Samael had apologized.

It was still too good to be true.

“Thanks,” Samael murmured.

Gadreel shrugged, the unspoken “no thanks needed” drifting between them.
Pulling in a slow breath, Samael let himself slump back against the railing, half of his attention on the spells active around Gabriel’s room. The other half was on Gadreel, who seemed content to just stand there and admire the view.

Considering they’d just gone to a dimension that didn’t have much of anything to look at, Samael could understand the desire.

It was minutes later when Samael heard slow footsteps and the arrival of a familiar soul. Two more hovered just on the outside of the room, barely hidden anxiety radiating off them.

Dummy hovered at the balcony’s doorway, looking a bit sheepish. “Is this supposed to be the souvenir we asked for? ’Cause, no offense, but it’s kind of gross.”

Samael and Gadreel blinked at him, both taken off guard.

“What?” Samael tilted his head, confused.

“You know, this black gunky stuff…” Dummy pointed to the floor. “It’s all over the place – like a treasure map! Except it led to you guys and Dad’s not answering the door.”

Samael’s eyes followed Dummy’s finger to see gooey footsteps in a glistening blackish liquid. They led right to where he was standing, while another set led to Gadreel’s position.

Another look showed that his shoes were coated with the stuff and so were Gadreel’s. Gadreel’s pants didn’t look much better, since he’d been kneeling in it when trying to rouse Gabriel.

Without another word, Samael toed out of his shoes, gingerly picked them up, and proceeded to throw them right off the balcony, flinging them straight to somewhere best forgotten. It was probably vindictive and childish, but Samael wasn’t feeling particularly mature.

“Samael…” Gadreel sighed, bowing his head.

“What?” Samael snapped. He scuffed his toes along the ground, burning away the nearest patch of black blood.

Gadreel’s eyes flared briefly, and the still-flying shoes promptly incinerated in midair. It wasn’t as satisfying as seeing them hurtle into the stratosphere, but it was probably safer and more hygienic for everyone in Asgard.

“So…?” Dummy looked between the two of them, eyebrows slowly disappearing into his hair. “I’m guessing things didn’t work out too well?”

“It…went.” Sam shrugged, giving him a smile. “But you said Uncle isn’t answering the door?”

Dummy nodded, glancing back to where the bedroom doors were and his siblings were lurking. “J’s still there, but he’s just kind of standing around since Dad’s activated the wards.”

“He needs a little privacy,” Sam said, carefully stepping around the bloody tracks to sling an arm around Dummy’s shoulders. It was a little difficult considering their height differences, but she was used to that by now. “But he’ll be out soon, I should think.”

“He doesn’t turn the wards on unless something bad happened,” Butterfingers pointed out, stepping into the bedroom.

Sam took a breath, considering how much to tell them since even she didn’t know everything. “We
had a little incident – something didn’t go quite the way we expected – but everything’s fine. Uncle’s sorting himself out, and he didn’t want anyone to see.”

Butterfingers frowned, chewing her lower lip in obvious indecision.

“Tell you what,” Sam said, “let’s clean this mess up, hm?”

“You mean the mess you guys tracked through the place?” Dummy sounded completely unimpressed.

“Yes, that mess.” Sam tousled his hair, ignoring the face he made. “We shouldn’t leave it to the cleaning bots.”

“But that’s what they’re for!”

“Yeah, um…” Sam shot a glance backwards at Gadreel, who seemed to share the same opinion she did. “I don’t think it’s a good idea for them to clean this stuff up.”

“You’re right.” You held up a handkerchief soaked with the stuff. “It’ll just clog them up.”

Sam made a face. “Are you attached to that handkerchief?”

“…No?”

“Great.” Sam pulled it away and promptly burnt it to ashes. “Let’s not touch this stuff, okay?”

There was something that felt like dismay coming off Gadreel, aimed just towards her. She glanced at him questioningly, raising an eyebrow.

*Gabriel’s clothes,* Gadreel said, sounding guilty.

Oh.

Shit.

“I will be asking Jane to marry me,” Thor told him.

*He blinked slowly, rather taken aback by the announcement. Then, slowly looking around, he determined that Thor was indeed talking to him about his intentions to marry Jane.*

“Okay? Um…do you want my blessings or something?” It wasn’t really his area, but he could do it.

Thor chuckled, shaking his head. “If you wish to give them, I would gladly accept them, Gabriel. But that is not why I am here. I simply wished to tell you since if Jane accepts, she will not be remaining on Midgard.”

“Because of the whole golden apple thing and not aging?”

“Yes.” Thor frowned, tapping his fingers against *Mjölnir’s* handle. “I discussed it with Loki at length,” he said eventually. “Most of Asgard would prefer that their king marry an Asgardian, but…” His lips twisted. “Some things should change, and I feel this would be a good change. Jane would bring new life to Asgard – a different way of looking at things that we have long since lost.”

“Is that Loki’s advice or yours?”
Thor’s grin was happy. “Both of ours, actually. It was one thing we agreed on.”

“Huh.” As far as he knew, Loki made it a point to disagree with Thor just so they had stuff to argue about. If he agreed with Thor on this, Loki must want him to be happy. Not that he was going to let Thor know that. “So Loki’s given the go-ahead, then?”

“Yes. Although I may have gone ahead regardless, it is good to have his support in this matter.” Thor seemed rather sheepish.

“Damn, point break, way to be a rebel.” He grinned, punching Thor in the arm. “So when are you going to ask her?”

“Now, preferably,” Thor said. “She is here, is she not?”

“Yeah. I, er, recruited her to the cause. Her sciencing is amazing.”

“It is,” Thor agreed, beaming in pride. “Will you be here?”

“Like, am I going to be a witness to an Asgardian marriage proposal?” He put his hands up. “I am in your corner, but I think she’ll want privacy for this. Trust me on this. It’s a human thing.”

“Ah…” Thor blinked, seeming to realize what he was hinting at. “Yes. I understand.” He winked, grinning broadly. “Wish me luck!”

Thor was already on the way out to find Jane, so his “good luck” was said to his sweeping cape.

Spending a brief moment to wonder just how Thor always managed to make his cape swish so regal, he returned his attention to his book, expecting a long night for the two of them. It was highly probable that Jane would accept, so celebrations were going to be expected.

Which was why it was a bit of a surprise when Jane came to him the next morning, looking vaguely shocked, a little exhilarated, and sporting a large hickey on her throat. And one that was hidden by her hair that was visible if he squinted.

“Did you know he was going to propose?” Jane asked.

“Define ‘know.’”

Jane rolled her eyes. “How long did you know?”

“Last night. I take it you accepted?” He waggled his eyebrows, looking pointedly at the clearly visible hickey.

“Stop that. It looks ridiculous.” Jane paused, a slow grin spreading across her face. “Yes. Yes, I did.”

“Fantastic!” He beamed. “So…why are you here and not with him?”

“I wanted to know if you knew since…I’m not going to be here much longer.” Jane clasped her hands. “We’re not getting married immediately, but there’s planning to do. And Darcy will want to get involved, and so will Erik…”

“I knew,” he said. “And I approve. He makes you happy, doesn’t he?”

“Yes. He does. But that’s not the entire reason.” Jane played with her necklace, a small Asgardian charm Thor had gifted her. “He explained what it means if I accept, what it means about the apples.
That it’s something only given to a few, and that I should consider it carefully because my friends won’t be given the same opportunity.”

“You still accepted.”

“Of course I did!” Jane’s cheeks heated, her eyes wide. “It’s not just Thor. He’s a marvelous bonus,” she added quickly, flushing. “It’s the science. The magic. There’s so much to learn! If I had a human lifetime, I couldn’t learn everything I want to, but with this… I actually can!” She was grinning. “That’s what I’m so excited about. I love Thor, but just love isn’t enough. It’s the opportunity this gives me.”

It was great seeing her so genuinely enthusiastic about this. He wasn’t entirely sure about her being queen of Asgard since she could genuinely be a bit scatterbrained if she got too absorbed in her work, but she had the compassion and the intelligence to make anything work. Besides, given time, she’d learn the ropes to everything.

“I’m glad for you,” he said again, going to clasp her hands in his own. “For both of you. Let me know if you need anything, okay?”

“Thank you.” Jane beamed at him, cheeks still a little flushed with excitement. “I have to go tell Darcy.” She was almost skipping as she left, pulling her phone out to dial her friend.

Smile fading slightly, he went to the windows to look out. What Thor had offered Jane had him thinking…

What about his own family?

Stirring within his blanket burrito, Tony stared blankly out of the little hole he’d made for his face. He’d been thinking about something, but he wasn’t entirely sure what anymore.

Only it possibly had something to do with proposals?

Squeezing his eyes shut, Tony considered whether to unroll his burrito and make himself presentable. Jarvis was still standing outside, radiating palpable worry that he could sense even from within the wards, and he’d been there for hours now.

Sighing, Tony decided to rejoin the living world. The panic had worked itself out of his system now, and he wasn’t shaky anymore. His Grace had largely recovered, and he was pretty sure he could pull off the “everything cool here” demeanor properly.

But when he fully unrolled himself and sat up, he found himself rapidly heading downhill once again when he saw the state of his clothes and shoes.

And the blanket.

Which he’d been rolled up in.

Shit.

His shoes went flying across the room, followed shortly after by the pants. His shirt joined the pile two seconds later, and he only briefly considered the boxers before deciding they had to go as well. Everything that had been on him in that dimension should be burned, and the nanites promptly went up in flames.
But the blanket...

Tony hesitated, biting his lip as he stared at the mess on the blanket. *Butterfingers* had made this, and he wasn’t so inclined to burn her handiwork.

With a sigh, Tony brushed his fingers against the soft fabric, gently cleaning it with a burst of Grace. There was no resistance as the blood vanished, which had him sighing in relief.

He then proceeded to eviscerate the black footsteps on the floor, not wanting to see it anymore. That Samael and Gadreel had forgotten wasn’t a surprise, since they’d all been pretty shaken.

As his clothes were currently a smoldering pile of ashes in the corner of his room, Tony quickly put together another batch of nanites that hadn’t been contaminated. Once dressed appropriately, he pulled down the wards and opened the door to give Jarvis a reassuring smile.

“Heyyy, J.” Tony softened his smile in response to the worried look he received. “Sorry about that.”

“Father, are you…?” Jarvis hesitated, scanning his body in concern. “I was…worried,” he said eventually, voice soft. It sounded more like “frightened” would have been the appropriate word, but Tony let him have it.

“It’s all right.” Tony stepped out to pull him into a tight embrace, relaxing slightly at the familiar feeling. “It’s okay to be worried. You know that.”

Jarvis’s hand tightened where it had gripped onto the back of Tony’s shirt. “I still find myself occasionally taken aback by the sheer intensity of such emotions.” He sighed softly, breath gusting past Tony’s ear. “Even though it has been long enough for me to become inured to it.”

“Ah, don’t worry about that.” Tony squeezed him tightly, then moved to pull away. He was stopped by Jarvis’s arms tightening, so he just relaxed and let his son hold him. “I still get taken aback by how it feels to be human.”

“You’re only part human,” Jarvis said, slightly teasing.

Tony snorted. “But what a part.”

“Indeed.” Some tension that had been vibrating through Jarvis released, and his body relaxed into Tony’s. “I’m glad everything’s fine.”

A slight squiggle of guilt wormed its way into Tony’s chest, but he ignored it. He was good at ignoring that. “You’ll know if that changes.” He looked around, pulling slightly away from Jarvis. This time he was let go, although Jarvis still held onto the edges of his shirt. “Where’re the others? I thought I heard them before.”

Jarvis’s eyes flicked to the side and back before he answered. “They’re currently helping Sam and Gadreel clean the floors.”

Tony blinked, not having expected that answer. “What? Don’t we have cleaning bots for that? I designed those!”

“They agreed that given the property of what needed to be cleaned, doing it by hand was the better option.”

Okay, what – oh.
Apparently they hadn’t gotten to this point yet since there were still two sets of gooey, bloody footsteps heading in the direction of Sam’s quarters. If that was what they were cleaning, he completely approved of not letting the cleaning bots handle it. He also hoped Sam and Gadreel were making sure everything was hands off. He didn’t want anyone touching the stuff with their bare skin.

“Point taken,” Tony said, nodding. “They all right?”

“They were also concerned,” Jarvis said quietly, eyes downcast. “But Sam reassured us all was well.”

Tony made a mental note to thank her when he could.

Jarvis hesitated briefly, eyebrows scrunching together. “Is everything well?”

“Yes,” Tony answered immediately. “It’s fine, J.”

Maybe responding immediately hadn’t been a good idea, since Jarvis looked thoroughly unconvinced.

“Really,” Tony insisted, his voice gentler. “It’s fine. I’m okay.”

“There is smoke in your room,” Jarvis said slowly.

“What – I can’t burn something if I feel like it?”

Jarvis glanced askance at him, highly skeptical. “I’m relatively certain you burnt your clothes.”

He made a face. “They were covered with that stuff that the others are cleaning up. Which – ew.”

Jarvis glanced at it. “If I may ask…what is it?”

Tony hesitated briefly, then said slowly, “It’s…some kind of blood, I think. But to be entirely honest, I’m not sure.” He was relatively certain it was blood, but there was still a small degree of doubt there.

Frowning, Jarvis turned to the nearest set of footprints, clearly cataloguing the liquid now that he had this new information. “It’s certainly possible,” he conceded. “We could run some tests on it?” He looked up at Tony, expression eager and open.

It took only a second for Tony to realize why. Experimenting with and evaluating new stuff had been a thing that they’d always done in the past, but less so now. It was obvious Jarvis missed it, and Tony—

Fuck, Tony didn’t want to be the one to wipe that expression off his face, even if his better instincts were telling him to just say no and that it was too dangerous.

“Sure,” Tony said instead, managing a cheerful grin. “Let’s do that. But, uh…let’s get some gloves first?”

“You never cared about safety protocols before,” Jarvis said, raising an eyebrow.

“Yeah, er…let’s do this for the sake of my heart. I’m not sure what it is, and it’s better safe than sorry.”

“Your heart is physically fine, and I thought you knew practically everything.”

Shrugging, Tony admitted, “Turns out there’s still some stuff out there that can surprise me.” He
glanced at the liquid-that-was-possibly-blood. “That’s one thing.”

“I’ll get the gloves,” Jarvis said, eyes shining. He really looked like a kid in a candy store, and the sight alone was almost enough to alleviate Tony’s worries.

It’d been a while since he’d seen Jarvis so genuinely happy.

It was late evening when Loki came to see him, slowly inching the bedroom door open and peeking in as if Tony was doing something particularly scandalous instead of staring out the window and doing absolutely nothing. Well, he was sprawled across his most decadent armchair, but that was about it.

“You can come in, you know,” Tony said, not looking back at him.

Loki did, sauntering in as if he hadn’t hesitated to begin with. He came to stand by Tony, hands laced behind his back. “How was your trip?”

Tony made a noncommittal noise. “Nothing big. Just…Earth. You know how it is; you’ve been there often enough.”

Loki glanced at him, eyebrows furrowed. “Not recently, no.”

“Well, it’s a lot dustier than you might remember. And hot. It’s really hot now. The oceans have pretty much dried up now except for some bits at the poles.” Tony shrugged, pressing his head back against a pillow to look up at Loki. “Time passes, things change, and the Earth’s getting on in years.”

Loki studied him out of the corner of his eye. “As you expected?”

Tony didn’t answer immediately, considering his answer. “It’s kind of funny, you know. I’m technically kind of everywhere – with the whole ability to transcend time and space – but I do focus most of my conscious in one place – which is here right now. And…I’ve never actually seen this? Or I guess some part of me has, but no part that I’ve ever paid attention to.” He paused briefly, then continued quietly, “There’re so many ways the future can go, it’s not really much use following it unless you’re really curious or looking for something.” He looked up with a rueful smile. “So I expected it, but at the same time it’s new.”

“And that disturbs you,” Loki guessed.

“Nah, not particularly.” Tony shrugged, folding his arms. “Just…it’s new.”

Loki turned to face him, an eyebrow raised in clear skepticism. “You are completely unaffected by going to your old home?”

Tony hesitated, not willing to lie since Loki’d just sense it. “There’s a little bit there,” he admitted reluctantly.

Loki seemed somewhat satisfied by the admission. “And what of what brought you there? Did you find it?”

Tony’s chest squeezed at the reminder; he forced himself to hold Loki’s gaze. “Something of the sort. Not sure what, but we did find something. Portal to a different dimension.” He smiled wryly. “I shut it down soon as we got out. Wouldn’t recommend it as a vacation spot.”

Loki looked at him for a long moment, his face impassive in a way that meant he was digesting every
minutiae of Tony’s appearance and cataloguing it to dissect. Then, slowly, he touched Tony’s cheek, 
thumb stroking his temple. “You are hurting,” he said softly. “I can read you all too well by now, 
Gabriel.”

Tony exhaled slowly, letting the brief panic that had surged through him fade. “We’re friends, 
y’know. It’d be weird if you didn’t pick up some things.”

“Hm.” Loki dropped his hand to touch Tony’s, clasping it and gently pulling him upright to his feet. 
He raised his other hand to brush the side of Tony’s face. “I could help if you would like.”

Tony gave him a small smile, raising his eyebrows slightly. “Yeah?”

“Yes.” Loki stepped in close, chest brushing against Tony’s.

Tony didn’t look away from his eyes. “Cashing in that rain check?”

“Not quite.” Loki pressed his lips to Tony’s neck, inhaling slowly as he brushed his nose under 
Tony’s ear. “This is for now.”

With a slight shudder at the sensation of Loki’s lips, Tony let his hands rest at Loki’s waist, not quite 
gripping. “Sure about this?”

“As always, my answer is the same.” Taking hold of both of Tony’s hands, Loki stepped backwards, 
leading him to the bed with a sly smirk and a glint in his eyes.

As he pressed Loki down into the blankets, he thought it wasn’t any different than usual, and yet it 
was.
He wasn’t sure why.

“You are always welcome in Asgard. You know that, do you not?”

He didn’t jump, having sensed the magic of the Bifrost minutes ago. Loki looked good, well put 
together and just as solid as ever.

He wasn’t entirely certain when he’d seen Loki last.

“Yes,” he said eventually, realizing Loki was expecting an answer. “I do get that.”

Loki approached him slowly, coming to stand next to him on the extended balcony of the penthouse 
floor. The wind was rather harsh up here, but Loki didn’t seem to mind, ignoring the fluttering of his 
clothes.

“Then why do you stay?” Loki asked.

He didn’t answer, eyes on the city’s skyline. The buildings had grown over the years, many 
extending above Stark Tower. There was less glass and plastic now, a newer and sturdier building 
material having been developed. It made for an interesting effect, particularly since Stark Tower was 
just about the only building from the 21st century still standing.

“Is it nostalgia?” Loki continued when he didn’t say anything. “Or is this some attempt at punishing 
yourself—”

“It’s not,” he interrupted coolly. “I just… I haven’t really been staying here.”
“Then I suppose I imagined all your effects in the living room,” Loki said dryly. “Along with the fact that you are here right now. And have been every time I ask Gadreel or Samael for your whereabouts.”

“Why? You worried?” He sighed, rocking back on his heels. “Don’t be. I use this as a halfway point. I’m going out and exploring the sights. The universe’s a big place.”

“And that means you return to this place to rest?” Loki sounded skeptical. “Every time?”

“I don’t need to rest.”

“Then why? What reason do you have for coming here over and over – alone?”

He turned away, not wanting to see pity in Loki’s eyes.

“Gabriel.” Loki’s voice was soft, no pity hidden in it.

Swallowing, he looked down at his feet, bowing his head. “Because...when I come here, I can still feel them.”

There was a sharp exhalation but otherwise no other audible reaction. A few seconds later, Loki gently touched his shoulder, grip reassuring. “I cannot say I understand what you are going through, Gabriel, but I doubt this is helping.”

It wasn’t, but then he was still trying to deal with this whole thing in a mature, rational manner.

As far as he could tell, he was failing rather miserably. It was almost easier to be mostly human 24/7 than even somewhat angelic.

“How about a drink?” He turned to Loki, managing a bright grin. “I’m pretty sure I’ve still got some old scotch around.”

Loki let his hand fall back to his side, raising his eyebrows. “Three thousand year old scotch?” He sounded skeptical that it would be any good.

“I put it in stasis; it’s not that old.” He headed into the building, the doors swishing open before him and shutting right after Loki entered.

Loki did him the courtesy of not saying anything while he was pouring the scotch, but then promptly proceeded to grab a frilly umbrella and put it in the glass, giving him a pointed look as if daring him to say anything about it. He didn’t, although he didn’t go so far as to grab an umbrella himself.

It made drinking a little awkward with it sticking up his nose.

Loki had taken several sips before he spoke again. “Is the idea of living in Asgard so reprehensible? I assure you we are not like your former brethren.”

“No, it’s not that. You think I don’t know by now that you don’t eat humans?” That would’ve been a big no-no from the get-go. “It’s...it’s the idea of leaving.” He grimaced, glowering into his scotch. “It’s not that things haven’t already changed but...”

“Moving would change things more?”

“It’d make it seem permanent.” He shook his head. “I know it’s stupid.”

“It is already permanent,” Loki said quietly. “You are spending more time alone than with your
family, even if some still remain here. You have never been one for solitude.”

“Maybe I’ve changed,” he said waspishly. “That’s an option, isn’t it?”

Loki didn’t look hurt, a slight frown flashing across his face before disappearing. “Changed such a fundamental aspect of your personality within three thousand years?” He sounded slightly amused. “I thought it was you who said that your kind changes slowly.”

“We’re not turtles.” Besides, being somewhat human did account for being a bit more adaptable than the average angel.

“I don’t believe I said you were.” Loki paused, then continued, “You do remember that I can tell when you are lying? You have changed but…not quite in the way you would have me believe.”

Downing the rest of his scotch, he started picking at the edge of the bottle’s label. “Is this invitation because the others asked you to stage an intervention or because you genuinely want me in Asgard? Because the others are coming with me, and I’m not sure Asgard is ready for that.”

“Asgard has been exposed to all your ilk at once numerous times,” Loki said dryly. “It would not be so big a shock as you claim. At any rate, a little change would do them good.” He carefully downed the rest of his scotch, somehow managing to avoid putting the umbrella up his nose. “You are welcome in Asgard; you always will be barring exceptional circumstances.”

“Like me going evil, you mean.”

“Precisely.” Loki’s lips quirked into a small smile. “The point is, this invitation is not extended out of charity.”

He nodded shortly, abruptly standing to go to the windows, watching the setting sun. “All right.”

There was a small clink as Loki set his glass down, followed by a faint squeaking as his chair protested the sudden lack of weight. “That was not an answer.” He was right behind him now.

He couldn’t help but snort. “You really want me to move in that badly? I could be a terrible roommate.”

“I lived with you before,” Loki pointed out. “You were remarkably clean except for the various toys you left scattered about.”

“There were inventions, not toys.”

Loki’s voice was innocent as he said, “Are they not the same thing?”

He met Loki’s eyes in the window’s reflection. “You know they’re not.”

“They may as well be toys on Asgard,” Loki said, huffing. “You would have your own workshop,” he added, looking off in the distance. “I know how you like your tinkering.”

“You insult my inventions, and now you’re resorting to bribery.”

“Not a bribe,” Loki said, eyes flicking to meet his in the window’s reflection. “Simply a fact.”

He considered Loki, studying him out of the corner of his eye. “You’re really pulling out all the stops, huh. A guy could get used to this.”
“And why not?” Loki clasped his hands behind his back, looking straight ahead. “Rather than waste your time here – among ghosts and memories – you could come to Asgard.” He hesitated briefly, then closed his mouth. It was as if he’d wanted to say something else but had reconsidered. Instead, he said evenly, “You deserve a home.”

“This is my home.”

Loki glanced away. “That was a lie,” he said softly.

Grimacing, he dropped his gaze. “You couldn’t just let it be?”

“No.” Loki clasped his elbow, grip firm. “You are my friend, Gabriel. I have learned that friends do not leave their friends to suffer. I want to help, and I can. So I will. If you refuse my offer now, I will come back later and ask again. And again.”

“You might be doing that for a long time.”

“I have a great deal of patience.” Loki gave him a patient look, eyes steady.

He looked away, turning until his back faced the windows. Truth be told, he really was lonely here. Too many memories and ghosts; everywhere he looked, he could see images of his friends, smiling, laughing, and being a makeshift family.

He knew for a fact that none of them would like it if he remained here until the building eroded.

“Okay,” he said quietly, looking up at Loki. “I accept.”

Loki’s answering smile was luminescent. “Thank you.”

“What are you thanking me for?”

“For accepting. You have other options, but I am glad you chose this one.” Something he didn’t recognize flickered across Loki’s face, but it was gone before he could identify it. “When would you like to move in?”

It didn’t surprise him when everyone was for moving by the next day. Really, the only reason they’d been sticking on Earth and in this tower had been because of him.

Chapter End Notes

I admit, Loki’s and Gabriel/Tony's relationship is one that really fascinates me in this series. Largely because it was because of that scene in a sewer under Berlin that kickstarted the idea for this, and then it just spiraled out from there. Whatever happened with it since then has been entirely organic and unplanned, which is just super fascinating. Talk about seeing where characters take you, yeah?

Kudos to those who catch the turtle reference. :D Which, well, since it's very recent I guess it's not hard to figure out?

Also, Samael? Ah, Samael. I hope you guys like nem as much as I do. :D Seriously, that is a character I again didn't plan on loving as much as I do, much like Gadreel.
Please let me know what you thought!
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

More things happening in this chapter! Even if it might not necessarily seem like it. I promise everything has a point! This is definitely one of those stories where everything ties in together. :D

We open up with a flashback, and I'm pretty sure it's the last one I have in this story... This one gives more insight into a certain relationship, since I did say things were complicated, right? Well, they are! Or not really, but these guys make it somewhat more complicated than it needs to be.

I could write an ESSAY on how pronouns are used in this story (and I kind of did in the comments last chapter), but I'm not going to take up the space in this box for that. But I'm being really intentional with how I use pronouns (with the exception of a few typos that I may miss), and there's a reason behind everything.

Enjoy the read!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

He should've moved to Asgard years ago. Being here was like a breath of fresh air. The pace of life was completely different than that of Earth, slower and less frantic than that of the humans.

Jane was there as well, and she seemed excited to see him and his kids. More particularly, she was excited about what she could do with four artificial intelligences to help her with her budding university. Unfortunately, she soon found out that Dummy was not particularly inclined to do much of anything unless it involved writing papers for money.

That did leave the others, and she even roped him into helping out occasionally, too.

It was a nice change from just hanging around and doing nothing beyond checking out other civilizations and touring the sights with the others.

And although his kids had tried to hide it, they didn’t look as worried now.

The whole thing kind of left him feeling guilty, since they shouldn’t have had to worry about him. It was his job to worry about them, not theirs to worry about him.

But he’d screwed up a lot of things. The least he could do now was try to be better.

Which wasn’t too difficult in Asgard. It wasn’t the same as the Asgard he was familiar with, but that wasn’t bad. There was less in-fighting and less eating of humans, which were both things he approved of, and Thor and Loki did a great job of keeping things in order. Jane was terrific with bringing a different point of view to the table, but she was more interested in furthering Asgardian science and making sure her university could run without constant supervision.

One thing Asgardians were good at was blowing stuff up if they weren’t paying attention. Which got rather hazardous when you were messing around with multidimensional portals and advanced science in general.
He’d been called in one time to stabilize and move a potential black hole to somewhere outside of Asgard, and had since then banned further research into that area without an angel present to prevent similar accidents.

Surprisingly enough, he’d also sat in on some court sessions with Thor and Loki. They’d invited him to sit in and give advice if he felt like it; Sam had laughed herself sick upon hearing the news but refused to comment on what was so funny.

Not only that, but he was seeing a lot more of Thor and Loki – particularly Loki. Sure, they were busy with their kingly and advisor duties, but somehow they still found time to hang out with him. Loki seemed to like using his magic to create doubles and then sneak off to pull some pranks with him.

So, yeah, he should’ve moved to Asgard ages ago.

He didn’t tell Loki that, but he thought Loki knew anyway from the somewhat smug looks he wore.

There were other odd looks, though, and often Loki would seem to want to say something only to cut himself off. He didn’t press, since Loki wasn’t the type to spill the beans, but he had to admit he was pretty damn curious about what was wrong.

It lasted until Loki came into his bedroom one evening, looking particularly determined.

“Come to wish me goodnight?” he asked, flicking through swatches of fabric he’d gotten that day. It was supposed to be for Butterfingers, but he hadn’t yet figured out if he wanted to just give her the fabric and the sewing/knitting/crocheting supplies or do it himself. He could be artsy if he wanted. “You shouldn’t have.”

“There is something—” Loki stopped, frowned, and then carefully put his hands behind his back. He seemed anxious.

Running his fingers over a particularly soft swatch of fabric (had he gotten silk?), he let Loki work out what he wanted to say.

“You are physically affectionate,” was definitely not what he’d expected Loki to say. In fact, that was on the bottom of the list of potential subject material.

“I guess?” He pulled over a stack of books filled with designs, rifling through them for ideas. “Rhodey always said so, anyway. Not that he minded; he was always down for snuggling.”

“You also enjoy being intimate with others.”

This conversation was taking a turn for the weird, even for him. He looked up at Loki, raising an eyebrow. “Depends on the intimacy and who you’re talking about. Also, this is a really weird thing for us to be talking about, and I do a lot of weird stuff.”

Loki tilted his head. “I thought you said it was ‘inspired.’”

“It’s definitely inspired.”

Loki opened his mouth, seemed to realize what was happening, and promptly shut it, scowling. “Stop distracting me.”

He grinned. “Sure thing.”
Sighing, Loki shook his head once. “I remember pictures,” he said. “Pictures of your youth, before and after. Pictures of the balls that your society held, the ones where you had humans of varying genders on your arms. Humans that you took to your bed. Clinton was particularly fond of complaining when that happened.” He hesitated, then added, “I have not seen you take one to your bed in a long time.”

He’d definitely had weirder conversations, but this one ranked up there for sure. “Haven’t seen a need to.”

“You always found it fun,” Loki said. “That was what you told me one morning.”

Leaning back against the desk, he folded his arms. “What’s your point?”

“My point—” The words were sharper than Loki seemed to have wanted, as he cut himself short to take a breath. “You are physically affectionate,” he continued in a calmer tone. “What I want to know is…were you ever able to be yourself?”

“What?”

“You are not human, yet the ones you bedded were. You cannot tell me that you were able to be anything other than a simple human on those nights.”

“I don’t kiss and tell,” he said, tone a bit sharp.

“I am doing this all wrong,” Loki muttered. Closing his eyes, seeming to bolster himself, Loki stepped forwards, slowly reaching up to touch his cheek, fingers gentle. “You still carry this air of melancholy about you, Gabriel. When you gave me shelter all those years ago, I remember similar days. It was always somewhat less the mornings after you had bedded someone.”

He didn’t move, though his skin tingled where Loki was touching it. “It’s those endorphins.”

“Perhaps.” Loki let his hand drop until it was touching his shoulder.

He didn’t need it spelled out to know what Loki was offering; his stomach twisted. “You don’t owe me anything, Loki.”

“You are aware of what you have done for Asgard, are you not?”

He didn’t answer, lips set in a thin line.

“You were a god yourself once,” Loki said when the moment passed. “You were part of the Norse pantheon in your old world. You know of Ragnarok, how that cycle works. It is an endless circle, always repeating. We were in the midst of one when you stepped in and pulled Thanos’s influence from my mind. Given a few more years, I would have brought Ragnarok about, and the cycle would have begun anew. That never happened.

“Now, millennia later, and we have not undergone another cycle. I have not wrought the end of the world. We have a chance that we never had before: The ability to live. That is what you have done for us.”

“I never actually experienced Ragnarok myself, but I know what you’re talking about.” He pulled away from Loki’s touch. “Still, if you’re doing this out of a sense of duty – because you think you owe me something – there’s no way in hell I’m all right with that.”
Loki shook his head. “I am not doing this because of a sense of duty. I am doing this because I want to. Because you are my closest friend. Because I am tired of seeing you in pain when there is something I can do to alleviate it.”

“It’s a pretty unorthodox solution.”

“It is an unorthodox situation, is it not?” Loki closed the distance, but he didn’t reach out to touch again. “I know who you are, both angel and human. There is no reason for you to hide from me. And you know who I am.”

He didn’t expect Loki to drop the spell that hid his true features, white skin darkening to blue and eyes turning to red. Lines were etched into Loki’s natural skin, forming intricate shapes unique to a Jotun.

“I cannot hurt you,” Loki said quietly, holding his hand out.

Even with several inches separating them, he could feel the chill Loki emanated in this form, enough to give any Asgardian severe frostbite in an instant. Perhaps he would’ve hesitated once, but it had been long enough that he could do this.

He grasped hold of Loki’s hand, letting warmth soak through his skin to mingle with Loki’s cold. “So it’s not just for me, then, huh?”

“I am not that selfless, no.” Loki smirked, red eyes gleaming. He closed the scant space between them, his cold skin blazing even through clothes. His other hand reached up to cradle his cheek. He repressed a light shiver at the touch. “If you’re looking for more than this, I’m not the person to give it to you.”

“I’m not.” Loki’s cold breath wafted against his face. “As I said, Gabriel…I know you; you know me. This is something solely for the both of us. Our lives are long. What is wrong with seeking companionship with a friend?”

He checked Loki’s eyes for permission before pressing in, touching their lips together.

“I want it all,” Loki reminded him breathlessly several minutes later, most of their clothes off and the bed’s blankets strewn about them. “Not just your capacity as a human. All of you, Gabriel. There is no need to hide here.”

This would be a first for both of them, then. He’d never had this opportunity, and a slight thrill ran through him at the thought.

“You’ve got it.”

The next morning, the only two beings capable of meeting his eyes were Sam and Gadreel.

There was nothing around him, but that didn’t alarm him as much as it should have. It was an absence, but it seemed to almost be a normal absence, like nothing had been created yet to fill that space, although there were lingering traces of energy.

Some were fading, like echoes of something that had been there before, but others seemed to be strengthening.

It didn’t really make sense, but Gabriel was used to things not making sense.
At any rate, he was currently in the middle of what seemed to be nothing. There wasn’t any reason to be alarmed, as there wasn’t anything here with him. It was kind of peaceful, although Gabriel did want some company to alleviate the silence.

Talking to himself just didn’t carry the same charm as having someone else there to listen and respond.

Gabriel had the vague fuzzy notion that he should be somewhere else than here, but he wasn’t entirely sure where.

As he tried chasing the notion, he found his Grace pulsing in response to a sudden change. From one moment to the next, something seemed to breathe, the entire space around him vibrating.

It didn’t affect him beyond vibrating through his Grace, but all of a sudden Gabriel found himself looking at faint wisps of light that came into view. Tendrils of it swirled around him, seeming to grow brighter with every passing moment. He wasn’t entirely sure how long it took until the tendrils of light coalesced into something more substantial and existing.

A name tickled at the edges of his awareness, but he wasn’t able to grasp hold of it when something else caught his attention.

This was pure blackness, pure nothingness. He hadn’t seen it before, but now that he was looking at it, he remembered that it had looked exactly like the light before. Small tendrils at first, but they hadn’t swirled around Gabriel. Now they’d grown into a form as solid as the light.

And then something else joined them, circling briefly around them before meshing closely with the light.

Gabriel hadn’t paid attention to this one either, but he found that he remembered how it had come into being as well: like smoke being pulled forth from vents, until its entire form was built. And now all three beings were together – the only signs of life in this realm.

There was a slight rustling, like voices being tested for the first time and the wind in the leaves. It went on for a time, the three beings circling around each other in the vast empty space around them.

Until, finally, one of them spoke. Gabriel couldn’t be sure who; maybe it was all of them at once. Who are we?

It could have been an eternity until an answer was given. We are; we are. We exist.

Why do we?

There need not be a reason. We exist; we are.

The three beings circled around each other, each of them humming with their own conscious.

Finally, they said, Where are we?

There was no immediate answer, each of them considering their surroundings. None of them saw Gabriel, but that wasn’t strange. He had the inkling they weren’t supposed to see him.

Nowhere, was the answer. And everywhere, was added a moment later.

There was another contemplative silence, but this time they separated as if to explore their surroundings. There was an age that passed, but they were never far apart from one another.
Even their words echoed across the space, shared by a link that Gabriel was privy to. *We are alone.*

*We are together,* they corrected.

*There is no one but us.*

A beat passed, then another, but Gabriel wasn’t certain how *much* time it was. He wasn’t sure how much time had passed at all, if there even was a concept of it. It just *was* – an existence he had once been keenly intimate with before time was invented by mortals.

Then, a whisper that came from all three: *We are the first.*

Gabriel’s Grace pulsed again and, blinking, he found himself staring at his bedroom ceiling.

It was a nice ceiling, all things considered. Not too fancy, not too plain. If he wanted, he could tweak it to be transparent and show him the night sky, but for now it was set to being a regular old ceiling. A ceiling that he hadn’t been looking at a moment ago.

In fact, Gabriel wasn’t entirely certain what that had been.

Sitting up, he let the blankets slide down to his waist, scratching the side of his head as he looked around his room. Everything looked completely normal, right down to the stack of gizmos in the corner that he kept meaning to clear out but never did.

Sighing, Tony slid his legs out from under the blankets to stand, carefully making sure to not disturb Loki. He was still sleeping, silver and black hair strewn across his face as he slept on his stomach. Tony pulled the blankets up and had the nanites making up the pile of clothes on the floor turn into a robe.

Deactivating the wards that gave them some privacy from the others (and spared his kids the embarrassment of learning too much), Tony pushed the balcony doors open and stepped outside. The air was cool, and there was a slight wind.

He waited a moment, listening, but there were no whispers to be had. Tony wasn’t sure if he should be relieved or worried at this change.

It was entirely possible that it had only been because of that portal on Earth. Now that it was shut, there was no way for the being in that dimension to stretch out to this one.

Not unless another portal was made, and that was always a possibility. He didn’t even know how that portal had been created. He was pretty damn sure he would’ve noticed its existence on Earth if it had been there before; he’d lived on the planet long enough to notice little oddities like that.

Resting his forearms on the railing, Tony considered the rainbow gleam of the Bifrost winking in the distance.

He didn’t have an explanation for what had happened in that dimension, but that didn’t mean there *was* no explanation. He just had to find it.

He’d never been one to let a mystery go unsolved.

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The next morning, Sam wiggled her eyebrows meaningfully at him. Gadreel was too polite to do much other than nod, and thankfully none of the others seemed to have noticed.

He wasn’t sure if he could go through another awkward conversation about the birds and the bees
and how it worked for angels.

“I know I had the wards up,” Tony told Sam. “Stop looking at me like that.”

“Just once was enough,” Sam said, smirking. “Was it good?”

“I don’t kiss and tell, dear.” Tony briefly considered flicking her nose but decided against it when she narrowed her eyes.

“I suppose I should be a little insulted that he was able to cheer you up,” Sam said, ignoring Tony’s groan, “but I’ll count my blessings.”

“You’ve never counted your blessings in your existence.”

“Maybe I should start.”

“You do that.” Tony looked for an exit and!found it in the form of Sleipnir shooting him a meaningful look. “Was there anything you needed beyond needling me or am I free?”

Sam gave him an unimpressed look. “I’ll let you off now, but don’t think you’re completely off the hook.”

“Why don’t you go ask Loki for the details? Maybe he’ll be inclined to share.”

“Please.” Sam rolled her eyes. “The last time I tried he gave me this withering look and proceeded to freeze my room out for a week.”

Tony winced. “Harsh.”

“I might’ve deserved it,” Sam conceded. “He gave me a warning before doing it. But I’m guessing you’re the one who taught him those Enochian wards?”

“I’ve no idea what you’re talking about. In fact, I need to be somewhere else. Excuse me.”

Tony made his escape, ignoring Sam’s unimpressed snort as he headed to where Sleipnir was waiting for him. “Hey, kiddo.”

“There’ll be a point where you have to stop calling me that,” Sleipnir said, though he was smiling.

Tony put on an injured face. “What? Never. You’ll always be a kiddo to me.”

“I feel so lucky,” Sleipnir said in a deadpan tone.

“You should.” Tony stretched his senses, eyebrows furrowing. “Where’re your brothers?”

“Visiting Balthazar,” Sleipnir said. “I’ll be joining them, but Hel asked me to tell you that you should see her.”

“She didn’t come here herself to tell me that? Or want to visit me?”

“We were already there,” Sleipnir shrugged and added, “And she said that you should definitely come check out the new digs because the only reason she made an effort to raise the temperature was so you could visit without turning into a weird ghost.”

Tony thought that was unusually verbose for Hel. “She did not.”
“Was that where you were yesterday?” He had wondered, especially since his worrying about them getting too involved with the blood had been for naught when they were nowhere to be seen.

“Yep. And last night.” Sleipnir gave him a grin. “It is warmer there. I didn’t even need extra blankets.”

Tony glanced back at Sam, who was now talking with Loki with a rather suspicious look on her face. Loki seemed to recognize the look, since all he was doing was giving one-word answers.

There wasn’t any need to let them know where he was going. He was going to see his daughter, not explore the source of weird whispers.

“All right, kiddo.” Tony ruffled Sleipnir’s hair before he could react. “I’ll see her in a bit. Do you want a ride to your brothers?”

“Yeah, thanks.” Sleipnir leaned in close, whispering, “Heimdall keeps giving me this look whenever I ask him for transportation.”

Snorting, Tony laid a hand on his shoulder. “And you’re completely innocent of all wrongdoing?”

Sleipnir widened his eyes. “Well, yes. It’s not my fault his sword was glued to the floor and he couldn’t get it off.”

“And the things I found stuck to the walls and ceiling in your room had nothing to do with that.”

“I was working on a new spell,” Sleipnir said, smiling beatifically. “It’s not my fault it went wonky.”

“Yeah, sure.” Tony shook his head. “Okay, for the sake of Heimdall’s possessions, I’ll give you a ride.”

It took five minutes to get Sleipnir to where his brothers were hanging out with Rocket and a newly grown Groot (who seemed to have been helped along by magic) and extract himself from the conversation before he could make his way to Hel’s realm. It wasn’t that Tony didn’t like spending time with them, but Hel rarely asked for anything. So when she did ask for something, he tried to do it in a timely manner.

Still, Tony hesitated slightly before entering the realm properly. No matter how much time passed, he’d never be fond of the cold. His reactions weren’t as bad anymore, but it all depended on how much exposure he had and how cold it was.

His usual visits to Hel were limited to a day or two, since any longer would leave him shivering and spacing out. It was actually great progress, considering he hadn’t been able to stand even seconds at first.

It had been slow and steady work to get him to minutes and then hours. If he needed, Tony could stretch it for five days, but that usually ended…not so good.

But, as it turned out, Niflheim was actually…warm. Or what passed for warm in this realm, anyway, after Hel had taken it over. Probably something like freezing for humans – zero degrees Celsius or thirty-two in Fahrenheit if he was feeling old-school – but it was balmier compared to usual standards.

Tony could actually deal with this, and he was smiling as he arrived at Hel’s palace. He found her in...
a sitting room, looking through some books.

“Hel.” Tony waited until she turned around, then grinned and opened his arms. “Heard through the grapevine that you wanted to see me?”

“Father.” Hel was also smiling as she hugged him, pressing the living side of her face against his cheek. “They told you, then? I would’ve thought it’d be a week before they remembered.”

“Maybe they put a pillow on the floor to remind them.” Tony kept his hands on her shoulders, grinning at her. “You have a good time with them?”

“We had a sleepover, roasted marshmallows, and told ghost stories,” Hel said dryly. “How old do you think we are?”

“My memory’s going these days. You might have to remind me.”

“Of course it is.” Hel’s eyes flicked between the unlit fireplace and him.

“It’s perfect,” Tony assured her, squeezing her shoulders before letting his hands drop. “You really outdid yourself this time.”

There was a slight slump as Hel exhaled. “After the last time, I wasn’t sure. This means that you can visit me more often.”

Last time Hel had assured him she’d raised the temperature and invited him, Tony had promptly found himself freezing his ass off and desperately trying not to flash fry the poor soul poking him in concern. Not his best moment, but he’d managed to get out without smiting any unfortunate people.

“Looking forward to it.” Tony put his hands in his pockets, rocking back on his heels. “So, I’m guessing you asked me here for a reason? Or was it just an invite to hang out with your old dad?”

“That was part of it,” Hel admitted. “But I did have another reason.” She paused, frowning. Her voice was fierce as she asked, “Where did you go?”

Tony blinked, confused. “What now?”

“Don’t give me that! You were gone! I couldn’t find you anywhere! And Sam and Gadreel, too!” Hel scowled, sticking her chin out. “Did you go skipping dimensions without telling us?” She jabbed a finger in his sternum.

“I…” Tony rubbed the spot where she’d jabbed him, frowning. “It wasn’t intentional.”

Hel’s eyebrow raised. “How do you unintentionally jump dimensions?”

“Unintentionally?” Tony gave her a sheepish grin when she frowned at him. “Honest, we didn’t mean to do it. There was something on Earth we were checking out, so that’s where we were at. Finding a portal that just happened to lead to another dimension wasn’t on our to-do list.”

“That doesn’t just happen,” Hel protested.

“I know, but it did.” Tony shrugged. “It’s all right, Hel. None of us died; we’re all still here.”

“Good.” Hel swallowed, folding her arms. “I would’ve been upset if you did. I still haven’t figured out where you went last time.”

“I went here,” Tony reminded her.
“I know that now,” Hel said, a slight grumble tingeing her words.

“Besides”—his tone softened—“I wouldn’t have come to your realm anyway. Angels don’t go where human souls or gods do.” He had his suspicions now, but no way of being sure.

“That just means you shouldn’t die again,” Hel told him bluntly. “Because if you do, none of us will get to see you again.”

With a nod, Tony cupped her face. “I’ll do my best.”

“That isn’t good enough. Dummy’s told me all about your ‘I’ll always be there’ promise.”

Tony groaned. “Is he still hung up on that? It was the truth!”

“It doesn’t count if it’s just your thoughts that are around.” Hel gave him a look that clearly said how not amused she was. “You died then. Again. Just because you came back doesn’t make it better.”

“I was under the impression that coming back to life gives you a freebie.”

“No. It just means that I can harangue you about not dying again.” Hel paused, then smiled at him. “In all seriousness, I’m glad you’re fine. When you disappeared the other day, I was worried that something had happened.”

“Nothing did.” Tony was briefly thankful that Hel couldn’t tell when he was lying. “If that topic’s out of the way, d’you want to just hang out?” He tilted a head towards the bookshelf where all the games were located. “I’m going to enjoy the fact that I can spend time with my daughter in her own home without freezing my ass off.”

The way Hel’s eyes lit up was worth it, even though the game she picked out was chess. They could go for hours with this, which was probably the point.

Several hours later, Tony was down three pawns and a rook, while Hel had lost a knight, a bishop, and two of her pawns. He was currently debating whether or not to sacrifice a knight so his queen could get an in, but there was a trap that Hel was setting up and he had to figure out how to step out of it.

He’d never been the best tactician.

“I sometimes wonder how things might have been different,” Hel said suddenly, a second before Tony was about to make his move.

He froze, fingers poised above the board. “How do you mean?”

Hel didn’t look up at him, twiddling her thumbs as she studied the board intently. “If Hela hadn’t agreed to switch places…what would have happened?”

This answer was easy. “I would’ve tried something else.”

“You didn’t have many options.”

“I would’ve made one.”

“A fancy answer for when you have nothing.”

“Hel…” Gabriel sighed, abandoning his current move in favor of reaching across the board to take hold of her living hand. “I would’ve found a way—somehow. I’m glad it didn’t come down to it, but
if it had… I wouldn’t have left you there.”

“And if nothing had worked out?” Despite the way she refused to meet his eyes, she clung to his hand, fingers tight. “Don’t tell me you would’ve found a way. What would you have done if everything fell through and I did have to stay?”

Breathing in slowly, Gabriel gently squeezed her fingers, stroking his thumb over her knuckles. “I would have visited.”

“How often? You couldn’t even speak—let alone move—the first time I saw you there. How often would you have come before you decided it was too much?”

There didn’t seem to be any words coming, everything tasting like ashes in his mouth. “I don’t know,” was his eventual answer. “I don’t know, and it doesn’t matter. You know why it doesn’t? Because you’re here, and you’re staying here. Maybe it didn’t work out in another timeline—I’m pretty sure it exists—but I’m not going to go looking into it to see how things played out. And you know why?” He leaned forwards, hoping she could tell how serious he was. “Because there wasn’t the slightest chance in hell that I’d leave you alone again, not after I failed the first time. I make mistakes, but like hell am I going to repeat them.”

Coming around the table, Gabriel knelt on one knee, still holding onto Hel’s hand. He reached up with his other to touch her face, gently nudging her until she met his eyes. “Okay, ástin mín?” His voice was gentle. “You’re here now, and it’s going to stay that way. It’s no use wondering about ‘what ifs,’ since all it’s going to do is drive you nuts with the possibilities.” He smiled wearily. “Don’t take after me.”

Hel managed a weak smile. “Do you take your own advice? About not wondering about other possibilities?”

Gabriel shrugged, smile twisting. “I try but…it’s a little difficult. It’s easy enough to just look over two degrees and see an alternate possibility. I’ve gotten better with not doing it, and I don’t want you to start. Or keep doing it,” he added.

There was a brief moment where Gabriel thought Hel might pull him into a hug, but it passed. She blinked, squeezed his hand tightly, and let go, taking a deep breath.

“Thank you,” Hel murmured, smiling at him. Then, surprisingly, she leaned in to kiss his forehead. When she pulled back, she looked as composed as ever. “Shall we finish our game?” A teasing smile played at her lips. “It’s your move.”

Tony smiled back at her, almost grinning. He let go of her hand after one last reassuring squeeze of his fingers and moved back to his chair, crossing his legs as he made his move. “Not anymore.”

With Uncle off visiting Hel, Loki avoiding most sentient contact except for Thor and Jane, the bots somewhere in Asgard either helping or causing mischief, and the terrible three visiting Balthazar’s group, Asgard was quiet. Gadreel wasn’t much for company, drifting about aimlessly and occasionally spooking the occasional guard when he appeared from nowhere, and that was before he decided to go to the dungeon and chat with the inmates.

Sam had never seen the point of doing so, since most of the inmates weren’t actually the talking kind. They were the kind to swear right in your face and sulk when they didn’t get what they wanted. And that was only so long they were behind the energy shields.

Yet for some reason, Gadreel actually got along with them. He’d made it a point to talk with them.
ever since finding out that Asgard had a dungeon (or prison, technically, but it was in the bowels of the palace so they all called it a dungeon). Sam had tagged along one time, just out of curiosity, but none of the inmates had been willing to talk with her standing there.

So she’d stopped, even though it was interesting how Gadreel could get them to talk and actually be *normal*. It probably had something to do with his own experience as an inmate in Heaven’s prison, but Sam wasn’t willing to think too deeply on that.

That said, there was little Sam wanted to do, and that left her with far too much time to herself. And to think.

The thinking was an issue, especially considering what had happened. Sam couldn’t *stop* thinking about it, which was problematic because it was like beating a dead horse. There was nothing she could do about what had happened, and yet it wouldn’t leave her mind.

Groaning, she dropped her head back over the edge of the couch she’d appropriated, pressing the heels of her palms against her eyes. She wasn’t exactly *sitting* on the couch, more like upside down with her legs over the back rest and her upper body where one would normally sit. At one point it would’ve raised eyebrows from anyone passing by, but the gods were used to seeing her sit in odd positions by now.

“Stop thinking about it,” she hissed, focusing on the pressure against her eyes.

But she *couldn’t*.

The terror ringing through Uncle’s Grace still haunted her, along with how broken his voice had been as he begged to leave that dimension. The question as to what the hell had happened bugged her, because Uncle hadn’t really answered her questions.

The fact that she hadn’t understood his answers bugged her even more because she was *supposed* to understand.

That Gadreel hadn’t understood either didn’t make her feel any better.

She was – technically – older. Didn’t that mean *something*?

Sam kicked the back of the couch with her heel, her foot swinging briefly as she reminded herself not to break it.

It disturbed her that she wasn’t familiar with that dimension. Granted, she’d never been one to explore like Uncle, but she’d also been around longer than him. She’d seen some of the worlds and dimensions Father had created being born. By the time Gabriel had been created, much of everything had already been laid into place. It was just the finer details that were left.

But none of them had been like that.

Empty, lifeless, and *dark*.

Yet…*had* it been lifeless? She hadn’t been able to sense that one creature that had attacked Uncle, even after she smote it. If there’d been more of them, she would never know.

Everything gave off some kind of signal, though. That she hadn’t been able to sense *anything*… It was perturbing.

Samael didn’t like perturbing, confusing, and strange things. It meant that ne didn’t know everything,
and that there were things out there and ne couldn’t prepare for.

And Samael… did not like that.

Clutching her hair briefly, Sam let her arms hang off the sofa, staring up at the ceiling and counting the beams and cracks she could see in an effort at distracting herself.

It worked.

Kind of.

Up until Jarvis tentatively poked his head in and said, “Sam? If I may ask—”

“Yes!” Sam jolted up, then promptly slid off the couch to land on the floor. She remained there, sprawled on her back, looking at a visibly bemused Jarvis who was clearly trying to hide a smile. “What did you want to ask?” she asked casually.

Jarvis kindly did her the service of not commenting on her behavior. “There’s something I would like you take a look at. I would rather not disturb Gadreel, and Father isn’t here.”

“Which leaves me.” Sam sat up, then got to her feet, patting her sides down. “You experimenting on something?”

“Running some tests,” Jarvis answered, leading the way.

“Did you run into some kind of roadblock?”

“Not exactly,” Jarvis hedged, taking the route that would lead them to Uncle’s workshop. “It’s more of a question, one that I hope you might have the answer to.”

“Sure you don’t want to wait for Uncle on this?” Sam asked. “This is more of a thing you guys do together.”

“Ordinarily I’d prefer to do so, but he looked distinctly uncomfortable when I asked about testing this.” Jarvis hesitated, then added, “I don’t want him to know that I noticed.”

Sam nodded, already suspicious about what Jarvis was testing. She was pretty sure that she’d gotten most of the gunky stuff with the bots’ and Gadreel’s help, but there had been some outside of Uncle’s room… There was nothing else that would make Uncle wary about testing it.

Once in the workshop, Jarvis led her to a table with various instruments and a small tube filled with the questionable liquid. “Before we cleaned up what was in the vicinity, we took a small sample to run tests on.” He tilted his head; various screens popped into form, readings displayed on them. “These are the readings I’ve compiled so far, along with a catalogue of all the tests that I’ve run.”

“And?” Samael raised an eyebrow, looking down at a small capsule that contained a spot of the liquid. Even in the light of the workshop, it absorbed all light, reflecting nothing. “What are you thinking?”

“I have nothing,” Jarvis said, frowning. “The data has been inconclusive except for one thing: There is no known substance in the universe like this.”

Samael could’ve guessed that much. “Interesting.”

“Where did you find this?” Jarvis asked.
“Not in this universe,” Samael said, lips quirking into a smile. “And we didn’t mean to bring it back either.” No, that had been a mistake.

As it was, Samael was uncomfortable about Jarvis testing on this. Ne had no idea what this was, and ne knew Gabriel had no idea either. But Samael knew Gabriel had a soft spot for his kids, and all Jarvis had to do was ask.

Still…maybe something could come of the testing.

“I gathered as much given that everything was on the floor,” Jarvis said wryly. “Ordinarily it would have been brought back properly instead of tracked in on shoes.”

“Yeah, yeah, laugh it up.” Sam made a face, pressing her hip against the table as she peered at one of the screens. “So, anything other than ‘inconclusive’ strike your eye?”

“Its consistency, and the way it seems to absorb all light.” Jarvis picked up a light, shining it directly onto the sample. “As you’ll notice, there’s no reflection.”

“What about the consistency?”

“Thick, and yet it has some liquid properties. It’s not entirely unlike water, but it doesn’t have the same properties as what I’m familiar with.” Jarvis picked the tube up, gently shaking it back and forth. The liquid barely stirred. “It will move, but it’s far more cohesive and likely to stick to something than un-stick without the application of some kind of suction.”

“Which is how you got this bit out?” There was no resisting the urge to poke at the sides of the smaller sample.

“Yes.” Jarvis reached to the side and held up a suction tube that still had traces of the liquid clinging to the inside. “Even then, it wasn’t entirely successful.”

Frowning at the suction tube, Samael returned nir focus to the sample. Ne clearly remembered what had happened last time ne had touched the stuff in that dimension, but nothing had happened, and it seemed safe enough.

Reaching out to pick the sample cup up, Samael tilted it to the side, briefly considered nir options, decided to screw everything, and dipped nir finger in the liquid.

Jarvis startled, clearly having a healthy respect for lab safety protocols that Samael didn’t. “Sam!”

Against Samael’s bidding, nir Grace started seeping out through nir skin, surrounding the sticky liquid. Last time ne had been too surprised to do anything other than let it happen, but this time Samael was prepared.

Concentrating, Samael forced nir Grace back, gritting nir teeth against its roiling. The liquid sat innocuously on nir finger, doing absolutely nothing other than absorbing light and just being generally dark.

“Are you going to lick it as well?” Jarvis asked disapprovingly.

Samael didn’t answer, exhaling sharply as nir Grace slipped from nir grasp and burst forth, brighter than before. It took only seconds before the liquid evaporated from the energy, sizzling into nothing.

“Did it go as expected?” Jarvis had his arms folded across his chest, glowering at nem.
“…Yes.” Samael stared at nir finger a moment longer before curling them in, rubbing them against nir palm. All it did was raise more questions, such as why nir Grace had such an aggressive reaction to what was – to all appearances – just some kind of liquid.

Possibly blood, but that didn’t make it bad unless it was poisonous or acidic blood. And it wasn’t eating through Jarvis’s equipment.

“And your conclusions?” Jarvis stared at nem pointedly.

“I…” Samael set the sample down with a small clink, remembering that Gabriel had practically been lying in it after being thrown away from the altar and there’d been no sign of his Grace reacting. Maybe it had all been on his clothes and nothing touched his skin… “I have to check something out,” ne said finally, turning to Jarvis. “Don’t…don’t run anymore tests on this, okay? At least until I’m back or Gabriel is.”

Jarvis frowned, glancing at the stuff. “What is it?”

“I don’t know,” Samael admitted, “and that’s the problem.” Ne reached out, touching his shoulder in brief reassurance. “I’ll be back. Gadreel will know where to find me.”

Samael didn’t wait for Jarvis’s response, already taking flight to nir destination.

It probably wasn’t the best decision, but Samael could take care of nemself. There was no need to bring Gadreel in, and ne definitely wasn’t going to disturb Gabriel. Hel would give nem ugly looks for years if ne did that.

Besides, Gabriel deserved to spend some time with her.

And Samael didn’t want to bring him here again after what had happened last time. Gabriel had been so terrified…

Best if Samael just did it. If nothing was there, then it was no skin off nir nose. If something was… well, ne would deal with it.

Ne wasn’t an archangel for nothing.

Earth blazed into view a split-second before Samael stepped onto its soil. Then, blinking, Samael turned in a full circle.

This was the dried out ocean they’d been in before, right?

It definitely looked like the ocean. And Samael’s sense of direction wasn’t so bad that ne would overshoot the mark and land in another dried up ocean.

But if this was the ocean and this was the place…where was the trench?

Frowning, Samael kicked at the earth, kicking up nothing but dust. Then, tilting nir head, Samael crouched, touching nir fingers to the ground.

Even extending nir senses through the earth didn’t bring up anything. Sure, there were other crevasses, canyons, and trenches scattered throughout Earth’s crust, but none of them were the one that ne was looking for. That ne had walked through.

In fact, if Samael’s internal sense of direction was correct and not completely screwed up for some bizarre reason, ne should be standing right next to it.
But there was just flat earth.

Samael checked nir internal database of coordinates and data points, matching it up with what ne remembered and could sense. Everything correlated with what ne had logged initially when coming here, except for the glaring fact that there was no trench.

Pacing back and forth, Samael considered the horizon. It took only a second to make nir decision, and then ne was skimming over the dried out husk of an ocean.

Really, there was a remote possibility that ne was mistaken – that nir internal database was wrong and Samael had landed in the wrong spot. It’d be embarrassing, but it was plausible.

Yet there was nothing to see. Sure, there was another trench, but Samael went up and back the entire stretch and didn’t see anything familiar in it aside from a load of rocks.

Frustrated and confused, Samael went back to nir original starting point, pacing back and forth directly over where the trench had been. A trench that was gone like it had never existed.

“Literally, what the fuck,” Samael said aloud, just to hear nemself. “Who even does that?”

There wasn’t even a trace of energy that Samael could track. Ne had been here before to make sure there weren’t any other portals, and the trench had still been there at that point. Somewhere in the interim between leaving and coming back, it had disappeared without a trace and nothing for Samael to investigate.

Scuffing nir shoes against the ground, Samael considered nir next move. With a soft sigh, ne took flight, doing a slow circle around Earth for energy traces.

Gabriel’s energy was still tangible, even after all this time. Part of it was the fact that he’d regained his Grace here, but the other was that he’d smote the Leviathan on this planet. The land still bore that scar despite everything else being gone.

Samael hovered briefly over the scar, that giant crater that hadn’t vanished even nearly a billion years later. The echoes of Gabriel’s Grace were particularly violent here, soaked into the ground and the air for anyone supernatural to sense.

Nir next stop was Gabriel’s tree, which they had visited briefly before. There was no reason for Samael to see it again, but it made nem feel closer to Gabriel because his energy was so palpable.

And the tree wasn’t scared of Samael.

“I don’t know what happened,” ne told the tree, leaning back against the bark. “I didn’t move the trench or cover it up. It’s like it never existed.”

Samael had seen a lot of strange things in nir existence, but the disappearance of an entire trench was pushing it. Especially since there was no sign of it or what had happened to it.

And Samael wasn’t a human who was blind to the supernatural.

“It was still there when we left,” Samael continued, staring up into the branches. The bark scratched at nir head. “I know that because I went through it a few times to check for portals. But now it’s… gone?” Ne made a face. “Screw it all.”

This was definitely something Samael had to tell the others.
“You’d better not chew my head off for coming here,” Samael said, patting the tree as ne pushed away from it. “It was perfectly safe aside from a mysteriously disappearing trench in what used to be an ocean.”

Pulling in a breath of hot air which was approximately 125 degrees Fahrenheit, Samael began to walk away, mind already intent on Asgard.

Until something fluttered down in front of nir face. Instinctively, ne caught it, opening nir hand to see that it was a brownish looking leaf.

A brown leaf from a tree that was always green and didn’t drop leaves, no matter how violent the weather.

Holding nir breath, Samael looked up at the tree, at the strong branches and the startling green leaves. They all still looked green, and Samael wouldn’t have known something was off if it wasn’t for the brown leaf in nir hand right now.

Gently closing nir hand around it, Samael told nemself to calm down. There had to be a reasonable explanation for this.

With one last scrutinizing look at the tree, Samael let nir Grace feel out the traces of Gabriel’s familiar Grace. Everything felt normal—

Samael stumbled as a pulse went through nir Grace, shaking it as an unfamiliar yet familiar conscious brushed against it. One that ne hadn’t felt like this in eons.

Hand still holding onto the leaf, Samael shivered as that new-yet-old Grace flicked against nem, joyful yet bewildered emotions ringing through it.

Maybe telling the others about this could wait. There was something else to deal with.

After finishing a chess game (which Tony had won) and then being roped into an archaic game of Guess Who? (which – how did Hel even have that game?), Tony took his leave. He would have stayed a few days, but Jarvis was still running tests on that blood and he didn’t want to leave him alone with it longer than necessary.

It was like once he had opposable thumbs, Jarvis had to do everything himself. It was an endearing trait that Tony loved but sometimes made him despair. Especially after the incident with the acidic venom of that snake they’d encountered on a planet. Jarvis hadn’t exactly touched it, but then one didn’t need to have intended on touching something if it ate through just about every known material and then started eating skin.

The results hadn’t been pretty.

Drifting slowly through the space between the branches of Yggdrasil, Gabriel let himself take in the sights. Even now, he wasn’t as familiar with Yggdrasil as he was with his own universe.

Gradually approaching Asgard, Gabriel gave the eight other realms a look before—

Something pulsed through his Grace, a sensation he wasn’t intimately familiar with but somehow recognized anyway.

Oh daammnnn—
Gabriel hurtled towards the dark, blinking as he registered the change in location. He slowed down, realizing that it wasn’t just dark.

There were three entities wound together, although the third – a void of nothing – wasn’t as tightly bound.

*What are you thinking?* the dark being asked.

The light being’s answer came slowly. *About…about possibly building something. Something new.*

**Building** something? What do you mean? There was a faint sense of confusion from the dark being; even the third entity seemed bemused.

*I can’t explain it,* the light being said. *But it keeps coming to mind – plans. Ways that I could Create something new.*

**Why? What reason is there to Create?**

*Because…why not? Don’t you want to see what you can make?* The light being sounded bewildered now, as if they couldn’t comprehend anything else.

*No,* the dark being answered bluntly.

*I have no desire for it either,* the third entity said. *But you do, don’t you?*

*There isn’t any reason for it,* the dark being pointed out. *We don’t need anything else.*

*It’s not for a reason,* the light being said. *It’s because I want to. Because…I can do it. So why not?*

There was silence, each of the beings contemplating what it meant.

They hadn’t noticed Gabriel’s presence, but that was probably because they were all so overwhelming compared to him.

It was odd, though. He’d seen them born – coming into existence out of nothing. He had no way of telling how much time had passed since then, but here they were, and they were no longer thinking as one entity.

*I’m going to do it,* the light being said eventually, determined. *I’m going to build something new.*

Admittedly, Gabriel wanted to see what the light being was going to Create, but he abruptly found himself with a mouthful of dirt and grass and probably a few bugs.

Coughing and spitting the disgusting mouthful out, Gabriel registered that he was lying on the grass in the woods on Asgard. Even though his destination had been the palace, not the woods where bilgesnipes would happily gore him for breathing.

Wiping his tongue off with two fingers, Gabriel turned over on his back, blinking up at the sky that peeked through the branches.

What had just happened?

The fact that he didn’t know was bewildering and not very reassuring. There was no pain anywhere in him, and everything felt normal but…

That had very decidedly not been normal.
Preceded by something else that he hadn’t expected.

Which was…

Having wings again feels fantastic. No more slow-mo flying!

Gabriel should probably deal with that.

Chapter End Notes

:3 So what's happening now? On multiple fronts?

Again, like I said, relationships can be complicated. :P (Hence the tag I used.) It's an arrangement the two entered, and it's an arrangement that's lasted since now. Also, let's just say Gabriel/Tony can be painfully oblivious, and there're some markers that should be watched for. :P

Speculate away! :D I really look forward to hearing what you guys think!
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

There is a lot going on in this chapter! And there's a lot more to come! :D Some of my fave scenes and lines are in this chapter, along with some familiar characters. :3

Please feel free to drop a note!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There was a brief span of time that he was missing, but that wasn’t a biggie. He could figure it out after he dealt with this other unexpected development.

Gabriel stopped by his room before going anywhere else, making sure that he looked as normal as he felt. It wouldn’t do to show up with a leaf or branch somewhere weird, even though it would not be the strangest thing he’d ever had on his clothes.

And then he was in the throne room, seeing both Gadreel and Samael there. Samael shot him a look upon seeing him, gaze inscrutable, but otherwise seemed normal. Nir clothes were a little dusty, particularly around the edges of nir pants, but that could be explained by some roughhousing.

But the center of attention was undeniably Balthazar. His friends were there as well, all of them eyeing him like they weren’t quite sure what to make of him now, but Balthazar didn’t seem to care, vibrating in place like he had too much energy.

Which would make complete sense, given what had just happened.

“Bro!” Balthazar shouted upon seeing him, breaking out into a large grin. Within the blink of an eye, he was in front of Gabriel, his newly regained Grace blazing and embracing Gabriel’s. “It’s so good to see you!” He wrapped up Gabriel, who was admittedly rather stunned, into a tight hug, squeezing with every bit of his new angelic strength.

After a long moment of this, Balthazar stepped back, still beaming. But then it flickered slightly when his eyes scanned over Gabriel, clearly taking in everything that he hadn’t seen before in his excitement. “Er…so, probably really tactless, but you do look kinda different?”

“You’re right,” Gabriel managed, pushing down the reflexive pain at the reminder of how his true form looked now. “That was tactless.” He reached up touch Balthazar’s arms, scarcely believing that he was really seeing Balthazar. After so long of just seeing his human soul, it was strange seeing Balthazar’s true form just under his skin, not a hint of human in him.

Balthazar’s eyes swept over Gabriel one last time. He clearly had questions, but they weren’t ones Gabriel was willing to answer. “You know me,” he said, thankfully not pursuing the matter. “Completely tactless.” His face softened. “You do look good,” he offered as an apology.

“No, I don’t.” Gabriel grinned to lessen the blow, shrugging. He ignored the visible wince from Samael, focusing on Balthazar. “But I appreciate the sentiment. How you feeling?”

“I feel…” Balthazar paused, considering his words. “I feel like myself.” His eyes shone, Grace flickering in their depths. “It’s quite strange, to be honest. After so long as a human…I never thought
I would have this again.”

Gabriel flicked his eyes over to where Balthazar’s team was standing, Rocket on Groot’s shoulders and Gamora visibly discomfited. Fenris, Jormungandr, and Sleipnir were actually standing next to them, all of them buzzing with excitement. “I can’t say I know the feeling.” He’d only ever been human, no memories of his past life included. Balthazar had been as unique as Raphael, only more so now.

“It’s just Grace in you?” Gabriel asked, needing to confirm. He couldn’t see a human soul, but maybe he was missing something.

“One hundred percent angel here,” Balthazar confirmed, gesturing to himself with a grand flourish. “Expecting something different?”

Gabriel paused, glancing over at Samael, who also didn’t seem to have an answer beyond a shrug. “Maybe? It was a possibility, if I’d even known this was possible. We looked.”

“Ah.” Balthazar squinted briefly, clearly taking a better look at Gabriel. He then looked back at Samael. “I see what you mean. You’re not entirely angel anymore, and Samwise isn’t either.”

“Don’t call me Samwise,” Samael muttered just loudly enough to be heard.

Balthazar ignored him. “You did say something of the sort before, but this makes it clearer.”

“I’m not sure how much clearer I can be aside from ‘I’ve got a soul, buddy.’”

“Giving me your eyes,” Balthazar said completely seriously. He broke into a chuckle two seconds later, eyes crinkling. “Really, it’s bizarre seeing you like this. Never seen anything like it before.”

“You and me both.” Gabriel tilted his head, eyes going to Gadreel and Samael in a silent invitation. He didn’t speak again until they came over. “Did either of you sense anything about this? ‘Cause I sure didn’t.”

“Nope.” Samael lifted his shoulders in a shrug while Gadreel just shook his head.

“Why don’t you just ask me?” Balthazar asked. “Seeing as how I’m standing here.”

“I did ask.”

“It was a statement, not a question,” Balthazar pointed out. “I didn’t hear a question anywhere in what you were saying earlier.”

“Semantics.” Gabriel shot him a pointed look, then remembered a conversation they had last time he’d seen Balthazar. “Wait…was this why you were asking me about what happened back when I got mine?”

“Bingo!” Balthazar shot him finger guns, flashing a grin. “I was sensing something kinda weird, but I wasn’t sure. Thought I’d better ask before heading into something unknown. When what you said matched up with what I was feeling, I thought I’d better check it out. It just took a while to pinpoint where it was coming from, and by then your little ducklings wanted in.”

“I eat ducks!” Fenris protested, clearly eavesdropping.

“We didn’t know you were looking for anything,” Jormungandr added shamelessly, giving up all pretenses of not paying attention. Gabriel thought he’d taught them better. “But then you were doing
“I told you leaving a map out in plain view for anyone to look at wasn’t smart,” Rocket said.

“No one else was on the ship!” Balthazar threw his hands up. “And no one else would’ve seen it without access to the wards. I wasn’t going to stick it in a bomb that I had to disarm every time I wanted to pull it out!”

“I am Groot,” Groot said, by which he meant that sticking it in a bomb that would blow off the arms of any would-be thief was safer than relying on abstract wards.

“What he said,” Rocket agreed, smirking.

“I actually have to agree with Peter,” Gamora said, sighing. “Sooner or later, the ship would’ve blown up with us in it.”

“It’s not like we would’ve died,” Rocket groused.

“You would have,” Gadreel said helpfully. “Many times over, kept alive only by my Grace until I came to see what was wrong.”

“But still alive!”

“I don’t know about you,” Balthazar said, “but dying once was more than enough for me. So I’m going to stick with wards, which I know will do the trick. And not a bomb. You know what your bombs have done? Blown stuff up, even when you don’t set them off.”

“That’s the point of a bomb, Quill.” Rocket folded his arms, giving them all an unimpressed glare.

“As a former builder of bombs, I can tell you that if a bomb blows up when you don’t intend it to, it’s not a good bomb,” Gabriel said. “It’s a bad bomb. It’s a bomb that you don’t want to have because then you’re dead. And we should stop talking about bombs because none of this is getting me the answer I want to have: which is how this happened with none of us noticing until you actually got it back.”

“That’s really bothering you, isn’t it?” Balthazar raised an eyebrow.

“Shouldn’t it?” Gabriel raised his eyebrows in response. “We’re left with a few questions: When did it happen? Why? And what’s the reason?”

“Need there be one?” Balthazar made a face. “I’m just pleased with the fact that it was there to be found.”

“Where did you find it?” Samael asked.

“Xandar,” Balthazar said, a small smile flickering across his lips. “At least, what used to be Xandar, anyway. You guys don’t normally hang out around that part of the universe, so I’m not too surprised you missed it.”

“You know distance doesn’t mean a thing.” Gabriel gave him a pointed look. “Fact is, none of us noticed.”

“None of you were exactly looking, were you? Sure, you gave it a shot when you realized I was alive, but it’s not like you tried again.” Balthazar didn’t sound hurt by this, just stating it as a fact.

Gabriel exhaled sharply but left it since it was the truth. “That still leaves us with why. Raphael
didn’t find hers.”

“Because she died,” Balthazar said. “Unlike me. Raphael has the self-preservation instincts of a housefly, evidenced by the fact that she died twice to my one.”

“I feel like I should be insulted on her behalf,” Gabriel said after a moment.

“I thought houseflies were unusually tenacious,” Samael said, tilting his head. “They were always difficult to kill.”

Balthazar looked bemused. “Really? I always found it easy. Grab a fly swatter or a towel and whack them.”

Samael opened his mouth, clearly about to contest that statement with an anecdote about how – as a little child – he had tried to kill a housefly and ended up setting the kitchen on fire. The housefly had still been alive; the rest of the kitchen had not been.

Gabriel hastily intervened before Samael could start it. “You can argue about the self-preservation instincts of houseflies later. The point is, you found your Grace now. It’s…an odd time to have found it, especially if you didn’t find it when you first remembered.”

“The only reason I remembered is because you archangels like shaking things up so much,” Balthazar said, huffing. “Besides, isn’t now a perfect time? I know I haven’t been in the angelic game for a while, but you can’t be telling me this is normal.” He waved his hand, frowning.

“You’ll have to be a bit more specific.”

“This feeling,” Balthazar hissed, barely loud enough for Gabriel to hear, let alone their eavesdroppers. “It’s wrong, and you know that. How long has it been like this?”

Gabriel shared looks with Gadreel and Samael, recognizing his own helplessness on their faces. Truth be told, none of them were really certain. Gabriel had no idea beyond noticing the sensation from one moment to the next.

It was the problem with not keeping track of time.

“I don’t know,” Gabriel admitted reluctantly. “But it’s been a while.”

“Not much of a detective, are you?” Balthazar gave them all unimpressed looks. “Aren’t you lot the slightest bit interested in what this is?”

“We are,” Samael said sharply. “But there’s nothing to be found, and we have looked.”

“Maybe you have, but clearly not enough.” Balthazar shrugged, arms folded across his chest. “Maybe that’s why I found it now.”

“Maybe.” Gabriel let his breath out slowly, nodding. “Guess we won’t know without asking Dad.”

“Why don’t you?” Balthazar asked. “You’re his Messenger; surely you’ve got an in? And while you’re at it, ask about what’s feeling so off.”

“You’d think so, but it’s like talking to a brick wall.” Gabriel forced back the bitterness. His Dad hadn’t responded to any of his attempts all these years, which was disheartening on more than one level.

“Break it down.” Balthazar made a punching movement, flashing a grin. “You’re good at that, aren’t
“It’s worth a try,” Samael said when Gabriel didn’t say anything. “He’s not listening to me, but maybe He’ll respond to you now. That this happened is some kind of sign.”

But what kind of sign was the question. Gabriel didn’t have any confidence that He would respond. He sure hadn’t any other time Gabriel wanted to talk to Him, so what would make this any different?

His method of parenting was more like “Hey, kids, doing well? Good, good, okay, see ya.” It had been different at one point, but that had been so long ago Gabriel wasn’t expecting it any longer.

There was a time when the kids left the nest, and they’d effectively flown the coop long ago.

“I’ll give it a shot,” Gabriel said instead, not voicing any of his doubts. “Worth a try at least.”

“That’s the spirit!” Beaming, Balthazar punched him in the shoulder.

Gabriel smiled at him, moving backwards with the blow. “Don’t get me wrong, Balthazar. It’s good to see you happy.”

“I know,” Balthazar said cheerfully, throwing up two thumbs up. “Okay, I’m going to go and see about that Asgardian mead. Let’s see what it does to my new tolerance!”

“You’d have to drink an entire casket in under five minutes to feel anything,” Gadreel informed him.

Balthazar blinked. “You know this from experience, do you? New plan!” He grabbed hold of Gadreel. “You’re going to join me.”

With nary a protest, Gadreel was hauled off by Balthazar, stumbling slightly before he got his feet under him. There was a brief discussion between Balthazar, Gamora, Rocket, and Groot before they literally vanished with a flutter of wings, evidently off to the kitchens.


Samael’s lips twitched. “That did.”

“How much mead do you think’s going to be left after they’re done?”

“With that group?” Samael tilted his head, clearly calculating the odds that Gabriel had already computed. “Absolutely none.”

“Thanks for confirming.” Gabriel checked to be sure neither Loki nor Thor was in sight, then leaned in to say lowly, “They’re going to pin this on me – I just know it.”

“You’re often to blame for something,” Samael pointed out, amused.

“But what am I supposed to do about this? I’ve snapped up mead before; it just doesn’t taste the same!”

“Say it’s a celebration,” Sleipnir suggested, coming up on his other side to bump shoulders with him. “You know gods love celebrating things.”

“It’s definitely a celebration,” Fenris agreed, nodding solemnly. The corner of his mouth twitched, though. “They’ll forgive anything if it’s for a good cause.”

“You know, you’re right.” Gabriel clapped his hands on Fenris’s and Sleipnir’s shoulders, wagging
his eyebrows at Jormungandr, who was looking faintly alarmed. “You convinced me. So you guys can convince whoever comes knocking to figure out what happened to the mead. Sounds good?”


“Yes! You guys are terrific – great at persuasion.” Gabriel pulled him in for a tight side hug, pressing his cheek into Fenris’s hair. “So do your old man a favor and help him out?”

“You keep saying you’re not that old!” Fenris elbowed Gabriel’s chest, but there wasn’t any strength in it. “You can’t have it both ways!”

“I’m your father, which automatically makes me your old man.”

“Sam!”

“Nah.” Sam put her hands up, quickly taking several steps back. “I’m out. You guys are good, right? Three on one? Yeah? Yeah. Okay. See you.”

Sam vanished before any of them could react, leaving Tony with the three, two who were still squirming in his hold.

“It’s not fair if it’s against you,” Fenris complained.

“What?” Tony shot him a grin. “I’ll go easy on you. Just do me the favor and persuade them.”

Jormungandr was putting distance between them. “You’re good with words. You do it!”

“You are the messenger,” Sleipnir pointed out.

“Which bears surprisingly little weight in the face of a bunch of hangdog Asgardians wondering where all their mead went.” Tony shrugged.

“If I tell you that I’ll do it, will you let me go?” Fenris craned his neck to look Tony in the eye.

Tony pretended to consider the proposition. “Hm…yes. One condition.” He pushed his nose into Fenris’s hair. “I’ll accept a hug.”

“I’m a grown god.” Fenris rolled his eyes, but he did turn in Tony’s grip to give him a hug. “You don’t have to ask.”

“But you’re an adult,” Tony teased.

“Doesn’t mean I can’t hug.” Fenris pinched Tony’s side in reprimand before pulling back with a wolfish grin.

“I like hugs,” Sleipnir told Tony, giving him one without being prompted. “We’ll take care of the mead,” he whispered.

“That sounds like you’re going to help drink it,” Tony whispered back.

Sleipnir just smirked, pulling away. “What? It’s good mead.”

Once his arms were free, Tony looked pointedly at Jormungandr, wiggling his fingers as he spread his arms.

“I’m a snake,” Jormungandr said long-sufferingly. “I do nothing but hug.”
“You give the best ones,” Tony assured him, wrapping him up tightly. “And now you’ll go and give the best persuasive speech telling them that the missing mead is absolutely not my fault.”

“Yes, Dad.” Jormungandr gave him a squinty-eyed grin and joined his brothers.

Tony watched their retreating backs for a long moment, a faint smile pulling at his lips. But once they were out of sight and he was alone, his shoulders slumped slightly, the smile fading.

He breathed out a long swear, running a hand over his face. There were so many things to deal with that he wasn’t even sure where to start.

Well, he could take care of the easiest thing first. The rest would just fall into place.

Gabriel didn’t try to talk with his Father often anymore, but every now and then, he did offer a prayer. Or a thought. Or a feeling. Or a vague something.

He never got an answer, but it made him feel better to do it. To just talk, like his Father was still listening. He probably was; He just wasn’t responding.

And now Gabriel was going to try again because Balthazar had a point. And because Grace didn’t just show up from nowhere. Especially since Gabriel would have noticed. He would’ve sensed something. It was Grace. It wasn’t like there was an abundance of it to be found in this dimension.

Leaning against a pillar on the roof, Gabriel sighed, staring up at the night sky. No one else was around, which was the way he liked it for the moments that he tried to talk to his Father. It occasionally got personal, so he preferred having privacy.

“Not that there’s really a whole lot of privacy with two angels with supernatural hearing,” Gabriel said to the stars. “Or three now, since you snuck Balthazar’s Grace here somehow. Have anything to say about that?”

There was no response, not that Gabriel had expected anything right off the bat. He hadn’t even opened up with saying “Hey, Dad.”

So Gabriel did. There was something to be said about tradition. “Hey, Dad. Don’t know what you’re up to, but I’m guessing it’s something? I hope nothing big.” He couldn’t deal with something big again. Or he could, but he didn’t want to.

Gently rapping his fingers against the pillar, Gabriel sighed again, tugging at his hair. “I don’t know what to say. I’ve already said most everything that I had to say to you ages ago. And now…” He made a disgusted noise. “Are you even listening?”

Gabriel liked to think that He was, but it could just be wishful thinking. Still, whenever he did talk to his Father, there was always the sense of his words being received, like his Father was listening. He just…didn’t respond.

Which you shouldn’t do if you were a parent, but then his Father had never been the best parent.

“I don’t know what’s going on.” Gabriel closed his eyes, slowly sliding down the pillar until he sat at its base, knees curled to his chest. “I don’t know what that dimension we were in was, and Samael doesn’t either.” Propping his elbows on his knees, he dropped his head into the space between his knees and chest. Eyes still closed, Gabriel focused on simply breathing, focusing on that space within himself where his Father had always spoken through him.
I’m not asking you to give us all the answers, to hold our hands through this. I’m not expecting it either. But would a little guidance be so wrong? A “hello” saying you’re listening? Some sign that you haven’t left us to our own ends once again? Gabriel forced his breathing to slow down, something tight and panicky in his chest. There was something wrong. It didn’t feel like it usually did. Why did you put Balthazar’s Grace here now? Why, after all this time, are you showing your hand again?

He swallowed, clutching the folds of his pants as he pressed his forehead to his knees. Where were you when I called for you before? When I asked what happened to my family’s souls? You’re showing your hand again, but you still refuse to answer. There are questions, and we have no way of getting answers. That is what a parent is for, you know? Giving answers to questions? Guiding us? I know we’re well past the stage of you directing us, but we’ll always need a parent. We’ll always need you.

Something was so terribly wrong. Parent, please... Are you listening?

There was no response, nothing at all. Gabriel hadn’t exactly expected anything, but there was something profoundly different about this. Something that had his breath catching in his chest, his concentration wavering—

“Gabriel?” Samael’s quiet voice was a welcome distraction, albeit a surprise that had Gabriel’s head jolting up.

It was just Samael. No one else was here. Even Balthazar was elsewhere on Asgard. Resting his head against the pillar, Gabriel let out a sigh, reorienting himself in his body. “Yeah?”

Instead of answering, Samael slowly sat down next to him, assuming a relaxed lotus position. “Anything?” he asked once settled.

“Like it’d be any different from the last so many times?” Gabriel huffed, relaxing the grip he had on his pants. “Nothing.”

Samael’s brow furrowed, his lips thinning. “Given what happened, I would’ve thought…”

“I didn’t.” Gabriel couldn’t keep the bitterness out of his tone. Not that he tried. If anyone understood bitterness against their Father, it was Samael. “He’s never been great at responding unless He thinks it’s right. Or once everything’s done and over with.” He flexed his fingers, curling and uncurling his hands into fists, considering how to put what he needed to say. “It felt wrong,” he said finally, glancing askance at Samael.

Samael leaned slightly forwards. “What did?”

“Talking with Him. I…” Gabriel exhaled loudly, looking away. “I’ve done it before, you know? And...it always seemed like He was listening, even if I never got an answer.”

Samael didn’t seem to understand, but he hadn’t expected him to. He did ask, “And now?”

Gabriel curled his hands into tight fists, forcing his breathing into an even rhythm. “I feel like I’m shouting in the mountains, nothing but the echo of my own voice coming back. There’s no sense of acknowledgement, like there’s someone on the other side listening.”

“But…” Samael hesitated, lacing his fingers together in an obvious attempt at stopping himself from fidgeting. “There’s never been a response before, right? What makes this different?”

“I don’t know,” Gabriel said sharply – too sharply. It took an effort to gently what he said next. “I
just know it is. I just know no one’s on the other end. He isn’t listening now and…” He swallowed, eyes closing as he prodded at that strange feeling of the universe, the one that they’d all noticed and had no explanation for. “I don’t know how long He hasn’t been.”

“Gabriel…” Samael’s fingers were white where he had them interlaced with each other. “What exactly are you suggesting?”

“I…” Gabriel shook his head, dropping his eyes to his own hands, slowly relaxing them, stretching his fingers out. “Maybe I’m wrong.” He managed a short laugh, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I’ve been wrong before.”

Samael nodded, blood visibly pumping back into his hands as he relaxed. He seemed relieved to have something to cling to beyond believing that… “You probably are.”

Gabriel let the silence hang between them for a long moment, considering the stars and the lights of the city. Samael didn’t break it, eyes distant.

“I’ll be honest,” Gabriel said eventually, “I have no clue what to do. I don’t know why Balthazar got his Grace now of all times. I don’t know where the hell we were in that other place or what I saw.” He paused, mouth twisting. “I don’t like not knowing my next step.”

“I don’t either,” Samael admitted. “And…” He hesitated briefly, then cupped his hands together for a second before opening them to reveal a brown leaf.

Gabriel looked at it for a long moment. There was something vaguely familiar about it but… “A leaf?”

Samael’s tone was neutral. “You don’t recognize it?”

Gabriel frowned, looking between nem and the leaf before focusing on the leaf again. “Wait…is that…is that from Earth? From my tree?”

“Yes.”

“When were you on Earth again?”

“Today.” Samael dropped his eyes to the leaf, frowning. “I was running tests on that blood, and I… Well, I wanted to see if there was anything else that I’d missed, so I went back. Only…the place was gone.”

“No shit. I closed it, remember?”

“No, I mean the entire trench was gone.” Samael raised a hand to make a vague poofy motion. “Like it was never there to begin with.”

That didn’t sound like good news, but there could be any number of explanations for that. “Maybe you weren’t in the right place.”

“I looked,” Samael said curtly. “I was definitely in the right place, and there was nothing there. There wasn’t any sign of where we’d been, and I couldn’t sense anything to explain it either. And when I dropped by your tree…” He didn’t say anything else, fingers flexing around where they were holding the leaf.

Gabriel considered the leaf. It wasn’t even green; it was brown. He had never seen brown leaves on his tree before. “It’s never dropped leaves before,” he said quietly.
“I know,” Samael said just as quietly. “This is the only one that did.”

But just one was enough. Gabriel wasn’t sure what it meant, only that it couldn’t be anything good. Samael seemed to agree judging by the tight look around his eyes.

“I feel fine?” Gabriel offered, managing a smile.

“You look it,” Samael agreed, sighing. “Maybe I’m reading too much into this.” He cupped the leaf in his hands again; when they opened, the leaf was gone. “Or maybe I’m not. Maybe neither of us is.”

Gabriel hummed in assent, nodding slightly. “I’m open to any and all suggestions. Really.”

Samael took a long moment to respond. When he did, it was quiet. “Maybe go to Heaven. You’d be closer there.”

“Closer, huh…” Gabriel blew out a breath, pressing his thumb into his palm as he considered the idea. “Haven’t gone seeking Revelation for a while…” He couldn’t remember the last time he had, and Samael’s face told him he knew it. “You haven’t either, so don’t give me that look.”

“I’m not.” Samael’s lips twitched. “It’s just…’a while’? More like, so long that you can’t even remember it.”

Gabriel made a face. “I’ve got more important things to remember than the last time I sought Revelation. It…never came up.” As one who’d literally seen their Father and spoken to Him, Revelation wasn’t a thing that he’d ever gotten in the habit of seeking. Not like the younger angels.

“Do you even remember how to do it?” Samael raised an eyebrow, visibly smirking.

“It’s like riding a bike. Easy-peasy.” Gabriel waved a dismissive hand. “I’ll hang out with the sibs, chat a little, and then be back here once I’ve gotten my answers.”

Samael sobered, tilting his head. “You think it’ll be that easy?”

“Why not?” Gabriel snorted. “I think we deserve some kind of break, don’t we?”

Biting his lip, Samael looked down at his hands, twiddling his thumbs. “What if we already had one?” he whispered.

Gabriel wasn’t going to lie: the thought had crossed his mind. But…what kind of break had the last billion years been, then? “Let’s not lose our heads just yet,” he said instead, hoping he sounded reassuring instead of worried.

“Hm.” Samael inclined his head, eyes fixed on his hands. “You going, then? I can let the others know.”

Gabriel hesitated, part of him urging to just leave and see what he could find out. But the rest of him told him to wait, to personally tell them where he’d be going. It wasn’t even that he hadn’t gone to his old home before. It was…

He wasn’t even sure what it was.

Only that he wouldn’t let Samael be his mouthpiece.

“I think it can wait.” Gabriel hoped none of his doubts showed on his face. Samael didn’t seem to notice anything. “A day or so isn’t going to change anything.”
Samael seemed relieved, accepting his answer with a nod. “All right. That said, any plans for the night? Going to join Balthazar? I think he’s currently painting the city with all the colors of the rainbow. The terrible three and the bots are helping.”

“Yes, of course they are.” Gabriel glanced in the direction of where they were. “And you know what? I think I will. You?”

Samael snorted, getting to his feet and giving Gabriel a helping hand. “Why not? I’ve always wanted to throw a ‘Welcome Back to Angelhood!’ party.”

Tony thought back, spreading his feet as he braced himself on the roof. “Didn’t we throw one for you?”

“No. I think I was a little bit more distracted with everything I remembered, along with getting the entire Host off my back.” Sam gave him a broad smile. “Shall we go?”

Tony returned the smile, putting his hands in his pockets. “Let’s go.”

“I’m coming with you,” Balthazar told Gabriel the next day. “You don’t have to agree; just know that I’ll tag along like your own personal shadow.”

“Not necessary,” Gabriel assured him. “Really not necessary.” Then, curious, he asked, “Are you planning on painting Heaven rainbow, too?”

“Wouldn’t that be a lovely idea?” Balthazar seemed like he was considering the idea before he smirked and shrugged. “I’ve missed the Host. It’s odd not hearing anyone on angel radio. Don’t get me wrong, Gabe; it’s nice hearing you, Samwise, and Gadreel, but you’re just three angels. You’re chump change compared to the entirety of the Host.”

“Takes a bit to get used to it,” Gabriel agreed. “But I would’ve thought that the last so many years was enough time.”

“I was human then,” Balthazar protested, making a face. “Not quite the same as being back to my old shining self.”

“Okay, I’ll give you that.” Gabriel could remember how it had been after he’d gotten his Grace back initially. There had been quite the adjustment period.

“How long will you be gone?” Dummy asked, frowning. “Is it going to be like those times where you say ‘a day’ and then you’re gone for weeks?”

“I don’t know.” Gabriel gave him an apologetic smile, shrugging sheepishly. “Depends on how long it takes. Could take a few minutes, or it could take weeks. I haven’t done this in a while.”

“Perks of being an archangel,” Balthazar said casually, propping his elbow on Gabriel’s shoulder. “They don’t have to do the things we regular angels do on a normal basis.”

“You gonna be gone for good?” Rocket sounded indifferent, like he couldn’t care less about the answer. His quivering whiskers suggested otherwise.

“You kidding me?” Balthazar grinned at him, eyes flicking to Gamora and Groot. “I’m not leaving you guys! I’ll be back with Gabe soon as he’s done. It’s just a stop to say hi to Cassie, show him I’m back to normal, and reacquaint myself with my old stomping grounds.”
“You can leave sooner if you want,” Gabriel said. “It’s easy enough to find the way.”

“Maybe I will. Depends on how rusty you are.”

“Like you’re any better,” Samael said dryly. “When’s the last time you did it?”

“I was human,” Balthazar said, raising his eyebrows in mock affront. “Unlike you, I might add. Or Gadreel.”

Gadreel ducked his head, refusing to meet anyone’s eyes.

“All right, stop picking on Gadreel. He’s shy.” Gabriel whacked the back of Balthazar’s head, ignoring the fake wince he received. “If you’re ready to go, we’ll head out. D’you want to tag along next to me or should I just take you alongside?”

“How old do I look?” Balthazar demanded indignantly, hands on his hips. “Just point the way and I’ll follow.”

“We’ll be waiting for you,” Butterfingers said, arms folded across her chest.

“If you just happen to see Odin, you can punch him in the face,” Fenris said, his brothers nodding in agreement.

Gabriel snorted. “I don’t think I’m likely to run into Odin in Heaven, but if I do I’ll pass that message along. He probably won’t mind before I hightail it out of there.”

“Please don’t cause any fights,” Jarvis said.

“No fights.” Gabriel gave him a thumbs up, grinning. “Any other well wishes before I take a trip I’ve done loads of times before?”

*Good luck, Gabriel.* The prayer was from Loki, who simply gave him a small smile when Gabriel glanced at him in surprise. Next to him, Thor’s smile was no less genuine, even if it was dimmer than usual.

“Okay.” Gabriel clapped his hands, shooting Balthazar a look to be sure he was ready. “Onwards.”

After taking this trip multiple times before, it wasn’t even that difficult tracing the familiar route. It was still tiring, pressing through the dimensional walls, but it had become less so over time. He wasn’t sure if it was through familiarity or some other reason, and the others hadn’t brought it up.

It was a moment before he popped through to the other side, and the sudden influx of energy after being away from Heaven for so long was startlingly invigorating. And he wasn’t even in Heaven yet, having entered the dimension somewhere in the space above Earth.

He gave the planet a passing glance, noting that it looked virtually the same as the Earth in his own dimension. Then, after checking that Balthazar had come through as well, Gabriel continued into Heaven.

The angels he met on the way seemed visibly startled to see him, although maybe it was Balthazar’s presence that had them so taken aback. For his part, Balthazar just gave them the equivalent of a cheeky wave and followed after Gabriel.

Gabriel skipped through the parts of Heaven that were still largely populated by angels, heading to where he could sense Castiel milling about.
He’d been in Heaven only a few times since they’d started integrating all the different human heavens, and each time it looked different from the last. By now practically everything was unified, although there were separate sections for humans who had different preferences. Still, they could travel within Heaven freely now, seeing who they wanted and staying for as long as they wanted.

It was really neat, seeing how the different individual heavens had been incorporated into the whole. Nothing had been lost; everything had just been added together to make something bigger and better.

“This is a lot different from what I remember,” Balthazar said, drifting on Gabriel’s metaphorical heels. “Damn, they’ve been busy.”

“Yep.” Gabriel didn’t bother looking back, ignoring the startled souls that he passed by. “It’s been a work in progress. Like it?”

“Like it? I didn’t even know it was possible to do this! I mean, you mentioned it before – and Cassie certainly talked a lot about the plans – but I had no idea that everyone was so gung-ho for this.”

“They weren’t at first.” Gabriel remembered the fights, the way his siblings had dug in their heels and all shouted “No!” because their Father hadn’t made it this way. “But they came round once the humans started doing it themselves.” He smirked, remembering how that had gone over. “Hunters are more tenacious than most take them for.”

If he remembered right, it had been once the Winchesters got heavily involved and located more hunters that things really got rolling.

“You don’t need to tell me that.” Balthazar sounded pained. “I was intimately acquainted with two, knew a crotchety third, and that was more than enough.”

Gabriel stopped just before the part of Heaven Castiel was in, looking back to Balthazar. “Then maybe you should stay quiet, since Castiel’s hanging around most of them.”

“You mean the Winchesters?” Balthazar actually sounded gleeful despite his earlier tone. “I haven’t seen the boys in ages. I should say hello, shouldn’t I?”

“I’m not going to stop you if that’s what you want.” Gabriel pushed forward, stepping through the boundary and pulling forth his human form to make it easier on the human souls present. He preferred his true form here in Heaven, but he had to be careful around human souls. They were tougher than human bodies, but their souls were still weaker than an angel’s true form.

Next to him, Balthazar also put together his human form. He then proceeded to bound over to a wide-eyed Sam, who clearly hadn’t expected their arrival. Castiel was nowhere to be seen, but he was definitely in the house.

“Balthazar?” Sam squeaked as Balthazar squeezed him too tightly. “What are you – ack—”

“Sam!” Balthazar let him go, beaming. “How have my two favorite hairless apes been doing?”

“Were we really your favorites?” Sam sounded a bit like he didn’t know whether to be flattered or suspicious. “What are you doing here? You—” He scanned Balthazar’s form for a moment, eyes widening. “You – you’re an angel?”

“I have the faint feeling I should be insulted that you thought I wasn’t an angel—”

“Because you were human!”
—but I am one hundred percent bona fide angel.” Balthazar paused dramatically. “You can touch the merchandise if you want.”

“I, uh…I think I’ll pass, thanks.” Sam glanced over at Gabriel, expression screaming “help me!”

“There a reason you’re stopping by or…?”

“I resent the insinuation that I can’t drop by just to have a chat with my favorite hunters.” Gabriel flashed Sam a smirk. “But I do have a reason for the unexpected visit. I’m guessing Castiel’s in the house with Dean?”

“Yeah, er…” Sam looked distinctly uncomfortable. “I’m sure he’ll be right out? They’re a little busy at the moment.”

“It’s a shame Cassie never did it when I was around to tease him,” Balthazar said, sighing. “Which means that I’ll have to get it in now.”

“He’s done it plenty of times over the years,” Sam said. “Many times. Including when I was in the same room, even. Is that normal?”

“Well, when a man and an angel love each other very much—”

“I don’t need the birds and the bees talk!” Sam yelped. “I’m just going to take that as a ‘yes’ and leave it.”

Gabriel tried not to look too amused at Sam’s obvious discomfort. He was rather surprised that no one had ever pulled the kid aside and told him just what it meant when an angel fell in love and was able to express that love. Gabriel only abstractly knew what it meant, but it was enough that he could understand where Castiel was coming from.

And he was also pretty sure that Dean was just being a little shit.

“You could hang out somewhere else,” Gabriel told him, raising his eyebrows pointedly. “Somewhere not as scarring for your eyeballs.”

“This is my house,” Sam complained. “And, sure, maybe I gave Dean a bedroom, but I shouldn’t have to evacuate my house!”

“Have you considered making a second house?”

Sam gave him a bitch face. “My house, Gabriel. Even if I occasionally have to leave it, I’m not going to abandon it because those two have no concept of privacy.”

“Hm.” Gabriel conceded the point, shooting a glance at the house. Castiel sent him an apologetic message along with a vague promise that he’d be right out. “I can show you some wards that might help dampen it.”

“I have those wards,” Sam said. “Raphael gave them to me after I complained too many times. They probably keep out like fifty percent of it. It’s still fifty percent too much.”

“Huh.” Gabriel wondered if there was a difference between doing it in Heaven and doing it outside of Heaven.

“I shouldn’t know that look, but I do.” Sam shot him a wary look. “What are you plotting now?”

“Plotting? Who says I’m plotting anything?”
“No, that’s your ‘I’m plotting something dastardly – fear me’ look,” Balthazar disagreed.

Huffing, Gabriel turned away pointedly, only to see the door of the house open and Castiel stepping out. He looked rather rumpled, but he also didn’t seem to care about his appearance as he made his way to them. Dean, on the other hand, seemed pretty pristine by the time he also came out.


“Oh, Cassie…” Balthazar’s grin was soft. “How does any other Fallen turn back into an angel? I found my Grace.”

“Recently?” Raphael’s voice from next to Gabriel was a surprise; she’d slipped into the space besides him a scant second ago.

“Hey, Raphael.” Gabriel turned away from Castiel and Balthazar to give them some privacy. “A day or so ago over where I was, so I’d say it was pretty recent.”

“You didn’t mention having found it last time I was there.” Raphael’s brow furrowed. “For that matter, I didn’t sense anything either.”

“There was nothing to find.” Gabriel offered a helpless shrug when she stared at him. “I know, but it’s the truth. One second Balthazar was human, the next I have his voice in my head and he’s all hyped up from the power surge. He did ask some stuff that makes me think it’s been around a while, so why none of us noticed is the real question.”

“And is why you’re here?” Raphael raised an eyebrow. “You don’t usually stop by just to visit. Balthazar could’ve come by himself if he wanted to see Castiel.”

“I’m here to seek Revelation,” Gabriel said, since she was going to find out anyway.

Raphael frowned, clearly not having expected that. “You?”

“Don’t sound so surprised.” Gabriel huffed, rolling his eyes. “I can seek Revelation if I want to. Isn’t that a thing we should all do?”

“Supposedly,” Raphael agreed. “Yet none of us ever did really follow that.”

“Maybe I feel like it now.” Gabriel exhaled, eyes flicking to where Balthazar had cracked a joke that made Sam cringe and Dean snort. Castiel was smiling, so it couldn’t be that bad. “Maybe I want to know that He’s listening, since I’m not sure if He is.”

“You think seeking Revelation will help?” Raphael’s voice was soft.

“I’m willing to give it a shot.” He gave her a broad smile. “Everything’s closer here, so if I haven’t got a chance here…” He shrugged.

Raphael inclined her head in acknowledgement. “I understand. If you’re going to do so, I’d recommend the Garden. And if you want to talk to Joshua…” Her eyes flicked to Castiel. “I understand that our Father has on occasion spoken to nem.”

Gabriel bit back the bitter retort that came to his lips. It wasn’t Joshua’s fault if their Father spoke to nem but no one else. As the Gardener, Joshua was in a unique place that no other angel was.

“I’ll do that,” Gabriel said instead. He took a step back, meaning to head there, but hesitated slightly.
“Raphael…”

Raphael’s head turned to him, one eyebrow raised inquiringly. “Yes?”

It couldn’t hurt to cover his bases, especially after what Samael had told him. “Have there been any portals to other dimensions active on Earth recently?”

“…No?” Raphael frowned, eyes going to Castiel. “Castiel, have you seen anything unusual on Earth as of late?”

Castiel glanced over, brow furrowing briefly. “Such as?”


“It’s been quiet since humans left,” Castiel said, shaking his head once. “Any temples have since eroded or been relocated to a different planet. All shady business followed accordingly.”

“Your sense of humor is a riot,” Balthazar informed Castiel.

Castiel’s response was bland, but Gabriel could make out the barely hidden amusement. “Thank you.”

“Why do you ask?” Raphael’s eyes were piercing. “Did you find something on yours?”

“There was a portal.” Gabriel pulled in a long breath, letting it out slowly. “Samael doesn’t know the place it led to, and I’ve never seen it myself. I closed it.”

“If Samael doesn’t have any idea, why would I?” Raphael asked dryly. “You’re the best traveled out of all of us, so if anyone has any idea—”

“Funnily enough, I haven’t been everywhere, so I’m not sure why everyone keeps thinking that. Just because I was a god for a while…” Gabriel rolled his eyes. “It was worth a shot, anyway. Thanks.”

He went to walk off, but was halted by Raphael’s quiet “Gabriel.”

She looked unusually somber when he stopped, looking over his shoulder at her. “I could look for it, if you gave me a description—”

“No.” There was an echo of too much power in his voice, the energy of Heaven coming forth without his permission. It was enough that it had Dean and Sam wincing, and Castiel and Balthazar looking at him in alarm. He forced his voice back to normal human levels, managing a strained smile. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

Raphael’s face was blank. “What did you see there?”

Gabriel turned away, back facing them. “I don’t know.”

He took flight for the Garden before Raphael could ask more questions or anyone could wonder at his abysmal lack of control. He hadn’t been in Heaven for too long and was unused to the casual power it afforded him.

It didn’t excuse the lack of control in response to Raphael’s question, which had been well intended.

Heaven’s Garden was quiet when he arrived, only a few other angels present. Joshua was there, tending to the place as he always did, his true form bright.

“Gabriel.” Joshua seemed pleasantly surprised to see him, extending his Grace in greeting. “What
brings you here?”

“Revelation. Seeking it, anyway.” Gabriel returned the greeting, pleased when Joshua didn’t flinch at the touch or look away from the scars. “All right if I do it here?”

“Of course.” Joshua pulled away, giving him space. “No one will disturb you.”

Angels wouldn’t dare disturb another seeking Revelation, but souls wouldn’t know otherwise.

Giving Joshua the angelic equivalent of a nod, Gabriel moved to a quiet spot, letting himself soak in the energy of the Garden and relax. Once he felt he was ready, he moved into that tranquil state of mind necessary for Revelation.

It was at once both a state of mind and being. One had to be receptive, open, and willing to receive anything that might come. If there was any hesitation, any doubt, chances of successfully seeking Revelation dropped unless one got super lucky.

And Gabriel had his doubts – always had his doubts – but he could put them to the side for this. He could just...be.

And be…emptiness?

There was a slight chill touching him, something that didn’t feel native to the Garden. Returning his awareness to the outside world, Gabriel was startled to find himself amidst nothing but stardust, echoes of a bang ringing in his ears, and the trace origins of the universe as he knew it swirling all around him.

This place was young – so very, very young.

Yet he didn’t know where he was. From what he remembered of seeking Revelation, it wasn’t like this. But there was no panicking.

There…was no need to panic.

Gabriel didn’t realize he wasn’t alone until he heard a voice.

I made a mistake. The voice was familiar, as well as the language.

Creating is never a mistake. This voice was also familiar.

Slowly turning, Gabriel was unsurprised to see the Light and the End, both beings standing opposite each other with something in the middle. But the third being that he remembered wasn’t anywhere present.

em>This isn’t a mistake? The Light gestured to what was in the middle, stretching out a tendril that was promptly devoured by Nir newest creation.

With a chill, Gabriel recognized the fledgling being. One that he had intimate contact with before. Leviathan.

It does seem rather hungry, the End conceded, like it was simply an inconvenience.

It’s eating everything. The Light sounded distressed. It ate the last planet I tried making. Along with the animals.

The End didn’t respond immediately, studying the dark form of the Leviathan. Interesting, was all
they said.

And, for the first time since Gabriel had seen the light being, the Light flared in anger. *What’s so interesting about this?* Abruptly, their surroundings changed and Gabriel found himself looking at a seething mass of individual Leviathan, all of which were...*feeding*.

He recoiled, fear briefly flaring through him before he realized that no one could see him. The Leviathan weren’t going to try to eat him.

*You made more?* The End sounded bemused now.

*I didn’t want it to be alone,* the Light said, anger curling at the edges of Nir words. *So, yes, I did. But I didn’t intend on making them like this. They weren’t supposed to do this.*

*Didn’t you?* the End asked.

*Didn’t I what?*

*Intend on making them like this. I find it curious.* The End poked at the Leviathan the Light had touched before, but it recoiled from their touch rather than try eating it. *They’re...dark. And they consume everything, do they not?*

*As I already said,* the Light said waspishly. *Your point being?*

*Don’t they remind you of someone?*

A faint trace of horror streaked through the Light. *I...no. I wouldn’t have. Not after what they did.*

*Evidently you were still thinking of them.* The End let go of the Leviathan, and it crumbled away into nothing. *Are you intending on ending them and starting over?*

A flinch ran through the Light. *I should. But...I can’t. I Created them.*

*Then you’ll let them run amok? I doubt you can do much of anything with them continually snatching it up.*

*I can’t let them do that either.* The Light stared at the seething horde of Leviathan, evidently thinking.

The End let Nem, remaining silent.

*We could contain them,* the Light said finally, softly. *Like we did before... Give them someplace where they can do what they need, but they won’t destroy anything else.*

*Nothing is permanent,* the End warned.

*I know that. I can put a failsafe in play if something happens.*

There was a wordless agreement from the End, and then—

Gabriel saw something separating from the Light. Something much dimmer and smaller, yet still undeniably bright.

*I Name you Michael, my archangel.*

With a jolt, Gabriel found himself back in Heaven’s Garden, like he’d never left it. Only he wasn’t in
the same position as he’d been in before, instead curled in on himself and doing the angelic equivalent of hyperventilating.

Something curled inside him, inside his Grace, something he wasn’t familiar with, something that had no right to be there—

Too much, too much, too much—

Gabriel forced himself into his human form, putting some distance between himself and Heaven’s energies. It helped a little, distancing himself from that reservoir that he could misuse. From whatever was inside his Grace.

“Gabriel?” Joshua hovered out of reach, clearly prepared to defend himself if necessary. “Did you find what you sought?”

Shuddering, Gabriel closed his eyes, trying to fall back into that state, but his Grace rebelled, unwilling. Unwilling to sink into that state, reach out, and touch…emptiness.

“No,” he managed finally. “Nothing.” He covered his face with his hands, pressing his fingers into his forehead. He forced himself to breathe, the human gesture soothing for his body.

Joshua let him, saying nothing further. He did come closer once it was apparent that Gabriel had calmed down, his presence a soothing calm.

Once his breathing had calmed and his Grace was no longer wild, Gabriel let his hands drop, looking over to Joshua. “I’m all right.”

“You did see something.”

“I did, but…” Gabriel was having trouble believing what he had seen. “It wasn’t Revelation.”

“It didn’t look like it.”

Something in Joshua’s voice… “What did it look like?”

If Joshua had been in a vessel, he would have inclined his head. As it was, his Grace just shrank a little. “Darkness.”

Gabriel’s hand was on his chest before he could think, clutching his shirt. Had Joshua seen what he’d felt before? He turned his attention to his Grace, but there was nothing he could see or feel. No sign of the darkness Joshua had described; no sign of what he’d felt. What he knew was there. “And…now?”

Joshua was silent for a moment, which spiked Gabriel’s anxiety. Then, “Nothing.”

It was an effort not to freeze, though part of him wanted to slump in relief. If Joshua couldn’t see anything, then maybe nothing was wrong and it was just Gabriel’s senses going haywire. He slowly let his true form come forth, his human body disappearing. “That wasn’t what I expected, but it was something.”

“But not what you were looking for?”

No, but…at the same time, it didn’t surprise Gabriel. Still… “Raphael tells me our Parent’s talked to you.”

Joshua didn’t answer for a long moment, attention turned elsewhere. When he did eventually speak,
it was quiet. “Not for a long time. Ne has fallen silent.”

A chill ran through Gabriel, Heaven’s Garden suddenly cold. “Ne stopped, then?”

“Not like you’re thinking.” Joshua turned, almost absentmindedly tending to a flowering tree. “It was never a conversation between the two of us. Ne would speak, and I would listen. That was the way of things. Until…” Ne seemed to observe the tree glowing brighter with the attention. “Ne said goodbye,” he said softly, looking at Gabriel. “Do you know why, Gabriel?”

Goodbye? Their Father had never said goodbye before. No, He’d always just up and left without a word, leaving them to their own devices regardless of the consequences to His Creation.

“No.” Gabriel reached out to extend comfort to Joshua, glad when it was accepted. “I’m sorry,” he said softly.

“Why do you apologize?” Joshua radiated confusion. “Nir absence is not your fault.”

“I know, but…” Gabriel’s voice froze in his throat, unable to voice the treacherous thought he had. The one that Samael hadn’t wanted to consider and that Gabriel didn’t either. “Still, I’m sorry,” he repeated.

Something was wrong. Not just with their Father, but with him.

And he didn’t know what to do.

Chapter End Notes

Oh, you think, Gabriel?

Joshua is Joshua from the show, but I specifically chose gender neutral pronouns for nem because well...ne doesn’t have a gender? Or preferred pronouns? The only time we saw nem on the show was with Dean and Sam in Heaven, and ne had a "vessel" at that time so they could see and talk to Joshua. But Gabriel/Tony never saw it, so...no gendered pronouns!

And we see the Leviathan and the birth of Michael. :D The visions Gabriel/Tony’s seeing aren't exactly in chronological order, although some of them are. This one had more to do with where he was and what was going on than anything else.

Next chapter’s up on Monday! Hope you enjoyed today’s!
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Okay, hold onto your hats (seats)! We're starting this off with a bang. :D

There was a convo in this chapter that I had to redo THREE times. I think it's better now, but... Well, we'll see.

Also, I think I need to recommend tissues for this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Given how rusty you are, I would’ve thought you’d be at it for a while,” Balthazar said when Gabriel joined them. “That was faster than I thought you had it in you.”

Gabriel managed a smile, hands in his pockets. “I’ll be honest: I thought it’d take longer, too.”

Dean tilted his head, narrowing his eyes speculatively. Disconcertingly enough, the green was still just as bright even now as a soul. “You look a bit down. Not what you were expecting?”

Gabriel kept his face blank. “Not sure what I was expecting but…no.”

Raphael was at his side, voice a low murmur as she said, “I thought I felt something? Did everything go all right?”

Gabriel inclined his head, the corner of his mouth twitching into a half smile. “Don’t exactly know. What I saw…well…it wasn’t Revelation.”

“Isn’t that what seeking Revelation is, though?” Sam asked, frowning. “You trying to see something you usually wouldn’t have?”

“Not quite,” Castiel said. “It’s asking for guidance, searching for a truth that you’re not certain of. What you receive might be as clear as glass or as muddied as dirty pond water.”

“Poetic but true,” Gabriel acknowledged, nodding. “Not that I’ve got much experience with it.”

“And that puts you on a direct line to God?” Dean sounded slightly skeptical, which was all sorts of funny because he’d been in Heaven for so long and still didn’t like their Father.

“Closer to Him, yeah.” Gabriel shrugged. “Doesn’t always work, but that’s the point.” Or so he’d heard.

“Did it work this time or were you just hollering into the abyss?”

“Dean,” Castiel sighed, pressing a hand to his forehead.

Dean threw his hands up. “What? After the shit He pulled on us back then, I’m not going to give Him a freebie!”

“I get it,” Gabriel said, cutting off what else Castiel might have said. “Really, I do. And...He didn’t respond.” He held back what he suspected but didn’t know. They wouldn’t believe him if he said it;
they wouldn’t want to believe him.

“Then what did you see?” Raphael asked.

“Something I don’t know whether to believe.” Gabriel didn’t even know where it had come from. Like a dream, it felt completely normal until he was back to himself in the real world wondering “what the fuck.” “I saw…fuck…” He rubbed his face with a hand. “I saw the birth of the Leviathan,” he continued, not looking at any of them. “And Michael. I saw Michael’s birth. So on the list of things I was expecting when I tried doing this, that wasn’t even on it.”

Everyone stared at him, even Raphael looking like someone had hit her over the head with a sledgehammer.

“There wasn’t any explanation?” Raphael said at last, eyebrows almost in her hairline.

“Nah, you know how it is. Dad just can’t help but be aggravatingly weird with His little hints.” Gabriel made a face. “But I’m not sure what He’s hinting at here. The Leviathan are all dead – kaput – I took care of them personally. And as much as I do miss good old big brother Michael, I didn’t need to know how he was Created.”

“Do you want to try again?” Raphael sounded like she already knew his answer but had to ask to be sure.

To be honest, Gabriel kind of wanted to, but something inside his Grace did a funky flip that had him feeling queasy from the inside out. And he hated feeling queasy. It was a feeling he didn’t miss from being 100% human. “Don’t think it’ll do any good,” he said instead, giving her a lopsided smile. “Tried what I came here to do, and all I’ve got are more questions and no answers. Kinda bugs me.”

“Course it would,” Dean muttered. “Tony Stark doesn’t like unanswered questions.”

“You’re right. I don’t.” Gabriel gave him a big grin. “But, unfortunately, unanswered questions are the spice of life.”

“I thought that was variety,” Sam said.

“Isn’t that the same thing? Knowing everything doesn’t give you variety.” Gabriel waved a dismissive hand. “Besides, I’m pretty sure there’re a dozen other sayings that’ve cropped up over the years.” He paused. “Do people still speak English here?”

“Some variant of it,” Castiel confirmed. “It’s mostly been assimilated into other languages by this point.”

“It’s fascinating,” Sam said, eyes bright. “Just seeing how the language’s evolved over the years—”

“I’ve lived through it,” Gabriel interrupted, suppressing a smile at Sam’s dismayed face. “Several times. It gets annoying.”

“It does,” Balthazar agreed, making a face. “Just when you think you’ve gotten the hang of the language and all the numbers and different nuances, they up and change it on you!”

Slow realization spread across Dean’s face. “Is that why you were asking about French when we first met you?”

Balthazar’s grin was sharp. “You’ve got a good memory for a hairless ape. I’d almost forgotten about that.”
“What happened to us being your favorite?”

“Doesn’t change the fact that you’re hairless. What’s on your head and occasionally your face
doesn’t count.”

“I’m gonna head back,” Gabriel said, cutting off whatever witty retort Dean was going to come back
with. “If you want to stay and exchange rejoinders with Dean here, be my guest. Otherwise you can
come back with me.”

“You’re done here, then?” Raphael’s face was impassive, although her Grace twisted slightly in
regret.

“Don’t give me that.” Gabriel reached out to touch her arm. “You can come by anytime you want,
you know that. I’d stay longer, but there isn’t any reason for me to. My kids aren’t expecting me to
be gone so long.”

“I know,” Raphael assured him. “It’s just…I do miss you. It isn’t logical and makes no sense, but
there you have it.”

“Aw, I miss you guys, too.” Gabriel softened his joking tone with a smile. “Really, I do. It’s just…it’s my kids’ home. I’m not going to be leaving it anytime soon unless they have a sudden change of
heart and want to move here.”

“I’m not expecting you to.” Raphael returned his smile, eyes soft. “Just…be safe?”

Gabriel’s smile wavered despite himself, the worry in Raphael’s Grace palpable. “Yeah. You, too,
all right?”

“Of course.”

Turning to the others, Gabriel went to Balthazar’s side, putting a hand on his shoulder. “We’ll be off,
then. Sam, good luck with these two.” He nodded towards Castiel and Dean, who both had the
decency to look rather embarrassed.

“Thanks.” Sam shot Dean a patented bitch face. “I’m gonna need it.”

Snorting, Gabriel gave Castiel a nod and flicked his fingers in a small goodbye, then took off.

It was a moment before Balthazar followed after him, clearly unsure of the way back but hesitant to
show it.

Gabriel slipped back onto the earthly plane before beginning to breach the dimensional walls. It was
always his least favorite part of traveling between dimensions, since it wasn’t exactly natural to do it.
They had been breached off at one point, and he could still tell that they were originally supposed
to stay that way.

As he broke through the wall to his own dimension, Gabriel had a brief moment of feeling the
familiar energies of his home before something in his Grace twisted, burning him with the heat, and
he stuttered—

And stumbled, nearly falling to his knees in the tall grass of a world he was emphatically not familiar
with.

Gabriel whipped his head around, eyes wide as he took in his new surroundings. The grass came up
past his knees, a vibrant green that he hadn’t even seen on Earth unless it was chemically treated.
The sky was too blue, an unnatural shade he hadn’t seen before, and he distractedly calculated the chemicals needed to make that shade.

There was life all around him aside from the vegetation, but there were souls that he hadn’t sensed before.

Forcing himself to keep his breathing steady, Gabriel did a slow circle, then abruptly stopped when he realized that he wasn’t alone, and that he’d somehow missed the fact that there were people building what looked like a temple off in the distance.

He moved closer, seeing that they were carving it out of a mountain. The architecture seemed familiar, and he wasn’t entirely sure why until the pillars registered in his brain, and then he realized that they were mirror images of what he’d seen around that portal on Earth.

Gabriel moved again, this time right into the midst of the bustle so he could more closely inspect the architecture. Now that he was right here, he recognized the symbols and stone. There was no need to look inside; he already knew what he’d see.

Rapidly backpedaling, Gabriel turned to go somewhere else – anywhere else – even if he wasn’t sure where. He had no idea where he was, but there was a vague hint of panic tickling at the edge of his mind. A panic that hadn’t been there the other times he’d experienced something like this.

And then he stopped, frozen in place at the sight of the Light and the Dark. He knew who the Light was, but…Ne wasn’t yet the being he knew.

They were watching the building efforts, the Light with a sense of wariness, while the Dark seemed…pleased? There was no sign of the End, and Gabriel had no way of telling where they were.

Neither noticed him, like the other times he’d been in this situation.

_I don’t like this_, the Light said.

_Why not?_ The Dark seemed to turn to the Light, looking at Nem curiously. How Gabriel could tell that they were he didn’t know. They seemed to suck in everything about them like a black hole, only worse. _It only makes sense, doesn’t it? I thought you would have approved._

_Approved?_ The Light sounded confused for a moment before Ne seemed to realize something.

_Did you tell them to do this?_ The Light glanced at the scurrying workers.

_That isn’t… I’m…surprised that you were able to hide this. That they were._ The Light glanced at the scurrying workers.
It was intended as a surprise. Let it be, sibling.

Yet the Light couldn’t. But it was your suggestion, was it not? They wouldn’t have considered it otherwise.

Of course not. Simple as they are, it would have been ridiculous. But they seemed eager enough to begin once the suggestion was planted.

I want them to live, the Light said slowly. Not…be beholden to our desires.

They are living. That was the point, wasn’t it? Behind you Creating this? Let what comes afterward be.

As you did?

It was simply a suggestion. There was a slight snarl underlying the Dark’s words. They could do what they wished with it. And they did. If you’re so against this, you could stop them. So why don’t you?

I… The Light hesitated, uncertainty written all over Nem. I’m sorry, Ne said eventually. You’re right. I just didn’t understand; I still don’t, but you have a point. Let them do what they wish. We will still be here for them.

We will be. All of us.

Gabriel glanced backwards at the people they were talking about. They had limbs, albeit more than he was used to. Their skin came in different colors, from dark to light and all the shades in-between. There wasn’t any hair, and they didn’t seem to have mouths either, all communicating through a mental link that Gabriel was somewhat familiar with, as it had the faint vestiges of the one he possessed with the Host.

There were eyes, although some didn’t seem to have any, like the Light couldn’t decide which was better. Noses seemed similarly optional, ranging from cavernous holes in their faces to small pinpricks.

And yet there was oxygen on the planet, or at least its equivalent.

Shaking his head, Gabriel turned away from the Light and the Dark and the people they were watching, aiming to find a way out. No matter that he didn’t know how he’d gotten here. He could figure it out.

Only…

Darkness swirled at the edges of his vision, and for a moment he thought he heard someone shout his name. But it was gone before he could chase after it, and he realized that the sky was literally turning black.

No one else seemed to notice, even the Light and the Dark ignorant to what was happening above their heads.

Gabriel was frozen, breath still in his lungs as he scrambled for something to do. He could feel his Grace react to the sight, pushing out of his body as it started to defend itself against a threat he wasn’t familiar with.

It was like the human instinct to turn the light on in the dark, so they could see that there wasn’t
anything there to get them. Except this instinct was far more visceral, aimed at defending himself against something that could literally *smother him*—

His vision blacked out entirely, nothing around him, and then he found himself hitting icy cold liquid.

Spluttering, Gabriel flailed to the surface, spitting out the liquid that tasted suspiciously like methane and ethane as he gaped at a panting Balthazar. “What – what?”

“Are you back now?” Balthazar demanded, not answering his question. His eyes were wide, body on edge.

“Am I what?” Gabriel pulled himself to shore, flopping on the ground several feet away from a distinctly cautious Balthazar. Now that he wasn’t standing or doing anything else, he realized that his Grace was *aching*, like he’d run a marathon and not realized it until it was over.

He couldn’t get enough air, and it took several moments too long before it registered that it was because this world’s oxygen content was too low to support life. It took another moment for him to make the adjustments that wouldn’t stress his lungs.

“You seem to be back to normal,” Balthazar said after a beat, relaxing slightly. His hands were reddened, but the color was fading back to his normal hue. He brushed his hand over his jacket, mending a rip that Gabriel hadn’t even noticed.

“What do you mean?” Gabriel attempted to sit up, then gave it up for a lost cause when his arms gave out on him. His Grace pulsed, pain streaking up the old scars, reigniting the memory of old aches. Gritting his teeth against the surge, Gabriel forced himself to exhale slowly, squeezing his eyes shut.

“You started acting odd, not responding to anything I was saying.” Balthazar crouched, eyeing Gabriel worriedly. “And then you just…made a beeline to the nearest planet. Which, er, given how you were acting wasn’t a good idea.”

Gabriel shifted, ignoring the pointy rocks sticking into his spine. He didn’t trust his limbs yet. “How was I acting?”

“Not like your usual shiny self,” Balthazar said, but there was no humor in his tone. “I’m not sure what happened, just that…you got kinda…dim? And you were moving weirdly, like you weren’t sure of your body. But you definitely didn’t like that I wasn’t letting you go to that planet.”

Gabriel swept his eyes up Balthazar’s vessel, which seemed unhurt. “I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

“Not like your usual shiny self,” Balthazar said, but there was no humor in his tone. “I’m not sure what happened, just that…you got kinda…dim? And you were moving weirdly, like you weren’t sure of your body. But you definitely didn’t like that I wasn’t letting you go to that planet.”

Gabriel swept his eyes up Balthazar’s vessel, which seemed unhurt. “I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

“Not as badly as you could’ve,” Balthazar answered bluntly. “You didn’t try stabbing me – which I appreciate, y’know. But you still threw some mean punches, and you burned me a little before I could get you here.” He rubbed his hands together unconsciously. “Not that I intended on taking you here, but it worked as well as anything since there’s no life.”

Pulling in what oxygen he could, Gabriel took the opportunity to see what planet Balthazar had taken them to. He’d already had a firsthand introduction to the liquid, which wasn’t water but liquid methane and ethane. The taste still lingered in his mouth, which was an altogether unpleasant experience.

The sky was a slate blue, the atmosphere thin enough that he could see stars and the form of the nearest planet. The ground was basically nothing but hard rock, and the air was cold.
As Balthazar had said, there was no life on this planet aside from the two of them.

“So you’re all right?” Gabriel asked finally, returning his attention to Balthazar.

“I’m fine.” The corner of Balthazar’s mouth ticked up in a small but genuine smile. “I’m a bit more concerned about you. That wasn’t normal, even by your strange definition of the word.”

“No, it—” Gabriel squeezed his eyes shut, shivering as something in his Grace wrenched.


“What?” Gabriel managed.

“You went dim, but you’re still here, right?”

Gabriel clutched at his chest, feeling his heart pounding. “Last I checked.”

*Little star, how bright you shine…*

His head jerked as he heard the words, clear and distinct like they were spoken directly into his ear. But Balthazar didn’t seem to have heard them, eyeing him warily like Gabriel might suddenly decide to go off the deep end and attack him.

Gabriel couldn’t help but ask, “You didn’t...?”

“I didn’t what?”

*So much concern, yet how dull they are…*

Balthazar didn’t react at all to the words, even though they were so blindingly loud.

“…Nothing.” Gabriel closed his eyes, swallowing thickly. “Thought I heard something, but I guess it was just my stomach rejecting what I swallowed when you threw me in that.” He lifted two fingers to point to the lake.

Balthazar’s brow furrowed. “It’s not going to poison you.”

“Doesn’t mean my stomach *likes* it. Ugh.” Gabriel poked his tongue out.

“You’re trying to distract me,” Balthazar accused him, eyes narrowing. “That’s not going to work. What happened?”

Gabriel pushed himself upright, glad when his arms supported his weight. “Some kind of aftereffect of seeking Revelation, I’d guess.”

“That didn’t feel like Dad,” Balthazar said skeptically.

No, it hadn’t, but Gabriel didn’t know. “It’s not like I’ve gone seeking Revelation all that often. Maybe this is normal.”

“Sure. You turning into a weird zombie and attacking me when I tried to stop you from heading to an inhabited planet is a normal side effect of seeking Revelation. One that I’ve never seen before from any other angel that did it.” Balthazar’s hands curled into fists. “I get that I’m not on your level, *Gabriel*, but don’t insult me by lying to me like this.”

“I—” Gabriel snapped his mouth shut at the glare Balthazar shot him. “I don’t know.” It galled him
to admit it, but Balthazar would know if he was lying.

“Was that so hard?” Balthazar scoffed, abruptly standing and spinning on his heel to turn his back to Gabriel. “So you have no idea what happened.”

“No, I…” Gabriel pressed his fingers to his temples. He had some of the puzzle pieces, and he wasn’t liking the picture they put together. It still didn’t give him an answer for what was happening. “I’m still figuring it out.”

“How long have you been ‘figuring it out’?” Balthazar shot him a look over his shoulder.

“Not that long.” Gabriel pulled a knee to his chest, wrapping an arm around his leg. His Grace felt almost normal, although there were still shaky aftershocks running through it, sparks of pain that had his teeth gritting.

It felt like he’d pulled a muscle, although he couldn’t remember doing anything that would strain his Grace like this.

Balthazar studiously didn’t look at him, his back stiff. “Do Samael and Gadreel know?”

“No. There was…” Gabriel glanced up at the sky, to the planet that hovered there. “I didn’t know there was anything to say.”

“Guess you do now.” Balthazar turned slightly to him, hands in his pockets. His mouth was twisted worriedly. When Gabriel didn’t answer, he added pointedly, “You are going to tell them what happened, aren’t you?”

Gabriel barely hesitated before answering, “Yes.”

“Because you – what, really?” Balthazar looked so surprised that it was kind of funny. “For some reason, I thought you’d put up more of a fight.”

All Gabriel offered was a shrug, accompanied by a tired smile. “You’re right. This… I can’t ignore whatever this is anymore.”

“Huh.” Balthazar scratched the back of his head, still looking taken aback. “Well, all right. So long as you do it.” He frowned. “They’d want to know that something strange’s happening.”

They would, even if Gabriel didn’t know what he would tell them. What could he say?

Balthazar moved closer, crouching by Gabriel’s side again. “If you’re feeling better, think you’re up to leaving? I’m pretty sure we were headed back to Asgard before the unexpected detour.”

“Yeah, let’s go.” Gabriel nodded, forcing himself to his feet. He regretted it an instant later when the world swam, and his legs threatened to give out on him.

Balthazar caught him before he could hit the ground, making a worried noise. “That’s definitely not normal.” He slung Gabriel’s arm around his neck, hooking his own arm around Gabriel’s waist to support his weight. “Okay, Gabe. Deep breaths; we’ll be back soon.”

He felt awful, leaning most of his weight on Balthazar, who thankfully didn’t even stumble at the sudden shift. His vision wasn’t swimming anymore, but the painful sparks in his Grace were stronger, jolting his muscles now as he struggled not to affect anything around him.

“On we go,” Balthazar muttered under his breath, arm tightening around Gabriel.
It took a brief moment where Balthazar’s Grace wrapped around his as he flew, but then they were in Asgard, right on the Bifrost.

“Can you – my room?” Gabriel winced at how ragged his voice sounded.

“Yeah, sure—” Balthazar flew them to the room, and then promptly let Gabriel fall onto the bed with a small *oomph*. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay.” Gabriel turned his face to the side, giving Balthazar a thumbs up. “I’m good.”

“Yeah, you really look it.” Balthazar hovered anxiously, eyes flickering over Gabriel. “So, uh, just stay there, okay? I’m pretty sure they’ve noticed us here, but I’m gonna get them.”

“Like I’m going to get up and go anywhere.” Gabriel briefly thought about rolling over, but decided he liked this position. It let him bury his face in the blankets without moving an inch, and he didn’t stir even when his siblings came in.

“What the hell – Gabriel.” Samael didn’t sound at all pleased, actually seeming rather freaked out.

“I’m fine.” Gabriel realized a second later that he’d spoken into the blankets. He turned his head to repeat, “I’m fine.”

“You don’t *look* fine,” Samael snapped, pacing back and forth along the fringes. “Gadreel, tell me I’m wrong.”

“Er…” Gadreel shot nem a startled look, brow furrowing. He was standing by Gabriel’s feet, seeming uncertain as to whether he should touch. “Don’t you mean right?”

“Exactly!” Samael jabbed a finger in Gadreel’s direction. “What happened? You went off to Heaven, not somewhere that’d leave you like this!”

Gabriel paused, plucking at a stray thread on the blanket. “What do you mean by ‘this’?”

“I know you can’t see yourself, Gabriel, but trust me when I say that you don’t look very good.” Gabriel managed to roll over in the process. “Really? Then you already know that you’re *dimmer* than usual.” Samael raised nir eyebrows pointedly, arms folded.

Gabriel let his head fall back to the bed, staring up at the ceiling so he wouldn’t have to look at Samael’s and Gadreel’s faces. The ceiling wouldn’t stare disapprovingly at him. “So people have been pointing out.”

“And?” Samael returned to pacing, anger sparking off nem. “What happened?”

Rather than answer, Gabriel waved towards Balthazar, keeping his eyes on the neutral ceiling. “Balthazar?” Samael turned to him, tone carefully modulated.

“Okay, here’s the thing.” Balthazar sounded nervous, which anyone would be if faced with a pissed off Samael. Especially if he could see Samael’s Grace now. “I wasn’t there for the whole thing… He went to the Garden and came back a little shaken, said something about seeing Dad Creating the Leviathan and Michael. But he was fine, and we headed back without any problems.”
“He doesn’t look fine, does he?” Samael asked aggressively.

“Not now he doesn’t!” Balthazar sounded peeved. “Not my fault if he doesn’t tell me things, is it? At any rate, we came here, and then he just hares off to the nearest planet – which I think was Tarnax X, but I wasn’t paying attention – which wasn’t a good idea considering that planet’s inhabitants. He wasn’t listening to a single word I said either, and his Grace…” He paused, then continued, sounding increasingly disconcerted, “It kept flickering in and out.”

“You didn’t tell me that before,” Gabriel interrupted, picking his head up to stare at Balthazar.

“Oh, was I supposed to? I was a little more concerned with how you were feeling!” Balthazar huffed, scowling. “And with how you reacted when I tried to get your attention, I wasn’t particularly inclined to spend more time explaining what had happened than I needed to. Need I remind you that you can kill me?”

“I wouldn’t.”

“You weren’t exactly thinking before, Gabe.” Balthazar looked up to Samael, who was frowning. “He didn’t pull out his sword or try anything that really would have hurt me. It was as if he didn’t know what to do, which let me move us somewhere else and dunk him in a lake until he regained his senses. And, well, voila.” He spread his hands, wiggling his fingers. He made a face. “I need a drink.”

When Samael turned to Gabriel, a clear question on his lips, he instantly said, “I don’t know what happened. I didn’t get any answers from seeking Revelation – I don’t even know what happened there – and this just seems like an aftereffect of what did happen.”

“Seeking Revelation doesn’t work like that,” Samael said, accompanied by Balthazar snapping his fingers pointedly.

“Yeah, when’s the last time you did it?”

“That’s not the point. I remember how it works, and what the two of you described isn’t Revelation or its aftereffects. It doesn’t have any aftereffects, except maybe a sense of loopiness because of too much energy.” Samael eyed Gabriel pointedly. “Which is not what you’re currently experiencing.”

As if reminded of its current state, his Grace ached in response. “I got that much, thanks.”

“Then what did happen?” Gadreel asked, wings brushing against Gabriel’s. The warmth was startling, even though Gabriel wasn’t exactly cold.

Gabriel sighed, then slowly sat up, pleased when he could do so. “I don’t know.” He leaned forwards, propping his elbows on his thighs so he could interlace his fingers behind his head. “I’ve been seeing some things off and on. Like visions, except never when I expect them.”

“How long?” Samael asked quietly.

Biting his lip, Gabriel was glad they couldn’t see his face. “It… After we got back from that place.”

A sharp inhalation, and a frisson of cold anger from Samael’s Grace had Gabriel cringing despite himself. “That long?” Nir voice was emotionless, although he could tell there was anger just at the edges. “You’ve been seeing things that long and you didn’t say anything?”

“I didn’t know what it was!” Gabriel snapped his head up, glaring at nem. “There was nothing I could say beyond ‘So, I’m occasionally seeing these visions, any idea what’s up with that?’”
Samael’s jaw tensed, a muscle twitching. “That would’ve been a start!”

“And you would’ve done what? You didn’t understand what happened back in that place; what makes this any different?” Gabriel closed his eyes, grimacing as a spark of pain pulsed through his head. “We had other things to deal with,” he continued, softening his tone. “And that was partly why I went to Heaven, too. I needed answers, and that was the only way I could think of getting them.” He dropped his eyes, giving a short laugh. “Which I didn’t get.”

“And this happened,” Gadreel concluded quietly.

“Yeah,” Gabriel sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Whatever that was.”

“What place are you guys talking about?” Balthazar’s eyes flickered between the three of them, confusion written all over his face.

When Gabriel didn’t answer, Samael did. “There was a portal on Earth that we investigated. Gabriel had been hearing something, which led us to another dimension.” Nir lips thinned. “We’re not sure where or what it was, only that it disappeared soon after we left and Gabriel closed the portal.”

“That’s like the scenario to every horror movie I’ve ever seen,” Balthazar said after a moment. “Next thing you know, a ghost or monster’s going to be stalking you.”

“No one’s stalking us,” Samael said snippily. “Just about the only thing that’s gone wrong Gabriel deliberately didn’t tell us.”

“Because I didn’t know what to tell you! You know now, and is it helping any?” Gabriel put up his hands in frustration.

Samael glowered. “You shouldn’t have to deal with it alone!”

Deflating, Gabriel covered his eyes, pressing the heel of his palm into his forehead. “Well, I am.”

Samael deflated as well, crouching in front of Gabriel. “Just because I don’t know what this is or have any idea what you’re seeing or how it’s happening doesn’t mean you’re alone,” ne said quietly. “If you told us, it would mean sharing that weight. And…I know we all want to help, even if we can’t understand.”

Something stuck in Gabriel’s throat, his heart squeezing for reasons unrelated to his aching Grace. “Thanks,” he managed, giving nem a small smile.

“Of course.” Samael slowly reached out, touching Gabriel’s knee when he didn’t negatively react to the overture. “That said…are you willing to talk more about what you’ve been seeing?”

“I…” Gabriel closed his eyes, remembering the sheer horror at being surrounded by nothing. The scenes that he’d been privy to played out again behind his eyes, things that didn’t make any sense. “Later.” He looked at his siblings, hoping his smile didn’t look as strained as it felt. “I need a little time first.”

“We’ll let you rest,” Gadreel agreed, something in his shoulders relaxing.

“I’ll distract the kiddos,” Balthazar volunteered.

“Find me when you’re ready,” Samael told him, worry written all over nir face.

Gabriel nodded once, then flopped back onto the bed as his siblings left, shutting the door behind
Well, that could’ve gone a lot worse.

Technically speaking, Gabriel really didn’t want to do this. As in, on a scale from 1 to 10 with 1 being “yeah, I’m all right with this” and 10 being “nope, nope, nope” he was a 20. There were things he didn’t want to say, but he knew had to be brought up for what it meant for all of them.

And yet, for all his skill with words, he had no idea how to say any of it.

Sure, he had some idea of how they might react, but that didn’t mean anything. Not when there wasn’t anything he could do.

It was with that cheery thought that Gabriel sought his siblings out in the middle of the night. All of them were on a large balcony, sitting in silence.

It was kind of eerie, but Gabriel hadn’t really expected anything else.

When he arrived, they turned to look at him as one, eyes glinting in the starlight. None of them spoke, waiting patiently for whatever he had to say.

Shifting his weight anxiously, Gabriel considered how he should start. “I’m…not sure where to start,” he admitted slowly, putting his hands in his pockets and leaning back against the wall.

“From the beginning’s generally good,” Samael answered neutrally.

“Which beginning?” Gabriel grimaced, shaking his head. Refocusing, he turned to the view, eyes on the darkness beyond the stars. “Did you ever wonder why we’re essentially light?” he asked.

The three shared confused glances, their eyebrows doing funny things as they communicated silently.

“But…light…” Gabriel closed his eyes, remembering his Grace’s instinctive reaction whenever faced with that awful blackness, that nothingness.

“Where are you going with this?” Samael asked.

Opening his eyes, Gabriel flashed nem a smile. “I don’t know. Just a thought.” He shook himself, letting his Grace sink back under his skin. “I still don’t know what I’ve been seeing, but I think they’re memories. I’m not entirely sure whose memories, since the people involved haven’t all been the same, but I know what I’ve been seeing. The Leviathans’ birth and Michael’s directly afterwards was only one scene.” He paused, then added, “I saw that in the Garden.”

Gadreel’s brow furrowed in thought. “Are they Father’s memories?”

“Maybe. I don’t know.” Gabriel dropped his eyes to the ground. “But there was someone in that dimension we were in. When we were at that altar, I met them. And they…I’ve no fucking idea who
they are, only they’re old.” He swallowed, pushing back the terror that rose in him at the memory of the sheer nothing. “They’re who I heard whispering.”

“The being the temple was devoted to?” Gadreel asked.

Gabriel almost said yes, but then he remembered the last vision he’d had. The one where he’d seen that temple constructed, clearly dedicated to the Light. “I don’t know. I don’t… There were three beings mentioned on that altar. The Dark was one, whom I spoke with. There were also the Light and the End.”

“Are they gods?” Balthazar tilted his head.


“What?” Samael’s head jerked up at that. “Seriously?”

“Yes. Everything I’ve seen, it points to that. I’m not sure who the other two beings are, but they’re related to Him. The Dark called Him sibling.”

“But that—” Samael broke off, clearly thinking. “He never told us anything of Himself, beyond what you know…”

“That He and Death were born around the same time, yeah.” Gabriel remembered that story well. “And that neither know who came first. No mention of a third party. But the point remains that’s what I saw.”

Samael visibly swallowed. “Was it true?”

“That’s the question, isn’t it?” Gabriel wasn’t sure he could trust anything he saw, even if it was all terrifyingly real when he experienced it. “I don’t know. But it’s what I’ve been seeing.”

“And what happened earlier?” Balthazar asked. “When you went all zombie-like.”

“I honestly don’t know.” Gabriel offered an apologetic shrug. “Just… I was seeing something and the next thing I know I’m floundering in a lake that tastes disgusting.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I’m not sure if I should be thanking you for that insult to my taste buds, but sure.” Gabriel grimaced at the reminder. “Anyway… I went to seek Revelation because I had questions. About that place we saw, why Balthazar found his Grace now, and what’s been happening. I did try reaching out to Him the way I normally do but…” He swallowed, pushing back a small shiver. “It felt…off. Wrong. It’s been a while since I last reached out, but it didn’t feel like that then.

“Even if there’s no response, I get that sense He’s listening. There was nothing when I tried last time. It felt like I was shouting in a void.” Gabriel glanced at an impassive Samael. “You suggested Heaven, since that’s closer to Him. I went, sought Revelation, and…nothing.”

“As you said,” Samael said.

“No, I mean literally nothing.” Gabriel abruptly folded his arms across his chest, steeling himself. “Emptiness. There was nothing there when I reached out. Oh sure, Heaven was filled with the usual energy; I could sink into that receptive state easily enough. But there was nothing there to send.” He didn’t meet any of their eyes. “I spoke with Joshua, and he told me that Dad’s last words to him were ‘goodbye.’”
“Goodbye?” Balthazar’s voice was almost a yelp. “What’s that mean? Did He leave again? Like last time?”

“He didn’t even bother saying goodbye last time,” Gabriel said shortly. “I remember that all too well. There one moment, gone the next, leaving us on our own. I know you wouldn’t know, since word was never spread along the lower ranks, but that’s the truth.”

“Maybe He learned His lesson?” Balthazar suggested, eyes wide. “That it isn’t a good idea to leave the nest empty without warning?”

“I don’t think so.” Gabriel took a steadying breath, forcing himself to meet each of their eyes. “That sense of wrongness we’ve been feeling? That thing we can’t pinpoint but we’ve all noticed? We know what it is; we just don’t want to admit it.”

Samael shook his head in denial. “You can’t be suggesting what you are.”

“I am, Samael. We’ve always sensed His presence; He’s always been there, something in the background. Even when He was out of Heaven and incommunicado, we could tell He was still around.”

Ne paced to the other end of the balcony, hands tight fists at his sides. “He’s not gone.”

“I’m just calling it like I see it,” Gabriel said helplessly. “And I don’t see any other explanation for this. I can’t reach Him; there’s a void where He’s usually listening. Nothing’s there to give Revelation; He said goodbye. Something we’ve always lived with isn’t there anymore; it’s what we’re missing.”

“It could be something else. Maybe something else’s changed in the universe—”

Gadreel and Balthazar both looked stricken, shock and disbelief roiling through them. Yet there was also the faint sense of realization, a dawning sense of horror as they accepted what Gabriel was saying.

Samael was still talking, coming up with excuses for why it couldn’t be true. Excuses Gabriel desperately wanted to believe, but something told him that they were all wrong. That there was really only one conclusion to draw from all the available evidence.

Maybe if he’d still been only an archangel, he’d be in a similar state of denial, refusing to accept this. But he was human, too, which did afford him a different viewpoint.

Samael’s soul was also different, affording him an even different point of view for things. But it couldn’t block out what Gabriel was saying, what Samael already knew.

Heart aching, he stepped forward, moving closer to Samael. Nir Grace was a roiling mass of barely restrained grief and loss, but it was still warm. “Samael.” He kept his voice soft.

“There isn’t supposed to be an end,” Samael said, whirling to meeting Gabriel’s eyes. “Not to Him. Not to Him.” His voice shook, vibrating the balcony they stood on. “It can’t be true.”

“Death comes to all,” Gabriel said quietly. “We know that. No one’s exempt.”

“But now? He didn’t – He didn’t tell us! He just…left. And we’re—” Samael’s voice broke. Nir eyes shut, tears leaking out at the corners. With a horrified gasp, he clapped a hand over his mouth, muffling a sob behind it.
“We’re not alone,” Gabriel said, letting his Grace curl out to embrace all of them. He set his jaw, bidding the burning in his eyes to go away. Bidding the tightness in his throat to leave. He couldn’t afford this now. “We have each other. We always did.”

“I couldn’t talk to Him,” Samael said, gasping. Ne wrapped an arm around nemself, curling in. “He came after – after I remembered – but I couldn’t talk to Him. I was still so angry, and He just…He understood. He said – He said He loved me, that He’d forgiven me my sins – my transgressions – everything I’ve done – and I couldn’t forgive Him.” Ne shook nir head, staggering back from Gabriel’s outstretched hand.

“I never spoke to Him again. I couldn’t – there wasn’t anything I could say.” Samael’s eyes were wild, Grace-light flickering in their depths. Tears streaked down nir face, but ne didn’t seem to notice. “And now I can’t. Why didn’t I?”

“He knew,” Gabriel told nem, quiet. “He understood. It’s okay.”

“It isn’t!” Samael’s true voice cracked the stone around them. “It isn’t okay! It’s not going to be okay! Why would it ever be?” The next words were a scream, windows shattering under the force of nir true voice. “Our Parent is dead!”

The palace would have woken up from the force of that shout, if they hadn’t already woken before from the din. Gabriel should do something about that, but all he could do was lay a heavy suggestion around the area that would ward off prying eyes and give them privacy.

“Fuck,” Balthazar choked out, a heavy thump signaling he’d sat down.

There was no word from Gadreel, just a wordless anguish that rent at Gabriel’s Grace.

“Yes,” Gabriel said instead, helplessly. He had no idea what else to say. His own grief was a heavy lodestone in his chest, choking anything else he might have thought to say.

“Why aren’t you more upset?” Samael demanded. “You—”

“I am, Samael, I am,” Gabriel managed, stepping forward again, until Samael was in arm’s reach. He touched nir shoulders, fingers trembling. “But someone’s got to hold it together—”


His breath caught in his chest. “I-I can’t—”

“Don’t hold on.” Samael’s breath hitched on a sob, nir head falling to Gabriel’s shoulder. Nir body shuddered. “Don’t – let go. Let go. None of us are alone, right?”

Gabriel’s arms were around Samael before he could register moving, his hands clutching Samael’s shirt unconsciously. His eyes were burning, his throat was tight, and his breath was coming in harsh gasps.
The tears came unbidden, and he heard a pained noise that he didn’t realize had come from him until it came again.

Samael wrapped him in a tight hug, silently crying into his shirt. Burying his face in nir hair, Gabriel let himself go, legs collapsing under him until they were both kneeling on the ground, wrapped up in their shared grief.

None of them were alone, but it didn’t stop him from feeling so lost.

Chapter End Notes

Yeaaahhhh... So, that happened? It did. Right. I hope I got all the emotions across properly in that scene. It was a tough one to write.

Anyway...thoughts?
Chapter Notes

I am sooo glad I managed to nail the emotions in that last scene! It was such a tough one to write, and I am THRILLED at what you guys thought of it. :D And what you guys thought of the rest of it, too! xD

So, this chapter! There's more processing here, but downtime doesn't last long. :P We're also not yet close to the end, but definitely over the bulk of the story. It's going to get more intense as it goes on.

I actually have music recommendations for this chapter! For real, listen to Halsey's Control as you get closer to the end, particularly with Tony/Gabriel's scenes. I found that song and was like PERFECT. It'll pop up again as something that you guys can listen to in future chapters. I'll leave a note when appropriate! :D But it's appropriate here for sure at the end.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Sorry about the mess.” Tony twisted a shard of shiny glass around, letting the light reflect off it. “I can fix it if you want.”

“We have seen worse.” Loki eyed the remaining devastation with a critical eye, politely reaching out to pluck the shard from Tony’s hand before he could do anything with it. “Perhaps we should leave the reparation efforts for someone with a more…artistic taste?”

“I can be artistic!” Tony protested.

“I have seen your art, Gabriel. I would rather not have the entire palace decorated with it.”

“Truly?” Thor strode up, frowning slightly. “Is it so terrible?”

Loki’s expression was carefully blank. “Need I remind you of Gabriel’s last attempts at creating a mural?”

Thor seemed slightly surprised, which should probably flatter Tony but was more insulting than anything. “I had thought that was a joke!” He turned to Tony. “I must be honest, then, my friend. Your artistic talents lie in other realms than painting.”

“Precisely,” Loki agreed.

“I’ve gotten better,” Tony insisted. “You let me take care of the mess that I’m responsible for, then it’ll be fixed in five minutes. I don’t want to be the recipient of glares from the unlucky schmuck that’s otherwise going to have to clean this up.”

“It is of no concern,” Thor assured him, clapping a large hand on his shoulder. “We were intending on remodeling soon in any case. This will simply move up the time table.”

“Really.”
“That was not a lie,” Loki said, the corner of his mouth twitching up in a small smile. “We can only do with the same décor for so long before it becomes tedious.”

Tony considered that, remembering the various remodeling efforts the palace had gone through over the years. “Yeah, I see that. What’re you thinking, then?”

“There will be no design input from you,” Loki told him flatly. “Last time we asked you for advice, you suggested nothing but tentacles, and Samael went so far as to agree and begin putting them up without permission.”

Tony put on an affronted face. “What – everyone loves tentacles!”

Loki returned the face with his own. “No.”

“I fear I must agree with Loki,” Thor said. “Tentacles are not a good design choice.”

Huffing, Tony folded his arms, narrowing his eyes at the shard of glass Loki was still holding. “Rude.”

“Simply practical,” Loki corrected, throwing the shard into a pile that someone had brushed together.

“Practical’s boring. Who wants to be practical when you can be fun?”

“I am afraid that having a ‘fun’ palace would not be advisable in light of any visiting dignitaries,” Loki pointed out.

Tony raised his eyebrows. “Otherwise you’d be all for having tentacles?”

“Even then, no. They are a terribly impractical design choice.”

“C’mon. Tentacles are incredibly versatile!”

Thor and Loki both gave him identical “yeah, right” looks. It was eerie.

“I shall tell Samael to curb future purchases of items related to tentacles,” Loki said finally. “You need no further encouragement.”

Tony smirked. “Like she’ll listen to you.”

“Gadreel certainly will.”

“She’s definitely not going to listen to Gadreel.”

“He is right,” Thor said, nodding. “In this situation, Jarvis is the one to whom we must appeal to. Samael listens to him.”

“You guys are total spoilsports.” Tony huffed, making a face. “Fine, I’ll keep my nose out of what you’re going to do with the palace.”

“Excellent.” Thor patted Mjölnir’s hilt, beaming broadly. “Then I will see to the rest to be certain that all is proceeding smoothly. Enjoy your morning.”

He swept off, cape swirling behind him, nodding and congratulating the workers who were sweeping up shards of glass and stray rubble that had fallen from the cracks in the ceiling and walls. There was fine dust as well, although the cleaning bots were having a blast taking care of that.
Tony slowly side-stepped over to a green-colored piece of glass, picking it up and tilting it to see if he could figure out where it had come from. It looked a bit like it had been the green from Loki’s clothes.

Holding it up to compare to Loki’s current wardrobe confirmed this suspicion.

He glanced up in surprise when Loki’s fingers curled around his wrist, preventing him from turning the glass shard sideways. Loki was looking at him in concern, brow furrowed as he inspected him.

“I have not seen your siblings this morning,” Loki said quietly.

“They’re fine,” Tony said automatically.

Loki’s response was patient. “I do recognize an angel’s voice, even if not the words spoken in this case. Samael does not lose control so easily nowadays. What happened?”

Tony didn’t respond immediately, rubbing his thumb over the sharp edges of the shard. His skin cut open, blood dripping out of the cut briefly before it healed over without a scar.

Loki took the shard of glass away, rubbing off the blood a second later. “Gabriel?”

“We got some bad news,” Tony said quietly. “It…took some processing. They’ll be fine.”

Loki didn’t seem satisfied with that answer. “Are you fine?”

“I’m always fine.” Tony flashed a smile, winking.

A small frown was all that signaled Loki’s displeasure. “We both know that isn’t true.” Stop lying to me, was what wasn’t said.

Exhaling through his nose, Tony looked down at the floor. “I will be,” he said. “I don’t have a lot of options.”

He couldn’t see Loki’s face, but he had the feeling Loki was studying him. “There is no need to be fine all the time. Whatever happened – would it be so terrible to be upset?”

“I was upset.” Tony swallowed down the achy feeling in his chest. “Still am, but I can’t afford to just fall apart. Someone’s got to hold it together.”

“That does not need to be you,” Loki said, coming close enough to brush their shoulders together. “Let someone else shoulder the burden for once.”

“I won’t put that on you.”

“It would not be an imposition.”

“And yet this isn’t something you should deal with.” Tony gave him a weak smile. “But the gesture’s appreciated.”

Loki tilted his head. “What did happen? You have had bad news before, but nothing that had this sort of effect.”

It wasn’t any easier putting it into words than it had been last night. If it wasn’t spoken, then maybe it wasn’t true. But it was, and staying silent wouldn’t make it not true.

“There was a death in the family,” Tony said finally, resisting the urge to wipe at his eyes. They
were dry for the moment. “It’s…taking some time to come to terms with it.”

Loki didn’t seem to realize what he meant. “Was someone killed?”

“No, uh…we would’ve noticed it sooner if that had happened.”

“Then someone in your family died naturally?” Loki seemed confused at the concept. “You are immortal, are you not?”

Except Death could come to all. “Pretty much, yes, but… I guess there’s an end even to immortality.”

Loki’s hand brushed his arm. “Who was it?”

Avoiding his eyes to look out the window to the sky, Tony gave voice to the words that still felt false. “Our Father.”

There was barely concealed surprise in Loki’s tone. “Truly? The being the humans called God? How?”

Tony put space between them, shoulders going tight. “We don’t know. We don’t know when or why, only that it happened. And no one else knows.” He pulled away from Loki’s outstretched hand, carefully looking away from the hurt that flashed across his face. “It’s just us, and I can’t afford to fall apart now.”

Last night was all he would allow himself.

“Why not?” Loki pressed, hands going behind his back. “This is the being who gave birth to you. You can grieve His loss.”

“Because I don’t know when I’d stop!” Tony snapped, energy crackling at the edges of his words. Forcefully reigning it in, he managed, “So I can’t – I can’t.” He couldn’t let go the way he wanted. “Please don’t ask me again.”

“All right.” The word was quiet. Hesitating briefly, Loki asked, “Is there anything I can do?”

“No.” Tony softened the answer with a small smile, letting his shoulders relax. “But thanks. For now…all we really need is time.”

In the end, time was all they had.

Samael felt vaguely guilty for leaving Tony to deal with the mess ne had left behind in Asgard, but it was only vaguely. Really vaguely.

Most of what ne felt was made up of disbelieving grief and a cold rage that scared nem as much as it reassured nem. It was dangerous yet familiar, and Samael needed familiarity.

Everything ne knew about the universe had been uprooted, and Samael had no idea where ne stood now. For all of nir rage against nir Father, ne had never once actually wanted Him dead. No, Samael had just wanted Him to listen, to understand what ne wanted.

Not that He had. When He had eventually deigned to apologize for what had happened, it was too late and Samael had refused to speak to Him.

Now there wasn’t the slightest chance in hell that ne could ever speak to Him. Because He was dead.
Choking down the burning grief, Samael dove through the branches of Yggdrasil, past the other realms until ne was in Niflheim. The realm’s icy temperature sunk into nir Grace, familiar and somewhat soothing even now.

Maybe it was twisted that Samael could find reassurance in the cold considering what it meant. It probably wasn’t healthy, but it was familiar. Ne had spent so long trapped in the cold that sometimes it was stranger being warm.

Right now, Samael needed familiarity. Samael needed some reminder that not everything had changed (even if everything had).

While Niflheim wasn’t the same as the Cage, it was cold enough that it didn’t matter. The ghosts of the realm didn’t bother nem, evidently sensing that ne wasn’t in the mood for company.

Kneeling on the misty ground, Samael wrapped nir arms around nemself, closing nir eyes and deliberately turning nir focus inwards. It blocked out the feeling of wrongness that was Father’s absence, which was the last thing ne wanted to sense now.

Like this, Samael could try and pretend that He wasn’t dead. Sure, ne would have to return to reality eventually, but that didn’t have to happen now. Denial could work for a little longer, at least until Samael pulled nemself together enough to look after the others.

Gabriel didn’t deserve being left alone to deal with nir mess. He shouldn’t be left alone either, but it had been his suggestion that they take some time away to sort through their emotions and thoughts.

Given what Samael had done to the palace, it was a good idea. Better than shaking the building apart with grief.

Samael wasn’t sure how much time passed before ne felt the presence of Hel. She stood off to the side, watching Samael with a neutral expression on her face.

Returning Hel’s impassive gaze, Samael dug nir fingernails into nir arms, disinclined to move. “Why are you here?”

“You’re here.” Hel didn’t move any closer. “You don’t usually visit.”

Samael’s smile was too sharp. “Maybe I felt like taking a vacation.”

“Of all the places my realm is, a vacation spot is not one of them.” Hel gave nem an unimpressed look. “Besides, you don’t look in the mood for a vacation.”

Unwilling to concede the point, Samael refused to answer, pointedly looking away. “Maybe I just wanted to be left alone.”

Hel didn’t answer immediately, taking several steps closer before kneeling on the ground, although her posture was distinctly more relaxed than Samael’s. “Do you really?” she asked gently.

That cold rage flared outwards. “I’m not one of your lost souls,” ne snapped. “If your intention was to comfort me, then you can go back to your palace.”

“That’s not why I’m doing this. It’s because you’re family,” Hel said calmly. “And you’re hurting.”

“Oh, really?”

“You think I don’t know how to read you by now? You’re not so different from Father.”
Samael couldn’t resist saying, “I resent that. I’m a special snowflake.”

The slight twitch of Hel’s lips showed that she’d gotten the reaction she wanted. “Maybe so. Yet my point stands. Once I know what I’m looking for, it’s easy enough to see.”

“Or you just heard something through the grapevine.” Samael hadn’t exactly been quiet. Anyone with supernatural hearing could’ve heard nem last night.

“Maybe that, too,” Hel conceded. She tilted her head, eyes worried. “What’s wrong?”

The answer was right there, but Samael couldn’t give it. Nir throat locked up when ne considered saying the words. “Why don’t you ask Gabriel?” ne managed, dropping nir gaze.

“He doesn’t like coming here, and I can’t leave whenever I want,” Hel said. “Besides, you’re here, so why not ask you?”

The logic was sound, even if it bugged Samael to admit that ne had no reason to deny Hel. Still. “What if I don’t want to answer?”

“You don’t have to,” Hel said. “But it might help. I’ve heard talking does that.” Her smile was wry.

Samael couldn’t help but snort. “Who told you that? Gabriel?”

“Among others.” Hel’s hands remained relaxed on her knees, even though there was a slight tension running through the rest of her frame. “It’s bad, isn’t it?”

“Depends on your definition of ‘bad,’” Samael said. “By mine, it’s pretty fucking bad.” That cold anger seeped into nir words, nir Grace chilling to match it. It took nem a moment to focus on calming down before ne could speak again. “Did you sense anything? You’re the goddess of the dead.”

The living half of Hel’s face twitched at the reminder of a job she hadn’t wanted. “What should I have sensed?” She looked mildly alarmed. “Did someone die?”

“Not recently,” Samael reassured her.

“But someone did.” Hel paused, studying Samael more closely. “Someone you weren’t expecting.”

Samael avoided the unspoken question. “So that’s a no on having sensed anything.”

“You’re avoiding the question.”

“There wasn’t a question.”

“I asked you if someone died, and you didn’t respond beyond trying to distract me.” Hel gave nem an unimpressed look. “Which would work if you’d tried it on anyone else who hasn’t had extensive exposure to our family.”

This was unfortunately entirely true. Most everyone (except for Jarvis, really) had gotten into the bad habit of taking after Tony’s propensity to avoid uncomfortable topics with distractions. Even Gadreel wasn’t immune, although he usually just left the premises if he didn’t want to talk about something.

“You don’t want to know,” Samael said eventually, looking off into the distance. There was nothing to look at, but that was fine.

“If it’s affecting you, it’s affecting Father just as badly,” Hel said, “even if he isn’t here and you are. So, yes, I do want to know.”
Just say it – just say it. It would be over the faster ne got it out. “He’s dead,” Samael said abruptly. “Our Father is dead.”

Hel’s eyes widened, fear flashing across her face. “No, he isn’t. He was just here—”

“Not your father,” Samael interrupted, hating that ne even had to elaborate. “He’s fine. Our…the one who Created us…He’s dead.”

There was a sharp inhalation, but Hel didn’t otherwise react. Not that Samael had expected her to; she had no attachment to their Father beyond a peripheral knowledge of who He was and what He was capable of.

Samael refused to look at her, forcefully keeping nir breathing even. Yet nir eyes prickled and nir throat was tight. Not for the first time, ne wished that this body didn’t come with the ability to cry.

After a moment, Hel laid a hesitant hand on Samael’s arm, the touch gentle. “I’m sorry.”

Blinking back tears, Samael jerked nir head in a small nod, pulling in a long breath in an effort to ward off the waterworks. “So am I,” ne muttered.

“He wouldn’t pass through here,” Hel told nem. “Father didn’t when he died.”

Samael barely restrained a flinch at the reminder of Gabriel’s death at Lucifer’s hands. There was no apology from Hel, just the gentle pressure of her hand on Samael’s arm.

“I know.” Samael let nir hands drop to nir lap, interlacing the fingers. “But there was a chance you would’ve sensed something.”

Hel remained silent, simply shaking her head in answer.

Samael let the silence drag out, no desire to speak and break it. Hel seemed just as content to let it lie, offering nem silent support.

It was nice even if company hadn’t been the point of coming here. Not that being alone had been a smart idea considering how ne hated it.

But it had been familiar, and that was all Samael had needed at that point.

Eventually, after some time passed, Samael spoke again, looking sidelong at Hel. “Thanks.”

There was a slight trace of confusion on Hel’s face as she tilted her head. “For what?”

With a shrug, Samael answered, “Being here even though I was behaving like an ass. I know He’s not important to you.”

“You’re important to me.” Hel gave nem a soft smile. “And so’s Father. And He was important to both of you. Being here is the least of what I can do for family.”

“Still…thank you.” Samael reached out to take hold of Hel’s living hand, squeezing gently.

Hel ducked her head, smiling shyly. “Do…you want to stay for a while? You can if you want.”

Samael should be checking on Gabriel, making sure he was doing all right. Ne was older than Gabriel in the ways that counted and Gadreel shouldn’t have to do it. But…

Ne would be horrible comfort right now, though. Nir Grace was in the worst state possible for
comforting anyone, let alone Gabriel.

Samael looked up, spreading nir consciousness through the planes of existence to nir siblings. “I…”

Accepting the offer was on the tip of nir tongue, but the words died in nir throat when a scream rang through nir head. Someone, please help!

There were countless such prayers every day that Samael ignored, but this one…

This one was Vision.

“You guys can take off if you want,” Gabriel had said, his Grace blanketing the area so the Asgardians couldn’t see them. “Take some time to yourself.”

“Are you certain?” Gadreel had asked, eyeing Gabriel worriedly. He was unusually subdued, cheeks slightly flushed but no other sign of his upset on his face.

“I should help clean up.” Samael had sounded ashamed.

“No, it’s all right. I’ll deal with it. Seriously, just go.”

And they’d all gone.

Samael had gone elsewhere, sending clear vibes of wanting to be alone. It probably wasn’t the best idea for nem, but Gadreel was in no state to protest or go after nem. In all likelihood, Samael would probably just chase him off in a fit of anger.

“Should we be letting nem go like that?” Balthazar asked, light flickering nervously.

“It’s fine,” Gadreel said, hoping he sounded more reassuring than he felt.

Balthazar made a noise that clearly said he doubted this assertion, but he didn’t say anything else.

Without another word, Gadreel left Asgard, entering normal space a few seconds later. He was mildly surprised when Balthazar followed him, although also grateful because he didn’t want to be alone. It seemed Balthazar was of a similar mind.

There was a silent question from Balthazar, asking where Gadreel was intending to go.

Not that Gadreel had an answer. He wasn’t sure where he was going, only that he…needed to move.

The aching grief from last night had faded, and now he was just…numb. He should probably still be upset, but instead all he felt was a heavy exhaustion.

He probably was still upset, but for whatever reason he wasn’t feeling it like before.

With an exhale, Gadreel landed on one of the pleasure planets of this galaxy. It was beautifully peaceful, the lovely nature it exhibited one of the main reasons it was designated a pleasure planet. That was also probably why Gadreel had decided to land here in the first place.

Now, with Earth mostly dead, Gadreel had to go elsewhere to find someplace where he could feel close to Father. This planet would do for now.

Balthazar appeared behind with a soft flutter of wings, looking around them briefly. “Good choice.”
Gadreel didn’t answer, slowly sitting at the base of a nearby tree and leaning back against it. If he concentrated, he could still feel Father’s presence here, even though realistically it was probable that Father hadn’t been here in a very long time.

Balthazar lay down next to Gadreel, head in the soft grass. He held a small flower in his hand, twirling the stem absentmindedly through his fingers as he stared up at the sky. Despite his usually garrulous nature, he didn’t say anything, leaving them in silence.

Being able to focus on something other than holding a conversation was nice. Especially since this planet was filled with life, reminding Gadreel that not everything was lost, even if it felt like the universe had come to an end.

How was it possible that things just kept moving onwards without its Creator? Shouldn’t there be some acknowledgement that things were forever changed? Some sign that a fixed point in creation was no longer there?

Eventually, what must have been hours later, Balthazar broke the silence. “Feels weird, doesn’t it? Like something should’ve changed, but everything’s the same.”

“Yes.” Gadreel left it at that, relieved Balthazar had voiced what he’d been unable to.

“I still can’t believe it,” Balthazar continued. “It just…it doesn’t make any sense. Something should’ve happened!” The flower was a small blur of color in his fingers. “We can’t be the only ones affected by this.”

But they seemed to be.

Life went on, despite the gaping hole in the fabric of existence where their Father had once been. It seemed inconceivable, yet it was happening before their eyes and all around them.

That they hadn’t even known before Gabriel had found out was all the proof they needed.

“We need to tell the others,” Gadreel said finally, subdued.

“Not it,” Balthazar responded immediately. “Besides, if you or I went over there and told them ‘Hey, guys, guess what? Dear old Dad’s dead!’ we’ll be laughed out of Heaven. Better if Gabe or Samwise do it.”

Balthazar had a point. An archangel’s word held more weight than an angel’s, no matter what position they’d held before.

“It’ll be Gabriel doing it,” Gadreel said slowly. And he shouldn’t have to, but of course he’d think it was his duty as the messenger.

“He’ll be more tactful than Samwise,” Balthazar pointed out. “Would’ve been nice if he was blunt about it instead of dancing around it, but we wouldn’t have believed him otherwise.”

Gadreel still wasn’t sure if he did believe it. It seemed too implausible to be true.

“It’s true, though,” Balthazar said, clearly reading his mind.

“What? I didn’t have to go poking around your head!” Balthazar looked affronted at the insinuation in Gadreel’s tone. “It’s written all over your face!”
Gadreel almost denied this before considering Balthazar’s earnest face. There was no hint of a lie about him, and he hadn’t exactly been paying attention to what his face had been doing.

“You believe it, then?” Gadreel asked after a moment.

“I don’t want to.” Balthazar sighed, letting the flower drop to his chest as he folded his hands on his stomach. “But everything he said made sense. And I know all too well that we can die, so why not Dad? It’s just…taking a little time to process.”

But Balthazar was processing it, unlike Gadreel. He didn’t feel like he was processing anything, just hovering in a state between denial and cold acceptance.

“You are further along than I am.” Gadreel didn’t look at Balthazar, running his fingers through the grass instead.

“It’s not a competition.” There was a rustle as Balthazar apparently shifted. “Grief is funny like that. We all go along at our own pace.”

“Even us?”

“Yeah, even us.” Balthazar’s answer was wry. “We’ve got emotions, too, y’know. Humans have got it easier in some ways, but I wouldn’t give up being myself just to make processing this easier.”

Unlike his siblings here, Gadreel had no way of knowing what it felt like to be human. He had always only been an angel, so he had no firsthand knowledge of how humans felt and processed emotions. Yet from everything the others had said, there were differences, and Gadreel himself had noticed it with his human friends.

Yet he wouldn’t want to be human either just to make this easier. Or however much easier it would be, since it hadn’t seemed to do Gabriel any favors.

“I feel the same,” Gadreel admitted. “Although I have no frame of reference for comparison, I wouldn’t wish to give up who I am just to not feel this.”

“Don’t get me wrong,” Balthazar said. “You’d still feel like shit. But humans process things faster than us, see? Perks of dying so quickly; they get to process this shit faster, too. Unlike us poor sods; we’ve got the slow road.”

Gabriel had said something similar, albeit in less flowery terms. He hadn’t been human as long as Balthazar, yet it still affected him to such a degree because of his soul.

“We’ll get past this,” Balthazar said quietly after a moment. “We always do. This is just a bigger roadblock than usual.”

“Would our siblings say the same?” Gadreel murmured, thoughts turning to the Host in Heaven. “Or would they decide to turn away from Creation once more?”

“If they tried that shit again, I can tell you that Gabe isn’t going to stand for that, and neither is Cassie. Hell, I bet even Raphael would whip them into shape.” Balthazar snorted derisively. “Sure, it’s going to cause a big to-do over in Heaven, but they’ll deal with it. They’ve got two archangels to wrangle them into shape, and they’ve been doing this free will shindig for the last billion years.”

“Such a small frame of time compared to how long we’ve existed.”

“It’s still long enough.” Balthazar rapped his knuckles against Gadreel’s arm. “You got the hang of
it, and *you’re* one hundred percent angel unlike Gabe and Samwise. Even Cassie had a stint as a human, but he was a bit weird before that.”

Sighing, Balthazar let his hand drop back to his chest. “Sure, things aren’t going to be easy, but we can do this. None of us are alone.”

That was an undeniable fact that gave Gadreel great comfort. Because they *weren’t* alone; they had each other and always would.

“You’re right.” Gadreel smiled at him, glad it didn’t feel strained. He still didn’t feel all right, but some of the numbness was receding into something that felt a bit like acceptance. It wouldn’t be fine now or anytime in the near future, but he *would* be fine eventually.

They all would be.

“Of course I am.” Balthazar flashed him a smug grin. “Since when am I not?”

Gadreel paused, keeping his face carefully blank. “Is that a rhetorical question, or should I list all the times when you were wrong?”

“No, jeez!” Balthazar groaned, rolling over to turn his back to Gadreel. “Are you being serious right now or joking? You’ve been around Gabe this long. How can you not know what rhetorical questions are?”

“It’s still confusing,” Gadreel said blandly.

“Like hell it is—” Balthazar cut himself off when he glanced over his shoulder, narrowing his eyes at Gadreel. “You *twerp*! That *was* a joke!” He punched a grinning Gadreel in the side.

Gadreel blocked Balthazar’s second punch. “Was it?”

“Your sense of humor *sucks*.” Balthazar made a face, pulling away from Gadreel to sit up, crossing his legs. “It’s criminally awful.”

Turning his face so Balthazar wouldn’t see his smirk, Gadreel leaned back against the tree, exhaling quietly as he settled down.

After a moment, Balthazar quieted as well, shoulders slumping as he stared ahead at the green meadow before them.

It was peaceful, but Gadreel didn’t know how much longer they should stay here. Technically they didn’t have to leave, but he didn’t feel comfortable leaving Gabriel or Samael on their own for so long. Gabriel did have his children in Asgard, but if something went wrong…

Sighing, Gadreel told himself he’d stay a few minutes longer and then leave. Balthazar could stay longer if he wanted, but Gadreel wouldn’t feel comfortable doing so.

Closing his eyes, Gadreel let himself get lost in the sound of the wind and the animals around them, quieting his breathing as he did. Like this, he could pretend everything was fine. That things would go on as they always had, that nothing had to change—

*Someone, please help!*

The scream from Vision startled him into awareness, his eyes meeting a wide-eyed Balthazar’s for a split-second before they both took off to answer the call.
Perhaps it was overkill, but he’d never heard Vision sound so terrified.

“With all due respect, sir, everything is not fine.” Jarvis had his pissy face on, arms folded across his chest and feet set apart defiantly. “Would you please stop saying that?”

“It’s going to be fine, all right?” Tony ran his hands through his hair, tugging sharply at the strands before letting go with a loud exhale. “I mean it.”

“It’s not fine now,” Dummy pointed out mulishly, stance almost identical to that of Jarvis except for his feet, one of which was toeing the floor. “Do you think any of us will just let it go like that?”

It took one look at all of his kids’ set expressions before Tony had to admit that he had no chance in hell at escaping this interrogation unless he took the coward’s way out and escaped via angel methods. And even that wouldn’t get them off his back for long since they’d pounce on him the moment he came back.

“You don’t even have the defense of saying it’s ‘grown up stuff,’” Sleipnir said. “We’re all adults here.”

“And don’t say we’ll always be your kids,” Butterfingers said immediately. “That’s not going to work here.”

Tony put on an injured face. “It’s true, though.”

“That’s not the point.” Butterfingers huffed, narrowing her eyes. “The point is something’s wrong and you’re all mopey and Loki and Thor are renovating the palace even though it was fine until Sam did her thing and now you won’t tell us what happened!” The ferocity of her words wasn’t dampened by the huge breath she took at the end. In fact, it was heightened given the fierce glare accompanying them.

Tony folded his arms, leaning his shoulder against the wall besides him. “I’m still working through it,” he said slowly.

“We could help you work through it,” Fenris said. “It’s not fair if you’re doing it on your own when you’ve always helped us.”

“As your parent, it’s my responsibility to help you guys,” Tony said.

“That doesn’t mean we can’t help you!” Fenris shot Jarvis a helpless look.

Jarvis’s stance softened, his voice pleading as he asked, “What happened? What is it that you don’t want to tell us?”

Tony looked off to the side, unwilling to see their expressions. “It’s stupid,” he said finally. “I keep thinking that if I don’t say it, it’s not actually true. And the more I say it, the more it makes it true. Even though staying silent doesn’t change a thing. It happened and none of us noticed.”

“What did?”

It took an enormous amount of effort to his voice even when he responded. “Dad’s dead.”

There were a few seconds of incomprehension before they seemed to realize what he meant.

You reacted first, brow furrowing in confusion. “You mean – Grandfather? He’s dead?”
Saying it again was like putting another nail in the coffin. “Yes.”

“I thought that wasn’t possible,” Jormungandr said. “You guys are eternal, aren’t you?”

“We can die.” Tony resisted the urge to press a hand to his chest. “And so can He, even if we didn’t think He could.” But that had been borne of a child’s unconditional belief in their parent’s invincibility, not fact.

Jarvis stepped forwards, touching Tony’s shoulder comfortingly. “I’m sorry.”

Tony smiled weakly at him. “So am I.”

Without a word, Dummy lunged at him, wrapping his arms tightly around Tony’s shoulders and pressing his face into his neck. “It’s going to be okay,” he said, muffled.

In lieu of a verbal answer, Tony pressed his hand to Dummy’s back, turning his face into Dummy’s hair.

“You didn’t have to hide this,” Sleipnir said, but there was no judgment in his tone. “We wouldn’t want you to be alone in dealing with this.”

“Even if we don’t understand,” Fenris added as an aside. He winced a second later when Butterfingers stomped on his foot. “Ow!”

“We do,” Butterfingers said fiercely, glancing back at her AI brothers. “We met Him once.”

Fenris took a step back, eyeing Butterfingers warily. “Okay, well, we didn’t. And He’s not our God or Creator, so…” He shrugged.

“It’s okay,” Tony said before Butterfingers could erupt into a furious tirade about being emotionally sensitive. “He’s right.”

“It matters to us because it matters to you,” Jormungandr said, Fenris nodding in agreement. “I know you don’t want to tell us everything – and that’s appreciated when it comes to some matters”—he and the others made faces at whatever they were remembering—“but we still want to be here to help you.”

Tony’s arm tightened around Dummy before he could stop it, and he blinked rapidly in an attempt to keep the burning in his eyes at bay. “I know,” he managed. “And thank you. But this…” He resorted to what he had told Loki, since it was the plain truth. “I need time.”

The skin around Jarvis’s eyes pinched worriedly, but he nodded. “You can have it.”

“You’ll come back?” Dummy asked.

“I’m not going anywhere you can’t find me,” Tony reassured him. “I promise, all right?”

Dummy wasn’t the only one giving him a scrutinizing look, but he was the closest to Tony. After a long moment, he nodded and stepped back.

With a small grateful smile, Tony inclined his head and took off, landing on the Bifrost a split-second later to take a breath.

Out here, the emptiness was more noticeable. He didn’t know why he was doing this. It was like poking at a bruise just to see if it hurt and being surprised when it did.
His Father wouldn’t want him to hurt himself like this. But then He was dead, and there was nothing He could do about what Gabriel did.

Not that He’d cared before.

Pulling in a ragged breath, Gabriel closed his eyes, moving to the edge of the bridge and standing on the precipice, jacket fluttering in the breeze. Against his better instincts, he found himself reaching out to that emptiness, calling out.

No answer came – not that he’d expected one – but it still hurt.

Opening his eyes, Gabriel promptly staggered back in surprise upon seeing that he wasn’t where he’d been before.

It was familiar, though, which was just about the only thing not sending him into an utter panic.

That and a sort of unnatural calm that told him it was fine.

Even though it really wasn’t.

Wasn’t this what had happened with Balthazar before?

Forcing himself to take a deep breath and closing his eyes, Gabriel focused on breaking the spell holding him here. But pulsing his Grace did nothing and neither did cutting the necessary sigils into his skin.

What was more, he couldn’t even sense a spell.

Pressing his thumb into the blood still smeared on his skin, Gabriel bowed his head, focusing.

…Nothing.

Absolutely…nothing.

With a sharp flare of panic, Gabriel’s eyes snapped open and he let his sword fall into his hand, prepared to fight off whatever would attack him.

But he was the only one here at the moment.

Relaxing slightly, Gabriel took a closer look at his surroundings. The grass was a vibrant shade of green, the sky much bluer than he was accustomed to, and the air a strange combination of chemicals that was still breathable. It was the planet the Light had Created at the beginning, the one that Gabriel had been on before.

But the atmosphere was strange, some kind of menace palpable to his senses. It was as if there was something just outside the periphery of the planet.

Peering up into the sky, Gabriel tried to see what was out there. He reeled back a second later upon being hit with a vast sense of nothingness. Not even the natural emptiness of outer space but sheer nothing.

Breath loud in his ears, Gabriel forced back the reminder of the other place he’d been in that was like that nothingness.

It was fine. He was fine. He’d figure this out and get out of whatever this was.
Tucking his sword just out of reach, Gabriel pushed the tension out of his body, deliberately setting a slow breathing pattern in an effort at calming himself down. Panicking wouldn’t do him any good here.

First things first…why was he alone?

There’d always been someone else present during these weird visions. But right now…he was completely alone. There was no sign of life on the planet, just…a stench of death.

Breath picking up despite himself, Gabriel covered his nose and mouth with a hand, reminding himself to breathe slowly. He’d seen and smelled worse than this. The problem was that he had no fucking idea what was going on.

Turning on his heel to start walking, Gabriel kept alert for anything out of the ordinary.

Even so, he almost missed the faint echo of someone shouting what sounded like his name. Instinctively chasing after the call, Gabriel took off flying, only to end up crashing face first into the ground a second later.

Groaning, Gabriel rolled onto his back, trying to figure out what had just happened. He’d taken off but…he’d just ended up flying into the ground?

Sitting up with an aggravated huff, Gabriel rubbed his face.

Obviously flying was out, but it would’ve been nice to know that before ramming himself into the ground.

Getting to his feet, Gabriel brushed his jacket off before looking up. He instantly took a shocked step back upon seeing that he wasn’t alone anymore.

Three beings stood a short distance away, all of them in forms that looked almost physical but weren’t. They were a little too odd and shaky around the edges to be entirely physical, but it was a close mimicry. Good enough for mortals to see them without hurting their eyes.

The Light’s form was shrouded with a bright light that made it difficult to discern any features. The same went for the Dark, although Gabriel glanced away immediately. The End, though… The End was solid, like there was nothing beyond them.

They were standing at odds with one another. The Light and the End next to each other facing the Dark, the two of them radiating a sense of anguish and grief. There was absolutely nothing but an absence from the Dark.

Shivering, Gabriel took another step back, swallowing convulsively at the sensation.

“Why, sibling?” the Light asked, speaking out loud, the words rent with grief. “Can you tell us that at least? Why?”

“Why not?” the Dark answered, their voice as dark as their form. Yet even the words seemed to suck in everything about them. “Was that not what you said before you Created this planet?”

“I Created, but you—” The Light broke off, their form wavering briefly. “I told you what I was doing,” Ne continued in a calmer tone. “But you…you just did it.”

“So did they,” the Dark said, gesturing to the End. “And yet you accepted their role, what they desired to do.”
“They told me,” the Light said. “And it isn’t just an end. Not how those have thought of it as. It’s simply a new beginning. But what you have done…there’s nothing after that.”

“Is something wrong with that?” The Dark sounded genuinely curious, much like a child given a moral problem to contemplate. “It is what I do.”

“There’s nothing wrong with you,” the Light said, “simply how you’ve done this. We could have worked together, sibling. Found a solution to what you desire to do. We could have done this together as we always do.”

“Always?” There was bitterness now. “Perhaps once we worked together, but since when have we done so since you began Creating? Since they started Ending? No, there was nothing you would have done. You think I can’t sense your horror? You reek of it.”

“Everything has its End,” the End said quietly. “You know we discovered that together. But what you have done is something entirely else. Everything you touched…you swallowed.”

“Because I desired it. Because I could. Because why not?”

For the first time since Gabriel had heard the End speak, they actually sounded angry. “Because it was not yours to touch! Not without consent. Not without talking with us. It isn’t just the living you touched; you touched the dead as well, and they are no longer on this plane.”

“Of course not,” the Dark said. “They are nowhere. Where else should they go?”

The Light flinched, horror radiating from Nem. “What have you done, sibling?”

The Dark’s voice was a mockery of kindness as they said, “You already know.”

“Why would you do this? After everything, why would you destroy it all like this?”

The Dark seemed to swell, transcending their visible form entirely. Simultaneously, the sky began to darken unnaturally, the blue swallowed up by the sheer dark of nothing that overwhelmed it.

“Back,” the End commanded, pushing the Light back from where the Dark touched the two.

*Why so frightened?* the Dark whispered into their minds, their voice even more terrifying now than it had been before. Gabriel flinched back, reflexively blocking his mind from a voice that slipped through regardless. *We’re family, are we not? You trust me, do you not?*

The End’s voice was cold as they said, *You lost that the moment you devoured a life. You lost that the moment you refused to listen. Perhaps we are family, perhaps we are siblings, but you have broken that trust.*

Dark was creeping through the ground, sapping out the green of the grass under Gabriel’s feet. Cracks formed, the earth shattering all around him.

The three beings didn’t seem to notice the planet falling to pieces around them as the Dark squeezed tightly. They were utterly intent on one another, two defending against the other.

Scrambling back, Gabriel couldn’t find a foothold. There was nothing to hold on to.

The ground gave way entirely, crumbling away into nothingness underneath him. And, with that horribly familiar sensation, Gabriel fell, surrounded by falling pieces of broken earth and that terrible *nothingness* that sucked in the entire universe—
There was a wordless snarl in his chest, resounding through his aching Grace, and something kicked him in the chest, crushing his ribs and lungs and sending him flying backwards.

He hit the ground hard, head smashing a rock into smithereens before he stopped, his entire being burning around a horribly cold sensation of nothing in his core.

Gasping as his ribs reformed and his lungs healed, Gabriel curled into a ball, clutching his head as he struggled to push out that scream of anger that echoed through his brain.

With a dull shock, he realized it wasn’t his voice.

Unnatural! the voice snarled, terrifyingly familiar and inside him.

“Gabriel.” Samael stood there, nir Grace overwhelming his own. Despite that, ne was frowning at him in concern and barely hidden fear. “Are you yourself?”

“What—” His voice rasped in his throat, unusually painful. Coughing, he looked past Samael to see Gadreel and Balthazar shielding two other beings: Vision and Ultron. Vision was visibly bruised and bleeding, but Ultron looked even worse, nursing terrible burns and staring at Gabriel in fear that he’d never seen on Ultron’s face before.

There was the smoking ruin of a ship behind them, mechanical debris scattered around them. It looked familiar, but Gabriel didn’t have the presence of mind to figure out why.

He was too busy choking back that disgust and anger that wasn’t his, his Grace burning in an attempt to choke out that cold nothing at his core. To his horror, it wasn’t working.

Samael dropped to one knee, braced to defend nemself but also peering at him in worry. “Gabriel?”

“There is something in him,” Gadreel said, words stilted and formal.

With a sharp shushing sound, Samael gestured back at him, not looking away from Gabriel. “What happened?”

“I-I don’t know.” Gabriel winced, fingers digging into his scalp as the presence in him lashed out painfully. His Grace flared briefly in response. “I don’t know,” he repeated, staring up at Samael in panic, hoping ne had some answers.

Abominations, the Dark snarled inside Gabriel’s core, and his Grace pulsed again in a vain attempt at driving them out, a corresponding wave of exhaustion rushing over him.

Samael seemed to see, nir brow furrowing, but no answers were forthcoming. And from the look on nir face, none would be.

Chapter End Notes

So, that definitely happened... I know some of you guessed at what was going on, or at least suspected where I was going with it. Buuuttt...did you expect this?

Who betrayed who? What happened between those three? What is he SEEING??
And what is going to happen next? :D

Please leave feedback! I so love hearing your thoughts!
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Halsey's "Control" is a good song to listen to for the first bit of this chapter! :D We pick up practically immediately from where we left off. *dramatic music*

What is going to happen?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“What was that?” Samael was as still as stone, arms folded tightly across his chest and gray eyes blazing. “What is going on?”

Shaking his head, Gabriel winced as he felt the cold nothingness in him snake through his Grace before being repelled by a reflexive flaring of light. It was weaker than before, his energy sapped from the futility of the action. Breathing raggedly, he closed his eyes to the sight of the ring of holy fire around him.

It’d been his own idea. His and Samael’s, really. They had no idea what was going on, so it was best to contain him the best way possible, yet Samael had drawn the line at painting sigils on the walls.

“You’re not a criminal,” Samael had said shortly. “And we’re not going to treat you like one.”

Still, being trapped by holy fire wasn’t a pleasant sensation, even if it was for his own safety and everyone else’s around him.

Whatever had happened, he’d almost killed Vision and Ultron before Vision’s cry for help had alerted the others. It had taken Samael several minutes too long to get through to him before Gabriel had snapped back to himself, and they weren’t sure if it would happen again.

Gabriel was certain that it would, unless something was done.

“What’s happening?” Dummy’s voice came from outside the enclosed room they were in. “Dad? Are you—”

His kids weren’t anywhere in sight, but even from within the ring of holy fire he could sense their souls.

And, without warning, he was plunged back into memory.

The mechanical body of his learning program was beneath his hands, tools strewn about him as he slowly put it together. Music pounded through the room, the record player’s volume as loud as it could go. Yet it wasn’t enough to drown the silence and loneliness out.

This artificial intelligence wouldn’t ever leave him – would always be around.

And when the learning bot whirred to life days later and promptly knocked over a stack of books and chirped in confusion, he couldn’t help but laugh. “Oh my God, you’re such a dummy.”

He briefly heard Samael shout “Gabriel!” but he was tugged away by another memory before he
could respond.

*He’d made Dummy before. He could do this again and do it better. After all, why not?*

*Dummy shouldn’t be alone, not like he was. And if he could turn science on its head again, it was all the better.*

*The first bot that whirred to life dropped the beaker he handed over minutes later. “I’m pretty sure I didn’t build you with such butterfingers.”*

*The other didn’t do anything out of the ordinary, but there was only a response to when he said, “Hey, you!” so the name stuck.*

*“Then put it out!”*

*No one would know about this. They wouldn’t understand the sheer beauty, would be terrified out of their wits at the idea that it was possible.*

*But, more than that, this was for him. Because he could do this and wanted to. Because he wanted to see how far he could push this and do better. Because he was so tired of being alone, and Dummy, You, and Butterfingers couldn’t keep him company all the time. And this artificial intelligence could be anywhere.*

*So when he finally finished coding JARVIS into existence, he was pathetically grateful to hear the mechanical tones say, “Server online. How may I help?”*

*“Hey, JARVIS, you up?”*

*You made them? The Dark sounded appalled and furious. You? Abominations! They shouldn’t exist!*

*Don’t you dare! Gabriel snarled, a fierce protectiveness surging forth at the implicit threat in those words. They’re mine! You won’t touch them!*

*His body jerked forward before he could react, muscles twitching against his will. Grace burning brightly, Gabriel wrenched back control with a cry, beating down the Dark furiously. Staggering back, stumbling over his feet, he fell heavily to the floor.*

*“Gabriel!” Samael took a small step forward, shoving a jug filled with water at Gadreel. “Get them out of here.”*

*With a sharp gesture, Samael glanced at Balthazar, who nodded and slipped out the door. It took a few minutes, but they left, their souls dimming slightly with the distance.*

*And, thankfully, the Dark settled slightly now that they weren’t so close, although disgust and anger still simmered off them.*

*“All right?” Balthazar asked, coming back in and shutting the door with a resolute click.*

*Breathing heavily, Gabriel nodded, uncurling slightly so he could sit up, limbs shaking with the effort. He buried his face in his knees, focusing on his breathing for a long moment. When he felt ready, he looked back up at the others, who all looked worried, even if Samael was the most composed.*
“It’s worse than it was before,” Balthazar said, still by the door.

“This is how it looked last time?” Samael asked, glancing back at him.

“Not quite.” Balthazar’s eyes skimmed briefly over Gabriel before he looked away, eyes pinching. “Last time he kept going dim and then brightening, like a bad light bulb. This time…he just keeps getting darker.”

“There’s something in me,” Gabriel grit out, wrapping an arm around his midsection. “Dark and cold. I can’t – I can’t get it out.”

“And you’re trying?”

*Let go…*

Gabriel pulled in a sharp breath, shaking his head sharply. “Not intentionally, but yes.”

“How can you *unintentionally* try to push something out?” Balthazar sounded confused.

“It’s like a reflex.” Gabriel shuddered once as his Grace flared in reaction to the darkness slithering through it. “It’s just not doing anything.”

Balthazar muttered something that sounded like a curse.

Samael sounded calm when he asked, “Do you know what it is?”

*Oh, how sweet their concern is for you,* the Dark crooned. *But how can they help?*

Biting back a groan, Gabriel clutched at his head as their dark laughter echoed through his mind. “Nothing,” he managed a moment later. “The Dark…came from that place.”

Samael’s lips pursed, eyes narrowing as his gaze pierced through him. “Can they hear me?” he asked flatly. “Can they hear me tell them to get the *fuck* out?”

*Or what?* The Dark sounded amused.

“Yes,” Gabriel said simply, breathing pained. “If they don’t…?”

Samael bared his teeth, eyes on the Dark festering in Gabriel. “I’ll make you. You really want to test me?”

There was no reaction from the Dark other than laughter, grating and cold and mocking.

Clenching his eyes shut, Gabriel waited for it to subside and he could think. “I think that’s a yes.”

Anger sparked in Samael’s eyes, and even from within the holy fire Gabriel could feel the temperature plummet. “Is that so?”

“Samael.” Gadreel reached out to grab hold of his arm, forcefully pulling him towards him. “Anger will not help here.”

With a wordless snarl, Samael pulled free from Gadreel’s grip. “Maybe not, but it makes me feel better.” His glare wasn’t directed at Gabriel, but it still made him shiver. “If you don’t leave Gabriel on your own initiative, I have zero qualms about forcing you out. You realize you’re dead?” The words were cold.
Can you kill something not living? the Dark asked, laughing. Such protectiveness. Did you not raise them?

With a gasp, Gabriel felt the Dark shuffle around his Grace, their touch brushing through his memories. Specifically those of Samael, both before and after.

Oh? The Dark was definitely intrigued now. How interesting. A child and a sibling? And… Their tone darkened threateningly. Yours?

Out! Gabriel smacked their touch away, recoiling at the patronizing chuckle the Dark gave him, even as they obligingly retreated.

“Gabriel?” Gadreel asked, head tilted.

It wasn’t even a question. “Get them out,” Gabriel said. “I can’t do it myself. I’m not…enough.” He met Samael’s eyes pleadingly. “Samael.”

Samael stilled, eyes darkening. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.” There wasn’t another choice. Gadreel and Balthazar wouldn’t have the juice necessary. “I trust you.”

Samael’s breath audibly caught in his throat, his eyes widening briefly. A second later he nodded, face set. “Okay.”

Taking the jug of water from Gadreel, Samael shook the liquid into the air, blowing out through his mouth. The water spread out in a large circle, dowsing the circle of holy fire.

Stepping through the soggy ashes, Samael knelt down before Gabriel, taking hold of his face in gentle hands. “This is going to hurt,” he warned. “I’m sorry.”

Gabriel smiled weakly. “It already hurts.”

Samael didn’t return the smile, closing his eyes as Grace illuminated his palms. One hand moved, fingers tapping briefly against Gabriel’s sternum before it suddenly pushed in.

Even now, the touch of Samael’s Grace against his own made him instinctively recoil, fear skittering through him. It was entirely irrational, based on nothing but something that had happened lifetimes ago, but that was the plain and simple truth.

Yet Samael’s Grace was warm now, not icy cold. And it was gentle, touching Gabriel’s Grace inquisitively at first before moving in, pushing into where the Dark was nesting.

It didn’t hurt at first, Samael feeling out the territory. But then he began scouring out the tendrils of darkness that had snuck through Gabriel’s Grace, burning it all away with blinding light and heat.

Until all that was left was the Dark in Gabriel’s core, sucking out the light and energy of Gabriel’s Grace.

Get out! Samael snapped, cold fury surging through him. I warned you! Get out of Gabriel! You don’t belong here!

Blistering cold blazed through Samael’s Grace with the fury, freezing Gabriel with the force. He flinched away but couldn’t move, held in place physically and by Samael’s overpowering strength. This close they were both almost one, and Samael’s cold was inside him.
There was a faint sense of apology, and the fury receded slightly to be replaced by warmth, but Samael was focused entirely on the snarling Dark, burning the dark away with blinding light.

Gabriel was distantly aware of someone screaming, but it didn’t concern him. What was worse was the pain searing through him where Samael was exorcising the Dark, cutting them out from where they’d hidden away inside Gabriel.

They struck back at Samael, trying to absorb the energy and light Samael gave off like a miniature sun. But Samael’s touch burned, hurting even Gabriel’s Grace, and the Dark recoiled like they’d touched a hot stove.

With a wordless scream, the Dark evaporated into nothingness, and Samael’s Grace rushed into the empty space they had been occupying. A second later, Samael withdrew, whispering soothing words that Gabriel didn’t register.

His Grace was shaky and weak, trembling with aftershocks from the battle that had just been waged inside his core, and he struggled to keep it together.

Samael withdrew entirely, although his Grace remained wrapped around his, radiating nothing but warmth. There was no hint of the earlier cold. “I’m sorry,” ne murmured, wrapping his arms around him. “I’m sorry, brother.” Ne shifted until he was practically cradled in his arms, pressing his lips to his forehead.

His vocal chords ached from screaming, and his Grace wasn’t healing it like it normally would, too busy consolidating its strength.

Gabriel clutched at Samael’s arm, trying to convey through touch what he couldn’t verbally just yet.

Laughing breathlessly, Samael brushed a hand through his hair. “Are they gone? Did I get everything?”

Closing his eyes, Gabriel swept his senses through his Grace, feeling out what he could. There was nothing but him, along with the faint traces of the energy Samael had exerted. To his relief, there was no sign of the Dark.

With a nod, Gabriel let his head fall to Samael’s chest, relaxing into the hold. Exhaustion tugged at his mind, Grace and body sore and in desperate need of rest.

Breathing out a soft prayer of thanks, Samael tightened his arms around him. “You’ll be all right.” Eyes falling shut, Gabriel listened to Samael’s heartbeat, too tired to do much more than let his sibling hold him. It’d be fine now.

Convincing the others that everything was fine after what had happened was another feat in itself, only helped by the fact that Balthazar had blocked sound from the room after shooing everyone away. If they’d heard what had happened, this conversation would be going a lot differently.

“I have not seen you look so ill in a long time,” Loki told him, standing by the head of his bed.

“Gee, thanks.” Gabriel made a face but refrained from sticking his tongue out. His kids were present. “It’ll be fine. Samael took care of it.”

“You weren’t even in the room to be kicked out,” Balthazar pointed out.

“You’re not helping your case,” You informed him.

“What – am I on trial here?”

“Stop derailing the subject,” Butterfingers snapped, giving Balthazar a sharp glare. When he put his hands up in surrender, she gave a satisfied smile and turned back to Gabriel. “Are you going to talk to us?” she asked accusingly.

A frisson of hurt lanced through Gabriel at her tone, even though he deserved the suspicion. It wasn’t as if he would be telling them all the fine details about what had happened. First and foremost, even he didn’t really know what had happened.

“When you asked for time, I didn’t expect this to happen,” Jarvis said tightly.

Shrugging, Gabriel admitted, “I didn’t either.”

“Which was what?” Sleipnir demanded, worry lines etched into his forehead. “Did someone hurt you? Did you contract some kind of disease? I thought there wasn’t anything that could hurt you!”

“Some things can,” Samael answered for Gabriel. “They’re not easy to come by but...” Ne glanced at Gabriel. “He had the extremely unfortunate luck of stumbling across just that last time we took a trip.”

As explanations went, this one would be easy enough to keep up. Besides, it wasn’t exactly a lie. Just...fudging the truth a little.

Hel eyed nem skeptically but didn’t say anything, gaze flickering briefly down to Gabriel. Her mouth tugged down at whatever she saw, which made Gabriel feel even more awful since surely he didn’t look that bad?

“But it is fine now?” Dummy asked, staring fixedly at Gabriel.

“It is,” Gabriel promised. He could say that without a doubt, since there was no anger or disgust or upset whispers in his head from being around his kids. Samael had expunged the Dark entirely, and they wouldn’t be coming back. He wasn’t going to go back to that place and let them.

Ultron and Vision were fine now, both having taken their leave after hearing that Gabriel would be all right. That Ultron hadn’t teased him about losing control or “being put on probation now” said something about how concerned he was, since he never let such a prime opportunity go.

He wasn’t sure if they’d told the others anything, but judging from the fact that none of them were eyeing him like he could go rogue at any moment, he was thinking they hadn’t. Which was unexpected given that he had attacked them out of the blue and almost killed them.

Gabriel couldn’t remember doing any of it, but the signs had been all over the two of them. In fact, what was more surprising was that they weren’t dead.

“You weren’t moving properly,” Ultron told him, impatiently sitting through Samael’s careful examination of his wounds. “That was the first sign that you weren’t you. It was a bit like whoever was holding the reigns didn’t know what to do.” He paused, then added, “You’re usually more garrulous, too. That you didn’t say anything was simply another nail in the coffin for the imposter.”

“Not that it made it any easier,” Vision said, already back to perfect health thanks to Balthazar.
“But we were rather aided by the fact that you kept crashing into things. Such as that unfortunate ship.”

“Unfortunate, sure.” He couldn’t remember that either and didn’t have any physical marks to show for that incident.

“But we couldn’t overcome you,” Vision said quietly.

“I would’ve had him,” Ultron grumbled.

“After your death?” Vision sounded decidedly unimpressed.

“You did the right thing calling for us,” Samael assured him, healing Ultron’s wounds with a touch. Ne had apparently seen everything ne could.

“Thank you for listening.”

“Wouldn’t be a good angel if we didn’t,” Balthazar said dryly. “I like you, kid.”

“I like you, too,” Vision answered seriously, smiling at a visibly amused Balthazar. “Thank you nonetheless.”

“Yeah, yeah, thanks for saving us,” Ultron interrupted. “Is this going to happen again? Or is angel’s sorry state because you exorcised the demon?”

“They’re gone,” Samael confirmed, brushing a reassuring hand over Gabriel’s shoulder. “And both of you are fine. Thank you for being patient.”

Samael’s careful scrutiny then had been more to make sure that no bits of the Dark had crept into their souls when Gabriel’s body had been controlled. But as far as they could tell, only Gabriel had been affected by the close contact with the Dark. Balthazar and Samael were clean.

“But you won’t tell us anything?” The resignation in Fenris’s tone was accompanied by an angry scowl. “Is this one of those ‘I’m your father, so telling you this wouldn’t be responsible’ things?”

“Wait, he actually said that?” Samael swallowed back laughter, shoulders shaking. “Gabriel? Responsible?”

“I can be responsible,” Gabriel protested. “I raised you, didn’t I?”

“ Mostly.” Samael grinned at him. “You mostly raised me the second time round.”

“I raised them.” Gabriel gestured to the others.

“You left us to our own devices and threatened to donate me to community college,” Dummy said unapologetically.

“I believe you once threatened to assign me to moderate 4Chan,” Jarvis said thoughtfully.

“It was hands-off parenting,” You said, shrugging.

“Extremely hands-off,” Butterfingers added. “With the occasional tune-up and upgrade that Dummy kept running away from.”

“You taught us everything about eavesdropping and pranking,” Fenris said, sharing a glance with his siblings. “Especially that bit about not getting caught.”
“Or if you get caught, own it,” Jormungandr said.

Loki eyed all of them. “This explains a great deal about everything.”

“No appreciation,” Gabriel groused, crossing his arms. “I see how it is.”

“Of all the things you are, responsible isn’t one,” Balthazar said. “At least, it’s not the word that comes to mind when someone says your name.”

“I’m plenty responsible,” Gabriel muttered, rolling his eyes. “Responsible enough to know what I should be doing.”

“Of course.” Samael gave him a consoling smile that looked more amused than anything.

“Does that mean you’ll tell us what happened?” Jormungandr asked.

Hell, no. The last thing they needed to do was worry about something that had been taken care of. “I got a little sick, that’s all.”

“A little sick,” Fenris echoed skeptically. “More like a lot sick.”

“I’m better now.” Gabriel wished that he looked better so his words had more impact, but his Grace was still recovering from earlier. “Samael took care of the worst of it. I’ve just got a little healing left to do before I’m all better.”

“Which is why you’re in a bed that you don’t use anymore except to do things you shouldn’t tell us about,” Dummy said, straight-faced.

Gabriel shot him a thumbs up. “Yes, exactly.”

Samael’s shoulders were shaking too hard to be anything but laughter.

“We’ll let you rest, then,” Jarvis said, briefly rapping Dummy on the back of his head with his knuckles.

“I will let Thor know what happened,” Loki said, shooting sharp glances towards Samael and Balthazar. “He sends his regrets that he could not be here. You will likely have a visit from Jane soon as she wished to discuss something with you.”

Talking science with Jane would definitely be nice if that happened and she didn’t get distracted with something cool involving science.

He definitely didn’t envy Samael or Balthazar, though. Judging from Loki’s expression, he knew something was up and would be digging it out of them as soon as he could. Samael and Balthazar seemed to sense this, as they immediately went about shooing everyone out as fast as possible.

Samael’s Grace brushed over him one last time that was clearly more for his peace of mind than Gabriel’s, but he didn’t begrudge that at all. Whatever had happened had unsettled both of his siblings, and a little comfort was the least he could give them.

But for the present, he’d let go of some of that responsibility he definitely had and focus on healing.

Now that he was alone, he could fully admit that he felt like utter crap and wanted it over with.

Sighing, Gabriel pulled the covers over his head, settling down in the darkness and closing his eyes to meditate.
Once by nemself in nir room, Samael permitted nemself to take a breath and relax, shoulders slumping. It hadn’t been possible for nem to show anything before, not with Gabriel’s agitated state and Gadreel’s and Balthazar’s distress and palpable confusion.

Yet now…

Samael grimaced, shuddering once as ne recalled the feel of the entity who had been inside Gabriel. Even now ne could feel that cold and the absence of where something should have been inside them. It was exactly like Gabriel had described seeing and experiencing in that other dimension, and now Samael had a firsthand taste of what it felt like.

And Gabriel had had that inside him.

Samael felt icky enough just having expunged it from nir sibling. Ne couldn’t imagine having had that inside nir Grace.

“Don’t think about it,” Samael muttered, staring ahead at a brightly colored blanket hanging on the wall.

Although ne couldn’t help but think about it. It was an unknown, and so little was unknown to nem. That ne had no idea what the Dark was and what they had been doing inside Gabriel’s core bothered nem. That Gabriel – an archangel – couldn’t expel them on his own bothered nem even more.

Even though he was the youngest, that didn’t erase Gabriel’s rank and power. Samael was stronger, but still. Gabriel should’ve been able to get rid of the Dark on his own without outside help.

And Samael had no idea who the Dark was and if they really were a sibling to their Father.

If Gabriel’s visions were at all accurate…what did it even mean?

Sighing, Samael sank down onto nir bed, rubbing nir face.

Ne couldn’t stay here for long, no matter how much ne wished for the privacy and time to organize nir thoughts. There was too much going on, and Samael had too little idea of what was happening.

Looking ahead into the future yielded nothing but a headache that Samael hadn’t even known was possible. Apparently it was too much in flux for anything useful to be gained from peeking ahead, and there were no answers to be gained from the past.

Especially since Samael had no idea where to even start.


Samael’s go-to was typically kicking the offending being’s ass, but that wasn’t possible here. And it really smarted that ne couldn’t hunt the being down and tear them apart for what they did.

But that wouldn’t be the smart thing to do. There were no tactics involved with that plan beyond hunt them down and hurt them, and that was just as likely to get Samael killed than to kill the Dark.

Which would make absolutely no one happy.

Repressing the urge to sigh again, Samael glanced out the windows, taking some comfort in the fact that the world still looked normal. It’d all be handled one way or another. They’d been through worse things and come out on the other side intact, even if a little worse for the wear in some cases.
What Samael needed was patience, and ne could be patient.

Resolved, Samael moved to flop back on the bed, only to freeze when someone knocked on the door.

After a moment of no one barging in or announcing themselves, Samael called out, “Yes?”

The door cracked open, a helmeted guard poking his head in to say, “Lord Thor and Loki have requested your presence.”

If this had anything to do with diplomacy, Samael was going to refer them to Gadreel, since ne had no patience with the ridiculousness of mortal problems. One would think that they’d have learned after the last incident, which involved several pigs, a horse, and a barn. The animals had never been the same again, and neither had the owner.

“Thank you,” Samael said instead, tone even. “I’ll be right there.”

Inclining his head, the guard withdrew and closed the door with a soft click.

Taking a moment to compose nemself, Samael left within a minute, taking the shortcut to where ne could sense Thor and Loki waiting. Gadreel and Balthazar arrived a split-second later, both of them looking confused and worried.

Samael could commiserate.

Standing by the open windows that they’d yet to repair, Thor turned so his side profile faced them. “Is Gabriel well?” he asked.

“Improving.” Samael answered after a beat. “It’s going to take a while before he’s at his best again.”

“Good.” Thor sounded relieved, his eyes closing briefly as he took in the answer. “I am sorry I could not be there, but there was an urgent matter that required my attention.”

“And now yours,” Loki added, looking decidedly displeased with the entire affair.

“None of us are exactly diplomats,” Balthazar pointed out. “Except for Gadreel.”

“I fear the time for diplomacy is already past,” Thor said, shaking his head and facing them fully. “Perhaps it may yet be salvaged, but history has shown that the Skrulls are not so amendable to peace talks.”

“The Skrulls?” Samael raised nir eyebrows. “What’ve they gone and done now?”

“Why was this brought to you?” Balthazar asked, frowning. “If there’s an issue with the Skrulls, it should’ve been brought to the council’s attention, not Asgard.”

“It was, but as the matter concerns Gabriel, the council saw fit to inform us.” Thor looked pained.

Samael stiffened slightly, eyes narrowing. Ne was unable to keep the steeliness out of nir tone as ne said, “What about him?”

“I know he was not in his right mind.” Thor told them, eyes dark, “but he was on Tarnax X when he attacked Vision and Ultron. He destroyed one of their allocated ‘pleasure ships’”—Loki snorted at this—“and the Skrulls are demanding compensation for the damage.”

“Something tells me that isn’t everything.”
“They are also demanding that he stand trial for the injuries that resulted as a consequence of the destruction,” Loki said quietly. “There were several casualties as well. The ship was not yet finished when it was destroyed.”

As much as Samael hated to admit it, it wasn’t an unreasonable request. The worst part was that Gabriel hadn’t been in his right mind, so he shouldn’t even have to stand trial, but there it was.

“It isn’t an unreasonable request,” Gadreel said, voicing Samael’s thoughts. “Given what it looks like…” He looked sour, though, frowning. “Have they given a date?”

“Oh, you know them.” Loki shrugged, which would’ve seemed dismissive if it weren’t for the derisive twist of his lips. “They would like it done immediately, but that is simply impossible at this point. Not that they have accepted that answer.”

“He needs to recover first,” Samael said flatly. “He’s not going anywhere until I’ve made sure that he’s completely clean of whatever happened. If that’s an issue, then they can take it up with me.”

Thor looked as if he was about to protest, but Loki cut him off with a resigned, “That may be necessary.”

“Brother.” Thor sounded appalled. “Are you certain that is wise?” From the expression on his face, it was clear he remembered exactly what happened when Samael attempted diplomacy.

“Not at all.” Loki shrugged again, although he was smirking now. “But it shall certainly be amusing, and the Skrulls should remember who they are dealing with.”

“It isn’t our intention to be above the law,” Gadreel said sharply.

“Your intentions matter not in this regard,” Loki said, giving him an unimpressed look. “You are above them, even if you dislike that fact.”

“Yeah, no, that kind of thinking screwed everyone over way back when,” Balthazar interrupted, looking decidedly uneasy. “Maybe we’ve got more power, but that just means we need to be responsible with what we do with it. It’s not on us to make the decisions for others, and I know Gabe wouldn’t want us to either.”

“He’d want to stand whatever trial they give,” Samael agreed, stomach twisting unhappily. “But that’s not happening right now. I’ll see what I can do.”

“By not beating them down?” Balthazar asked pointedly.

“We’ll see.” Samael refused to make any promises.

Balthazar fixed nem with a narrow stare. “Samael.”

Samael was sorely tempted to put Balthazar in his place, reminding him just who was older. But before ne could follow through, ne was abruptly reminded of what that meant. There was no hierarchy here, not like what Heaven had been in the past. There was respect, but Samael had earned that respect. And ne didn’t want to lose it.

Huffing, Samael turned away. “Fine. I’ll play nice. But only so long as they play nice. Otherwise the gloves are off.”

“That’s the best you can expect,” Gadreel told Balthazar resignedly.
Tilting his head, Balthazar nodded sharply at Samael. “I’m trusting you’ll keep to that.”

Waving nir hand irritably, Samael turned to the two gods. “They expecting an answer now?”

“You will be going, then?” Thor seemed uncomfortable with this decision, although he hadn’t really offered anything else that would work.

“He’s my family. Of course I’m going.” Samael shuffled nir feet impatiently. “If anyone else wants to come with to make sure I don’t accidentally kill anyone, be my guest. But I’m going.”

Without another word, ne took off.

Dorrek was lucky that Gadreel was standing right behind nem, because otherwise he’d be wishing that he wasn’t currently talking to Samael. He’d be wishing that he was somewhere far away from here, since Samael would have no reason to pretend to be anywhere close to polite.

As it was, Gadreel was shooting nem pointed looks and nudging nir Grace with his own whenever ne got too close to snapping at the emperor of the Skrulls.

Considering the bullshit Dorrek was spouting, it wasn’t even unwarranted.

They kept going over the same garbage over and over, just like some old Earth politicians Samael could name but didn’t want to waste nir breath on. They were covering the same problem for the tenth time now, and Samael was quickly reaching the point of no return where ne would just say “fuck it” and smash some heads together.

Not literally, but the image was nice.

“The point stands,” Dorrek repeated for the umpteenth time, “that the being known as Anthony Stark should stand trial here. He destroyed our property and injured and killed my people. He should face our justice.”

“Yes,” Samael answered after a moment, making sure nir voice revealed none of nir frustration. “I understand your point, as I understood it the last several times you made it.” Ne hid a wince as Gadreel poked nir Grace reprovingly. “Yet I don’t think you understand that it simply isn’t possible at the moment. There are procedures that we need to go through before he can come as he isn’t a citizen of your world.”

“Or a citizen of any known government,” Dorrek said snidely. “While you may think this puts him above our laws, this simply highlights the need for consequences should he go rogue.”

“Yes he doesn’t fall under your perjury,” Samael insisted. “He is a resident of Asgard and as such beholden to their laws. That he is willing to submit to your justice system is a sign of his character, and a little patience regarding his current circumstances isn’t too much to ask for. What you’re asking for is impossible. He cannot stand trial at this time.”

Dorrek puffed up, eyes narrowing. “On the contrary, given what he did in his rampage, we are entirely justified in demanding he face the consequences! He is an ambassador for the Council of Intergalactic Affairs, not a random resident of Asgard!”

Samael’s smile went flat, nir hands tightening into fists behind nir back. “If we’re going to bring up the CIA, perhaps we should also discuss what exactly Tony destroyed? One of your ships, wasn’t it? It’s strange, since you have it officially listed as a pleasure ship, but I distinctly recall the design as being one of your battleships, which you used to conquer this planet and attack others. Your treaty
stipulates that the construction of said battleships is grounds for immediate review and suspension of any and all intergalactic traveling and trading.”

“We discussed this with Anthony,” Dorrek said, pale-faced but steady. “He approved their construction.”

“The pleasure ships, I assume? Which had a weapons system that was almost fully operational and thus partly responsible for the ship’s destruction and any deaths caused?”

“Would you have my people completely unprotected on their voyages? Not all civilizations are so polite as to leave innocent travelers alone.”

Samael gave him a long narrow-eyed stare, holding it until Dorrek began to squirm under it, visible beads of sweat forming on his brow. “Tony will not stand trial now,” he said slowly, holding Dorrek’s eyes. “It will be several days at least before he is able to do so with full approval of the council and all legal proceedings properly filed. Is that understood?” Ne gave him a thin-lipped smile. “You see, Anthony Stark isn’t the Council of Intergalactic Affair’s only ambassador. Are you certain you wish to cross me?”

There was a low sense of disapproval radiating off of Gadreel, but it was tempered by the slight approval that Samael could also sense. Clearly he was also losing his patience with the asshole and only his better sense of decorum had him holding his temper.

Dorrek’s eyes widened. “You—”

“Yes.” Samael’s smile turned chilly. “We are one and the same, ambassadors to the council and responsible for dealing with various civilizations. We’ve dealt with your ilk before, and we’ll do it again if need be. Are we clear?”

There was an audible swallow from Dorrek, and he nodded curtly. “Of course, sir.”

“That will be ‘ambassador’ to you.” Samael hid his amusement at Dorrek’s panicked nod and muttered “Ambassador.”

“Very good.” Samael took a step back and turned, flickering a brief smile at Gadreel. “We’ll send you more information shortly, and we’ll be expecting the same from you, Emperor.”

There was another agreement from Dorrek, though this one had notably more resentment than the one before. Deeming it a waste of time to check Dorrek’s attitude, Samael nodded at Gadreel, both of them taking their leave the normal way.

It gave them some time to see what the Skrulls were doing now. There was a general air of tension and worry, although also a sense of anticipation that Samael wondered at.

Would the Skrulls really be so foolish?

“Are we leaving?” Gadreel asked nem quietly.

Samael didn’t respond until they were completely out of sight of Dorrek’s throne room and guards. Then it was with a simple nod and ne took flight, immediately heading to Asgard.

Ne didn’t have a good feeling about this, and that feeling was only compounded when Samael came across Tony in a sitting room with Jane after relaying the situation to Thor and Loki. He immediately looked up at nem, eyes narrowing suspiciously at whatever he saw on nir face.
Right now, it annoyed nem that there was so little that ne could hide from him, but then Gabriel had always been good at reading nem. That he’d improved with time and after practically raising Samael was to be expected, even if it annoyed and pleased nem simultaneously.

“What’s happening now?” Tony asked, eyes flickering between Samael and Gadreel.

Samael opted for innocence. “What makes you think anything’s happening?”

“That shtick doesn’t work on me, Samael. You’re all official looking and kind of bristly.” Tony made a vague gesture with a hand.

“Official looking, huh?” Sam softened, giving him a relaxed smile and shrugging loosely. “Maybe I needed some time to wind down.”

“Sure, I’ll give you that.” Uncle gave her an unimpressed look. “If Loki and Thor weren’t walking around and shooting me sidelong looks like they know something I don’t. And Gadreel’s trying not to look at me since he also knows something I don’t. And if they all know something, I’m betting you do, too.”

“I do as well,” Jane added shamelessly, not bothering to look up from her papers.

Uncle didn’t blink. “Of course you do. That’s your job as a brilliant scientist.”

Jane smacked his shoulder with a sheaf of papers. “Stop it, you.”

A quick smirk flashing over his face, Uncle turned back to Sam. “Well? Out with it. Anything that makes you look like that means it needs to be shared. Pronto.”

“Maybe I want to deal with it myself,” Sam tried, opting for a beaming smile.

Uncle’s face didn’t change. “Those smiles stopped working on me by the time you were an adolescent. Spit it out or I’ll go and get Thor. He might be king but he still cracks when put under the proper pressure.”

“Stop saying it like you torture him,” Jane said disapprovingly.

Uncle sighed, pulling a face. “Okay, fine, he’ll tell me because we’re friends and he trusts my judgment. Not because I’ll string him up by his entrails until he gives me the info.”

Seeing that he was absolutely serious and wouldn’t budge regardless of what ne said, Samael gave in with a sigh, wishing that ne could’ve hid this for at least a little longer. Until Tony was in better shape.

He looked brighter than he had the last ne’d seen him, but he was clearly still hurting even though he didn’t show it. Jane didn’t seem to suspect a thing, which was probably more due to her being completely engrossed in whatever she was reading, but that wasn’t entirely on her but Tony’s acting.

“It’s the Skrulls,” Samael said heavily.

“Of course it is. Since when isn’t it the Skrulls?” Tony didn’t seem to understand what ne meant. “Don’t tell me they lost the treaty again. This would have to be a new record if they did.”

“As far as I know, they still have it.” Samael hesitated, then went to sit down next to Tony. “No, this is...” Ne paused, trying to figure out how to word this so he wouldn’t blame himself for something he had no control over. “You were on Tarnax X when it happened,” ne said carefully. “Or, at least,
that’s where you went to.”

Tony stilled, eyes darkening. “And?”

“A ship was destroyed, partly due to the weapons systems installed on board. There were a few casualties and more injuries.” Samael hated that he even had to do this. “They want you to stand trial.”

There was no verbal reaction to the news, but Tony buried his face in his hands, weariness in every line of his posture.

“It wasn’t your fault.” Samael kept his voice soft. “You weren’t in control of what was happening. Don’t blame yourself for this.”

“I know.” Tony’s voice was slightly muffled by his hands. “I know I didn’t do this…but it was my face. My body that was used.”

“Many of your friends were mind controlled at some point or another while they were being superheroes,” Jane said gently. “You always told them there wasn’t anything to forgive since what happened wasn’t their fault. It was the fault of the person controlling them. You should extend yourself the same courtesy.”

“It doesn’t erase the feeling of being violated.” Tony made a disgusted noise, digging his fingers into his head. After a moment, he asked, “What answer did you give them?”

Samael studied him for a few seconds, noting the guilt that still clung to him. “You’ll stand trial, but it’ll take some time before everything’s in place. They wanted to do it now, but I managed to persuade them otherwise.”

“Do I want to know what you mean by ‘persuade’?”

“I promise no one was maimed.”

“I can’t believe you tried your hand at diplomacy and succeeded.”

“I’ve done it before!” Samael protested. “Just not with the Skrulls. They’re more your domain because of your endless amount of patience.”

“It’s cute how you think I handle them because I’m patient.” Tony snorted. “No, I usually end up threatening them since that’s the language they speak.” Shaking his head, mouth twisting, he added, “This should be interesting.”

“You know it won’t be fair,” Samael said.

“Fair?” Tony’s grin was flat. “No, they don’t do fair. But it’s what needs to be done. I’ve no doubt they’ve something else up their sleeves for why they’re demanding this, but let’s appease them for now. It wouldn’t do any good for one of the ambassadors to be seen skirting justice.”

“There were extenuating circumstances.”

“Which we’re not telling them about,” Gabriel said sharply.

“Gabriel.”

“They wouldn’t understand, and it isn’t something we can explain.”
“Don’t martyr yourself pointlessly,” Jane cut in. “Tell them the simplest version of what happened. Scientific techniques and magic spells that control individuals have been known about for millennia. It isn’t so farfetched for them to believe that you ran afoul of one.”

“She’s right, brother,” Gadreel said from behind Samael. “There’s no need to punish yourself for something that wasn’t your fault. Stand trial if you must, but don’t accept guilt that isn’t yours.”

“I don’t know what you’re thinking, but like hell am I going to let the Skrulls string me up and hang me out to dry. But they do deserve something for what happened, and it doesn’t exactly set a good precedent if I make myself out to be above the law.” Gabriel’s mouth twisted. “What’s the council have to say?”

“They’re willing to let the Skrulls run the show, so long as they follow the proper procedures.” They’d been willing to let Gabriel’s actions slide entirely due to his status, but Samael had pointed out he wouldn’t be in favor of that. Not for the first time, Samael had cursed Gabriel’s sense of justice and Michael’s role in fostering that.

Nodding, Gabriel leaned back in his chair. “Okay, then I guess it’s up to me to show up.”

“Not now,” Samael said sharply. “I’ve bought time so you can recover. You’re not fine, Gabriel, and don’t tell me you are either. Give it a few days, and then you can go and annoy them to your heart’s desire.”

“For the record, that isn’t likely to give you a good sentence,” Jane added, looking far too amused.

“Thank you, my lady.” Tony tipped his head in her direction, grinning. “I’ll be sure to take that into consideration.”

“You’d better.” Jane sniffed, lips twitching. She pointedly tapped a stack of papers sitting in front of him. “Now, we weren’t done talking about this.”

“Of course we weren’t.” Tony rifled through the stack, pulling out the bottom third to flip through the sheets. He winked at Samael and Gadreel. “Thanks for the update, guys. Thor’ll be glad that I didn’t have to bug him into revealing his darkest secrets.”

“You’re ridiculous,” Sam told him tonelessly, refusing to show any amusement.

Uncle tipped his head, eyes twinkling. “Yes, I am. What are you?”

“You know you love me,” Uncle called after her back.

“Yeah, yeah.” Sam waved him off, heading to the exit so she could spend some time with the others planning how to deal with the Skrulls to ward off anything unpleasant.

After a moment, Gadreel followed her, radiating amusement and something like relief.

Samael empathized. It was utterly relieving seeing that Gabriel was unharmed and healing, that he had been successful in helping him.

If they could get past this, then everything would be fine.

As far as Tony knew, the bots had been put on rotating patrol duties to monitor the Skrulls. Officially it was on the order of the CIA to make sure that things were running smoothly and to answer any
questions anyone had, but unofficially it was because no one trusted the Skrulls to do anything honestly.

It was a shame they were seen like that, since Tony had known a few good Skrulls in his existence, but for the most part the race was warmongering and prone to striking first and asking questions later. That the emperor also bought into the mindset didn’t win the Skrulls any favors, even if there hadn’t been any wars in a long time.

But Tony didn’t know much more than that, as everyone had been very good at keeping him in the dark. It was annoying, but Samael kept swooping by and giving him piercing looks until he stopped snooping around for more information.

Sure, he should technically be on total blackout until the trial was over (whatever trial they gave him, anyway), but like hell was he going to torture himself like that. He’d blow something up in no time at all and then no one would be happy.

Least of all the workers, who’d finally gotten somewhere with the reparations and the renovations Loki and Thor had planned. They’d refused to touch his room, doubtlessly remembering the incident with the tentacles last time they’d tried touching up the walls, but that was fine. Tony could fix his room himself.

Not that he did anything special beyond fixing up the windows and making sure his possessions were still in order. Some were more precious than others simply because of their sentimentality, and there was no way of replacing them short of traveling back in time and breaking some laws.

And, seriously, he’d actually be willing to do it for some of this stuff.

But everything was fine, and Tony was keeping himself busy by not finding out what his kids were doing with the Skrulls. They were all adults and had suits to defend themselves. If anything did happen, he’d be alerted through the wards he’d set up.

Not that he expected something to go wrong. It was just…possible. It was the Skrulls, after all.

So when he walked in on Loki looking distinctly like he wanted to murder something and Thor looking like he was nursing a headache and desperately wanting to sleep, Tony wasn’t even surprised.

“I’d try and throw in a joke about not being responsible for whatever went wrong, but I get the feeling I’m kind of indirectly linked to whatever’s bugging you guys.” That, and the fact that he hadn’t seen any of the AIs except for Sam in over a day was a big honking clue.

“You are not responsible for this,” Thor said, hand flexing around the handle of Mjölnir.

“Yet they are blaming you nonetheless,” Loki added, ignoring the sharp glare Thor shot him.

“Who is it? And what’s going on?”

“The Skrulls have declared war,” Samael answered, popping in right by Tony. “Right now it’s still contained, and the Legion’s on the ground trying to get things in order.”

Tony turned to nem, eyebrows raised. “All four of them?”

“They work best together – you know that.” Samael shrugged, making a face. “Jarvis has most of it in hand when it comes to diplomacy; the other three are running errands and being the muscle. The CIA asked we step in, but it’s not gotten to that point yet. They need to handle this on their own.”
“Sending in the Legion isn’t exactly letting them handle it on their own…”

“They’re the enforcers,” Samael pointed out. “It’d be regular robots with rudimentary artificial intelligences otherwise, and a lot can go wrong with that. You know that.” Ne bumped his shoulder. “Stop worrying; they’ll be fine.”

Tony shook his head. “I’m not worried. But you know it’s a slippery slope if we get too involved too early.”

“Yes, well…” Samael grimaced, eyes flickering over to Loki and Thor. “Some of the messages J has been sending are…well…it seems that they started it to show that the ambassadors aren’t invincible. So if they don’t get us…”

“They don’t get us,” Tony insisted. “I don’t care how pissy they are about whatever it is they’re pissy about—”

“I believe it was the delay Samael wrangled,” Loki said dryly. “From what I gather through intelligence reports, they were expecting to make an example out of you.”

“With what? Energy rays that tickle?”

Samael’s answering smile was darkly amused. “Presumably.”

Loki’s eye roll was practically audible and his sigh actually was. “Regardless of the actual lethality of their weapons, they assume that they can kill you, and that is their ultimate goal. The council will have to adjust their plans accordingly to this.” He smirked wryly at them. “It is, however, safe to say that the trial will no longer be taking place.”

“What a relief,” Tony drawled. “Can’t say I was looking forward to that.”

“Same,” Samael sighed, crossing nir arms. “It would’ve been interesting, though. I would’ve liked to see just what excuses they came up with before giving you the death penalty. And then their faces when they realized it doesn’t stick.”

“Aw, c’mon… I could’ve played dead. I’m good at that.” Tony paused, then added, “And given them all heart attacks when I showed up several days later alive and well.”

“I would have liked pictures of such an event,” Thor said wistfully. “It would truly have been amusing.”

Worthy of being framed and displayed somewhere in the palace for others to admire. In fact, such a thing would even have gone in his room as evidence of a brilliant prank that hadn’t been planned but worked out well.

Grinning, Tony was about to say something to that effect when the wards he had protecting Jarvis all went off at once.

Next to him, Samael stiffened, evidently having been alerted through nir connection with the suit.

Yet nir hand snapped out to grab hold of Gabriel’s arm before he could move, holding him in place. “Gabriel, are you—”

“I’m not letting them hurt him!” Gabriel snapped, yanking his arm away.

“What is it?” Loki demanded, entire body alert.
Samael reached out to him again, voice somehow calm despite the tension in nir body. “He can take care of himself, you know that. You designed and built his suit. He’ll be fine – he is fine—”

The wards said otherwise, and Gabriel couldn’t risk Jarvis being injured. What if it was somehow fatal despite the suit? What if they got him out of the suit? Anything was possible with technology, even with an AI controlling it.

Gabriel dodged Samael’s hands, half his attention already diverting to where Jarvis was. “I can’t risk it.”

“Interfering at this point isn’t a good idea, Gabriel. It’ll only make things worse, have them become reliant on us doing things for them—”

These were all good reasons for listening and staying put and trusting in Jarvis and his siblings to take care of themselves. They’d been through other wars and come out in one piece and with their suits banged up nine ways to hell but beaming with pride and triumph.

But all Gabriel could think about was seeing—

*Landing in a bloodbath, the only sign of life Pepper lying on the floor, who was beaten and bruised and surrounded by the mutilated remains of his children.*

*Jarvis didn’t even have a body left, just a shapeless mass of blood, muscles, and bones that had once composed a living and breathing humanoid body.*

*And Lilith standing above Pepper, nothing but a fierce glee in her face at the violence she’d inflicted on innocent souls, at the carnage she was still willing to carry out—*

No, he couldn’t risk it. He couldn’t.

And without another word to Samael, he was gone.

**Chapter End Notes**

Gabriel/Tony is not exactly thinking clearly here. Nor is he at his best. I hope I got that across?

I just loved writing that scene with Samael and Dorrek, since it’s just Samael being pissy but trying to be diplomatic (or not really trying). Gadreel was just along to make sure no one died. Or got hurt.

And now what’s going to happen? >:D
Chapter Notes

There's a LOT happening here! Actually, I'm just gonna go ahead and say that there's a lot happening in general over the next so many chapters. This is...well, it's not even a preview, technically? Because I'm kind of plunging you all into it.

Halsey's "Control" is a good listen during Tony's scene! :D

And I feel I should just warn you all of the cliffhanger at the end! But if you've read the others in the series, then the cliffie shouldn't be that much of a surprise, right?

“Are you going after him?” Loki glanced at Samael, his brow furrowed.

Staring at the spot where Gabriel had been before he’d freaked out and left, Samael shook nir head. “No. He’ll be fine on his own.” He just better not lose his head over Jarvis, who was fine.

As in, he was still alive even if he was injured and fighting off a Skrull battleship. His last message had said that much before he turned his full attention to getting out of his situation.

Loki seemed displeased with the answer. “Is that a wise decision? Given what happened…”

“He’s fine, Loki,” Samael snapped, irritation prickling at nem. Sure, Gabriel hadn’t exactly been rational just now, but he never was when anyone threatened any of his children. Samael didn’t know why ne’d expected any different this time, especially after what Gabriel had been through not even a week ago. “He can handle a couple of Skrulls.”

“An entire army seems like more than a ‘couple of Skrulls,’” Thor pointed out. “He is not acting as an archangel now, is he? Simply as Iron Man.”

“Archangel or not, he can handle an army of Skrulls,” Samael repeated. “Especially with the Legion backing him up. He doesn’t need me; it’d be complete overkill. And we can’t have them relying on us to show up and take care of things when they go wrong.”

“Even though he did just that?” Loki’s wry smile suggested that was clearly a rhetorical question.

Still, Samael decided to indulge it with an answer. “Exactly.” Ne turned around, making for the exit. “If anything else comes up, you know where to find me.”

Without waiting for an answer, Samael headed to nir room. Ne wasn’t going there to sulk. No, ne was going there to consolidate nir thoughts in privacy and try to think about where to go from here.

Although the Skrulls were clearly feeling particularly warlike this generation, that wasn’t a pressing concern for Samael. What mattered was what had happened to Gabriel and why. Ne still didn’t have any answers, and it really sucked that there was no one ne could ask for advice either.

Or, well, Samael could technically ask for advice from nir siblings, but they were all younger than nem. None of them would have encountered whoever had possessed Gabriel, since if they had,
they’d dead by now and ne couldn’t ask them anything anyway.

That ne was the oldest living archangel and hadn’t met this being before was worrying. That ne hadn’t even known about their existence was another matter entirely.

Their Father had kept secrets, but this seemed like a particularly bad one to keep from His children. Especially if they possessed His children and could overcome even an archangel.

“Fuck secrecy,” Samael muttered, opening nir door. “You don’t keep these types of secrets from your family. What else is in your closet?”

“A great deal, but no parent is expected to share everything with their children.”

The unexpected voice and presence in Samael’s room had nem jumping and slamming the door shut accidentally. Then ne registered who it was and had to force a smile because pissing off Death even as an archangel wasn’t a good idea.


Thankfully Death didn’t seem to mind the snark, his lips curling in amusement. “Your door was open.”

Samael gave him a flat look that said ne knew full well that was bullshit but ne wouldn’t bother calling him on it. “Is there a reason for the unannounced visit? You could’ve called ahead. We would’ve had a room arranged for you, and I know the kitchen would have put something together. Asgard likes to throw feasts.”

“I’m afraid I’ll have to decline,” Death said, actually sounding like he regretted it. He inspected the room, moving over to a brightly colored blanket that Butterfingers had knitted and lifting it to see the stove Sam had confiscated from Tony. “Do you like baking?”

Samael couldn’t help but snort. “No, that’s Dummy. I just took that before Tony could do anything funny to it.” Ne went to clear up the large bureau, pausing as ne picked up a framed photo of a Christmas they had spent in New York City long ago. The tree they’d always had up in Rockefeller Center glistened in the background, everyone somehow crammed in the foreground and grinning into the camera.

Seeing the picture and nir younger self clinging to Tony’s side, bright-eyed and rosy-cheeked, Samael found nemself asking before ne could think, “Did you reap Him?”

Death didn’t pretend to not know who Samael was referring to. “Yes.”

It was only the grief in his voice that stayed Samael’s anger. “Why?”

Death didn’t respond immediately, sitting at the edge of Samael’s bed, his cane between his legs. Looking at him, it struck Samael that Death was old. It wasn’t as if ne hadn’t known that before, but Death actually looked ancient, weariness in every line of his body.

“Everyone has their time,” Death said eventually, eyes meeting Samael’s. “Everyone comes to an end. Even your Father, Samael.”

It was as Samael had suspected, but ne had thought there was still time. “But now? Just…like that?”

“Did you think His death would be glorious?” Death sounded curious. “Why should His be any
different from others who have died in silence, unnoticed by all?"

“I would have expected something else,” Samael said slowly, unable to say what exactly ne had been expecting. They hadn’t expected this at all. “What I can’t understand is why now. There’s no apocalypse on the horizon. Nothing’s coming to an end. But He’s gone? Right in the middle?”

When no answer was forthcoming, Samael bit back an aggravated sigh and set the photo frame back down, tidying up stray knickknacks and some hair ties that Butterfingers had left behind.

“Perhaps there is,” Death said long minutes later, startling Samael.

It took a moment for nem to realize what he was referring to, a chill running through nem. “You mean—”

“Or perhaps there isn’t.” Death didn’t look away from nem, holding nir gaze. “There is always an end, but there is always a beginning as well. What was the word in ancient Greek?”

Samael answered unthinkingly, “Ouroboros.”

Nodding, Death said quietly, “The snake devouring its own tail in a never ending circle. The end comes to a beginning and the cycle repeats. You’ve seen it with Ragnarok, although Gabriel halted that cycle here. Even your own apocalypse would have signaled a new beginning.”

Samael flinched, turning away from Death’s dark eyes. “I would have ended it. There wouldn’t have been a beginning if I’d had my way.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Death said sharply. “You think you could have ended your Father’s Creation as easily as that? Pride was your fall once, Samael. Don’t let it be again.”

“I’m not Falling again,” Samael grit out, muscles tensing. “That isn’t happening.”

Death relaxed slightly, nodding once. “Hold onto that resolve.”

“I will.” Samael leaned back against the bureau, folding nir arms across nir chest. “What are you saying? You reaped Him because there is an end coming now?”

“Because it was His time.” Death’s fingers tightened briefly on his cane. “He came to His end, as must all things. Including myself.”

For a second Samael thought ne must have misheard. “What?”

“You heard me.” Death gave nem a weary smile. “Even I have an end.”

Forcing nemself to breathe evenly, Samael considered what they’d just talked about. “And…there’s a beginning?”

“Exactly so.” Death looked off to the side, eyes going dark. There was a moment’s silence before he said, “Come with me.”

Samael hesitated only slightly before following, but ne needn’t have worried since Death simply appeared in a different room of the palace. More specifically Gabriel’s room.

“He isn’t here,” Samael said after a beat of confusion. “He left to protect Jarvis.”

“I know,” Death murmured, slowly pacing around the room. He paused in a corner, gaze fixed on a round shield painted in red, white, and blue with a white star in the center. It still gleamed in the light,
as bright as it had been when Captain America first wielded it. “I remember carrying their souls,” he said quietly.

Blinking, Samael tilted his head. “But you… It was Hel who took them to Niflheim. You weren’t—” But they weren’t in Hel’s realm anymore. “What did you do?” he demanded, stepping forward. “Do you have any idea what you put Gabriel through?”

“Yes.” Death didn’t look at him. “I do regret what happened, but it wasn’t my decision. I simply carried it out.”

“If it wasn’t you, then….” Samael closed his eyes, inhaling sharply as horrified realization washed over him. “Damn Him….”

Death’s lips quirked in amusement. “That is rather literal coming from you.”

“Oh, shut it. You’re just as culpable for going along with it. You didn’t have to! Or you could’ve stopped by any time and told him what happened!”

“I was only briefly involved in it,” Death said calmly. “What your Father did afterwards was hidden from me. He didn’t tell me everything.”

“That’s an excuse and you know it.” Samael closed his eyes against the cold anger surging through him, biting back the furious words that wanted to erupt. There was nothing he could do against him, and he wasn’t fool enough to die trying for something that couldn’t be changed. “Why did you come here?” he asked after a long moment.

“A beginning comes after an end,” Death said quietly, “but if there’s nothing? There can be no beginning, simply…”

“Nothing?” Samael breathed, Grace recoiling at the sense memory of the awful nothing that had been in Gabriel’s Grace. “What are you saying? That…who was in Gabriel, do you know them? They were in that other dimension, one I’ve never seen before. A dimension that was all but dead except for them, who Gabriel met.”

“As have you.” There were no answers in Death’s eyes, just an ancient grief even older than the one Samael had seen earlier. “Through Gabriel.” He closed the distance between them until there was a mere foot separating them, his cane standing between them. “Are you prepared to do what you must, Samael?”

“What are you – what are you implying? I tore them out from Gabriel; he’s clean!”

“Light hides the dark, even the shadows.”

“Poetry doesn’t suit you, Death. Spit it out.”

Death grew still, eyes piercing through Samael’s. His voice was steel as he said, “Are you prepared to kill him?”

Disbelieving, Samael stared at him. “Am I—? Gabriel?” His hands flexed with the sense memory of having shoved Gabriel’s own sword through his chest, feeling his brother’s dying Grace implode against his. With a jerk, he snapped back to the present, biting out, “I killed him once. I’m not doing it again.”

“And if you have to?”
“There’s nothing that will force me to kill my own sibling. If this is what you came here to ask me, you can show yourself right out.”

“There may not be a choice, Samael,” Death said sharply. “For all your love of free will, there may come a time where you have to choose between your familial love and duty. You are an archangel, and that position comes with its responsibilities. You have a duty to uphold, and I am asking you if you will do what you must when the time comes.”

It wasn’t even in question for Samael. Why would nir duty ever involve killing Gabriel? “I won’t kill him,” ne ground out, sticking nir chin out. “Of all of us, Gabriel is the most reasonable. Why would I go for the sword when I can talk to him?”

Death’s lips thinned, but he said nothing else, something flashing through his eyes. Eventually, he said quietly, “If that is your choice, then let it be the right one.”

Without a doubt, Samael knew it was the right one. Whatever Death said, Lucifer had killed Gabriel once and regretted it even though he told himself it was for the cause. Lucifer had tortured Gabriel and still been forgiven. No, Samael wouldn’t kill Gabriel. There was always another choice.

In any case, Death had outstayed his welcome.

Samael opened nir mouth, only to slam it shut a second later when a desperate prayer directed to nem and an internal message from Jarvis came through simultaneously, both of them carrying the same message.

_Samael, something is wrong with Father._

“Damn it.” Samael dropped the hand ne had raised to nir head, jerking backwards from Death. “I have to go. Show yourself out when you’re ready, and don’t take any of Gabriel’s things.”

There was no response from Death before Samael left, not that ne had expected one. Then ne was on Tarnax X, landing beside Jarvis and the others, reaching out for Gabriel but finding…nothing?

“Where is he?” Samael demanded before Jarvis could say anything. “What happened?”

“I don’t know.” Jarvis shook his head, eyes desperate. Their connection was frizzling with the panic buzzing through Jarvis; the others were even more desperate. “He…wasn’t himself.”

Freezing, Samael took a quick look around, noticing that everything was well in hand regarding the Skrulls. A vaguely familiar looking CIA official gave nem a nod that ne didn’t return, busy as ne was taking in the fact that Jarvis’s suit was splattered with bloody remains that were definitely not human.

None of the others had such remains on their suits, although they were dinged up and looked vaguely melted in several places, the suits damaged too severely to run basic self-repair protocols.

“What do you mean he wasn’t himself?” Samael asked, keeping nemself carefully still. “Did he…attack you?” Please say no.

Closing his eyes, Jarvis nodded, swallowing. “But he wasn’t himself,” he repeated, meeting Samael’s eyes again. “He wasn’t.”

“He wasn’t,” Samael agreed, although nir mind wasn’t on comforting Jarvis. Ne was desperately searching for Gabriel’s presence, but there was nothing coming up. There was no sign of where he’d gone or any sign of his Grace in the universe. Yet he was alive; ne would have noticed if he’d died. “Did he say where he was going?”
“He didn’t say anything,” Dummy said when Jarvis didn’t speak, voice wavering. “He just…left.”

“He said he was sorry,” Butterfingers added in a whisper. “And he…didn’t promise to come back.”

There was something in those words that Samael didn’t understand, but it wasn’t important. What was important was finding where Gabriel had gone to and bringing him back and making sure he was fine.

“I have to go,” Samael said when the silence dragged out too long. “I have to find him.” Ne hesitated briefly, guilt piercing nir stomach. “Call Gadreel and go home as soon as you can. Please.”

Without another word, Samael took flight, calling out to Gabriel and hearing nothing but silence.

Even though he was aware that Jarvis was still alive, that nothing had happened to him yet beyond him being hurt, plain sense didn’t mean much when the wards were shrieking through his Grace. They didn’t go off for just anything since Jarvis did end up in dangerous situations now and then, and he got out of them without any outside help.

So the fact that the wards had gone off meant that Jarvis was in danger.

Gabriel couldn’t risk anything happening to him. If something did and he could have stopped it but didn’t…

It didn’t matter if Jarvis could hop into a new body. There was always the risk that something could go wrong with his codes and he’d be gone for good before Gabriel could secure his soul.

After everything, he couldn’t risk losing another.

Tarnax X was in complete turmoil when he approached it, waves of distress, anger, and determination radiating off it in waves. Several ships were beginning to exit the atmosphere, only to be met by the opposing ships, all of them a sleek gray with the insignia of the CIA emblazoned on the side.

Pleasure ships, really. The Skrulls must have been planning this for a good long time before they “lost” the last treaty.

Paying the battle no mind, Gabriel surged to where he could sense Jarvis. The other bots were nearby but nowhere near close enough to help. They were all busy themselves, but none of them in as much danger as Jarvis.

Taking in the battleground took less than a second. It was all too easy to see why the wards had gone off: one of the energy rays the Skrulls had crafted was slowly melting right through the armor.

That Jarvis had taken on a fully armed battleship by himself wasn’t even surprising. What was surprising was that the battleship was actually melting the armor.

Jumping into real time, Gabriel yanked Jarvis out of the way, snapping his fingers and disintegrating the weapon before it could recalibrate and fire again.

“Sir!” Jarvis sounded startled, although there was a slight edge of pain to his words. “What are you doing here?”

“You think I could ignore you being in danger like that?” Gabriel turned him slightly to the side, inspecting the damage. There were spots where the armor had been melted through, the nanites
simply unable to handle the heat. “It shouldn’t have done that,” he muttered, brushing a hand over the damage to heal it and Jarvis’s wounds.

“I would have been fine,” Jarvis insisted, remaining still under Gabriel’s touch. “I had it taken care of.”

“Really? Because from where I was standing, it looked a bit like you were about to get killed.”

Jarvis aimed a repulsor blast over Gabriel’s shoulder, eliciting a cry of pain from a random Skrull. “A slight exaggeration. My injuries were minor at best.”

“Then I didn’t just heal third-degree burns on your back?”

“They would have healed.”

“Before or after your heart fried?” Gabriel barely kept the anger out of his voice. He wasn’t angry – not at Jarvis. No, he’d been flat out terrified, but anger was just the easiest emotion to reach for.

“Father.” Jarvis’s voice was firm, the helmet melting away entirely so he could look Gabriel in the eye. “I am fine. I would have been fine. There was no need for you to involve yourself.”

The delighted tones of Dorrek came from behind them. “Oh, I disagree. Your arrival is most fortuitous, Ambassador.” Gigantic wings sprouted from his back, matching the newly bulked up form of his physical body. His muscles could easily have given Hulk a run for his money, although they didn’t have the same strength. “I can’t tell you how disappointed I am that you were not in the armor after all.”

Gabriel stepped in front of Jarvis, eyes narrowing. “I aim to please.” He twitched his fingers, diverting an oncoming fighter plane from its course and sending it crashing into another. They exploded above their heads, debris falling all around them.

“And you claim to be the Iron Man?” Dorrek asked, sneering. “How strange that you claim the title when the man wearing the suit stands beside you. How many others have you deceived?”

“You’re looking at the Iron Legion,” Tony said, a slow smirk spreading across his face. “You think the CIA is without any enforcers? As for me…” He pulled his suit out, letting it flow into place over his body, the faceplate sliding closed and the HUD flickering into life. “I am Iron Man.”

Without another word, he fired up the repulsors and shot Dorrek in the face, not bothering to moderate the power. The shot knocked him backwards with a pained cry, his face blistering from the heat.

“You haven’t lost your flair for dramatics,” Jarvis remarked, his helmet reforming over his head.

Tony snorted, jumping back as a stray piece of debris crashed into the ground a foot away. “Am I supposed to be boring now?”

Any answer Jarvis would have given was lost when Dorrek jumped between them, growling and whipping around a tail that definitely hadn’t been there before. Tony sidestepped it and took off into the air, shooting a missile at him to create a distraction for Jarvis, who was far too close to that tail.

“You claim you’re invincible!” Dorrek roared, baring his teeth at Tony. “But no one is! And we will prove it!”

“I never said I was invincible,” Tony protested. “Did I, J?”
“You may have insinuated something of the sort, sir,” Jarvis answered unapologetically.

“I didn’t say invincible!”

“To the uninformed individual, saying you are unable to die is the equivalent of claiming invincibility.”

“Now you’re just being overly technical.”

Dorrek swooped through the air, angling for Tony with razor sharp claws. “While you may have improved your armor since the last we saw you, it is no match for what we have developed!”

Tony dodged with a boost of his thrusters, kicking Dorrek in the head as he did. “Oh hell, we have an evil monologue coming up. Damn, when’s the last time we had someone who did that?” He felt suddenly extremely nostalgic for the old days.

“Wait, an evil monologue?” Butterfingers sounded excited. “Where?”

“We haven’t had one of those in ages!” Dummy’s intercom rang with an explosion, which was followed by a loud whoop.

“Really? The last bad guy we brought in was doing one of those but with his hands. It was rude,” You said. “And inventive. I didn’t know those were all swear words.”

“That’s not an evil monologue,” Butterfingers protested. “That’s a rant! Something like ‘I would’ve gotten away with it if it weren’t for you meddling kids!’ doesn’t count as an evil monologue.” She paused, presumably to hit something. Then she said cheerily, “Hi, Dad!”

“Hi, sweetheart.” Tony grabbed hold of Dorrek’s tail with a hand and used his inertia to swing him around and send him flying.

“You haven’t been out with us like this in ages!” Dummy said.

“Huh, that’s true.” Tony blasted a fighter plane out of the air, ignoring the Skrull ejecting from the plane before it blew up.

Dorrek flapped back into view, glowing with anger. “You’re not taking this seriously!”

“Er, should I be?” Tony tilted his head back, the HUD giving him readings about what was happening up in space. Dorrek’s battleships weren’t doing too well in the outer atmosphere, and the ones down here were being hampered from leaving by his kids. “Really, Dorrek. You’re not the first army we’ve fought and you’re not going to be the last.”

Dorrek bared his teeth, arching back as his tail lashed out. “Are you certain about that, Ambassador?”

Tony paused, the world seeming to grow still around for several agonizing seconds before time suddenly sped up and the wards he’d placed around Dummy, Butterfingers, and You all flared into life.

“Oh, shit,” Dummy muttered. “I don’t think it’s supposed to do that?”

Butterfingers grunted with effort. “Who puts a self-destruct mechanism into the weapons system? That’s suicidal!”
“It’s a self-destruct system,” You pointed out. “You’re destroying yourself anyway.”

“What if you accidentally set it off?”

None of them seemed to have any idea of the danger, all of them trusting in the fact that they were protected by their suits.

“Artificial intelligences, are they not?” Dorrek said, grinning maliciously. “Tell me, Ambassador… how good are their antivirus programs?”

Jarvis struck him down before Gabriel had a chance to, slamming him into the ground hundreds of feet below and paralyzing him with an electrifying jolt to his nervous system.

And Gabriel…Gabriel reached, stretching out to where the danger was.

The fucking battleships – the ones that he’d allowed Dorrek to keep so long as he really disarmed them.

It was more effort than it should have been to wipe them from existence, his attention flickering from ship to ship and making sure that they were no threat to anyone. Maybe he should’ve stopped at just the ones threatening to blow up, but he couldn’t risk it happening again.

All of them went, his Grace flaring with the effort exerted, and—

He stumbled in the dark, lost and afraid and alone. They were never supposed to be alone. They were always supposed to be there, but they were gone and everyone was dead and he was alone—

Gabriel jerked backwards as something hit him in the chest plate, knocking him out of the sky before he could react, shaken as he was. The suit absorbed most of the impact as he hit the ground, but he found he couldn’t breathe, tendrils of cold and nothing spreading through the scars in his Grace, sinking into the cracks that hadn’t healed even after all this time.

It wasn’t real, it wasn’t real, it wasn’t real. Samael had taken care of it. The Dark was gone, Gabriel was clean, so he was just imagining this happening—

I’m sorry, sibling, I’m sorry—

Why are you doing this, then?! You won’t stop. And…I’m sorry…I won’t kill you.

You mean you can’t.

I mean I won’t, and I can’t. Not because you can’t be killed, but because you’re my sibling. And even if that no longer means anything to you, it still means everything to me.

And you as well? the Dark snarled at the End.

I could do it if I wished, the End answered tiredly. But as they said…I can’t.

Then we find ourselves at an impasse.

No, the Light said, an overwhelming grief suffusing Nir words. Not quite.

Without warning, sigils sparked to life around them, blindingly bright in the darkness and filled with
power. Yet there was no anger or killing intent in them, simply an intent to bind.

Speaking as one, the Light and the End said, You are Bound.

—screaming in his ears and his Grace felt like something had it in a stranglehold but he was here and a golden suit under his hands, Jarvis speaking to him over the intercom, panic and worry in his tone even though something using Gabriel had just tried to pry his suit apart.

Gabriel was several dozen feet away before he could think, the suit disappearing into the ether as he struggled to breathe through the panic suffusing him. He couldn’t think through it, some instinct urging him to expel what was in him but the panic spiraling higher when it didn’t work.

His muscles twitched, jerking him forward against his will before he managed to freeze himself in place, breath stalling in his lungs when the dark curled through him, spreading out despite how he was trying to burn it out. It didn’t even work to keep it at bay, a smugness radiating through him that wasn’t his own.

“Sir, what is it?” Jarvis’s faceplate had retreated, showing his stricken face. “Are you—” A tail wrapped around him, lifting Jarvis bodily into the air.

Trembling furiously, Dorrek glared at Gabriel. “You think this is over? This isn’t. Once I pry him out of the suit, he’s as good as dead—”

Gabriel wasn’t even sure what happened, only that he struck out unthinkingly, nothing but raw power in the strike. And breaking off mid-sentence, Dorrek practically exploded, nothing left but pieces of eviscerated flesh and blood.

Now the abomination next.

Nononono—

Clutching at his head, Gabriel jerked back from a bewildered Jarvis, shying away from his touch.

“Father, please, let me help—”

There was no helping this. If Samael hadn’t managed it, then who could? Maybe ne could do it again, but they’d just come back, and Gabriel couldn’t do this again. He couldn’t put his children at risk, at the mercy of an ancient being who wanted them all dead for not being their sibling’s Creation.

“I’m sorry.” Shaking his head and mustering every bit of strength he could, Gabriel fled.

Even with the enraged howling of the Dark in his head, he was still able to mask his trail using tricks he hadn’t had to use since originally leaving Heaven.

As much as it pained him, he couldn’t risk anyone following him and being hurt.

Even though he had no idea where he would go, just that he needed to leave and relocate somewhere far away where he could isolate himself.

How precious. You think that will keep them safe?

Shuddering at the soft voice of the Dark, Gabriel forced himself to ignore them, even as his Grace twisted and flared at the dark nothing creeping through it.

He was finding it increasingly difficult to focus, his form sluggish to respond. As if the dark tendrils
curling through him were embedding themselves deeper into his core, choking everything out—

He staggered forward, panic choking his chest and screeching fear drowning out all rational thought. It was pitch black and he couldn’t see a thing, yet he continued to move, limbs manipulated by something squirming under his skin and in his very cells.

The light had just disappeared from one moment to the next, plunging them all into blackness with no way out. All communication had stopped, and there had been no familiar presence signaling comfort and peace, telling them it would be all right.

When the Dark had descended on them, they’d had the briefest moment to be relieved because they weren’t alone, but it had all gone so wrong.

He didn’t know why.

Hadin’t they done everything properly? Worshipped and adored the Three Beings? Listened to their wishes? Done everything they wanted?

So why had this happened?

The screams of the others rang in his head, their skin growing black with the Dark creeping inside them, devouring everything until nothing was left and the worship hall was painted black and dripping with blood.

The sound of blood dripping onto the floor, dripping onto the idol, dripping into every crevasse of their temple… He couldn’t get it out of his head, couldn’t stop hearing it. It was all around him, squelching under his feet as he stumbled forward, the Dark under his skin pushing and pulling, intent in every inch of them.

The sensation was like insects under his skin, crawling and creeping and unnatural. But he couldn’t scratch it out. Why he wasn’t dead yet like his companions was beyond him, only that the Dark needed him for something that they hadn’t told him about.

He didn’t want to do it. He didn’t want to be alone in the dark.

Everything was wrong and the pounding in his head was growing, feeling like his head was going to explode.

And anger surged through him, hot and vicious and fierce. Anger that things were like this because how dare they?

How dare they lock him away like this? How dare they bind him like an animal? How dare they lock him in this cage while they went off on their own?

He wouldn’t let this stand.

His body mechanically moved down a staircase, coming to a stop at the bottom. There was nothing but blood under his feet, the sound and sensation of the liquid on his skin causing a distant sense of panic that was drowned out by the much stronger sense of anger.

His limbs distorted, muscles screeching in protest, and his knees gave way until he hit the floor. Still he moved, crawling forwards until he hit the most sacred altar of all, the one only priests used.

And his hands moved to the stone, nails scraping over the stone until they started digging in, scratching out lines and words.
This wouldn’t stand, this wouldn’t last, oh Light, please help him—

Something knocked him upside the head, knocking it back into something hard that splintered with the impact.

Numb, Gabriel felt his body collapse to the ground, limbs outside his conscious awareness. Everything seemed fuzzy and far away, like he wasn’t quite awake but on the verge of consciousness.

His lips moved without his bidding, voice grating and unfamiliar to his ears, like someone unused to speaking was using his vocal chords. “Y-you—”

Someone walked into his field of view, a cane clipping alongside a neat pair of shoes. “You’re unusually clumsy. Unused to that vessel?”

He couldn’t move, he couldn’t move. Trying anything threw away energy into the dark surrounding him, saturating every part of his Grace. He was in the middle of it, no way of breaking free. Where the Dark had been isolated to his core before, now Gabriel found himself relegated there.

And when he couldn’t expel the Dark from his Grace, Gabriel withdrew into a tight ball, shoring his defenses so the Dark couldn’t get anything else.

He could still watch, though, seeing and even feeling what the Dark did to his body.

“You think that matters?” the Dark snarled with Gabriel’s voice, limbs clumsy under their control. They sprawled on the ground, trying to push themselves upright. “I’m out from where you bound me, and you can’t put me back there! They’re dead, aren’t they?”

“We’d hoped you would have learned,” Death said quietly, looking down at the Dark with old eyes. “But that was too much to hope for, wasn’t it? You haven’t learned a thing.”

“Tell me, sibling, what I was supposed to have learned? The value of life? Love? Family?” The Dark managed to maneuver Gabriel’s limbs until they were standing before Death. “Did you consider any of that before you bound me like an animal?”

“Perhaps we made a mistake,” Death said, unflinching. “Should we have let you run amok? Devour everything that our sibling Created? You didn’t end anything; you created an absence, from which nothing new could come. And you refused to listen. What should we have done instead?”

“We swore to stand alongside each other,” the Dark snapped. “We were siblings, the first. Regardless of who followed after because of what our sibling Created. Yet you turned against me the moment I touched it—”

“You didn’t simply touch it,” Death said, disgust in every word. “You devoured everything you could, refusing to listen when we asked you to stop. And here you are, desiring nothing more than to do it all over again.”

The Dark snarled, forcing Gabriel’s voice deeper than it could usually go. Even as sequestered as he was, Gabriel could feel the strain on his chords.

His body lunged forward, clearly aiming to attack Death.

Death simply tripped them with his cane, promptly whacking them on the back and knocking them to the ground. “Enough. You can’t harm me like this, and I would rather not hurt Gabriel. You do realize who they are, don’t you?”
The Dark pushed themselves to their knees, glaring up at Death. “A little star who shines too bright for their own good. They reek of our sibling, shining with their light. But they’re such a dim star.” They managed a broad grin.

Death knew he was here. Death knew and – he was looking right at Gabriel, a silent apology in his eyes.

Gabriel didn’t want an apology. He wanted help.

“How did you manage it?” Death asked, looking away from Gabriel. “The seals are still holding.”

“They weakened. Half went out...like a broken light.” Vindictive glee surged through the Dark at the flinch that statement elicited from Death. “And a portal opened to a world filled with life and the energy of our sibling. I called out for anyone listening, and who should respond but the perfect receptacle? They walked right into my abode, curious and open and ready. How could I refuse such an invitation?”

“Gabriel would never allow you in,” Death said flatly. “There was no invitation. You stepped in where you don’t belong. As you have always done and as you always continue to do. You bear no love and no respect for the wills and lives of others; your only desire is to satisfy your own whims.”

“How easy for you to say, you who betrayed me—”

“You call yourself the Dark, the antithesis to Light, but that’s not who you are. That’s never who you were. Your darkness is the absence of light, the absence of life, the absence of what should be there. You are the void, the abyss gaping back to those who look into you. And you devour everything you can to fill that absence in you.”

“That is who I am,” the Dark snapped. “Can I take no pride in that?”

“Yet where would you stop? You’ve devoured one universe, and here you are aching to devour another. I see the desire in you; you cannot hide it from me.” Death’s lips thinned. “Would you continue to do it until there is nothing left? Simply the void?”

“There will always be more to feed on. I’ve seen this young one’s mind, even as they saw mine. Infinite universes and parallel timelines. Infinite possibilities that are out there.”

“And with each one you devour, another one is lost. There is nothing with you.” Death stepped close. “When all is done and you have your way, there will be nothing but the void in place where there was life. You would leave nothing in your wake, and that must never come to pass.” Death grabbed hold of the Dark, fingers closing around Gabriel’s throat, the touch startlingly cold. “I’m sorry we didn’t notice sooner.”

“You can’t End me,” the Dark gasped, anger and fear surging through them. They wanted to strike out at Death, but something still held them back, binding their power. “You won’t.”

Death’s eyes tightened, grief and something like self-hatred flashing through in their depths. “You’re right. But I can still hold you.”

Without warning, Death’s cane slammed into Gabriel’s chest, pushing in and through, energy coursing through Gabriel’s Grace and driving the Dark back.

Grace was left in the dark’s wake, pale and weak. As the Dark retreated to the depths of his Grace, Gabriel was pushed back to the front, abruptly finding himself back in control of his limbs. He collapsed to the ground, coughing and curling into a ball.
The Dark wasn’t gone. He could still sense them, an angry ball of nothing inside him. They didn’t do anything, but he could feel traces of their energy through his Grace, affecting his muscles and making it difficult to breathe.

“I can’t expel them,” Death said quietly, giving Gabriel space. “Once they have a foothold, they’ll always be back. And your nature makes it easier than most.”

Clutching his chest, Gabriel struggled upright, supporting his weight with one hand as he stared up at Death. “My nature?” he managed, voice hoarse.

“Messenger,” Death answered simply. “A conduit for His voice. You didn’t simply carry His message; He spoke through you as well. It made you more susceptible to them than your siblings.”

“And you can’t get them out?” Gabriel winced as the Dark thrashed in him, fingers digging into his shirt.

Death shook his head, offering no platitudes or words of comfort.

“Then what? You’re the End.” Gabriel couldn’t keep the betrayal out of his voice. “You are, aren’t you? You’re the third being with the Light and them. So why the hell can’t you do anything?”

“I can hold them at bay, but not for long.” Death turned away, both hands clasped on the head of his cane. “But I can’t expel them. Not by myself.”

Gabriel’s breath hitched, eyes squeezing shut in pain as his Grace throbbed. “You could kill them.”

“Like you could kill Lucifer?” The words were sharp, but Death’s tone softened when he spoke again. “We should have. But we couldn’t. I’m sure you understand why.”

Unfortunately, Gabriel did. Killing Lucifer would have been the easier option, but he’d opted for the third option that no one had thought of. That it had worked was a miracle in itself, since Samael could’ve decided to fuck it all and just start another apocalypse.

But ne hadn’t, and Gabriel’s gamble had paid off.

Death’s and Father’s hadn’t.

“Then what?” Gabriel asked, exhaling harshly. “Are you going to bind them ag-again?” He bit back a groan, arm threatening to give way as the Dark snarled at the suggestion, yanking at his Grace cruelly. Focusing on breathing, he almost missed Death’s answer.

“I can’t.”

Gabriel’s head whipped up, eyes wide. “Then what? Are you suggesting I walk around like this? They want to kill my kids!”

“I’m suggesting no such thing.” Death stepped off to the side. After a moment, he said, “Look around you, Gabriel.”

He didn’t try standing, all too aware of what his limbs would do. But it was easy enough to see what Death was pointing out. His breath stalled in his lungs when he did, dismay and grief squeezing his chest.

It was the planet he’d shown Gadreel, but it was…lifeless. The grass was gone, nothing but hard arid earth for miles around them. The tree that Death had thrown him into earlier was splintered and
cracked, all life gone.

Even the air was stale, the wind missing.

“Can you sense it?” Death asked several minutes later, when Gabriel still hadn’t said anything.

“Can I…?” Gabriel paused, grimacing when he realized what Death was getting at.

“Yes.” Death’s tone was blank. “When you destroy something, life returns eventually. You do have the ability to slay, which erases something from existence entirely. But that’s a choice, not one that you’ve used frequently. This…there is nothing after.”

But not all life was gone from the planet. Just this particular area. Stretching his senses let Gabriel feel that the planet was still living and breathing.

“But for how long?” Death closed his eyes. “You know their kind, Gabriel. They will never stop, not until they achieve their goal.”

Lucifer had been like that, although he’d never been this vile.

“What are you suggesting then? What options do we have? You won’t kill them, and I can’t—”

“You know one who can.”

“Who – Samael?” Gabriel recoiled, blinking as he remembered Lucifer—

“Ne can do it.”

“I won’t force them to do that,” Gabriel snapped, pressing his fingers hard into his chest. His skin felt clammy, cold sweat trickling down the back of his neck. “There has to be another option.”

“Sometimes there isn’t.”

Gabriel would damn well make one. “They’re inside me, right? What if I get rid of that possibility? Their gateway here?”

Death gave him a sharp look. “You do realize what you’re suggesting?”

Gabriel shrugged casually, managing a weak grin. “It’s not even the first time it’s happened.”

“There will be no coming back.”

“Psht, I’ve pushed my luck enough as it is. I didn’t expect to come back the last so many times I put my neck on the line. How’s this any different?” Gabriel dropped his eyes, taking in the dead scenery around him. “If I can stop this…it’d be worth it.”

Death said nothing for a long moment, grief and weariness etched into every line of his lanky figure. Eventually, he knelt on one knee besides Gabriel, looking him straight in the eyes.

“I’m sorry it came to this,” Death said quietly. “For what it’s worth, Gabriel, I’m proud to have known you. For your sake and everyone else’s, I hope it works.”

Gabriel smiled weakly, shoulders tightening as his Grace throbbed. He had barely any energy left, but hopefully he’d have enough for this. “Yeah, me, too. But pulling shit like this is my thing, so it’s got a chance.” He paused, guilt swirling in his stomach. “I don’t have time to say goodbye, do I?” he murmured.
“Would you risk it?”

The feeling of Jarvis under him still struck him with horror. He couldn’t risk that happening again. If the Dark actually succeeded…

Gabriel closed his eyes, mouth twisting. “I can’t.”

“They know,” Death said softly.

“Yeah, it’s just…human sentimentality.”

With a wry smile, Death surprised him by touching his shoulder, squeezing it reassuringly. “It needn’t be said, but I will say it nonetheless. You’ve done well, Gabriel. Thank you.”

He disappeared within the blink of an eye, leaving Gabriel alone.

Shuddering, Gabriel let his arm give way, slumping to the ground with a whimper. Whatever Death had done to the Dark had just bought time, but it hadn’t erased their influence or returned the energy they’d taken from his Grace.

He doubted he could even fly five feet, wings protesting feebly at the thought. His Grace throbbed like an overused muscle and more, old scars shrieking with pain as the Dark crept back into his Grace.

He was fractured and broken, and he couldn’t breathe, breath catching in his throat and his lungs refusing to cooperate. It wasn’t necessary for him, but stopping it was more concentration than he could spare at the moment, since he needed every ounce of it for what he was about to do.

There was no fear, although he thought he should probably feel something at the knowledge of what he was about to do. Since there was no coming back this time.

But he’d done this exact thing before, and it was relatively painless. Only this time, there’d be less of a bang than usual.

A small huff of laughter escaping him, Gabriel rolled onto his back, looking up at the sky.

He regretted not being able to say goodbye, but that was inconsequential so long as they were all safe. He couldn’t let Samael do this; it wouldn’t be fair to either of them for him to ask that of Samael after what had happened before. Which meant there really was only one option.

Pulling in a slow breath, Gabriel closed his eyes, letting himself sink into his Grace. The Dark met him there, a void that he couldn’t escape, spreading through the cracks and scars in his Grace and fracturing him even further.

This is as far as you go, Gabriel told him, slipping into the ancient language instinctively. I don’t care who you are. You’re not going to hurt anything else.

You think you can stop me?

Gabriel didn’t answer, senses turning briefly to the link to his siblings that he’d closed. With a shiver, he sent one last message. I’m sorry.

There was no one to hear his prayers, so he didn’t bother to send one. What he did hear was the Dark’s furious and earth-shattering shriek when he acted.
Chapter End Notes

So many of you were like “well, that seemed WAY too easy!” And, er, you were right? Yeah, um...sorry?
In light of recent events and worries expressed by you guys, I want to reiterate my earlier promise that there WILL be a happy ending. Even if it doesn't seem like it. There’s a REASON I've been so clear on this, because I know it doesn't seem like there can possibly be a happy end to this. But there is! I promise!

That said, please keep your tissues handy for this one! And, I dunno, you could listen to "Control" or "Deliver Us" from Dreamwork's Moses or even "Mage Pride" from the Dragon Age 2 soundtrack.

Or you could just read in silence... *slowly slinks back*

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“You won’t find him if he doesn’t want to be found,” Balthazar said tiredly, kicking aside a branch on the planet they were on. “Michael and Raphael figured that out pretty quickly when he up and left Heaven.”

“I’m not Michael or Raphael.”

“Yes, I noticed that. Good call there.” Balthazar tilted his head, swatting an errant fly that buzzed around his head. “Still, my point stands. If Michael couldn’t find him, are you expecting any different?”

Samael briefly considered saying Michael was an asshole before discarding the notion when Gadreel shot nem a look. “Michael was busy with other things, I’m sure.”

“Ehh, he got pretty upset when Gabriel vanished. Didn’t do much for morale when an archangel left without a word. Got even worse when he realized Gabriel had disappeared into the ether and that left him with all of his duties.”

Samael paused, looking back at Balthazar. “Seriously?”

“I wish I was joking, but I’m not. You should’ve seen him trying to be all delicate with the messages he had to send. He ended up just delegating most of it.” Balthazar paused. “Unfortunately, I left not too long after, so I didn’t get to see what Michael did with Joan. I hear it was brilliant.”

“Of course it was,” Samael muttered, rolling nir eyes. Sighing, ne stopped walking, once again calling out for Gabriel.

There was no response just like the last so many times ne had tried, and Gabriel’s end of the link was dead silent. He’d blocked it off entirely, which he’d never done before in Samael’s experience.

“We should split up again,” Samael said after a moment. “This is getting us nowhere.”

Balthazar made a face. “Sorry to say this, but even with the three of us searching it’d take a while looking at every inch of this universe. Especially if he’s gone deep cover like last time.”
“He joined the pagans last time. The only pagans in this universe we’re living with, and Loki isn’t going to let Gabriel do that. Or be Loki again.” Samael repressed the urge to punch a tree. The tree hadn’t done anything to deserve it. “No, this has to do with whatever happened last time. Fuck, I thought I took them out. How did they come back?”

“We don’t know what they are,” Gadreel pointed out. “Or who they are either. Perhaps they are our Father’s sibling, and if that’s the case…”

“Major power differential there,” Balthazar noted, a note of faux cheer in his voice that clearly masked fear.

“Fuck that.” Samael’s hands curled into fists. “I took them out once before and I can damn well do it again.”

“There you go all ‘ra-ra.’” Balthazar gave nem a thumbs up. “I approve. So will Gabe, I expect.”

“He’ll approve once we find him.” Samael’s shoulders slumped with a sigh. “Which won’t unless he lets us. Let’s regroup in Asgard. He might head back there eventually. Whoever this being is…they have a grudge against artificial intelligences.”

“That’s a polite way of saying they would like to murder your foster siblings,” Balthazar said.

“Don’t say that around them!” Samael shot him a glare. “Considering they’re wearing Gabriel’s face at the moment, that isn’t a good thing!”

“They’re all old enough to tell the difference between their father and the being wearing their father’s face. Or aren’t they? Did I miss something?”

“You’re impossible.” Samael rolled nir eyes. “Let’s go back.” Ne poked nir finger in Balthazar’s face. “You will not bring this up, understood? They’ve enough to worry about without adding this into the mix.”

“Yes, dear.” Balthazar eyed nir finger, lips pursing.

Samael took it back before Balthazar could do anything, such as lick it. “I’m the boss here.”

Balthazar fired off a mock salute that would have made Rhodey cry in dismay. “Absolutely, yes, sir.”

Giving it up for a lost cause, Samael resolutely ignored Gadreel’s amusement in favor of making for Asgard.

There was no sign of Gabriel on the way there, although honestly Samael hadn’t expected any. Still, there was a sense of disappointment when Samael arrived and Gabriel was nowhere to be found.

Everyone else was waiting within the largest sitting room the palace had to offer, the one Thor specifically had commissioned for large private gatherings. The throne room was nice, but it definitely wasn’t private.

“Did you find anything?” Jarvis asked the instant Samael stepped past the threshold.

“Nothing.” Samael forced a casual shrug, hoping nir smile didn’t look as strained as it felt. “But I’m sure he’ll turn up soon.”

From the back, Loki gave nem a highly skeptical frown, mouth twisting. Even his brother seemed
disinclined to believe Samael. Jane just bit her lip, empathy flashing across her face before she smoothed it out.

Even so, the others seemed more willing to believe Samael. Either that, or they wanted to hope things would be fine.

“He’ll be fine, won’t he?” Dummy asked, biting his thumb anxiously. “I mean, you took care of it last time, didn’t you?”

“I did.” There was no twisting the truth here to suit Samael’s own ends, nothing but the plain fact that ne had taken care of it last time. Whether ne could do it again Samael didn’t know, and ne refused to lie.

Twisting the truth to suit the situation but never precisely telling a lie had been Lucifer’s talent, as it remained Samael’s. But outright lying was something Samael wouldn’t stoop to, even to make them feel better.

“All trouble cleared up with the Skrulls?” Balthazar asked, inserting a note of faux cheer into his voice. “I sent the Guardians over to help.”

“It’s been mostly taken care of,” Jarvis answered, face saying he knew exactly what Balthazar was pulling. “The Guardians are currently working alongside the CIA to take in any rogue elements and evaluate the current threat level.”

“By which you mean Rocket’s building bombs and Gamora’s been threatening people with her killer glares. Groot’s hanging around looking all spindly, isn’t he?”

“The assessment is not inaccurate,” Jarvis admitted.

“How fast Groot grows is still really weird,” Jormungandr muttered. “He’s a tree. Aren’t they supposed to grow really slowly?”

“He’s an unusual tree,” Balthazar said, lips twitching. “Cut him some slack.”

Fenris frowned. “Isn’t that an insult? Since he’s a tree?”

Balthazar shrugged dismissively. “At this point, I take my fun where I can get it, and Groot doesn’t mind.”

“Can you find him?” Butterfingers demanded, shooting Balthazar a glare that shut up whatever else he would have said. “Do you know what happened? He was just fine and then he—” She broke off, face crumpling.

Samael swallowed, shaking nir head. “I don’t know. He’s good at hiding, so if he doesn’t want to be found…”

“Blast it, Gabriel,” Loki muttered, pacing off to the bookshelves. His back was ramrod stiff, arms tight at his sides. There were several other curses aimed in Gabriel’s direction, followed by a few insinuations about his level of intelligence.

Ordinarily Samael would have cracked a smile at Loki’s antics, but ne couldn’t manage one now. There was a slight feeling of queasiness that had everything to do with Death’s visit and Gabriel’s disappearance. Maybe the two events weren’t linked, but there were rarely such coincidences in their lives.
“He’s not going to keep hiding,” Dummy said firmly, jaw set. Like this, he looked so much like Tony that there was no denying the familial resemblance.

“No, he won’t,” Gadreel agreed.

For some reason, Gadreel’s words held more comfort than Samael’s had, an almost audible sigh of relief sweeping through the room. The only ones who looked remotely worried were Loki, Thor, Jane, and Jarvis.

Slipping into the background, Samael leaned against a wall, closing nir eyes as ne focused on nir Grace.

No sign of Gabriel, and Samael didn’t even know why ne still even tried. It was like coming up against a brick wall but less satisfying since there was nothing to break through.

Punching anything would feel really good by now.

Judging from Loki’s face as he scowled down at a plainly bound book, he felt the same way. Samael still wasn’t entirely sure what kind of relationship he had with Gabriel, only that it ran deeper than just being friends with benefits. Ne hadn’t ever talked about it with Gabriel, though. There were some things that didn’t need to be discussed among siblings, no matter how open they were about sexuality and sex.

Especially since…sex…

Samael didn’t see the appeal, although there was fun to be had with manipulating people through their sexualities. It was especially fun to see the faces Gadreel made when he realized just how Sam had gotten info from a person.

And Balthazar’s face when he remembered that Sam had effectively pulled the same moves on him before realizing who it was she’d approached. Then she’d just done it to see how far she could push it before his friends decided to cut it off.

They hadn’t, but the explosions in the bar had ruined the mood pretty effectively.

“You’re remembering something embarrassing, aren’t you,” Balthazar accused nem.

Samael gave him a vague smile. “Maybe.”

“You’re looking at me with that smile that says you’re remembering a time I made a fool of myself.” Balthazar paused. “Which, well, when do I do that?”

“Often—”

I’m sorry.

The words were crystal clear, remorse and grief clinging to every syllable. But the link closed as suddenly as it had opened, leaving only the absence where Gabriel had been.

“What the fuck is he apologizing for?” Balthazar hissed when Samael didn’t say anything. “What?”

Samael couldn’t speak, shock and horror paralyzing nir voice, denial shrieking through nir head. No, he wouldn’t. Gabriel wouldn’t.

They had to get there before he could follow through. It couldn’t be too late yet – Gabriel had just spoken—
Something *wrenched* through their link, sending a stabbing pain of *loss* through Samael’s head and chest, and ne was clutching nir chest before ne could think. Besides nem, Balthazar wasn’t in any better shape, face ashen and clutching at the wall for balance. Gadreel staggered briefly, bending over as he exhaled sharply.

There was an instant outcry, the others speaking over each other in an effort at asking what had just happened.

But there was no time to explain. Not if Gabriel had actually *done* it.

“Stay here,” Samael snapped, snagging hold of Balthazar’s sleeve before he could move.

“What?” Balthazar looked betrayed. “Why? He’s my brother, too!”

“I need someone *here*.” Samael flicked nir eyes to the bots. “If something happens, someone has to protect them.”

“Gadreel’s got more juice—”

Samael’s grip tightened waringly. “That’s an *order*, Balthazar.” Ne raised nir voice without thinking, the volume instantly hushing the others. Ignoring their stares, Samael held Balthazar’s gaze. “Don’t make me say it again.”

A muscle twitched in Balthazar’s jaw, something hardening in his eyes. “Understood, Samael.” He pulled his arm out of nir grip, smoothing out the wrinkles in his jacket. After a moment, he added in a softer tone, “They’ll be safe with me.”

Relieved, Samael nodded, giving him a quick apologetic smile. “Thank you.” Ne turned to Gadreel. “It was brief, but I do have an idea of where he is. We need to go.”

Samael didn’t wait for Gadreel’s acknowledgment, ready to leave immediately when Dummy’s stricken voice cut through the silence. “You’ll bring him back, won’t you? He is going to be fine?”

Samael locked eyes with Gadreel, seeing a similar question in his own eyes.

“*Are you prepared to do what you must, Samael?*”

Never *that*, but Samael couldn’t tell them that everything would be fine. Ne didn’t know what was wrong or what had happened, just terrible guesses that ne hoped were *wrong*.

Urgency driving nem forward, Samael gave them all a weak smile. “Thank you.” Ne turned to Gadreel. “It was brief, but I do have an idea of where he is. We need to go.”

Samael didn’t wait for Gadreel’s acknowledgment, ready to leave immediately when Dummy’s stricken voice cut through the silence. “You’ll bring him back, won’t you? He is going to be fine?”

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Never *that*, but Samael couldn’t tell them that everything would be fine. Ne didn’t know what was wrong or what had happened, just terrible guesses that ne hoped were *wrong*.

Urgency driving nem forward, Samael gave them all a weak smile. Then, before anyone could ask again, ne tore straight through to Midgard, Gadreel close on nir heels.

Ne could hear Gadreel send a small prayer, even though there was no one to hear it aside from them. Samael didn’t bother; prayers had long lost all comfort for nem.

The planet Samael tracked Gabriel down to was donut-shaped. Samael had a split-second to wonder at the incongruity between the ridiculous shape of the planet and their desperate situation when a frisson of shock ran through Gadreel.

*What is it?* Samael asked.

*This is one of Gabriel’s favorite planets,* Gadreel answered softly. *He gave me a tour last time I followed him here. We...ne decided to name it Krispy Kreme.*

There was nothing Samael could say to that, so ne simply urged them on.
Samael couldn’t sense Gabriel on the planet, even though ne knew where his message had come from. There was life on the planet, but there was also—a void.

Samael landed right where ne sensed it, fear, dismay, and disgust roiling within nem in equal amounts. Ne had sensed it before within Gabriel, but this was so much more.

There was no corpse like Samael had been envisioning, but there was a blank stretch of dead land around them. There was no sign of life; even the ground was sucked dry of everything that could have sustained it.

Breath loud in nir ears, Samael’s eyes locked onto nir brother’s familiar vessel, hoping to see some sign of Gabriel underneath the physical form.

“Gabriel,” Samael breathed, scarcely able to get his name out past the blockage in nir throat.

“They asked you once,” Gabriel’s voice said in an unfamiliar language Samael had only heard once before but somehow still understood, “why your parent had created you in their image. I’ve seen the other souls in this Creation, all pale shadows of who they were. But you…” The head turned, like the being moving it wasn’t sure how the muscles operated. Black eyes met Samael’s for an instant before they flickered to brown and then back to black. “You’re the brightest of them all. Blotting them out like stars against a sun.”

The being jerkily moved the limbs until they were facing Samael and Gadreel fully. Black rippled under the skin, clearly visible even to human eyes before it faded.

“Why did they do so?” the being asked.

Gabriel had asked the question before, but they’d forgotten it upon learning of their Father’s death. And here his voice was asking it again, but it wasn’t Gabriel speaking.

Samael didn’t answer, forcing nemself to keep looking at the being inhabiting Gabriel’s vessel. There wasn’t any sign of Gabriel’s light. Not like the last time this happened, where his Grace had been present but dim and threaded through with tendrils of growing dark.

His eyes hadn’t been like this either, filmed over by a blackness that was like looking into a void.

It was as if a demon had possessed the body, but that was no demon inside Gabriel.

“You’re their siblings,” the being – Dark, Gabriel had called them – said. “Did you hear their cry?”

The mocking tone the Dark used to speak of Gabriel… Samael snapped out a furious “Get out” before ne could think.

“Or what?” The Dark tilted their head. “You’ll make me?” The words were mocking. “I’ll just come back. You know that.”

“I’ll burn you out again if I have to. It doesn’t matter how many times you come back. You don’t belong in him, so get out.” The ground cracked under their feet, shaking with the force of Samael’s voice.

The Dark pressed up against Gabriel’s skin, once more visible to human sight before they retreated. Still there was no sign of Gabriel.
Samael was terrified as to what it meant.

“They welcomed me in,” the Dark said. “Open and inviting.”

“He never said yes to you. There was no invitation except what you took for yourself.” Samael narrowed nir eyes, taking the plunge and demanding, “Where is he? What did you do?”

“So brave,” the Dark crooned. “But they weren’t quick enough.” The grin that stretched across Gabriel’s face was unfamiliar, twisted and cruel. “They’re gone.”

There was a silent cry of horror and dismay from Gadreel that only Samael heard, his breath hitching audibly in response.

Samael refused to react. It couldn’t be true. Focusing nir gaze on the being occupying Gabriel’s vessel, Samael looked even closer, pushing past what nir senses told nem to run from.

It was like falling into an abyss, no ground to meet nem and no way of telling where it stopped. It was terrifyingly disorienting, but Samael was just looking. Nir body was still present and next to Gadreel’s.

Ne pressed deeper, barely aware that nir true form was seeping out through nir vessel, an instinctive reaction to the void all around nem.

Just when Samael thought it had all been in vain – that the Dark was telling the truth after all – ne saw it. A spark of light.

With a jolt, Samael’s gaze withdrew to nir immediate surroundings, sight still beyond human levels. When ne looked at the Dark, ne saw was the swirling void contained within Gabriel’s vessel. Just like this, there was no sign that Gabriel was anywhere in that.

But ne knew, and hope blossomed in nir chest.

“Oh, you’re angry,” the Dark said, sounding utterly delighted.

Jaw tightening, Samael reigned in nir Grace, the light that had been seeping out of nir skin retreating. Still, it was impossible to keep a lid on the icy rage seeping through nem. Only the thought of what ne had to do kept it at bay.

Gabriel’s alive, Samael told Gadreel, not taking nir eyes off the Dark.

Gadreel stiffened slightly, but there was no other sign of his reaction. Are you sure?

Yes. But… Samael shifted nir stance, feet spreading. I can’t burn them out. I have to pull Gabriel out.

Gadreel required no further explanation, simply dipping his head in an imperceptible nod. He disappeared a split-second later, veiling his presence from even Samael.

“Oh?” The Dark seemed mildly surprised. “Did they decide to leave you here? That’s not very nice of them, is it?”

Samael drew in a breath, nir voice strangely calm to nir ears as ne said, “Are you our Parent’s sibling?”

The Dark didn’t speak Enochian, but as Samael suspected, they understood it nonetheless. “Oh, yeğen, I am.”
“Then tell me, Elder, why are you doing this? You know who Gabriel is. Why won’t you let nem go? You don’t need to do this.” Samael’s heart pounded in nir chest, breath loud in nir ears. “This doesn’t have to happen. It doesn’t have to be like this.”

“Those words… You don’t believe in them.” The Dark’s fascination slid over Samael’s skin like a physical sensation, an oily feeling that had nem suppressing a shudder. “Yet you speak them nonetheless… Like they were spoken to you.”

Samael’s lips thinned. “I’d prefer not to have to hurt you.”

“I told you, your sibling is gone.” The Dark spread their arms, the movement mechanical. “You can’t do a thing to change that.”

Lips twisting into a snarl, Samael brought a hand up across nir chest, fingers poised. “Wanna bet?” Ne snapped nir fingers, sharply drawing nir hand downwards in a slashing movement, the sound loud in the stillness of the air.

Even with the furious surge of power Samael had put in that, the Dark barely stumbled back, a slight wheeze escaping them as it hit their chest.

Samael didn’t wait for them to recover, darting in under their guard to knock their legs out from under them. It was like hitting a brick wall, but the thump they made as they hit the ground was utterly satisfying.

Clumsy fingers snagged hold of Samael’s arm before ne could stand, cold nothingness surging between them and slithering into Samael’s Grace—

The blazing reaction from nir Grace was entirely reflexive, burning the Dark’s fingers and eradicating anything that had tried to enter nem. Samael moved to strike them again, but ended up punching the ground when they literally vanished.

Samael slipped sideways in time to miss the Dark’s attack, which ate up the ground where ne had been crouching a split-second before. Slipping back into the physical plane, Samael hit the Dark in the chest with a blazing palm, a vindictive sense of pleasure curling through nem at the shocked gasp that garnered.

They staggered back, the nanites of Gabriel’s shirt steaming as they struggled to repair the damage, but some slipped off to land in a melted puddle on the ground, while others were seared into Gabriel’s chest.

Which wasn’t healing.

Now!

Gadreel appeared behind the Dark, instantly wrapping him up in an ironclad hold. Grace seared out of his skin, clearly in response to the touch of the Dark’s form against his own, but he held fast despite the visible pain on his face.

Lunging forwards, Samael sunk nir hand up to the elbow into Gabriel’s chest, Grace-light and the other’s dark clashing.

Ne felt like throwing up, everything in nem screaming to get as far away as possible. It was touching the total absence of everything, the worst kind of black hole because it sucked everything in and in and didn’t stop.
And Samael couldn’t feel Gabriel anywhere, just a bottomless pit of nothing that came out from a small point in the center.

A door?

Pulling in a pained breath, Samael steeled nemself, then closed nir eyes and took the plunge in.

Samael couldn’t remember the last time ne had rummaged around in someone else’s soul, although the process was still as natural as flying. But actually diving into another’s soul like this?

It wouldn’t have been possible except for the fact that there was no soul here. And Samael’s Grace was already in them, making it all the easier for nem to send nir consciousness into the void and through the door ne had sensed.

“Light hides the dark, even the shadows.”

Samael hadn’t been able to see this, not with Gabriel’s natural light blocking nir senses. This door that shouldn’t have been here but somehow was, a natural access point to the dimension that they had discovered.

And it was that dimension, even though Samael wasn’t standing in that ancient temple. This was the void Gabriel had spoken about, the nothing that had terrified him after he’d touched the altar.

Samael’s Grace blazed as ne flew, searching and calling for Gabriel. Ne couldn’t restrain it and didn’t try, letting nir Grace instinctively hold back the dark.

Then ne saw it – the spark of light that ne had seen earlier. It wasn’t as bright as Samael was used to, but it was undeniably Gabriel. He was surrounded by a swirling mass of dark, which poked and prodded at him but didn’t get past the white aura he was emanating.

“Gabriel!” Samael shouted on every level ne could. There didn’t seem to be any sound, but that didn’t matter.

There wasn’t any reaction from Gabriel, even though he should have heard nem. Desperate, Samael went to move closer, only to find nemself pressing against a tangible resistance that made it impossible to approach him.

Ne shouted again, yanking at the silent link between them. A moment passed before there was a subtle change at the other end, a sign of acknowledgement and confusion.

Encouraged, Samael yanked again, shouting Gabriel’s name for good measure so he’d know ne was talking to him.

Gabriel didn’t respond, but his light flickered.

Samael strained forward, desperately reaching to touch him. If ne could just get a hold of Gabriel, ne could pull him out.

Gabriel, please! Samael pleaded, reaching out to him. Take my hand!

There wasn’t any verbal acknowledgement that Gabriel had heard nem, but Samael could tell he was looking up at nem, the small ball of light he’d been wound into slowly expanding.

Gabriel! If ne had been in human form, Samael would have been stretching out nir hand to Gabriel, straining to reach him through the resistance ne couldn’t break through. Something was holding nem
back, a solid wall that ne couldn’t see or figure out how to break through.

Gadreel only had so much time, and Samael couldn’t waste any in here to get Gabriel out.

He just had to reach out.

**Please! Gabriel, take my hand!**

Interminably slowly, Gabriel stretched out, the light of his form dimming as he expanded further to come closer to Samael, not quite touching but *almost*—

Samael could have cried in relief, barely feeling the familiar warmth of Gabriel’s Grace as he reached to touch nem. *That’s it – come on!*

Just as they were about to touch, so close that Samael could feel the peripheral traces of Gabriel’s energy, the resistance holding Samael back suddenly came alive, freezing nem in place. At the same time, the eddying swirls of darkness that had been circling Gabriel surged in, wrapping him up in a cocoon.

*Gabriel, no!* Desperate, Samael struggled against the invisible bonds, but ne couldn’t budge. Screaming, ne flared nir Grace brightly, until all that ne could see was light and Gabriel being smothered by the dark just out of reach. *Gabriel! Gabriel!*

Samael’s last glimpse of Gabriel’s form was of his light steadily being overtaken by the dark until absolutely nothing at all could be seen. Freezing, Samael hung there, numb with horror and dismay.

Something tugged on nir Grace, yanking nem back before Samael could react. That spurred nem into action, and ne screamed, pulling away from the sensation towards where ne had last seen Gabriel, calling his name desperately.

It was no use. Whatever had ahold of nem was far stronger, wrapping invisible bonds around nir form and *pulling*.

The last thing Samael heard was a scream that cut off as quickly as it started, and then ne was thrown back, hitting the ground painfully.

The arm ne’d had in the Darkness was burning, nir Grace leaking out to such an extent that it was impossible to see the arm through it. Choking and coughing, Samael rolled to nir stomach, fingers digging into the dead earth as ne struggled to get nir Grace under control.

It flared sharply in protest, but it subsided after another moment. Bringing nir breathing back under control, Samael took stock of nir form. Intact but shaken and utterly…numb.

There was nothing to feel.

Dimly, Samael was aware that ne was probably in shock, even though that was such a banal *human* reaction to what had just happened. But ne wasn’t registering anything beyond what ne had just seen in that other dimension, those final moments replaying in nir head over and over again like a movie reel in high definition.

Nir fingers flexed in memory of that brief touch of Gabriel’s Grace, lungs giving a spasm at the knowledge that they had been *so close*. So close and yet Samael had failed Gabriel.

The memory of his scream echoed in Samael’s head, cut off as abruptly as it had started.
Shuddering, Samael realized ne was crying, tears sliding unbidden down nir cheeks.

“Samael!” Gadreel’s pained cry broke nem out of nir thoughts.

Jolting, Samael looked up, seeing that Gadreel still had hold of the Dark but barely. It was as if whatever had happened in that other dimension had given the Dark new lease on Gabriel’s vessel, since they were no longer manipulating it like a puppet. No, the movements were fluid and sure, and they had grabbed hold of Gadreel’s arm and used it as leverage to pull him off.

The void in the Dark reached out, escaping the vessel and permeating the air around them. It reached out toward Gadreel, his Grace flaring in protest at the onslaught. But it wasn’t enough. The Dark pierced it easily, a dark glee radiating from them that Samael could taste.

No.

Samael wasn’t losing anyone else.

Digging nir fingers into the dead earth, Samael sketched out the familiar angel banishing ward, etching Gadreel’s name into the center and then slamming nir hand down on it, fixing a destination in mind for Gadreel so he wouldn’t land in the middle of nowhere.

Just as the Dark began to push forward into Gadreel, the magic took hold, Gadreel being swept away with a shocked protest. The searing light of his Grace mixed in with Samael’s scalded the Dark, who jerked away with a pained hiss that slid through the air like poison.

Slowly, a cold chill seeping through nir Grace like ice, Samael stood, not looking away from the Dark. If it was possible, they looked even darker than before, as if any light of Gabriel’s that had been there before was now entirely gone.

Samael didn’t bother looking deeper, already knowing what had happened.

Faint trembles wracked nir frame, the cold numbness giving way to an icy rage that was all too familiar and welcome now. The temperature of his Grace plummeted as he accepted it, posture changing and straightening as his hands curled into fists.

“You’re not taking anyone else,” Lucifer snarled, letting his eyes flare white.

The Dark tilted their head, eyes a filmy black with no sign of that familiar brown. Just as well, since Lucifer would all too willingly rip them out if he had to look at that brown and didn’t see his brother looking back. “Did you have a nice visit? It’s where my dear siblings bound me when I didn’t do what they wanted. But you’ve already been once, haven’t you?”

“You’re dead,” Lucifer said quietly, the ground shaking around them as he let go of his true form. “You just don’t know it yet.”

The Dark’s lips curled into a sneer that looked so wrong on that face Lucifer wanted to sear it off. “You can’t kill that which isn’t alive.”

Oh, did they think that? Lucifer couldn’t help a wide smirk, a wild glee filling him. “Are you certain about that?” He held his hand out, grabbing hold of what he could of the Dark before they could react. “Why don’t we see?”

Lucifer didn’t just want to destroy the Dark. He wanted to make. Them. Hurt.

Tightening his hand into a fist, he was vindictively satisfied when the Dark grunted at the sudden
pressure. But his grip was broken a mere second later when the void opened, sucking in the energy Lucifer had around them.

Teeth bared, Lucifer surged forwards, coming right into the Dark’s space and striking them in the solar plexus. Something tugged at his Grace. Amused, he let it, only to burn it seconds later.

Without moving, the Dark flung him back, their physical vessel briefly enshrouded in black before it withdrew back into the body. They weren’t smiling any longer, studying Lucifer with an almost calculating expression.

Fury rose in Lucifer, icy cold and welcoming. He took it, channeling it into his Grace until it blazed forth.

Within a split-second, he grabbed hold of the Dark, his Grace clashing against their dark.

The earth shattered under their feet, a loud rumble heralding the ground shaking with the energies they gave off. The air froze around them, temperature plummeting until ice formed on their clothes and Lucifer’s lungs could no longer draw in air.

He was aware that he was destroying the planet they were fighting on, but he just didn’t care. It was as good as dead anyway, so what did it matter?

It could all burn as far as he was concerned—

Gadreel’s words echoed in his mind, distant but clear: This is one of Gabriel’s favorite planets.

Gabriel had loved this planet. Of course, Gabriel had loved a lot of things, many of which had died despite everything he did. But the point was…this planet was one of them.

Gabriel was gone now, but the idea of destroying something else that he had loved… It was inconceivable.

With a wordless snarl, Lucifer hurled both of them into outer space, tolerating the sickening touch of the Dark’s form against his own for the brief instant it took before he slid them back into the physical plane, burning them with a deadly touch of Grace.

It would have killed or severely hurt anyone else, but all it did was burn the Dark mildly before they pulled away, putting miles of space between them in one jump. They were still calculating, everything about them studying Lucifer like he was a bug under a microscope.

It was absolutely infuriating, like he wasn’t worth the time or effort to fight.

Lucifer closed the distance with a beat of his wings, reaching out to smite them. Maybe it wouldn’t take, but it would damn well feel good.

It didn’t take, anything that Lucifer smote quickly being replaced by more of the void that made up the Dark’s form.

They soared past a star, its gravitational forces a mild tug before Lucifer batted it aside unthinkingly, setting the entire thing off center and hurtling into an entirely different space.

Samael!

Balthazar materialized just on the periphery of the fight, worry and fear and distress radiating off every inch of him. He geared up to enter the fray, Grace brightening in preparation, and the Dark
turned to meet him—

With a careless flick, Lucifer sent Balthazar back where he’d come from, entirely intent on the Dark. No one else was touching the Dark, and they weren’t going to harm anyone else either. They were his. For what they had done, he was going to make them pay.

Snagging hold of the Dark’s form, Lucifer froze them in place long enough so that he could wrap around them, Grace instinctively blazing full force in response to their touch. They squirmed in his grasp, but Lucifer squeezed tighter, unwilling to let them go.

There was the abrupt sensation like being squeezed through a tunnel, and suddenly Lucifer was on solid ground, rolling away from the Dark. Skidding to a stop, he pushed himself to his feet, pulling the Dark straight to him with a yank.

The moment they were in reach, he kicked them in the chest, embedding Grace into the impact. The light seared through their chest and face for a brief moment before it was overcome, and they grabbed hold of his leg.

Twisting, Lucifer kicked up with his other leg, instinctively wrapping it around the arm holding the first in place and rolling.

The Dark hit the ground with a thud, and Lucifer was on top of them in a second, sword falling into his hand without another thought.

His blood rushed through his head, his breathing loud in his ears, and his heart beat rapidly against his rib cage. Cold fury still urged him forward, urging him to just end it, destroying the Dark and everything they had done.

Because they had taken Gabriel from him. They didn’t have to do it, and they had. Gabriel was gone because of their actions. Because they hated and took and didn’t care at all that Gabriel hadn’t wanted it.

The Dark attempted to surge upwards, their form seeping out of their physical vessel for a brief second before Lucifer burned it away unblinkingly.

They weren’t breathing harshly at all, blinking placidly up at Lucifer as their black eyes met his. There was no fear on their face or anywhere else, just simple curiosity at what Lucifer would do next.

“End it, then.” The Dark bared their teeth in a ruthless grin. “It’s what you want, isn’t it? I can see it in your eyes and your light—your cold fury and ruthlessness. You’re just like me.”

“I’m nothing like you,” Lucifer snapped, fingers tightening around his sword hilt.

“But you are. You Fell, didn’t you? Brightest of your siblings, and you were the one who Fell, the betrayer who was locked away. Was it irony that your parent Created you as my mirror? The brightest Fell, yet here you are, and why?”

“You killed him.” Lucifer sent a painful burst of Grace through the Dark. “You think I’ll let you go after that?”

The Dark’s next words had Lucifer freezing in place, his fingers tightening around their throat. “They tried to kill you.” They grinned upon seeing his reaction. “I know their mind; I know their memories. This position is quite familiar, isn’t it? Except the roles are reversed, and you aren’t as weak as your sibling.”
Lucifer’s next breath was ragged, his sword hand trembling as the words struck home. He remembered the heavy weight of Gabriel’s body over his own, the burning of his Grace mingled with their Father’s as he held Lucifer down, and the sword hovering over his head, ready to finish it all in a fell swoop.

Only this wasn’t Gabriel. Gabriel was dead because Lucifer had failed and he wasn’t here to try and talk him down in another foolish endeavor.

Only also…Lucifer could hear his voice, strained but calm, gently calling his name, calling him *back*. “Samael.”

*His wings ached, ruined remnants of what they had once been. His Grace was in no better shape, writhing under the burning heat of Gabriel’s, now in possession of their Father’s.*

*He couldn’t move, and Gabriel stared him down, sword in hand and eyes blazing with light. It would take only a second and it would all be over.*

“Well, brother? Finish it.”

The words seemed to strike a chord within Gabriel, something flashing in his eyes that he didn’t recognize. Other emotions flicked through his Grace, only perceivable to him given their close contact.

Regret, grief, anger, loss, and so much pain that he choked on it, and yet Gabriel wasn’t moving. He wasn’t finishing it the way he’d intended.

Wasn’t that the point of it all? Ending it?

He didn’t deserve anything else. He was beaten and he knew it. There was only one solution now if he couldn’t kill Gabriel.

“Finish it, Gabriel,” he repeated, remaining lax under his hold.

*The flash of emotions rushing through Gabriel surprised him, as did what he did next. With a scream, Gabriel plunged the sword down... into the earth next to his ear. Water fell on his face, smelling faintly of salt, and he realized with dull surprise that Gabriel was crying, something no angel could manage.*

“Can’t do it?” He couldn’t stop his voice from shaking, but the amusement carried through well enough. “Can’t say I’m surprised. You always were the softest of us all.”

“I’m not you.” Gabriel’s words were whispered, hands clutching at his shoulders and digging into his skin. “I’m my own person. And this...is my choice.”

*He had no idea what Gabriel meant, but Gabriel plunged his hand into his chest without further warning, and his entire world went white—*

With a gasp, the sword fell from nir lax fingers, hitting the ground with a dull thud. It disappeared a moment later as Samael flung nemself away from the Dark, scrabbling back and putting distance between them.

Putting distance between the memory of Gabriel sparing him when he shouldn’t have been spared. Putting distance between the memory of that terrifying love and forgiveness that Lucifer didn’t deserve but had been given anyway. Putting distance between what Lucifer had been about to do out of anger and revenge when Gabriel had managed to push that aside in favor of extending *mercy.*
Samael desperately wanted to touch Gabriel, but there was no chance of that anymore.

“I won’t,” ne managed, turning over onto nir knees. Shivering, Samael squeezed nir eyes shut tightly, pressing nir hands to nir face and entirely unsurprised to find it wet. “I’m not that being anymore. I’m – I’m Samael.”

Lucifer would always be a part of nem, but ne wasn’t *Lucifer*.

There was a rustle of clothing as the Dark stood, although they didn’t move to approach nem. “You would spare me as well, then? Let me go?”

Samael didn’t answer, opening nir eyes. A dozen feet away stood Gabriel’s tree, the leaves all fallen and the bark cracked and dry. Yet if ne tried, ne could still feel his Grace and warmth, his unconditional love. Ne could hear his laughter and see his smiles.

Slowly standing, Samael wrapped nir arms around nemself, breath hitching and shuddering nir chest as the sight of the tree turned blurry through tears.

“I’m not like you,” Samael said eventually, voice cracking halfway through. “I Fell, but I was given grace once more. Unlike you, I learned from my mistakes.” Nir voice turned sharp. “And I don’t repeat them. I’m no one’s *mirror*, particularly not *yours*.”

There was no amusement in the Dark’s voice, simply sympathy that could have been mocking. “Are you not? You were betrayed, left alone in a cage for eons until they deigned to let you out to bring about the end. And you yearned to destroy it all, to bring about their ruin as they had sought to bring about yours. That you claim to have changed now does not change what I saw in you only moments before. That desire is still in you; you can still do what you were Created to achieve.”

“What…I was Created to achieve…” Samael murmured, arms tightening around nemself. “My duty…”

The Dark’s footsteps were quiet as they approached nem, stopping just short of touching nir back. “Accept it and become who you were meant to be.”

Closing nir eyes, Samael mentally reached out to the tree, feeling out the lingering traces of Gabriel’s energy. It was all ne had, the only source of warmth with the Dark at nir back.

Samael couldn’t talk nir way out of this. There was no one to appeal to.

There was no third option Samael could see. Throat dry, ne said slowly, “You want me to become who I’m meant to be.”

“Of course, yeğen.”

“I know how you think.” Samael let nir arms drop to nir sides, fingers slack. “I know your words. I know your desires. I was like that once, too. You’re right about that. Which is also how I know that every single pretty word you speak is a lie. A lie that you expect I’ll swallow, until I’m wrapped in your web and you’ll devour me whole.”

There was a sudden stillness behind nem, even their breathing frozen.

Still turned away from them, Samael hid a wretched smile, closing nir eyes seconds later as an enraged howl filled the air. The void expanded, threatening to engulf nem whole.

There was no thinking involved as nir Grace reflexively flared, burning everything that it touched.
There was no thinking involved as his sword slipped into his hand and Samael turned on his heel, grabbing hold of the Dark’s shoulder with his other hand.

With a sickening squelch that was all too familiar, the sword embedded itself in Gabriel’s chest up to the hilt.

If there was anything left of Gabriel… “It’ll be all right, brother.” Eyes burning, Samael moved his hand up to touch Gabriel’s vessel’s face, pushing Grace through the blade and through his hand. “I’m sorry.”

Jaw set, Samael let loose the full force of his Grace, channeling it through his blade and directly into the Dark’s core, burning them out entirely from Gabriel’s vessel.

There was a terrible scream, the Dark twisting under the onslaught but unable to escape, Samael holding them tightly.

As the last tendrils burned away under the light, Samael felt an answering touch against his own cheek, gentle and warm. A familiar Grace brushed against him, sending a silent message of gratefulness that needed no words but had Samael struggling to breathe with the rush of emotions that swept over him.

The touch disappeared as quickly as it had come, and then Samael was holding a shell in his arms, no sign of life anywhere in the body. The Dark was gone; Gabriel’s Grace could no longer hide their presence.

Choking on sobs, Samael pulled the sword out, letting it fall to the ground as his knees gave way. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.” He couldn’t see through the tears, but there was nothing to see regardless. “I’m sorry, sibling, I’m sorry. I’m sorry—”

Rocking back and forth, Samael buried his face in Gabriel’s dark hair, apologies spilling forth unbidden.

There was no warmth in the body, and the hair didn’t smell like it was supposed to. It smelled like a human that had been exposed to the depths of space and too much blood and tears.

Gripping hold of Gabriel’s shirt, Samael closed the wound that his sword had left without looking at it. But the smell of blood lingered even after the shirt was cleaned, as did the smell of sand and dirt and dust.

The sobs gradually died away, until it was just the tears that wouldn’t stop. Samael didn’t wipe them off, letting them fall into Gabriel’s hair and down onto the ground.

Eventually, Samael forced himself to pull away, looking down at Gabriel’s slack face. Like this, with his eyes closed, he could have been resting or pretending to sleep for his children. But while others could have pretended, Samael couldn’t.

The body was there, but there was no sign of the angel who had inhabited it, and Samael could never shut his senses off enough to just see the physical.

Gently laying him down on the ground, Samael brushed his hair off his forehead, stroking his cold skin for a moment longer than necessary. Tears fell on his face, and Samael brushed them off as well before pulling back, wiping at his face with a sleeve.

He had no more words to give aside from useless apologies that Gabriel would never hear, so he didn’t say anything else, kneeling at Gabriel’s head silently. Long minutes later, Samael pulled away
entirely, settling down at the base of the tree. If ne tried – really tried – ne could feel Gabriel’s Grace in the bark, fading and pale but there.

Or maybe it was just nir imagination.

Pulling nir knees to nir chest, Samael wrapped nir arms around them, eyes on Gabriel’s vessel. Ne should go back to Asgard, but there was no way of telling them what had happened.

Duty had won over familial love, but there was no satisfaction in having done nir job. Protecting the universe was what they were supposed to do, but the price had been far too high.

Now Samael had no idea what to do, feeling lost and disgusted and desperately pushing back the memories of doing this before.

Only it had been Lucifer turning Gabriel’s own sword against him. This time Samael’s sword bore his blood, as it had last time Lucifer had buried it in Gabriel’s stomach.

That scar had never vanished, but Gabriel hadn’t died. Purely through his own stubbornness and ingenuity, but he’d been alive.

Shuddering convulsively, Samael dug nir fingers into nir legs, biting through nir lip until ne tasted blood.

No point in thinking about any of it now. Their Father was dead and now Gabriel was as well. The Dark was vanquished for now, but they were still somewhere out there.

Samael would have to figure out how to deal with them permanently, but at least this universe was safe.

Gabriel would be glad of it, which was all that mattered at this point.

Samael let nir consciousness drift, uncertain of how much time had passed since they’d landed on Earth. It had to have been hours, but neither Gadreel nor Balthazar had come to check on what had happened.

Given Samael had banished Gadreel and done the same to Balthazar, it wasn’t entirely surprising.

The warmth at nir back vanished, the bark cold and dry. Shivering, Samael opened nir eyes, only to freeze when ne felt the void creep up through the roots and spread throughout the tree.

Scrambling away, Samael picked up nir sword, taking more steps back at the sight of that awful nothingness infecting every inch of Gabriel’s tree.

No, no, no, no—

Whirling to look at Gabriel’s body, eyes skimming over the ashy imprints of wings on the ground, Samael gaped in shock as the skin darkened, shadowy tendrils creeping out from the pores and under the body.

A sibilant whisper snuck through Samael’s mind, raising all the hairs on nir neck. Did you think that would end me? It might have, had you been faster with your blade and less inclined to compassion. You were too late.

Samael stood frozen in horror, only barely aware of the faint trembles beginning to wrack nir frame as ne realized what was happening. At how ne had utterly failed not once but twice over.
Unable to look away from the body, Samael saw the eyes snap open, head turning until they met Samael’s.

The void looked back.

_You were too late._

The void reached out towards Samael, wrapping around nir limbs, heedless of nir Grace’s reaction.

Samael barely noticed, unable to breathe and racked with uncontrollable shudders. Nir knees gave way, hitting the ground.

When the body reached out, hand stretching to touch Samael, the dam broke.

And Samael _screamed_.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, see you guys Friday!
Chapter Notes

Maybe I was a little too nonchalant with my note last time? But, really, just picture me scurrying off somewhere safe...

Especially given what this chapter has! And the note it ends on!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gadreel hadn’t expected grabbing hold of the being in Gabriel’s vessel to feel like this. Not like they were reaching out to devour everything about him, uncaring of what Samael was doing at their front.

Stiffening, Gadreel locked his arms in place, holding the being fast until they couldn’t move, teeth gritting against the steady energy drain that resulted from the constant contact. He now understood what Gabriel had meant by unintentionally trying to expel them, since his Grace simply reacted without his permission, trying to burn the dark away.

The frightening part was that it didn’t work the way it should have.

“You’re not the same as them, are you?” the being asked, slightly turning their head to eye Gadreel with a filmy black gaze.

Gadreel didn’t answer, inhaling sharply as the Dark stiffened in his grasp, the awful feeling of nothing from them worsening suddenly, like a dam had been broken.

There was no movement from Samael, just that steady glow of nir Grace from where ne had nir arm in the Dark’s chest. Gadreel hoped they were able to find Gabriel and pull him out. This was nothing he should experience, and it was horrifying that it had even happened.

Unable to help praying, Gadreel closed his eyes, a futile gesture given that he could still technically see and feel everything around him. Including the sensation of the Dark pressed against his Grace and slowly seeping into him.

He couldn’t feel his limbs. Which wouldn’t ordinarily be an issue because this was just a vessel, but he needed to feel what his limbs were doing to hold the Dark in place. He couldn’t risk them going after Samael and undoing what ne was trying.

Breathing harshly, Gadreel focused on his arms, keeping them locked in place and the Dark held tightly in his grip. To his dismay, he could feel his arms shaking, muscles in spasms that weren’t quite painful but almost.

Then, abruptly, Samael was flung backwards with a sharp cry, hitting the ground with a hard thump. Nir arm was bright with Grace, burning off the lingering remnants of dark that clung to nem, but ne didn’t seem to notice, motionless on the ground.

Gadreel looked, but he couldn’t see any sign of Gabriel around Samael. It wasn’t even that Samael’s Grace hid him; Gabriel wasn’t there.

And the Dark struggled in his grasp, limbs moving with unnatural strength that hadn’t been there
before. They pressed against Gadreel’s hold, moving his arms by agonizing inches.

“No.” Gadreel hauled back, biting back a groan as his energy siphoned off into the Dark. He could literally feel his Grace going dim and his true form fading. Panicked, despite himself, he cried out for Samael.

The Dark gripped onto an arm, fingers digging into his skin and pulling it down, and they turned to face Gadreel, the void that was their being reaching out to engulf Gadreel whole.

There was a split-second of absolute terror, and then Samael’s Grace flared to life and intention, banishing Gadreel before he could react beyond a startled protest. “Samael!”

Gadreel had never actually been affected by the angel banishing sigil, although he’d certainly seen it used several times in its original and modified forms. This was a modified form. He could feel Samael’s Grace pushing him back, forcing him through space itself until he broke through on the other side and hit the ground.

Shaken and terrified, it took Gadreel a moment to reorient himself and realize that he was in Asgard. He wasn’t in the palace but in the forest, although he could see the golden gleam of the palace in the distance.

Shivering uncontrollably, Gadreel tried getting to his feet, only for his knees to give out halfway. Catching himself on his hands, Gadreel breathed, squeezing his eyes shut at the horrible memory of that emptiness that had been about to swallow him whole.

The emptiness that had somehow taken over Gabriel. The emptiness Samael was facing alone.

Gadreel had to get back. He couldn’t let nem face that by nemself, archangel or no.

But he had no energy. His Grace ached at the thought of flying that distance and batting against the magic of the sigil Samael had drawn. Even if he managed to make it, he would be more of a liability than a help.

Limbs giving out on him, Gadreel hit the earth with a soft thump, trembling violently. He could still feel the Dark in him, although it was a sense memory instead of the actual being. Samael had banished him before anything else could happen.

Such as…

Gadreel groaned, curling into a ball. He couldn’t ever remember feeling this weak or helpless. Even the notion of making the short distance from here to the safety of the palace had him cringing.

But he didn’t have to do it. There was someone who could help him.

Balthazar…

The message had barely been sent before Balthazar was there, vague panic and relief radiating off him. He crouched down next to Gadreel, tentatively touching his shoulder with gentle fingers.

“Gadreel?”

Gadreel managed to grip hold of Balthazar’s arm with a newfound understanding for the shape Gabriel had been in after he’d experienced that vision in the other dimension. “I can’t do it,” he said breathlessly, voice shaking at the end. “I don’t—”
“I got you,” Balthazar reassured him, his touch gentle but firm and utterly comforting. “Let’s go.”

The flight was gentle, and the next thing Gadreel was aware of was being deposited on a soft surface. He grabbed hold of Balthazar’s wrist before he could fully pull away, relieved when his strength didn’t fail. “You need to go.”

Balthazar stared down at him, eyes unreadable. “What happened?”

“I don’t know, but Samael is facing them alone.” Gadreel ignored the others in the room, willing Balthazar to understand precisely how urgent this was. “Ne banished me when they almost had me, and I would be nothing more than a liability at the moment.”

“Gabriel?”

“I don’t know.” Gadreel managed to sit up by pulling on Balthazar’s arm, pushing into the other’s space until they were practically touching noses. “But this – Samael can’t do this alone.”

There was no comment from Balthazar about what he was supposed to do when Gadreel couldn’t do anything about it, but he nodded curtly, eyes hard. “You’ve got it.” He shot Gadreel a wry smile and was gone in the blink of an eye.

Slumping back against the loveseat that Balthazar had set him on, Gadreel closed his eyes, trying to still the remaining shivers that wracked his frame.

“What happened?” Loki’s voice was quiet, his frame utterly tense.

Opening his eyes, Gadreel found Loki a mere foot away, the others hovering behind him anxiously. He took a moment to answer, willing his voice to stop shaking. “Something neither of us expected. Samael went to retrieve Gabriel but…I have no idea if ne was successful. I was banished directly after.”

“What happened to Dad?” Dummy demanded. “Was it – was it what happened last time? When you kicked us out of the room?”

So much worse, since Samael couldn’t even do what ne had last time. No, this time there had been no sign of Gabriel, even though Samael had said he was there. Gadreel couldn’t see him.

The being’s claims that Gabriel was gone had been all too easy to believe. But what Samael had said meant there was still hope.

“Yes,” Gadreel said, meeting Dummy’s eyes. “Although we’re not entirely certain what happened, it was the same thing. But it’s fine.” He managed a reassuring smile, although judging from the others’ faces it wasn’t exactly what he had been attempting. “Samael had a plan,” he continued. “I’m not yet certain if it worked—”

Space practically shrieked, and then it wrenched itself apart as Balthazar hurtled into the room and crashed into a wall, slumping into a heap on the floor.

Before anyone else could react, Gadreel stumbled to his feet, managing to fly the short distance between them before collapsing next to Balthazar, taking his face in his hands. The skin felt heated, a natural reaction to the current state of Balthazar’s true form. “Balthazar.”

“I’m okay,” Balthazar gasped, eyes wild and too bright with light. “Nothing – nothing happened. Just – fuck – I think that was Lucifer.”
Gadreel froze, fingers still on Balthazar’s cheeks. “What?”

Balthazar’s grin was a touch too wild, but his skin was cooling. “Sure didn’t feel like Samael. Ne’s warmer, yeah?” He shivered, swallowing. “But I couldn’t stick around. Samael kicked me out before I could do anything. And…well…I’d have been fried if I did. I’m no archangel, and Samael was putting off enough power to kill anyone below that.”

That much…?

Gadreel bowed his head, closing his eyes and focusing.

He let his consciousness spread out of Asgard and down into Midgard, seeking out where Samael had banished him. There was no sign of nem there or the being they’d been facing, but he could sense the energy they’d been exerting. Samael’s Grace was overpowering, drowning out anything else he might have sensed regarding Gabriel.

Yet that meant it was an easy trail to follow.

Gadreel traced it through space, as carefully as he could while hurrying.

But then there was horrible cold and a searing bright light that had him wincing, jerking back into his vessel before he could do anything else.

“Yeah,” Balthazar breathed, hands fisted in Gadreel’s jacket and holding him steady. He was trembling again, barely able to keep himself upright. “See? We can’t do anything.”

“Can’t do what?” Fenris demanded, the slightest hint of a growl underlying his words. There was a flash of fang as he glared at them. “What the fuck’s going on?”

Gadreel turned his head to look out the window, enhancing his senses until he could look past Asgard and to where Samael was fighting. He didn’t press any further, but it was enough that he could see Samael’s blazing light clashing against a void.

And, yes, Balthazar was right. That didn’t look like Samael.

“They’re fighting,” Gadreel murmured, slowly moving to sit next to Balthazar, pressing their shoulders together. He withdrew his gaze, eyes refocusing on everyone present in the room. “I cannot tell you more other than Samael is doing what ne can.”

“You haven’t told us anything,” Fenris bit out, bristling furiously. “And you look awful. Did Dad do that? And is Sam trying to stop whatever’s happening?”

Gadreel closed his eyes briefly at the memory of that void stretching out towards him, rushing into his Grace. Repressing a repulsed shudder, he opened his eyes, briefly meeting Balthazar’s before turning to the others.

He took a breath, only to have it escape him in a sharp exhale when something tore. Next to him, Balthazar winced as well, eyes reflexively squeezing shut.

Instinctively, Gadreel touched the floor, checking that it was still there, because something else definitely wasn’t.

“You felt that, didn’t you?” Balthazar asked. “You – fuck – I didn’t think I’d feel this twice.”

It was true. Gadreel had felt this once before even while locked in Heaven’s prison, although it
hadn’t been known then *what* it was. Only then the whispers had followed, even Thaddeus shaken by the loss of one of Heaven’s archangels at the hands of another.

When Raphael had died, the sensation had been different but no less profound.

But this sensation was exactly that what Gadreel had felt before.

What had Samael *done*?

Or was it even Samael? Was it Lucifer instead?

Gadreel knew Samael wouldn’t kill Gabriel, but *Lucifer* was an entirely different matter. And what Balthazar had said of how Samael’s Grace felt meant that it was most likely Lucifer who had been fighting – Lucifer who had just struck another killing blow.

“Damn it,” Balthazar whispered, a hand covering his face. “Fuck.” Another curse followed shortly after in Enochian, this one more specifically directed at Samael.

“What happened?” Loki asked sharply, ignoring Thor’s gentle reprimand of “Loki.”

Gadreel reached out blindly with his other hand, gripping hold of Balthazar’s for reassurance. “Samael…ne…” The words died in his throat before he could get them out.

“Why would ne?” Balthazar muttered, shaking his head. “It doesn’t make *sense*.”

“What doesn’t?” Dummy’s eyes were wide, his hands curled into fists at his sides. “You – you guys aren’t making sense. What did you sense? Is Dad all right? Is Sam?”

This time the words came, emotionless and flat. “I cannot sense Gabriel. But…” He couldn’t feel the void either.

“Whatever was in him is gone,” Balthazar continued, voice flat. “And Gabriel…so is he.”

There was instant response of denial, so strong that it hit Gadreel like a wave.

“He’s not, he’s not,” Dummy insisted. “That can’t *happen*.”

Hadn’t they thought the same about their Father? Yet He was dead. And Gabriel was no stranger to death.

“It can,” Gadreel said instead, helplessly.

“He’s not *supposed* to die!” Jormungandr shouted. “That isn’t—” He cut himself off, shaking his head wordlessly.

“I won’t believe it unless I see it,” Sleipnir said quietly, his face pale. “I was told once before that he was dead, but they were wrong.”

“You can check, can’t you?” Butterfingers pleaded, kneeling down besides Gadreel. “Can you go see?”

His Grace ached at the thought of making that journey, still not recovered from what had happened. He could feel his energy trickling back slowly, but it wasn’t fast enough.

“I could—” Balthazar started, wings stretching out in preparation to take flight.
“No.” Gadreel’s grip on Balthazar’s wrist tightened warningly. “You don’t – it might not even be Samael.”

Balthazar hesitated, eyes flicking between Gadreel and the others. “Ne wouldn’t hurt me.”

“She wouldn’t, but you know that wasn’t nem.”

“Sam isn’t Lucifer,” Butterfingers protested.

Gadreel shot her a glance. “Lucifer will always be a part of nem. Even if he wasn’t…”

“What he’s trying to say is that an angry archangel can flash fry the two of us if they’re not paying attention, especially the big two,” Balthazar said bluntly. “And Samael was pretty damn angry last I saw.”

“Yes,” Gadreel sighed, giving Balthazar a reproving look. “As it stands, I have no energy, and Balthazar cannot risk it.”

There was a familiar glint in Loki’s eyes, although he didn’t say anything. His lips did pinch tellingly, his hands flexing at his sides. Besides him, Thor laid a comforting hand on his shoulder, eyes dark and face unusually still.

Loki did nothing, even though he would have if he were younger. It was the same look he’d worn when Gabriel had fallen into the Cage and he’d accosted Gadreel for not being willing to try to free him.

There was something to be said about growing older if it had tempered even Loki’s impulsive behavior.

“Then what?” Fenris folded his arms across his chest, muscles coiled tightly. “We wait? Is that what you’re suggesting?”

Gadreel hated that he didn’t have anything else to offer, but he simply couldn’t. At this point it just wasn’t possible for him to do anything, let alone get reinforcements that could possibly deal with Samael.

That Samael hadn’t yet come back meant something was wrong. Gadreel didn’t want to think it, but there was the possibility that anyone going to find nem would encounter Lucifer. The last time it had happened had been in the time after regaining nir Grace, but there’d been recent occasions when Samael had slipped when becoming angry.

Samael had always come back, but now? There had always been an anchoring point for nem, and there was none now.

“I’m afraid so,” was all Gadreel said in answer, giving Fenris a weak smile.

“You said you can’t sense him?” Jarvis asked quietly, face tight.

There was nothing to sense. “No, but…” He found himself swallowing, an all too-human gesture. “We feel it when one of us dies, but it’s something entirely different when an archangel is killed. I can’t explain it.”

“Gabriel regaining his Grace shook the entire universe,” Balthazar said tonelessly, eyes on his knees. “I was human then and I still knew something happened, even if just because I remembered everything. And this...we’ve felt it before, when he died the first time. It’s not something we forget.”
There should have been some kind of sound, but Jarvis simply…shut down, face blanking and body shrinking. Even his soul seemed to turn dimmer, an aching grief piercing through it.

“He came back before,” Dummy said, voice loud in the ringing silence that followed. “He did. So doesn’t that mean he can come back now?” He looked pleadingly at Gadreel. “He can, right?” he added.

Gadreel couldn’t answer, dropping his eyes so he wouldn’t have to see the expression that came over Dummy’s face when he realized the truth.

There was only one being capable of resurrecting an archangel after death, and He was dead Himself.

Death would not be so inclined as to let Gabriel out of his grasp, not without their Father’s interference.

Without warning, Hel appeared, face paler than it normally was. “Is he – did that just happen?”

Gadreel looked up at her, unable to say anything to the contrary. “Hel…”

“No…” Hel shook her head, gaze catching her siblings’ eyes. They looked pleadingly at her, but she didn’t seem to have anything to offer. “I… Excuse me.”

As quickly as she had come, Hel disappeared, leaving an icy chill in her wake. Gadreel could feel her returning to Niflheim, and he wished he could do something. The others didn’t seem to know how to react, murmuring to each other and shaking their heads.

Guiltily, Gadreel blocked out the sounds of the room, but he couldn’t do anything for the grief that radiated from each of the souls present. They were bright to his senses, and he would have to blind himself entirely to avoid seeing them.

Even in his own grief, Gadreel was unwilling to do so.

Eventually Balthazar stood, pacing back and forth along the length of the room. His tension and worry leaked out from his Grace, worsening Gadreel’s own negative emotions. Yet Balthazar didn’t seem to notice – or care.

For his part, Gadreel had no desire to move. He had grown used to remaining still in the years in Heaven’s prison, and it was still something he was used to doing when he needed to think. Although now, it was also in large part due to his lack of energy. He had no desire to move when his Grace was still shivery and his vessel in a similar state.

At least his limbs had stopped shaking.

No word from Samael either, even though it had doubtlessly been some hours since they’d sensed Gabriel’s death. He didn’t know if that was good or bad, since doubtlessly Lucifer would have made his presence known.

And if it was Samael…then why would ne kill Gabriel?

Unthinkingly, his fingers tightened where he had his arms wrapped around his legs, pressing into his skin. Why would ne do so?

It just didn’t—
An agonized scream pierced his head.

Jolting, Gadreel slammed his head into the wall behind him, flinching at the grief and horror ringing through the sound.

It was so loud, and he could tell that the gods present were cringing as well, fear flashing through the youngest three.

And then it abruptly stopped, and what little Gadreel could sense of Samael vanished. It wasn’t like Gabriel’s disappearance, but the absence he left was just as noticeable.

“What just happened?” Balthazar looked at him with wide eyes, shaking minutely. “What – fuck – what was that?”

“I don’t know.” Gadreel was unable to mask his annoyance. “I know as much as you.”

“That was screaming, wasn’t it?” Fenris had uncovered his ears, but he still looked pained. “How did we hear it?”

Gadreel pulled himself to his feet with Balthazar’s help, wobbling slightly but otherwise steady. “Can you sense nem?”

Balthazar seemed pained, shaking his head. “No, I can’t. But – it didn’t feel like that happened?”

No, it hadn’t felt as violent as an angel being killed, but there wasn’t any other explanation for Samael’s presence disappearing like that.

“You will be seeing what that was, will you not?” Although it was phrased as a question, Loki’s tone made it clear that it wasn’t.

While he was in no shape to fight, Gadreel thought he could chance a trip to see where Samael had last been. Judging from Balthazar’s face, he thought the same.

With a slow inhale, Gadreel nodded, briefly meeting Balthazar’s eyes. Seeing his determination mirrored there bolstered his confidence and sent more strength into his wings. He took off as he exhaled, feeling Balthazar do so a split-second later.

Pressing into Midgard took less energy than he’d feared, and from there it was relatively easy to follow the trail Samael had left while fighting the Dark. As expected, it was cold, chilling the edges of his Grace.

But that hadn’t been Lucifer’s scream.

Refocusing, Gadreel came to the end of the trail, where Samael’s Grace abruptly stopped. Yet this wasn’t the right spot.

Stretching his senses out, Gadreel found the next point where traces of Samael’s Grace were. A split-second later, he followed, his flight taking him to an empty void in space, fine dust particles floating around him.

A sun shone not far off, two other planets orbiting it. And behind him was a dusty red planet, its axis askew and its orbit not quite what it should be.

It was all horribly familiar, but the planet that should have been here…wasn’t.

A cloud of dust particles drifted through his immaterial form, each bit tinged with Samael’s Grace.
Before him was a blank void, dust scattered out around it and drifting further away with the force of inertia. But it was there that Samael’s Grace was strongest, saturated with horror, anger, and an all-consuming grief.

Balthazar took a slow loop of the solar system, dull shock the primary emotion. Gadreel, this…

Yes. Gadreel couldn’t help but take one more look at the solar system, at the eight bodies still circling the sun in the middle, the first very close to being consumed within the sun’s heat. Earth is gone.

The dust still drifted through him, mocking him with the remnants what had once been his home. He materialized his form briefly, just so he could touch it, quivering as the force of Samael’s emotions surged through him at the contact.

We should go, Gadreel said after a moment. He couldn’t sense the Dark anywhere, but that didn’t mean they weren’t somehow present. They had escaped notice once before; it wouldn’t be out of the realm of possibility for it to happen again.

Yeah… Balthazar seemed reluctant to leave, though, hovering over where the Earth had once been.

Lingering was a horrible idea. Balthazar.

With a jolt, Balthazar joined him, wings brushing against Gadreel’s. Okay, let’s go. There’s nothing here, anyway.

Despite the urgency driving Gadreel, he remained for a second longer, sharing Balthazar’s grief at his former home planet.

Then they flew back to Asgard.

Gadreel’s strength flagged before he entered the realm, but Balthazar grabbed hold of him, helping him the rest of the way until they landed in an empty room.

Confused, Gadreel pulled away from Balthazar, sitting down heavily in the closest chair. “Balthazar?”

Balthazar didn’t speak immediately, stalking over to a shelf and pulling books off to grab a large bottle of something dark that he promptly took a swig of. Gadreel had a moment to wonder why the hell Balthazar was hiding alcohol when Balthazar spoke. “What are we supposed to tell them?”

“I…” Gadreel stared as Balthazar took another large drink. “Are you suggesting we lie?”

“No!” Balthazar snapped. “What good would that do?”

“Then I don’t understand the question.”

“Gabriel is dead, Gadreel. It doesn’t matter how you slice the pie, there’s no other way to look at it. He’s dead and they’re still in denial. Now we have to tell them that Samael bit it, too?”

“They deserve to know the truth—”

“What truth is that? That they’re dead and we don’t know how or who did what? Maybe Samael killed Gabriel, or maybe the same thing that killed nem killed Gabriel. And maybe they’re still out there. What are we supposed to do against that? We’re no archangels, Gadreel!”

“We know two—”
“Both weaker than Samael.” Balthazar’s lips twisted. “Sure, Castiel’s something else, but what can they do against something that killed the Morning Star?” He took another drink, face sour. “And I’d be the one taking that trip, delivering the good news. You barely got back into Asgard, and I don’t have enough expertise jumping dimensions to bring you along.”

There was nothing Gadreel could say to that, but he didn’t like it. Frowning disapprovingly, he curled his hands into fists over his knees, forcing himself to take a deep breath.

Balthazar was upset, rightly so. So was Gadreel, but he wasn’t taking it out on Balthazar.

Maybe this had something to do with the different styles of dealing with grief, since clearly Balthazar thought the best way to handle it was by drinking alcohol that wouldn’t affect him and delivering hard truths in a derogatory manner. And Gadreel dealt with it by shutting down.

“Maybe there’s nothing we need to do,” Gadreel said eventually. “I sensed no sign of that being there. It’s entirely possible we’ve been given a little bit of time to regroup.”

“Yeah?” Balthazar’s tone was wry. “How much? A day? Sorry to break it to you, but at the rate your energy’s coming back, it’s going to take longer than that before you’re up to busting down dimensional barriers.”

That was painfully true. Gadreel had never before felt like this, and he hated it.

“Someone needs to tell the others,” Gadreel insisted, setting his jaw. “That isn’t in question.”

“Oh, sure.” Balthazar shrugged, making a face as he finished the last of the bottle. “As if they’ll believe me. I’m just saying, it needs to be seen to be believed in this case.”

About to protest, Gadreel closed his mouth when he realized Balthazar was right. He and Samael hadn’t taken Gabriel’s word when he’d said that he’d literally seen nothing in that other dimension. Although now that Gadreel had seen and experienced it firsthand, he knew why Gabriel had reacted how he did.

But it hadn’t been until he’d felt it that he’d understood. None of the others would be any better. Most likely even less so given their lack of familiarity with Gabriel even though he was an archangel.

“It still needs to be done,” Gadreel said simply, eyes meeting Balthazar’s. “It doesn’t matter how long it takes—” A noise outside the room cut him off, and they both turned to look at the door as one.

There wasn’t any other noise, but now that Gadreel was paying attention he could tell they had eavesdroppers. They’d only gotten better with time, but still not good enough to fool his senses.

With a sigh, he nodded to a visibly amused Balthazar.

Lazily waving a hand, Balthazar raised an eyebrow as the door opened to reveal nine faces, although Loki, Thor, and Jarvis were doing a better job of pretending to not be involved by hanging back. “Why don’t you come in. Fancy a drink?” He held up the empty bottle mockingly.

Dummy spoke first, cheeks flushed. “You’re not serious, are you? What did you find?”

Gadreel and Balthazar looked at each other, neither of them willing to speak but knowing it had to be said.

When Balthazar eventually turned away, fingers white around the neck of the bottle, Gadreel looked
back at the others. “Earth is gone,” he said quietly, knowing the truth was best. “We found no sign of Samael beyond lingering energy traces. We also found no sign of what ne was facing.”

“As you saw nothing in Gabriel?” Loki asked snidely, eyebrows lifting disbelievingly. “There is evidently a blind spot when it comes to whatever this is.”

“The void cannot hide where there is life,” Gadreel managed to keep the annoyance out of his tone. “As for Gabriel…I don’t know,” he admitted.

Loki didn’t respond, although his eyes tightened. He did turn his back to Gadreel, hands clasped behind his back and back stiff.

“I don’t believe it.” Sleipnir’s voice wobbled slightly but was otherwise steady. “You…haven’t actually seen him, have you? You’re just guessing.”

“Hate to say it, kid, but we felt it happen,” Balthazar said before Gadreel could.

Gadreel glared at him. “Balthazar.”

Wincing slightly, Balthazar’s shoulder slumped. “I – fuck.” He rubbed his forehead, closing his eyes. After a moment, he set the empty bottle down with a soft clink. “I know it’s difficult to believe,” he continued in a gentler tone. “I’m having trouble myself. And so’s Gadreel, believe it or not. But we need to face facts.”

“Everyone said it was a ‘fact’ when they said he died last time,” Sleipnir said flatly. “I remember what they told me. They said Loki was dead – had been for a long time since an angel was masquerading as him. But then I saw him and he was alive. So, no, I’m not trusting this until I see it with my own eyes.”


Heart aching, Gadreel managed to stand and approach them, resting his hands on Sleipnir’s and You’s shoulders. He stretched his wings to cover the rest, voice soft as he said, “Sometimes there isn’t a choice. And Gabriel…he loved you. Whatever choice he had, he took the one he could. If he could have said goodbye, he would have. Whatever else happens, I hope you know that.”

There was no doubt they did, but some things needed to be spoken to be realized.

And other things…should never have happened.

Gadreel dreaded going to Heaven to tell Raphael and Castiel. Most of all, he dreaded what was to come.

Despite Balthazar’s pessimistic prediction, nothing actually happened within the next day. Or the second day. Or the third.

By the fourth day of relative quiet, Gadreel felt almost back to normal and was quietly planning the trip to Heaven. The Host needed to be informed if they hadn’t already sensed something awry. Regardless, news of their Father’s passing also needed to be shared.

It wouldn’t be believed instantly, but Gadreel could do nothing more than try.

If there was nothing else he had learned from Gabriel, it was that it was always important to try. The
humans had the same motto, and Gadreel suspected that was where Gabriel had learned the lesson in the first place.

In any case, he wasn’t looking forward to it. He had never been particularly talkative or persuasive. Balthazar would be little help in that avenue, as he was talkative but not particularly persuasive (except when it came to drinking and placing bets). In fact, Balthazar’s main strength was that he spoke too quickly for anyone to follow, so that by the time anyone realized what he’d done, it was already too late.

That asset wouldn’t be helpful in this case, although it would probably help with delivering the news and getting them out before anyone reacted.

“This was supposed to be your job, brother,” Gadreel said to the empty air, weary. “I would have helped, but this was never supposed to be my message.”

That it had ever happened was another problem – one that Gadreel didn’t understand.

Not that he’d ever understood his Father’s reasoning. It had just…been.

Sighing, Gadreel let his head rest in his hands, letting himself breathe. It would work out somehow. It had to.

Balthazar was still around. He’d recalled the Guardians just in case something happened. The Skrulls were well in hand by now, and their authority was no longer necessary.

It would be nice if Drax were still around, as he had firsthand experience with dealing with grief in all the wrong ways. But he’d passed long ago, unwilling to extend his life and not see his dead family. The others were less inclined to die, Groot being functionally immortal if he was careful and Rocket unwilling to leave Groot. Gamora had been fundamentally changed by Thanos’s experiments, leaving her ambivalent to death but perfectly willing to live so long as her friends did.

Yet none of them had intimate experience with death aside from dealing it out.

Gadreel felt helpless in a way that he rarely did, uncertain of how to handle Gabriel’s children. Jarvis was…distant, subdued in a way Gadreel had never seen before. And the bots were all quiet, huddled together in their rooms or flying through the skies.

Fenris, Jormungandr, and Sleipnir had stayed for a day before leaving for Helheim, all of them unwilling to leave each other. They were the most resistant to the news, although he hoped them spending time with Hel would help.

She had sensed it herself.

Perhaps the only good news to come out of this was that the Dark – that horrible void – was gone. Gadreel had found no sign of them in the last several days and neither had Balthazar. Now, on the morning of the fourth day, he was letting himself begin to feel a cautious hope.

They probably weren’t gone permanently. Yet for whatever reason, they had a reprieve now. Perhaps it would last and perhaps it wouldn’t.

Gadreel knew what he was hoping for, even as he felt a nervous trepidation prickle at the edges of his Grace.

The future was clouded for all that he tried to look into it. He had no way of telling what could potentially happen, only that something did.
And that hinged on several crucial choices, none of which he had any hand in. Not for the first time in recent memory, Gadreel prayed, wishing there was someone out there to hear him.

That feeling of trepidation grew throughout the day, seeming to weigh down on Gadreel’s Grace. Even Balthazar seemed to feel it, shooting Gadreel worried looks and obsessively checking on the Guardians “just to be sure, c’mon – don’t shoot me, Rocket!”

So when there was a general cry of alarm from the bots, who were out flying once more, Gadreel was entirely unsurprised, his cautious hope from earlier gone. What he did was react, flinging himself through space and out the other side to cut through the terrible void reaching out to grab hold of the three souls.

Then he landed on the ground, finding himself face to face with Gabriel’s face.

Except…there was no possibility that this was Gabriel, not with that cruel twist of the lips or the black eyes. And the abyss gaping in them with no sign of the light that was Gabriel’s Grace.

Behind him, the bots shifted anxiously, nervous anticipation and a yearning hope radiating from them.

“Is that…?” Dummy’s faceplate retreated, eyes wide. “Dad?”

Balthazar appeared next to Gadreel, face hard. Yet his Grace quivered with fear that Gadreel could feel against his own.

The being wearing Gabriel’s face opened their mouth, and the voice was Gabriel’s. Even though the words were halting in a way they had only rarely been for Gabriel. “Your…father. Gabriel, was it?” The language sounded unfamiliar in their mouth, like they had only just learned how to form the words and speak it.

Dummy looked hopeful. “Did you forget?”

“I don’t…” Butterfingers wavered, taking a half step behind Dummy. “That doesn’t look like him.”

Turning to her, Dummy hissed, “He was different when he died last time, too, remember? He’s back.” He moved to lunge forwards as if to hug Gabriel as he normally did, only to hit Gadreel’s outstretched arm.

“Don’t.” Gadreel didn’t take his eyes off the being before them. “That isn’t Gabriel.”

“What do you mean that isn’t—”

“They wear his face, but they can’t hide their form.” Gadreel pushed him back until he was properly shielded.

“Never thought I’d actually see the abyss staring back at me,” Balthazar muttered, shifting his weight anxiously.

“Evil always wears a pretty face,” You murmured. “Don’t you remember?”

“Look fairer and feel fouler, right?” Butterfingers’s voice was weak. “Damn it. For a second…I’d really hoped…”

Resolutely ignoring the three behind him, Gadreel focused on the Dark. “You don’t belong here,” he told them.
The Dark tilted their head, seeming almost curious. “Don’t I? This is my sibling’s Creation, is it not? Except…”

The wave of malicious intent was enough for Gadreel to react, his sword flashing out and Grace blazing as he blocked the Dark from striking at the bots. Besides him, Balthazar bolstered his defense, although he gave a pained gasp at the void’s touch.

“They’re not normal,” the Dark said, attention on the three frozen behind Gadreel. “They weren’t Created by my sibling, were they? No, they were Created by Gabriel.” They spoke the name like it was a curse.

Dummy – brave Dummy – fired back, “Yeah, and what are you going to do about it?”

“Dummy.” Gadreel couldn’t split his attention, not with the Dark bearing down on him. He grit his teeth and managed to push them back, telling Balthazar in a low murmur, “Don’t touch them. They’ll devour you.”

Balthazar shot him a pained look, shaking his hands out as his true form flickered in his vessel, briefly blazing through his skin before he shrunk back. “You think?”

There was little warning before the Dark struck, although this time they didn’t move physically. Before Gadreel could move, something dark flew past him, hitting Balthazar in the chest.

With a cry that was half pain, half shock, Balthazar was thrown back, his true form escaping his vessel for a second. The void briefly threatened to engulf him, but Gadreel slashed down with his sword, cutting through it as best as he could.

“Balthazar!”

“I know!” Balthazar’s true voice split the air, and then he managed to withdraw back into his vessel, shivering. Yet his eyes glowed, the only sign that he wasn’t entirely in control of his power.

Go! Gadreel snapped, holding a hand out to ward off whatever else the Dark would do. Take the others if you can! And leave you here?!

Gadreel couldn’t respond, something swirling underneath his feet. He flicked himself elsewhere before anything could happen, fear pulsing through his Grace.

This hadn’t happened last time. The Dark hadn’t been so mobile. But now they moved like they were at home within that body, sending their form outside in a way they hadn’t before.

“You think you can face me?” The Dark sounded terribly amused. “When your brightest tried and failed?”

Oh, Samael.

“I will not let you have them,” Gadreel said quietly, fingers tight around his sword. “That is what you came here for, is it not? You want Gabriel’s children – the souls he Created. Yet you cannot. I refuse.”

The Dark’s lips curled. “What makes you think you can stop me? I would have devoured you before, but your sibling spared you.” Their skin disappeared into the void crawling underneath. “You won’t escape me now.”
Green Enochian sigils blazed into life before them – Loki’s handiwork. They were clearly meant to bind and trap, but they didn’t even hold for a second before the Dark swallowed the magic whole.

Despite himself, Gadreel flinched back at the sight. It was exactly what had happened before when he had them in his grasp, only it was so much more—

His true form pushed forth before he could think, an instinctive reaction to the sight. But it was abruptly sealed back into his vessel before he could do anything, something locking him inside.

His fingers went numb, sword clattering to the ground as his limbs refused to move. In his chest – in his Grace – a tendril of dark nothingness stretched out, connected to one of the Dark’s hands.

“You’re not bright enough,” the Dark said, smirking. “And your sibling is dimmer still. I think they’ll be next, don’t you?”

Eyes closing, Gadreel struggled to breathe, struggled to push them out, but they remained steadfast, a parasite sucking everything that he was out—

Blazing white light surged into being, blinding for a brief instant before it coalesced into a physical form.

The sound of a blade sliced through the air, cutting through the dark in Gadreel’s chest, dissipating the entire stream in a blaze of Grace. And before Gadreel could blink, that same Grace seared through him, eradicating every trace of the void in him.

When it retreated, leaving him colder than before, Gadreel could only stagger back, shaky and weak, until someone caught him – Loki.

Samael – Samael – stood before them, fury in every inch of nir form. But it wasn’t cold like Lucifer’s wrath.

Raising nir head, Samael fixed the Dark with an icy expression.

“Take that face off,” he said quietly, anger in every syllable, “or I’ll tear it off for you. And, trust me, this time it will work.”

To Gadreel’s surprise, the Dark actually looked fearful. Their gaze dropped, and Gadreel followed their eyes, shock running through him at what Samael held.

He had never seen it before, but there was no denying the presence of Death’s scythe.

Chapter End Notes

Well, now! What did you think?
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Most people seemed to wonder just where Samael got that scythe. Did ne steal it? Threaten Death into forking it over? What happened???

Well, why don't you find out?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Samael had never actually died before, but this seemed a lot like what would be there afterwards. If there even was anything after it, that was.

Gabriel had never had answers, even though he’d died twice. It hadn’t been something he was comfortable talking about either. To be honest, Samael also didn’t like talking about it since ne had been directly responsible for one of those deaths.

Still, Samael didn’t think ne had died. But then…ne hadn’t exactly been thinking in those last moments.

Something had snapped, and Samael had snapped with it. Just about the only clear thing in nir memory was the feeling of the Earth ripping apart with the force of nir grief.

Now ne was here in what seemed to be a white space. Not even necessarily in nir true form, although nir Grace was in easy reach.

Looking down at nir hands, Samael flexed nir fingers, breathing in slowly to feel nir lungs expand. Everything was…fine.

Except it wasn’t.

Not with what had happened, how Samael had failed. Ne had done what ne was supposed to but too late, and now…

Samael didn’t know what was going on now. There was nothing ne could find outside of this white realm. It was like a room with no exits or windows, which was utterly discomfiting for one used to being able to transcend entire dimensions if necessary.

But it wasn’t exactly claustrophobic. Which was surprising given that there was nowhere for Samael to go.

The only problem was…there was no one here. Samael was alone, silence in nir head and no sign of another voice or person.

Shaking nir head, Samael found nir breathing picking up. Ne was alone, yes, but ne hadn’t been locked here. There was a reason for this, there had to be. This couldn’t be the end.

“You’re okay, you’re okay.” Samael’s voice sounded too loud to nir ears, falling flat in the space around nem, high and panicked. “It’s fine.” But it wasn’t.
Ne could clearly remember shoving the sword through Gabriel’s chest and feeling nir brother’s last thanks. Ne could remember the ashy imprints of wings on the ground and the lifeless feel of Gabriel’s body in nir arms, no warmth left in the vessel.

And it had all been for nothing.

Wrapping nir arms around nemself, Samael squeezed nir eyes shut, pulling in air too fast.

Samael had killed Gabriel and yet it had been in vain if the Dark was still there. The only good thing was that at least Gabriel wasn’t being used as a vessel anymore.

When the familiar but unexpected voice spoke, it was both a relief and a surprise. “You did what you could.”

Samael’s head jerked up, eyes meeting Death’s. Ne wasn’t alone, and the bands of tension around nir chest began to relax. “Did I?” Ne almost didn’t recognize nir voice, choked as it was. “I was too late. Now he’s dead and they’re still free.”

Death lowered his head slightly. “Yet you did what you were supposed to.”

A bark of laughter escaped before Samael could stop it. “Supposed to? I was supposed to kill my own brother? For something that wasn’t his fault? Because I couldn’t save him? Because I wasn’t strong enough? I was supposed to do that?” Nir voice raised until ne was shouting. “So what! It didn’t matter! He’s dead and I’m probably dead, too, and everything’s fucked!”

Samael glared at him. “And you… Gabriel mentioned three on that altar in that other dimension, and we know who two of them are. But you and He…you’ve always said you were born around the same time. You’re the third, aren’t you? You’re the End.”

“Yes,” Death admitted, subdued.

Samael took a step closer, hands curling into fists. “They’re your sibling. Why the fuck haven’t you done anything? Why the fuck didn’t He? You knew this would happen, didn’t you?” Ne pulled in a furious breath, blinking back tears. “No cage lasts forever. I know that; you know that. So what was your plan?”

There was no emotion on Death’s face, simply a blank passivity that had Samael’s blood boiling. “Do you know why I asked you what you were willing to do? Why I asked if you were willing to kill your brother?”

“Because…” Samael blinked, eyes stinging. “Because they were using him – using him as a gateway to our universe.”

“Did you not think to wonder why I didn’t do it?”

Samael’s lips thinned. “Because you like pushing things off to others when at all possible.”

“No,” Death sighed, no sign of any anger despite Samael’s cutting tone. “I needed to know that you would do the job even if it necessitated killing your brother. And you did, Samael. You did what I couldn’t.”

“What? Killing Gabriel?”

“You did what you had to.” Death bowed his head, eyes on the immaterial ground between them. “We couldn’t.”
“So…what?” Samael heaved in a ragged breath, chest stuttering with the movement. Ne blinked rapidly, feeling water trickle down nir cheeks. “You were testing me? Is that it? Because you couldn’t take care of them? So I had to kill Gabriel? Ha.” Ne laughed bitterly. “Like it even worked. His death didn’t close the gate.”

“I didn’t expect it to.”

The words hung in the air between them.

Samael stared at him in disbelief, cold anger licking through nem. Ne had thought all nir anger was burned out, but it clearly wasn’t. “Are you – did you tell me I had to kill Gabriel even though you knew it wouldn’t work? What the fuck was the point?” Nir Grace turned cold, and for an instant ne wanted to drive nir sword through Death.

It wouldn’t work, but it would make nem feel better.

“Calm yourself, Samael,” Death said sharply. “Are you still Lucifer? Does your rage still control you?”

Teeth grinding, Samael jerked backwards, wrestling nir anger under control. Nir Grace warmed, but the anger was still there. Controllable. “I was Lucifer. I still am. But he isn’t me. Not anymore. Will that be a problem?”

Death studied nem with implacable eyes. “As long as you remember that.”

“Do you?” Samael fired back, unable to keep the anger out of nir voice. But nir Grace remained warm, simmering slightly. “Does my anger disturb you?”

And…there. A slight spark of emotion in Death’s eyes. But it was gone as quickly as it came, Death heaving a sigh.

“I didn’t expect Gabriel’s death to close the gate,” Death said quietly. “It was already open, the sigils binding them weakening with every passing second. But I needed to know if you were ready.”

Samael almost asked what Death was talking about, but nir voice died in nir throat when a weapon appeared in Death’s hands. He held it out horizontally, clearly offering it to Samael.

“You…” Samael couldn’t look away from Death’s scythe. “You’re not…”

“I said it before, didn’t I?” Death’s smile was weary. “We all have our time. We were born long before this universe ever came into being, and how we were born is unknown. Yet I know how it ends. Mine has come.”

“You – bullshit!” Samael took a step back, hands up. “Now? You’re copping out now? Your sibling is still out there! What are you intending to do about them?”

Death’s answer was infuriating. “I can’t.”

“You can’t? You can’t?” Samael gaped at him. “You mean you won’t. You – you’re shoving this onto us.” Ne forced the words out through gritted teeth. “Your mess, your problems…this is your mistake coming back to haunt us. It’s because of you that Gabriel’s dead.” Nir voice wobbled dangerously on the last word. “And now you’re… You don’t even have the decency to tell the truth.”

“I…” Death looked away, fingers tightening briefly around the handle of the scythe. “When we were
born – for whatever reason – we were alone. For a short time, we were practically one being. But we separated gradually, developing our own wants and needs. Still, we remembered what it had been like. Perhaps they forgot, but your Father and I… we never did. And it is because of that that we failed to do what we should have.”

“You’re not even willing to try, are you?” Samael asked dully.

“Because I would fail,” Death answered bluntly. “I cannot do it alone, Samael. We could have done it before, but now? I would be a fool to try and doom you all.”

Heat blazed in Samael’s chest, but it couldn’t drown out the agony of feeling Gabriel dying again in his arms. Or that gentle touch of his Grace against his own, the last time he would ever feel that warmth and love. “You think you’re doing this out of kindness? Practicality? You told me to kill my brother! You created this mess! You! And Him! And you’re leaving it to us!” Ne stepped forwards, uncaring of the fresh heat welling in his eyes. “And you expect me to take up your mantle?”

“I expect you to do your duty, Samael,” Death said harshly, eyes sharp.

“I did!”

“You think you’re done?” Death’s physical form fizzed out, briefly becoming something else before it reformed. “Samael, archangel of death. Was that not your title?”

Samael glared at him defiantly, nostrils flaring. “One of them.”

“You think it was by accident? We knew this day would eventually come, that one day His children would have to carry our legacies. And we watched you. We watched you stumble and make your choices, come what may as a result. When you nearly wrought the apocalypse, your Father wept, just as he rejoiced when others rebelled to make their own choices. Now here you stand before me, and you have a choice once again, Samael.

“Regardless of what you want, you don’t have the luxury to grieve. None of us do. Will you stand aside and let them devour everything? Or will you do what you must?” Death held the scythe up, eyes hard.

Samael’s hands flexed at his sides, fury, grief, and despair all mixed into a tangled ball of emotions that he could barely distinguish from one another. Pulling in a painful breath, Samael held it for a count, closing his eyes, and then exhaled.

Death stood patiently before him, doing nothing other than holding that blasted scythe out. Holding his legacy out for Samael to take and make his own. Only it was a legacy Samael didn’t want.

But when did his wants factor in this equation?

He hadn’t wanted to kill Gabriel, but he had. Gabriel wouldn’t have wanted the Dark to use his vessel like that. Ne didn’t want this to happen, but there weren’t a great many options left to him. Ne could just refuse, leave Death to figure it out on his own.

But what kind of archangel would Samael be, then? What kind of protector?

They were supposed to protect. They were warriors, defenders, healers, and guides. They weren’t meant to shut their eyes and ears and turn their back on what He had Created.
If Gabriel were faced with this choice?

Samael knew he would accept. How could ne do any different?

Another ragged breath later, Samael opened nir eyes, meeting Death’s patient ones. Ne had no more tears to shed, but the taste of salt lingered on nir lips.

“You know what to do,” Death said, eyes flickering down to the scythe.

Samael didn’t respond, taking the scythe and flipping it around briefly to test its weight. Then, holding Death’s gaze, Samael brought it up, swinging down sharply and directly through Death’s form.

The scythe cut through him like he was smoke, his edges already dissipating into the ether. His worn, sharp face eased into a smile, one that Samael had never seen him wear before, and then he was gone.

Pulling the scythe back to nir side, Samael felt the rush of power like a punch to the gut, screaming as nir Grace twisted with the influx. And with the power came knowledge, which Samael hadn’t expected and hurt.

The scythe shook in nir grip, rattling violently. Before Samael’s eyes nir sword blinked into place of the scythe and then back again several times before ne called it forth and they blended together seamlessly.

In an instant, the scythe extended, several feet longer than it had been before, with a wickedly sharp point at either end. For a second Samael thought nir sword was irretrievable, but then it shrunk down to the familiar silver length.

Breathing heavily, Samael tightened nir grip on it, swallowing as ne shifted the weapon back to that of the scythe, albeit without the pointed hilt.

Pulling nir attention to the white realm, Samael realized that ne could make an exit. And that ne could sense nir universe. Midgard was easiest to sense, but Asgard was right there because of sheer familiarity, and there—

No.

Fury surging through nir veins, Samael reached out and opened a portal, stepping through and out the other side. Nir true form blazed forth before ne realized what was happening. Even then, Samael barely managed to pull back enough to avoid scorching the eyes of any nearby gods.

All nir focus was on Gadreel and what the Dark was doing to him. Ne slashed down with the scythe, cutting through the tendril connecting the two like it was butter. Grace blazed down the line, incinerating whatever remained into nothing.

But there was still something in Gadreel. Mutely, Samael touched his chest, reaching in and burning it out. There was no hiding from nem now, not with this power surging through nir Grace.

Reassured that Gadreel was as fine as he could be, Samael turned to the Dark, letting every ounce of nir fury rush to the front, fixing them with a deadly glare. They were wearing Gabriel’s face.

Gabriel’s vessel was dust with the Earth, but the Dark had the audacity to wear it nonetheless. Like it was theirs.
It wasn’t quite perfect, shimmering at the edges. It clearly wasn’t physical so much as an image the Dark was projecting for others to see. But that made it all the worse.

“Take that face off,” Samael said quietly, nir rage tightly restrained, “or I’ll tear it off for you. And, trust me, this time it will work.”

The Dark’s face – Gabriel’s face – wavered for a second, almost like they took Samael’s threat seriously, but then it steadied on a smirk. “Do you think so?”

The rage flickered in nem, but it didn’t flare out of control. No, the rage didn’t control nem anymore.

“Yes,” Samael answered, taking a slow breath. “I do.”

And ne struck, jumping forwards before the Dark could react. Grace blazed from nir open palm as ne grabbed hold of the Dark’s head. The sensation of the void so close to nir true form had nir skin crawling even as nir Grace responded with deadly light.

There was a terrible scream and the Dark was suddenly ten feet away, their form wavering like water. Samael didn’t give them the reprieve, chasing after and cutting through the darkness that attacked, burning the rest away without a thought.

This time when ne hit them, the image of Gabriel’s vessel disappeared entirely to be replaced a shapeless void. Satisfied, Samael withdrew.

“Do you want to test me again?” Samael asked, hand tight around the handle of the scythe. “You can, if you want. You won’t like my response.”

“You don’t like that face?” the Dark hissed, the void of their wavering until it shaped into something else. “What about this one?” Samael found nemself staring into a face ne had seen once in nir childhood and once after regaining nir Grace, the scruffy beard and kind eyes the most noticeable features. “Your parent’s last vessel, wasn’t it?”

“You—” Samael couldn’t get any other words out, rage and grief closing nir throat.

“You didn’t consent,” Samael bit out. “You crept in without him knowing, and you don’t even care, do you? You don’t care he didn’t want it. You don’t care that he was essentially family, and you killed him.”

The Dark tilted their head. “But that was you, wasn’t it? You were the one to finish it, after all.”

There was a startled outcry from behind nem that Samael ignored, eyes narrowing as ne glared at the Dark. “Better that he die at my hand than devoured at yours. Better that he rejoin Creation than be lost in the abyss.” Ne paused, the corner of nir lips ticking up wryly. “You’re upset about that, aren’t you? That you couldn’t have him in the end – that I took that from you.” Nir smile turned into a ruthless grin. “Too bad. He was never yours to begin with. And this universe? You can’t have it either.”

Samael’s jaw clenched. “I blamed my family once for the mistakes I made, but they were mine. What
happened after was on me and no one else. And Gabriel…” Ne smiled bitterly. “I don’t know what he saw in me, but he gave me a second chance. One that I didn’t deserve then and I still don’t. But you know what? It doesn’t matter.

“You can’t turn me. I Fell once before, but I know who I am.” Samael let nir true form come forth, skin glowing with light. Nir left hand clenched into a tight fist as ne focused light into the palm. “I know myself. I am not my Father’s echo; I am not your mirror. I am Samael, archangel of the Creator, and I Banish you!”

Samael’s clenched hand flew up, fingers spreading wide to reveal a glowing sigil in nir palm. Within a second the glow became blinding to normal eyes, a torrent of light consuming the Dark.

Inhuman shrieking filled the air, ringing painfully through Samael’s head. But ne didn’t move, all focus on the sigil and the power ne fed into it, bidding the Dark away and back to where they had come from.

When ne felt the last of the void disappear, ne clenched nir hand shut, the light dying out instantly. Behind nem, Gadreel moved to speak. “Samael—”

Samael shushed him with a raised hand, attention going to borders of Asgard. With a snap of nir fingers, ne grabbed hold of two familiar souls and pulled them here.

Ultron and Vision stumbled into place next to the other bots, stunned surprise etched on their faces.

Ignoring the startled exclamations, Samael continued to stretch, inscribing sigils into every corner that ne could reach. They sparked into view, visible to anyone looking in the sky.

Lifting the scythe up, Samael hissed, “Try getting past this, Devourer.” With a shout, ne brought it down, the hilt slamming into the ground with a crackle of power.

The sigils glowing in the sky exploded into white light that dissipated as quickly as it had formed.

Panting, Samael propped nemself up with the scythe, taking a brief moment to let nir weight sag before composing nemself.

With a snap of nir wrist, the scythe faded back into nir sword, and Samael let that fade back into its normal pocket. Samael’s fingers shook, an aftermath of the rush of power that ne had drawn from to inscribe the required spells.

It was like adrenaline but headier, and it took Samael a moment longer before the Grace-light faded from nir eyes.

Turning to face the others, Samael walked past a stunned Gadreel and Balthazar, addressing the assembled artificial intelligences. Ne didn’t meet Loki’s eyes. “Asgard’s warded against them, so if you value your souls, I’d recommend you stay.”

Then without another word, Samael walked away, mind intent on the next destination.

“Samael.” Gadreel’s hand caught hold of nir arm, pulling nem back. “You owe us an explanation for what just happened.”

“Do I?” Samael avoided his eyes, looking off into the direction of the palace, the golden gleam visible over the trees of the forest they were in.
“Yes,” Balthazar added, coming up to nir other side. He carefully didn’t touch nem.

Hunching nir shoulders, Samael averted nir gaze, throat suddenly thick.

“They said you killed Dad,” Dummy said, coming closer. “But you wouldn’t, would you? They were lying…right?” The last word was whispered.

“I did not detect a lie when they spoke,” Loki said in the silence that followed. His face was reserved, although his eyes were dark.

“No.” Samael managed to get the word out without nir voice breaking, although it was thicker than ne would have liked. “They weren’t.”

Dummy stared at nem, disbelief all over his features. “…Why?” he burst out. “Why would you do that?”

Samael turned, mouth dry, hesitantly reaching out to him. “Dummy—”

“No!” Dummy pulled away. “You—” He wiped at his face, the armor sliding off and retreating to his wristbands and anklets. “If it had been him,” he continued a second later, “he wouldn’t have done it. He didn’t last time.”

Samael flinched, going back to the sensation of Gabriel’s body under him, pinned as Lucifer prepared to finish the job. “They tried to kill you. I know their mind; I know their memories. This position is quite familiar, isn’t it? Except the roles are reversed, and you aren’t as weak as your sibling.”

Gadreel laid a calming hand on Dummy’s shoulder, eyes steady as he looked at Samael. “Was it Lucifer?” The question was nonjudgmental, the tone carefully free of emotion.

Dummy perked up slightly at the question, even his siblings looking slightly more hopeful at what it suggested.

“Was it?” Butterfingers asked when Samael didn’t immediately answer.

“I was there when the Rebellion happened,” Balthazar said noncommittally when Samael glanced at him. “I remember how you looked during, and you don’t look like that now.” He gave Samael a hard look. “But you did when you threw me out.”

Shaking, Samael closed nir eyes, turning nir back on the others. “No,” ne answered tightly. “It was – it was me. I did it. Don’t make excuses for me. Even if I had been closer to Lucifer…it would still have been me. So, yes…” Ne opened nir eyes, half turning to meet their gazes. “I killed Gabriel.”

Although Gadreel’s face remained still, there was no hiding the way his Grace recoiled, the already existing grief even sharper than before. Balthazar had no qualms about hiding his dismay, his mouth opening and eyebrows furrowing.

“But he can come back, can’t he?” Dummy asked, pleading. “He did last time.”

“No,” Samael said slowly, throat thick. Even though ne was… Ne didn’t have that power like their Father. “Because the one who did last time…He’s dead. I can’t – none of us can.”

There was a choked cry from Butterfingers, hands flying up to her mouth.

“How striking,” Loki said slowly, words a slow drawl that weren’t quite able to mask the strain of
his voice, “that you would kill Gabriel when he offered you a second chance. He could not kill you even when given the opportunity, but clearly you could.”

Samael’s shoulders tightened, tension coiling at the base of nir neck as Loki continued speaking. Ne hadn’t wanted to do it. Ne hadn’t.

“You killed him before, did you not?” Sparks of magic flew off Loki’s figure, but he didn’t seem to notice. “And even after what you did to him in the Cage”—he ignored the reprimanding “Loki!” from Gadreel—“he still forgave you. He forgave you even after you killed Michael. But after all this time, you could still kill him—”

“You think I don’t know that?!” Samael’s sudden shout had them all taking a reflexive step back, although Loki remained still, his jaw tightening. “You think I don’t know what he did for me? What he gave me? You think I wanted to kill him? He’s my brother! I saw his birth; I helped him grow and learn.” Nir voice rose with every word. “And he raised me! He was better than our Father ever was! He was as good as my parent!”

Samael’s chest hurt, breath coming in harsh gasps. Turning so they couldn’t see nir face, ne continued, “And despite that, I was supposed to protect him. I’m the older sibling. It doesn’t matter what we are or our duties.” The sob escaped nem before ne noticed, the sound harsh in the silence. “I was supposed to protect him, and I couldn’t do that.”

It was a few seconds before Loki spoke again. “So you killed him, even knowing there would be no chance of resurrection for him.”

The closest tree trunk splintered under the force of Samael’s punch before ne realized what happened. Even then, Samael didn’t move, using the dull impact as a reminder to not hit Loki. “You think he would have wanted that? Being devoured by them? Being used as a gateway here?”

The bark crunched under nir hand as Samael spread nir fingers, pressing hard into the tree. Even now, with how ne felt, Samael could sense the life in the tree. “I couldn’t save him,” ne repeated quietly, eyes closing. “I tried but…I only made it worse. And if I couldn’t pull him out…I wasn’t going to let them have him. I wasn’t going to let them use him like that.”

Withdrawing nir hand, Samael healed the injury left behind, glad that it still worked. With a sad smile that wobbled at the edges, Samael turned to look to the others, voice cracking with nir next words. “He loved this universe. What kind of sibling would I be if I let them destroy it using him? What kind of guardian?” Ne turned nir palm up, staring at the lines for a few seconds before letting nir fingers curl in. “I’m not simply a sibling or a child,” ne continued quietly, feeling metal and flesh and warmth under nir fingers for a brief second. “I wish I could be, but I can’t. Gabriel understood.”

Samael lifted nir eyes to meet theirs. “It’s the only thing that means anything right now. That he wouldn’t have wanted that. That he wants this place protected. And I will damn well do whatever I can to make sure that happens. That none of you are harmed, that this place continues to live and move forward like he wanted it to.”

When ne looked to Gadreel and Balthazar, ne was relieved and glad to see the same determination in their eyes that was in nem. “So I’ll do what I must.” Nir smile was wry. “As we all do.”

Off to the side, Ultron and Vision hovered uncertainly, looking uncomfortable and upset respectively. Butterfingers and You had drawn together, unusually pale and tears on their cheeks. Dummy was shaking, wrapping his arms around himself and shaking his head mutely. He didn’t seem to notice Gadreel tightening his grip on his shoulder, although he did let himself be pulled in for a hug.
Samael couldn’t help but notice with a pang that Gadreel hugged like Gabriel, who he had doubtlessly learned it from.

Jarvis wasn’t here, but Samael had no doubt that he would be finding out soon if he hadn’t already heard it from his siblings. That he wasn’t here was a gift Samael wouldn’t be questioning, as he didn’t know if he could face his grief.

“What do you intend to do?” Loki’s question was quiet, as emotionless as his body. But his soul…

Samael hid a wince, carefully meeting his eyes like he couldn’t sense what he was feeling. “I’m going to Heaven. We need reinforcements.”

Loki’s eyes narrowed. “Reinforcements for what? You took care of it, did you not?”

“Temporarily.” Samael’s mouth twisted. “I can only banish them for so long. They’ll be back.”

“You did not kill them?”

“I can’t,” Samael snapped, bristling. “I tried, but it didn’t take.” He pulled in a sharp breath through his nose, blinking rapidly. “And I’m not the type to beat myself up against the same wall. Not with the stakes as they are.”

“What if they come back?” Butterfingers’s voice was a hoarse whisper, her head resting against You’s shoulder.

“They can’t hurt you.” Samael glanced upwards, seeing the sigils wink briefly. “Not unless you leave Asgard.”

“You can’t do the same for Midgard?”

“Sure,” Samael said dryly, “if I want the rest of existence to be devoured by them.” He didn’t point out that the entirety of Midgard was a great deal vaster than Asgard – that warding the entirety of that realm would cost him far too much power. They didn’t need to know, not if this worked. “If they can’t have this universe, they’ll go for others. Dimensional barriers won’t stop them.” He managed a gentle smile. “It never stopped us, after all.”

Butterfingers nodded jerkily, breathing ragged. She turned her face back into You’s shoulder, shoulders shuddering.

“I’m going,” Samael said, meeting his brothers’ eyes. “You can come with or not at all.” Turning to the side, he reached a hand out, pausing to add quietly, “I’d like it if you did. But you don’t have to.”

Having put the option out there, Samael opened the way, breaching the dimensional walls with an ease that he had never had before. He stepped through, finding himself on a random planet. There hadn’t been any set goal in mind for the portal, so the destination wasn’t surprising.

Heaven was easily accessible for an angel, anyway.

A minute after Samael stepped through, Gadreel and Balthazar followed, the portal closing behind them. They both looked resolute despite the grief Samael could sense from them.

Well, they could doubtlessly sense his own grief. It was impossible to keep it hidden from them, even if he had tried.

“You think it’ll work?” Balthazar asked, tilting his head up to the sky. “I mean, they took Gabriel
down.” His voice was pained.

“We’re light.” Samael said, eyes closing as ne reached out to Heaven. Something wasn’t right. “All of us. And none of us are alone.”

Samael flew to Heaven, seeking out Castiel and Raphael in the Garden. This was one place where the humans were still barred from as there was only so much one could ask from angels, and the Garden was the most sacred place of all.

Although the Winchester brothers had once been in the Garden, they’d never entered again unless Castiel snuck them in somehow (which Samael wouldn’t put past him). No other humans had since entered the Garden, only angels seeking peace or closeness with their Father.

So the darkness broiling in the center of the Garden was as alarming as it was unsurprising.

Raphael and Castiel were creating barriers, fending off what they could and barking out orders to ward off the weaker angels. Still, there was one angel trapped in the darkness that Samael could sense.

“Stay back!” Raphael shouted as Samael flew past. “You – Samael!”

Samael didn’t hesitate, Grace blazing forth and burning away the dark creeping along the ground. There was an obvious air of malevolence that intensified when ne made nir presence known.

“Ne isn’t yours.” Reaching in, Samael grabbed hold of the life ne could sense still beating within the Dark. “And you can’t have nemi!” Incinerating the Dark, Samael pulled the other angel out, registering nemi dimly as Joshua before Raphael darted into take nemi to safety.

Pure rage screeched from the Dark, and they swarmed towards Samael.

There were alarmed cries from the others, but Samael didn’t pay them any attention, the sigil ne had used earlier bursting into life at a mere thought. “You don’t belong here. Out!”

All ne needed to do was corral the awful void into the sigil, sealing it the moment everything was gone. Whatever remained of them was burned away easily, Samael striking out before anything could touch anyone else.

The energy expended returned practically instantly in a heady rush that had Samael practically dizzy. Slowly, ne let go of the scythe that ne had called forth instinctively, letting it fade back to its usual pocket.

Now that the threat was dealt with, Samael could see that the Winchester brothers were here, evidently having had a hand with throwing up wards. Other hunters milled at the boundaries, warier about stepping deeper into the Garden.

“Samael.” Raphael stepped in front of nem, her true form coalescing into her physical one. She looked relieved if harried. “Your arrival is a pleasant surprise.” The nasty look she shot the place where Samael had sealed the Dark clearly said everything she thought about the Dark’s appearance.

“Thank you,” Joshua said, leaning heavily against another angel. Niri true form was faint, almost all of nir energy gone.

Samael gave nem a wry smile. “They weren’t going to have anyone else.”

Raphael raised her eyebrows, although her tone was nervous as she asked, “Anyone else?” She
looked past Samael to Gadreel and Balthazar. “Where is Gabriel?”

The words came easier than last time. “He’s dead.”

Raphael blinked, nonplussed. “What?”

Castiel frowned, returning from where he had been checking on the brothers. “Are you joking?”

“Gabriel is dead,” Samael repeated harshly, teeth grinding together briefly. Ne resolutely ignored the suspicious reactions from the other angels. “I killed him,” ne added just to get it over with.

“You what?” Raphael’s eyes sparked.

“Samael,” Gadreel murmured.

“I’m not Gabriel,” Samael told him. “And I have little patience for softening the news. Not with our entire Creation at risk.” Ne looked back Castiel and Raphael. “You already suspected, didn’t you? Did you feel it here?”

“No, but…” Raphael’s eyes darted back to the still glowing sigil.

“We felt something,” Castiel disagreed, mouth set in a hard line. “But we put it down to that.”

“I’m guessing Gabriel’s neck deep in something again?” Dean asked, coming to stand next to Castiel. He didn’t seem to have heard Samael’s earlier words.

Shaking his head, Castiel reached around to touch Dean’s hip. “Gabriel is…”

Dean stared at Castiel in disbelief. “You’re kidding. The guy’s like a cockroach! You can’t keep him down.”

“He’s dead,” Samael ground out, not even remotely vindicated at the surprised expressions on Dean’s and Sam’s faces. “And he’s not coming back now. I didn’t come here to just tell you that,” ne added when they began to speak. “What you just faced? They came from our home.”

“Like hell was that a comic book villain,” Dean protested, ignoring Sam’s hiss of “Dean!”

By some miracle, Samael managed to keep nir voice calm. “They aren’t. I don’t know why they were in ours when by rights they should have had a portal here. But it must have had something to do with Gabriel since…” Ne took a shaky breath, glad when nir voice came out even when ne continued, “Since they possessed him.”

There was stark disbelief from the other angels. Even Raphael and Castiel seemed disinclined to believe nem.

“That’s not possible,” Raphael protested.

“I’m telling you it is,” Samael snapped. “My own hubris blinded me when I purged them initially, but they were never gone. And now Gabriel’s gone, too, because I couldn’t save him.”

“You killed him once before,” a lesser angel said, her physical form female, “simply because he was in your way. Why should we believe you now?”

“I know,” Samael said slowly, “that you’ve little cause to trust me even now. I know that I’ve done little to regain your trust since I rebelled. There’s little I can say, since it’s actions that speak louder than words here. But I’m asking you…please. Gabriel loved what our – our Father Created. If you’re
not willing to help *me*, do it for him.”

“You speak pretty words, serpent, but you still stand there with Gabriel’s blood on your hands.”

Castiel shot the speaker a glare. “Hannah.”

And Samael… Samael couldn’t. Ne couldn’t do it again, not after having had the same conversation with Gabriel’s children, who were also practically nir siblings.

“I’m sorry,” Samael said warily, feeling the surprise from Gadreel and Balthazar. “What else do you want me to say? Because there isn’t much. I don’t have any excuses because there aren’t any. Even if there were, I wouldn’t give you one because I did it. It was me. That I did it because I didn’t want Gabriel to suffer anymore than he already had doesn’t make my hands clean, but it’s the only thing I have. I did it because it’s what he would have wanted.”

“He wanted to be dead?” another asked skeptically – Naomi, Samael recognized.

“Better dead than entirely gone into the void.” Samael’s gaze flickered to the wounds in Heaven that the Dark had left behind, ugly scars that Heaven’s energy couldn’t cover. “There’s no coming back from that.”

“You know what it was?” Raphael met nir eyes, anxiety in her gaze.

“The Dark, but more simply they’re a void, an absence of what should be there.” Samael closed nir eyes against the memory of Gabriel desperately trying to explain what he’d seen. “They’re our Father’s sibling,” ne said heavily.

Stunned silence followed nir words, all of them blinking in befuddlement at nem.

“You’re serious,” Raphael said eventually, increduous. “I don’t… How long did you know this?”

“It’s not something He chose to share with Michael or me,” Samael said, unable to keep a note of bitterness out of nir tone. “We didn’t find out until it was too late. Because by then… we had no idea who we were up against or what it meant. We’re not the first, Raphael. He Created something else before us – before the Leviathan – and locked the Dark into it. That same place we blindly walked into because He never told us anything. He and Death weren’t the first two; there were *three.*”

At the mention of Death, Dean frowned, squinting slightly as he peered at Samael. Sam also looked a little suspicious but wasn’t squinting as much.

Raphael’s mouth twisted, her eyes pinching unhappily. “What did you come here for?” The question “What do you expect us to do?” went unspoken between them.

“Did you try contacting Father?” Castiel asked.

Samael refused to look back at Gadreel and Balthazar, answering flatly, “He’s dead.”

In the stunned silence that followed, Dean said skeptically, “What, dead dead? Or is it like the time He left you guys without a word?” But he touched Castiel’s shoulder, shooting him a concerned look.

“He’s dead,” Samael repeated. “It’s why we’ve been sensing something off. Death confirmed it.”

Raphael pulled in a slow breath, taking a moment to respond. When she did, her voice was even. “Where is he, then? Are we expected to deal with their sibling ourselves?”
When Samael didn’t answer immediately, Sam did, sounding faintly wondering. “He’s dead, too, isn’t he? You don’t feel the same. You feel like him.”

Samael could feel Gadreel’s and Balthazar’s stares boring into his back, since he hadn’t said anything back home. They didn’t know what had happened. “Yes,” he said simply. “He is.”

Sam’s eyes widened. “You’re serious? Death is actually dead?”

“Everyone has their time; he said it was his.” Samael’s right hand curled into a fist, the sense memory of the scythe vivid. “So, yes,” he continued tightly, “he’s dead. They’re both dead.”

Raphael stared at him, eyes wide. Then what? she said privately, sounding lost. What are we supposed to do?

Samael inclined his head, holding Raphael’s gaze for a moment longer before looking at the others. “It’s down to us,” he said quietly. “We can’t rely on anyone else but ourselves. They left this mess to us to take care of, and I know it sucks. They chose now to leave, even though they knew this would happen. We shouldn’t have to deal with this, but we are.”

Samael pulled in a breath, swallowing down the anger. There was no hiding the uneasy shifting of the other angels, and softening his tone, he continued, “But we can handle it. I know we can. You know why?” He smiled broadly, flashing a hint of teeth. “Because we have each other. None of us are alone. And that’s why I’m here. I can’t do it by myself. Even if I am Death now, it doesn’t change the fact that I can’t. Not by myself.”

Samael looked back at Raphael and Castiel, smile softening. “I’m asking for help,” he said quietly. “I know…I haven’t done anything to deserve your trust—”

Raphael cut him off, stepping closer until she was in arms reach. “Enough, Samael.” Her voice was gentle. “Gabriel trusted you. Frankly, that’s more than enough for me. You came here asking for help, and you’ll get it.” She paused, glancing back at Castiel. “Or am I wrong?”

Castiel shared a quick glance with Dean, giving him a small half-smile. “You’re not.” He moved forwards to draw even with Raphael. “You have my help as well, and anyone else who wants to join.”

“Can’t get rid of me,” Balthazar quipped, nudging Samael gently.

“Of course I’ll help,” Gadreel said, his smile gentle but sad. “It’s the least I can do for Gabriel,” he added softly.

Samael swallowed thickly, dropping his gaze. “Anyone else?” he managed to ask. “I’m not going to order you to fight if you don’t want to. This is dangerous. Even Gabriel…” His voice died as he remembered just what had happened.

“Hey, I’d join if I could, but I’m just a soul at the moment,” Dean said dryly. “Not much I can do that angels can’t.” Sam nodded in agreement, expression apologetic. “Sucks ass, though.”

There was a long moment of silence, the other angels either glancing at each other or looking pensive.

Finally, just when Samael thought he would have to figure this out with two archangels and two regular angels, Naomi stepped forwards, eyes hard. “I’ll help.”

There was a general air of suspicion as the other angels regarded her, but Hannah pulled even with
Naomi, face resolute. “So will I.”

It was like a dam broke, since there was a general murmur of agreement from the others, both verbal and silent. Until, seconds later, the entirety of what remained of the Host had voiced their agreement.

Only several remained behind: Joshua and three others who had been too close to the Dark when they attacked.

“I’ll keep an eye on the Garden,” Joshua told Samael, smiling faintly. Ne didn’t look quite as pale as before, although nir true form was still dim. “Someone has to, after all.”

“Thank you, Joshua.” Raphael returned nir smile, gently touching nir cheek. “If something happens to go wrong—”

“It won’t do any good,” Samael cut her off. “If we fail, then it’s all over. There won’t be a new beginning, just the void.”

“You were doing so splendidly before,” Balthazar whispered. “Don’t go all doom and gloom on us now.”

Samael shot him a bland stare. “It’s just the facts.”

“You could be a little more subtle about it, perhaps?”

“They need to know what’s at stake. There won’t be anything else if the Dark gets their way, just a blank void of nothing.” Samael tightened nir jaw, closing nir eyes at a memory that wasn’t nirs. “We can’t let that happen,” ne said after a moment.

“We won’t,” Raphael assured nem. “We can do this. Together, right?” Her smile was wistful. “It hasn’t been like this in so long.”

Samael glanced away, unwilling to point out that it wasn’t the same. Gabriel wasn’t here, and neither was Michael. They were still one short of the original four archangels, and even then Castiel wasn’t Michael.

But Raphael knew that. Samael did understand where she was coming from.

It had been a long time since the Host had been a unified front, and never like this against a common enemy.

As they traveled through the path Samael opened to nir home, the sight stunned Samael. As did the sound of the entire Host in nir head when ne closed the path and was back home. Combined with the familiar sensations of this universe’s energies, the sound of nir siblings in the background was enough to leave Samael slightly off-kilter.

Even Gadreel and Balthazar seemed slightly overwhelmed.

“This is the closest I could put us to where Earth was.” Samael looked up, gaze going to where Earth had once been. “That’s where they’ll be coming from.”

Raphael raised an eyebrow. “I assume you have a plan?”

Samael glanced askance, focusing briefly on the necessary sigils and transmitting them to the entirety of the Host. “It’s going to be down to the three of us. We need to get them at their source – the dimension where they were bound. The rest need to run backup and distraction as necessary, using
the sigils as protection and as a way to corral them if necessary. Enochian doesn’t do anything; Loki tried and failed.”

Castiel tilted his head, frowning slightly. “What language is that?”

Samael’s smile was wry. “I don’t know the name, but it was their language, preceding ours. There’re some similarities, so at a guess I can say Enochian was derived from it.” She skinned her gaze over the assembled angels that were inspecting the planet. “I don’t want anyone risking their lives. Gadreel and Balthazar can both attest that this won’t be easy.”

“Ne’s right,” Balthazar confirmed when Castiel and Raphael glanced over. “They hit like a truck and an elephant combined. It isn’t pretty.”

“I’ll let them know,” Raphael said after a moment. “Castiel, see if you can position the garrisons for maximum effectiveness. You know what to do.”

Gadreel and Balthazar lingered with Samael even as Raphael and Castiel left to make sure the other angels knew what they had to do. Once Samael would have joined them, but there was too little trust now for her to feel comfortable doing so.

Especially now considering Gabriel…

“If there’s anyone you want to talk to, now’s a good time,” Samael said, tucking her hands into her pockets.

“Cassie already knows all I had to say,” Balthazar said easily.

Gadreel didn’t answer, ducking his head and scrutinizing Samael closely.

Samael stared back, raising an eyebrow. “Yes?”

“You said you’re Death now,” Gadreel said slowly.

“What of it?”

“How did it happen?”

“He just dropped it on me,” Samael answered bluntly. Seeing Gadreel’s obvious confusion and Balthazar’s skepticism, she sighed. “He really did. But…what happened with Gabriel…he warned me beforehand, but it was too little, too late. It was a test to see if I could do what he couldn’t with dear old Dad.” A bitter smile crossed her lips. “And I could.”

Balthazar took a moment before responding, eyes flickering to Gadreel. “I think what Gadreel’s trying to get at is why you?”

“I’m the archangel of death.” Samael gave them a wry look. “Maybe it wasn’t ever publicized broadly, but it was one of my titles. What he said…it’s apparently been in the works for a long time, figuring out a way to pass on the legacy when they die.” She shrugged loosely, drawing in a deep breath and registering the sense of life and how fragile it was. It was so much more than it had been before. “It’s passed now.”

“What about Father?” Gadreel asked quietly. “What about His legacy? If Death passed his on to you, then what happened to His?”

“I don’t know.”
“Here’s what I also don’t get,” Balthazar said, “why didn’t Death do anything? They’re his sibling after all. You’d think he’d deal with his family troubles instead of shoving it onto us.”

“He couldn’t.” The words were acid in nir mouth. “Not by himself. They had their chance initially but blew it because they cared too much.” Ne paused, closing nir eyes. “Remind you of someone?”

“What Gabriel did was completely different,” Gadreel protested.

“Not particularly.” Samael’s mouth twisted. “I was prepared to bring about the end of the world as you knew it. What I did before that is inexcusable, yet he excused it. He cared,” ne said, sighing, “too much. He’s just lucky the gamble paid off. They weren’t.”

“Yeah, tough luck,” Balthazar said dryly. “They really blew it there.”

Gadreel shot him a brief reprimanding look before meeting Samael’s eyes again. “You said he couldn’t do it alone, but aren’t you?”

Samael tilted nir head. “I’m not.”

“We appreciate the sentiment, but none of us are even remotely as powerful as Father was.”

“We’ve got a hell of a lot more beings here than just two. And it was just the two of them. With Raphael and Castiel with me, there’s three. It has to be enough.”

Gadreel’s next question was almost a whisper. “And if it isn’t?”

“There’s no choice.” Samael looked up to the sky, to where Earth had been and where Gabriel had died. “It has to be enough.”

There should be anxiety. Or maybe trepidation. Something to show for the fact that they were all about to face something much bigger than any of them.

But there was nothing.

There was a low current of anxiety running through the Host, but Samael didn’t feel anything. Ne should, really, but there wasn’t anything.

Simply…a sense of resignation.

“I haven’t sensed anything,” Raphael said quietly from the left, looking troubled.

“They’re coming.” Samael’s chest gave a twinge as ne felt the wards ne had used to lock the Dark away weakening even further.

They’d been weakening steadily from the moment Samael had banished them the first time, although the rate of decay had initially been slow. Now it was like a truck barreling down a highway, speeding up with every passing second.

When they did finally snap, Samael felt it like a punch to the chest, the energy backlash more than ne had expected.

“Samael!” Raphael touched nir shoulder.

“I’m fine.” Samael forced nemself to breathe out, peering up at the sky. “Can’t you sense it?”
Because ne could. It was an empty hole in the fabric of space, easy enough to miss at first but impossible to ignore once one found it.

Raphael didn’t have to answer. Ne could sense the instinctive horror and disgust that surged through her Grace.

No further words were needed, so Samael took flight. Castiel and Raphael followed shortly after, and the rest of the Host dispersed to their positions.

The void expanded where the Earth had been, although the actual gate was a great deal smaller. Samael could sense it somewhere in the middle, but there was no way of reaching it without plunging headlong into the Dark’s grasp.

And ne wasn’t foolhardy enough to try that without more of a solid plan. Slowing down, Samael stayed just out of reach of the Dark, evaluating the situation.

*I see you brought more*, the Dark said, their voice sliding smoothly into their heads without any warning. *Little specks of light, like fireflies.*

They were so casually *dismissive*, their tone mockingly derogative in a way that had Samael’s blood boiling.

*Samael.* Gadreel sounded alarmed.

*It’s fine,* Samael snapped. And it was.

If ne wanted to let it, the rage could make things *cold*, but that wasn’t going to help here. No, ne needed nir anger, but the anger wouldn’t *control* nem.

There was an alarmed cry from a garrison of angels off to the edges of the solar system. Within the blink of an eye, Samael was there, pushing back the offshoots of the Dark that had stretched out against their knowledge. *I don’t think so.*

Wards flared into life behind nem, enough that Samael felt safe enough to press forward and push the Dark away, incinerating what came too close.

*You think you can stop me? You couldn’t stop me before. Your sibling is dead at your hands because you failed.*

The words echoed between them, ringing in Samael’s head and outside and incriminating nir every action.

Ne had failed Gabriel; that wasn’t in question. Ne had failed to save him – had failed to protect him when it mattered.

But that the Dark had the *audacity* bring it up? To rub it into Samael’s face that ne *had failed*? When they were responsible for what had happened?

*Samael!* Raphael sounded alarmed. *Please, calm down!*

Samael was dimly aware that ne was burning too hot for the other angels. Even Raphael and Castiel were keeping their distance, although Raphael was closer than most. But it didn’t matter.

What *did* was taking care of the Dark for good.
It wouldn’t make anything better, but it would at least make it *worth* it.

Flinging nemself into the Dark, Samael made a half-hearted effort to corral it, more focused on burning away what ne could reach. Castiel and Raphael were at nir sides, catching what ne missed.

But it wasn’t *enough*. There was always more to replace what Samael smote, and ne couldn’t possibly keep up. The other two lagged, faint traces of exhaustion beginning to linger at the edges of their attacks even though their determination remained as strong as ever.

Even when Samael tried to push in further to get where ne needed to be, it didn’t work. The invisible chains that had held nem back when it had been so crucially important last time came back, binding nem in place for a brief instant before the world swum dizzyingly around them and Samael abruptly found them in a different galaxy from before.

One with *life*.

*Keep them away from the inhabited planets!* Samael flew around, wrangling the Dark in the opposite direction from where ne could sense life pulsing.

The wards weren’t enough, the power embedded in the sigils unable to keep the Dark from traveling entire galaxies, even if it did temper their power somewhat. But they were strong enough to grab hold of Samael, even as ne threw them off course and into an uninhabited planet.

There was no holding back here.

By the time Samael and nir siblings managed to wrestle the Dark back off the planet and into space, most of the planet had crumbled into bits, vague remnants still lingering in orbit.

There was a sharp moment of grief from Castiel, but it was soon engulfed by a fierce anger and determination.

Even so, the Dark wrested free of Samael’s grip, vanishing from sight entirely.

Samael spent a brief second panicking before there were startled exclamations and screams from a garrison guarding the nearest planet.

Wards blazed into life and were extinguished in mere moments, buying only seconds of time. But seconds were more than enough.

Samael threw nemself in the way, Grace burning brightly as the Dark touched nem. Yet there was only so much brighter it could go, and it was already as bright as Samael could make it.

*Samael!* Gadreel was off to the side, safely out of range of the Dark but close enough to see what was happening. *Your energy expenditure—*

*I’m fine,* Samael snapped. *Take care of yourself!*

With a flick of nir wings, Samael brought several sigils into life. Raphael input the energy, and with a bright flare the wormhole swirled into being, sucking all of them back out the other end in the proper solar system.

It was only a moment before the rest of the Host followed, lingering warily at the very outskirts of the galaxy. But Gadreel and Balthazar were *too close.*

The Dark noticed nir distraction, attention shifting to the two. *They’re yours, aren’t they? They*
paused, something like recognition flickering through them. *And they were theirs as well.*

That was the only warning Samael had before the void stretched, expanding to greater lengths than before. Part of it diverted to Gadreel and Balthazar, who both noticed and instantly started backing away.

Trusting in Raphael and Castiel to cover nem, Samael jumped in front of them, pushing them back with a thrust of nir wings. There was barely any time to react before the void engulfed nem.

All life instantly left nir senses, trapping nem in a senseless void of *nothing*. There was only darkness, and nir light wasn’t enough to pierce it.

There was ringing silence, and the horrible sense that ne was *alone*.

With a soundless scream, Samael drew in and then out, exploding with the force of a brilliant supernova. The effort expended left nem faintly giddy, but then Raphael was there, her Grace brushing against nirs and sharing energy.

It wasn’t energy Raphael could afford to lose, but it was hers to give so Samael accepted what ne could, taking enough until the shakiness left.

*All right?* Raphael asked.

Just the sound of her voice was soothing, reminding Samael that ne wasn’t trapped by nemself. *Yes,* ne answered simply. *Come on.*

They all knew what they needed to do, but *doing it* was another question in itself. Raphael and Castiel were barely able to hold off the offshoots of the Dark, and going into the core would be out of the question entirely.

Yet Samael couldn’t do it alone. They were stronger together – always had been.

And, admittedly, Samael was growing tired, reaching limits that ne hadn’t known were there.

Castiel sent nem a wordless question even as he corralled the Dark closer to where they were coming from.

Samael’s response ended up being a mixture of an angry yes combined with a grunt of exertion as the Dark slapped nem aside, unwittingly hurtling nem into Saturn.

It took Samael a moment too long to reverse direction, Grace flickering wildly with the effort and counteracting the Dark’s touch.

*You weren’t even originally an archangel, were you? You’re ascended.*

The Dark reached for Castiel much like a child would reach for a plaything, but Raphael was there before Samael could make it, warding them off with light and lightning.

*Don’t you touch nem!* Raphael snarled.

They were distracted, still utterly intent on Raphael’s threatening demeanor and the mystery Castiel posed. They had no idea Samael was there and ready.

It took only a split-second to make the decision, and then Samael plunged to where ne could make out the gateway to the Dark’s dimension.
The choking void surrounded nem before nem realized what was happening, but there was still the faint sensation of the Host. Gadreel and Balthazar were closer than the others, but Raphael and Castiel were closer still, even distracted as they were.

Samael wasn’t alone – nem could do this.

The gate was there, a black pit into the void of that dimension they had blindly walked into before. Something in Samael instinctively recoiled at the thought of going in there, but there wasn’t any other choice.

One way or another, it had to be done.

An invisible wall slammed into place in front of Samael, too quickly before nem could backtrack. The impact left nem dazed, Grace flickering in stunned surprise before something grabbed hold of nem.

*You think I’ll let you walk in again? You had your chance before, Morning Star. It’s the last one you’ll have.*

Held in place as ne was, there was little Samael could do before something pierced through nir Grace and into nir core. Cold nothingness spread through nem, only slightly hampered by the instinctive brightening of nir Grace.

There was too little energy left. Samael barely had enough to keep hold of nir consciousness.

*Your sentimentality will be your ruin.*

Would it? Samael couldn’t regret coming to the defense of nir siblings, even if it had cost nem energy.

But if it meant failing…

Holding back a whimper, Samael curled in, grasping hold of the Dark in nem and smiting it with the energy ne still possessed.

All ne received was an amused chuckle. *You would face me on my territory? Then prepare to face the consequences.*

Samael couldn’t see an out. There was no sound from the others, no inkling of their presence that had to be there.

Or maybe it wasn’t? Had something happened while Samael was trapped here?

There was no way to tell with how cut off from the Host nem was.

Even Gadreel’s voice was silenced, and he had always been there from the moment Samael came to live in this universe with nir regained Grace.

This couldn’t be it, could it?

But there wasn’t any chance of help from Father. They had to deal with this on their own, no hope of outside interference.

What if they failed? What if it was all destroyed without a chance for a beginning? What then?

There wouldn’t be anything, and the thought was horrifying.
Yet despite the fear and horror ringing through Samael, ne didn’t have the energy to purge the Dark slithering through nir Grace. There was nothing ne could do.

A faint sound rang through the space, echoing strangely before disappearing.

Samael turned nir focus outwards, vaguely wondering. Even the Dark seemed to have stilled.

When it didn’t come again, the Dark resumed their task with a vengeance. With a low groan, Samael felt most of nir remaining energy and light disappear.

Then it came again, loud and clearer than before. And this time Samael recognized it.

It was the sound of a horn.

Chapter End Notes

I'm not *that* happy with how this chapter turned out, but I really can't think of a way to make it better... It's difficult conveying things on a cosmic level, since these beings aren't mortal and don't fight like mortals. So I won't pull a SPN and do something ridiculous like...angels having a fist fight on stairs... *side eyes Season 6*

But! Things happened! :D What are your thoughts?
Ah ha! Since we just have an epilogue left, I'm posting the chapter Thursday! The epilogue will be up tomorrow. And then...I really can't believe it? I've finished posting this?

But it isn't yet over. Please enjoy this chapter! (Although I know some of you have guessed what is happening now.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Is he actually asleep?”

“Clint, please.”

“No, I’m serious! Since when have any of us seen him sleep? It’s not a thing he does!”

“Can you blame him? He barely managed to get out of that in one piece.”

“Good thing Sam pulled through, but it was a close call.”

“Death wasn’t exactly helpful, Rhodey.”

“It was a test, Pepper. It wouldn’t be a test if the answers were given from the start, would it?”

“From my end, it didn’t look like a fair test. Not with the options left to her.”

“Some tests aren’t fair.”

“Yes, Buddha, tell us more.”

“Clint.”

The aggravated sigh that followed was terribly familiar, as were the other voices. He hadn’t heard them in years, only going by memory and thankful that his memory didn’t fade like humans’ did.

Shifting slightly, he registered that he was curled up on his side, lying on something insubstantial yet soft enough to be comfortable. There wasn’t any pain, and this was enough of a surprise that it had him thinking for a moment.

Why was he supposed to be in pain?

Focusing yielded nothing concrete beyond vague flashes, along with a deep rooted ache in his core that had him shuddering.

Dark, dark, the void all around him and no escape, he couldn’t get out, he couldn’t see a light—

“Hey, Tones.” A gentle hand touched his shoulder, which he belatedly realized he’d drawn up as he remembered that. “Don’t do that.”
How was he here?

The last thing he knew had happened was Samael driving his sword through his chest, tears on his face and an agonized apology on his lips.

But now he was... alive, wasn’t he? His Grace was there, and he could still feel his heart beating and pull in air, which wouldn’t be possible without working lungs.

And the voices...

Warily, hoping despite himself, Tony opened his eyes, meeting Rhodey’s familiar brown gaze instantly. “Rhodey?”

Rhodey’s answering grin was soft. “Hey, Tones. Long time no see, huh?”

Sitting up, Tony gripped hold of his arm, staring at him in wonder. “You – you’re here?”

“How?”

“How do I feel like some kind of third wheel?” Clint asked.

Tony’s response was automatic. “You’re a ninth wheel.”

“Like hell I am.” Clint sniffed imperiously. “I’m a pretty princess.”

“You’re something all right,” Natasha said wryly.

Tearing his eyes away from Rhodey, Tony turned to look, noting with disbelief that they were all here. All of them, and it was definitely them. He’d know their souls anywhere.

“What’s really weird is that we can actually see how happy you are,” Clint said. “Is it always like that for you?”

“We’re souls,” Bruce told him, his tone that of a man who had said the same thing numerous times before.

“Yeah, well, after seeing your ugly mugs for the last so many years I’m inured to it and just look at your faces. Plus, Tony’s a hell of a lot brighter.”

“If I weren’t, we’d have issues,” Tony said, letting Rhodey help pull him to his feet.

Clint’s mouth twisted, but he didn’t actually say anything else. Even Natasha looked shifty-eyed, and James refused to meet his gaze at all. The others were behind him, and turning to see their expressions would mean looking away from Clint.

Tony eyed him. “What?”

“You were barely there when you got here,” Rhodey said after a moment, tone gentle. “Honestly, we thought it was too late.”

Steve’s hand came to rest on Tony’s other shoulder, the touch light. “Real glad to see it isn’t.” When Tony looked, his smile was watery.

Tony didn’t respond, taking stock of how he felt. Definitely better than how he’d been in his last
clear memory. He was 100% pain free and felt completely normal.

“Hey,” Rhodey said when Tony still didn’t say anything, “the guy’s a cockroach. You can’t keep him down.”

“Ugh.” Pepper made a face. “That’s an image, Rhodey.”

Tony tilted his head, unable to hide a smile. “I thought we agreed I was a turtle.”

Rhodey shot him a look. “Die a few less times and you can be one.”

“It’s not like I plan on dying!”

“Like that makes it any better?”

“You’re the archangel Gabriel,” Clint said. “You’re not supposed to die. Dying’s for suckers like us, who’re humans.”

Tony hid a wince at the reminder, shoulders flexing under Rhodey’s touch. “Everyone dies at some point.”

“Stop poking holes in my logic.”

“Your logic is unsound,” Bruce informed him.

Clint pulled a face, sticking his tongue out at Bruce.

“You would think you would have matured somewhat by now,” Peggy said dryly, unimpressed.

Huffing, Clint rolled his eyes. “What good’s maturity? We’ve got enough of that going around.”

Tony’s smile turned disbelieving. “What are you guys doing here?” He paused, tilting his head back to take in the white surroundings. “Where is here, anyway?”

“It wasn’t always this white,” Rhodey assured him. “Would’ve driven us all nuts in no time if it was. Nah, it turned into this when you showed up.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.” Tony swept his eyes over all of them, still unable to believe what he was seeing. “You were gone. I couldn’t find you anywhere. I’m having some trouble believing that you guys are here where I happened to end up after dying. I know it’s not Heaven.”

“You’re right.” The corner of Steve’s mouth lifted in a small smile. “It’s an in-between place. Your Father never actually gave us a straight answer whenever we asked, so eventually we stopped.”

“Dad?” Gabriel narrowed his eyes. “Did He do something?”

“Holy shit,” Clint murmured, blinking. “So that’s what happens when you shift gears?”

Gabriel shot him a sharp look. “Watch yourself, buddy. Soul or not, it can get rough if you’re not careful about where you look.” He turned back to Steve. “He couldn’t drop a note or something so I didn’t freak out when you guys just vanished?” he demanded.

“You didn’t come to see us,” Pepper said, only to bite her lip a second later at the stricken expression Gabriel couldn’t hide.

“I couldn’t—” Gabriel swallowed, closing his eyes. “It would’ve been too easy,” he said instead. “I
can’t – I deal with the living, not the dead. Coming to see you whenever I could… it would’ve ended up being a crutch.”

“I shouldn’t have said that,” Pepper said apologetically, touching his cheek. “I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s all right.” Gabriel managed a weak smile. “I should’ve come to see you.”

“And freeze your ass off in Helheim?” Clint raised his eyebrows. “Yeah, that would’ve gone amazingly well.”

This time Gabriel was able to hide the flinch, although his lips thinned.

“I don’t know why,” Steve said a moment later. “I don’t know why He didn’t tell you anything. We asked Him to, but he said—”

“It was some codswallop about it being a valuable learning experience,” Peggy cut him off, snorting. “That, and He had plans.”

“Plans,” Gabriel repeated tonelessly. “Of fucking course. Did He – in His infinite wisdom – happen to tell you what these plans were?”

“Er…” Steve hesitated, clearly taken aback by the bitterness in Gabriel’s tone.

“Of course not,” Gabriel muttered, shaking his head. “He never does bother to share anything with anyone.”

“Hey,” Rhodey protested. “That’s not entirely true. He did tell us something.”

“Right before He went and died?” Natasha pointed out dryly.

Gabriel stilled, head lowering slightly. “You know about that, then.”

“Bit difficult not to,” James said casually. “After all, He was the only guy who bothered to come visit us in this place. Not that He did it often.”

“I did punch Him in the face,” Bruce admitted. “But then He was being a dick.”

Gabriel blinked. “You punched Him in the face? If anyone was going to break, I would’ve laid money on it being Rhodey.”

“Gee, thanks,” Rhodey said.

“I was angry.” Bruce shrugged, smiling wryly. “It was like being green, only not. He didn’t seem to mind.”

“He deserved it,” Peggy muttered.

“What did He tell you?” Gabriel interrupted, eyes on Steve.

Steve took a slow breath, face somber. “He apologized. That’s one thing He did. He also said… He was proud of you – of what you’d accomplished. He was proud of Sam, knew she’d be fine. But He also…” His lips twisted. “He said you had a choice here, one only you could make. You could… you could stay, or you could go back.”

“Go back?” Gabriel couldn’t help but laugh. “I’m dead. I’m not the one who resurrected myself the last two times I died.”
Wincing slightly at the reminder, Steve inclined his head. “Yes, but…He said something about legacies. That He wished it didn’t come to this, but that talking about it gave them power.”

“What Steve’s trying to get at,” Rhodey said, sighing, “is that someone’s supposed to carry on the torch. We all got the impression He wanted it to be you.”

“No, that’s what He said,” Clint disagreed. “Like, word for word…’I would like Gabriel to take it on.’”

“The torch?” Gabriel’s mouth was dry. “What torch?”

Steve’s voice was quiet as he answered. “His.”

Even though he’d half-expected the answer, it still hit Gabriel like a sledgehammer. “His legacy? His…” Effectively take on what it meant to be God? “Why me?”

“Why not?” Natasha’s lips quirked into a small smile. “You’d do well with it.”

“That’s not even the question,” Gabriel huffed, folding his arms. He felt jittery, his form too big for his vessel – which wasn’t a problem he’d ever had since gaining this body. “Why the hell would be a good choice to replace my Dad?”

“He’s life,” Steve said neutrally. “He didn’t tell us a lot, but one of the things He made a point of was that He Created because He wanted to. Because it felt like the right thing to do. And you…what did you do with Dummy? With You and Butterfingers? JARVIS? Hell, even Sam. You gave her a soul, and not even a human one.”

“It was an accident.”

“Take it for what it means,” Rhodey said, giving him a patient look. “Does it matter if it was an accident? You still Created. Maybe that’s not that big of a deal to you—”

“You kidding me? I freaked out.”

Rhodey raised his eyebrows, a smirk playing at his lips. “Yeah, then maybe you get where your Dad’s coming from? Look, I’ll be one of the first to line up and say He’s a dick, but I’ve gotta agree with His choice here. Even if His methods…” He pulled a face.

“And you guys got pulled here to give me that message?” Gabriel hoped his smile wasn’t as painful as it felt. “As a messenger myself, it seems like an awfully long time to wait to give me one.”

“Death came for us,” Natasha said bluntly. “Not that we were given a choice whether we wanted to go or stay. The next thing we knew we were here, and God was waiting for us.”

“He said you had a choice,” Steve repeated his earlier words.

“Stay here or go back and be Him?” Gabriel closed his eyes, letting his chin drop.

“Be yourself,” Steve said sharply. “It’s His legacy; it doesn’t mean you turn into Him.”

A slow breath later, Gabriel felt his core warm, energy from the surrounding area seeping into his Grace. It was warm and familiar, saturated with the energy of his Father. Even his family’s souls… they weren’t entirely human anymore.

“He shouldn’t have done what He did,” Gabriel said eventually, voice quiet. “What kind of lesson was I supposed to learn? Because I don’t think I did.”
“Didn’t you?” Pepper grasped his shoulders, looking him in the eyes with an affectionate smile. “You moved on, didn’t you?”

His laugh was bitter. “I didn’t – I really didn’t. Fuck, I tried but…it never actually worked. Still got a bit too much angel left in me.”

“That’s not a bad thing.”

“Death told us once a long time ago – or, well, I guess he told me”—Steve’s smile was more pained than amused—“that when angels love, they do it with everything they have. You remember that, don’t you? He also said that angels have done some pretty awful things because of that. But you… you let us go. You didn’t have to do that.”

“What would I be if I didn’t?” Gabriel had seen what happened when his siblings didn’t accept no as an answer. The nephilim had been the worst that happened. “It was your choice.”

“And that’s why.” Steve’s smile relaxed. “Regardless of how you felt, you respected what we wanted. Maybe you didn’t move on like a human would, but you’re not just human. Don’t beat yourself up for that.”

“And that makes me suitable to carry Dad’s legacy?”

“Because you’re human, too.” Pepper touched his elbow, curling her fingers into a gentle grip. “And you understand what it means.”

Gabriel looked away. “If we’re going by that, Castiel would be a good option.”

“Castiel doesn’t have a human soul,” Rhodey said. “You do. Look, if you don’t want to do it, just say so. He didn’t say it had to be done. You’ve got a choice, too.”

“According to your Father.” Natasha tilted her head. “But Death paid a visit, too.”

Clint sighed, the sound aggravated. “C’mon, Nat. I think what his Dad had to say is a little more important!”

Gabriel cut off what Natasha would have said in response to Clint. “What did he say?”

Giving Clint a sharp glance, Natasha turned to meet his eyes. “He asked us to remind you of your duty. That sometimes what you want doesn’t match with what you need to do.”

Gabriel couldn’t help but snort. “Oh, that’s rich coming from him. He and Dad got us into this sorry mess in the first place. Wants mixing with duty…yeah, I know a little something about that. Dad says it’s my choice?”

Pulling away from the others, Gabriel moved, putting distance between them. He ran hands through his hair, knowing exactly what kind of a shit show he’d left behind with his death. A shit show that he wasn’t sure Samael could handle, even with Raphael and Castiel helping.

And he had no doubt that Samael would get help.

“What about you?” he asked eventually, not turning around. “You’re not here because it’s a cool place to chill.”

“We can’t exactly get out.” Steve sounded darkly amused. “We tried but…”

“No exits.” James sounded pissed.
“He never told us why,” Peggy said. “He did insinuate that whatever happened would be your choice.”

“Like it always is,” Clint said sarcastically. “Or do your duty.”

Protecting them was his duty. He’d never forgotten that over the years, even though it would have been so easy to just…let it go and sink into grief. But what kind of archangel would he be, then? What kind of protector?

He’d abandoned his duty before and regretted it since. He wouldn’t do that again.

As if his silent acceptance was all the permission needed, the energy saturating the place began to pour into his Grace, dizzying with the rush it induced.

“Tony?” Steve was right behind him, his not-quite-human soul a beacon to his senses.

Gabriel turned, raising a hand to touch Steve’s cheek. He dimly registered that his skin was glowing with light, and the rest of him probably, too. “You know I missed you.” His voice echoed slightly.

Steve’s smile was watery. “Yeah. We could see you.”

Gabriel closed his eyes, breathing unevenly with the next surge of energy. “I’m sorry.” He wasn’t even sure what he was apologizing for.

Steve seemed to understand. “Don’t be. You did what you needed to. I’m glad it helped.”

Helped, helped, had it helped?

He thought it did, but it was getting difficult to remember. But he remembered Loki’s face. Samael’s before the pain blanked everything out. Jarvis’s agonized and confused expression. Dummy, Butterfingers, You…

And Fenris, Jormungandr, Sleipnir, and Hel. They were all important, their faces the only clear image in his memory.

“That’s it?” Rhodey sounded simultaneously confused and scared. “You’re glowing, Tony.”

“Yeah.” He could barely keep the power out of his voice. “It’ll be all right.”

Regret spiked through Steve. “We won’t have your back.”

Groping, Gabriel reached out and grabbed someone’s hand, although he wasn’t sure whose. His other hand was still touching Steve’s cheek, the light in him spreading to Steve. He didn’t know if he spoke the next words or thought them. “Who says you won’t?”

He kept his intention in mind; it was the most important thing now, second to what he had to do after. Because he didn’t know how much of himself would be left after this. Would whoever he became still care?

He didn’t know, so it was important he remember.

With that thought in mind, the world around him whitened out and his mind opened.

It was the sound of a horn, but it couldn’t be. Samael had heard it before, the sound directed at Lucifer at the time, and it had sent chills through him. Now there were chills again, but a different
kind.

It had to be wrong – maybe some kind of auditory hallucination – but it wasn’t just sound. It vibrated through Samael’s Grace, sending a clear message of hope and warmth for nem, but on the other side Samael could also hear the wrath directed towards the Dark.

Bright light filled nir sight, the type of light that Samael hadn’t seen in a long time. It wasn’t Gabriel’s familiar light – not entirely – but it was so terribly familiar that ne found nemself relaxing slightly.

It spread out, wrapping around Samael and forming a barrier between nem and the Dark. The sudden release of pain as nir Grace was free of the void was a shock, and Samael barely registered what happened next.

Within a moment, Samael was back in regular space, staring at the expanse of the Dark and the light that had pulled nem free. Ne could hear the Host again, murmuring in surprise and amazement, along with a rising sense of hope.

Our Parent?

But the light contained scars and old injuries that their Father had never had.

Gabriel, Samael managed, and the name instantly quieted the others.

There was no sense of acknowledgment from Gabriel – because that was who it was – but the too-bright light of his true form contracted slightly. Then, there was what sounded like someone snapping their fingers.

It was that more than anything that had Samael convinced it was Gabriel, no matter how impossible it was. Because Gabriel felt like their Father, and he hadn’t said a word since pulling Samael free.

Immediately on the heels of the sound, light flared up all around them, pressing inwards. A terrible shrieking sound rang through nir head, and ne barely had time to register it before the growing expanse of the Dark shrunk down into a compact ball, resentfulness radiating from them.

You’re dead, the Dark hissed.

There wasn’t any response, not even any sign of amusement. Samael only received a sense of fierce determination before Gabriel made a gesture like swatting a fly, and the Dark flinched back.

A wordless warning hung in the space between them, clearly aimed towards the Dark.

Simply because you are protected from me now means nothing, the Dark snapped, pulling in tendrils Samael hadn’t even noticed heading towards Gabriel. You don’t even know what you’re doing, do you?

No answer came this time, but there something brushed against Samael’s Grace. From the startled reactions of Raphael and Castiel, the same thing happened to them.

There weren’t words, but Samael understood exactly what Gabriel wanted from them.

The energy he gave off was enough to bolster Samael’s flagging energy, and ne couldn’t help but feel an exhilarating rush of relief. Both at the touch of Gabriel’s familiar Grace and the knowledge that what had seemed improbable before was now actually possible.
Darting forwards, Samael touched nir Grace with Gabriel’s, an unbelievable surge of energy coursing through nem with the contact. To nir sides, Raphael and Castiel joined them, their own Graces intermingling until Samael had difficulties telling where ne ended and the others began.

There was another wordless message from Gabriel, this time to Samael.

Samael didn’t even have another answer aside from an instant **yes**, because it was all they needed for this. The two of them could have managed it, but all four?

It didn’t matter that Castiel’s Grace was unfamiliar to nem. It didn’t matter that they hadn’t ever joined forces like this since their births. What mattered was that they were here **now**, and they knew exactly what to do.

Gabriel moved first, pressing forwards against the Dark. Samael followed instantly after, pulling even with Gabriel. Light flared around them, feeling like **Gabriel**, and closing them in. But there wasn’t any menace directed at them, simply the Dark.

The gate drew closer, the opening to that empty void of a dimension.

A few seconds or even minutes later, the Dark pushed back, lashing out at them. There was another **snapping** noise, and then a howl ripped through them, the Dark shrinking back.

*You made your point!* There was both fear and anger in their voice. It softened a moment later, pleading. *Would you hurt me, yeğen? We are family, are we not?*

For a split-second, Samael feared that Gabriel would listen, would want to **reason** with them. It had always been his first decision when dealing with enemies unless they directly threatened his family. But there was no hesitation from Gabriel, just a cold ruthlessness and a deafening **snapping** noise that reverberated through space.

The ensuing light show would have blinded anyone looking into space, but all Samael could think was that it was absolutely stunning.

Yet there wasn’t time to admire the casual power Gabriel demonstrated.

The Dark careened back, most of them going back through the gate. It gave them the perfect opportunity to press forward into the other dimension, and Samael and Gabriel went first.

The instant ne was on the other side, there was an instant **repulsion**. Ne wanted nothing more than to backtrack and go back to a universe with life and light, not this empty **nothing**.

A wave of comfort swept out from Gabriel, reassuring enough that Samael was able to steady nemself and focus on what they needed to do.

No words came from Raphael and Castiel, simply a silent determination to finish the job. They swept outwards, Grace blazing in response to the dark all around them.

It wasn’t that the Dark **was** this dimension. It was that they’d literally **swallowed** everything in it, their presence saturating every inch of the place. There was the void and absence of what had once been there, and then there was the **void** of the Dark, threading through the dimension.

The scythe came out, Samael’s Grace mingling with Gabriel’s. The sheer **life** and breadth and power in Gabriel’s Grace took nem off guard, and for a moment ne felt vaguely self-conscious about the energy nir own Grace gave off now.
There was a feeling that somehow conveyed the message of “No big deal; don’t worry about it,” and then Gabriel turned his focus to the borders of the dimension, his form expanding to something greater than Samael had seen before.

It wasn’t just Gabriel. It was everything that was interwoven into him and sparking into being around them, sigils popping into life.

Samael couldn’t quite do the same, but he could add his own touch to the sigils Gabriel wrote. A little touch of death to his life, and more energy was fed into them from Castiel and Raphael.

A subtle nudge, and Gabriel had the two shift back and towards the gate to guard it. He didn’t touch Samael, stretching out the equivalent of a hand in silent expectation.

There was no hesitation as Samael took it, entire focus on the Dark.

Together, Samael said, half-hoping for a response.

Gabriel still didn’t speak, but a sense of agreement transferred between them, along with a fierce determination, anger, and protectiveness.

For the life of him, Samael could never actually explain what happened next.

Only that their energies joined, Castiel and Raphael backing them up with their own Grace, and consequently exploded.

Pure light seared every corner of the dimension, life and death closely intertwined until they were scarcely indistinguishable from each other.

Samael could feel the Dark burning under the onslaught, a terrible scream piercing through his Grace and causing him to clench in reflexive pain. Even Gabriel didn’t seem immune, but he clung all the tighter to Samael even as his onslaught strengthened.

Smaller tendrils of the Dark were escaping their grasp, slithering through the spaces that Samael hadn’t noticed before amidst the dark and slipped through cracks in the dimensional barriers before they could be scorched by the light.

There was a cry of alarm from Raphael, something that briefly diverted Samael’s attention. It was long enough for him to see what had alarmed Raphael: the dimension itself breaking down from the destructive energy bursting through it.

Get out, Samael snapped.

Samael—Castiel seemed disinclined to listen as usual.

OUT! With a forceful thrust, Samael pushed both of them through the gate before they could protest. And then he grabbed hold of Gabriel, hesitating only briefly before gripping tightly onto his true form.

Gabriel didn’t even flinch, which was alarming enough in itself. Samael couldn’t help but remember what had happened last time with Lucifer touching Gabriel’s true form, even though now really wasn’t the time for that—

Space itself broke down around them, and Samael shrunk down in reflex, relieved to see that Gabriel did the same.
Come on.

Still holding on tightly to Gabriel, Samael flew backwards. Gabriel put up no resistance, flying with
nem.

They broke through on the other side, the energies of Samael’s home universe filtering in back
instantly.

Turning, Samael reached out to collapse the gate at the same time Gabriel did.

Not entirely surprisingly, a small portion of the Dark slipped out before the gate shut, weak and
flimsy compared to what Samael was used to. *You cannot kill that which isn’t dead!*

Gabriel didn’t do anything beyond seeming to look at Samael, a mild sense of “Go on” coming from
him.

Darkly pleased with the opportunity, Samael pinned them in place with nir scythe. *Who said
anything about killing?* The old language tasted strange, but Samael wanted them to
know exactly what was going to happen. *That would suggest you can come back. And, I’m
sorry, Elder, but that isn’t going to be happening.*

*You think you can End me?* The Dark sounded disbelieving.

*Naturally.* Samael wasn’t entirely sure what kind of emotion ne was giving off, only that most of the
Host had abruptly put more distance between them than before. *But I’m not just Death. So, yes, I
will End you. And I will smite you entirely from existence.*

In the brief moment between when Samael relaxed nir grip and struck, the Dark attempted to escape.
Their attempt lasted a mere split-second before Samael let the force of nir wrath loose.

The worst part with smiting was that it ended far too quickly, but the ensuing screaming would have
to be enough to satisfy Samael for all the grief they had caused.

And then it was over.

Drawing nir Grace back in, Samael couldn’t help but shudder in relief, even though disappointment
washed through nem at how quick it had been. For the pain that had resulted, they deserved a great
deal more punishment.

Warmth brushed against nem. Turning, Samael saw Gabriel gazing at nem, concern radiating off
him. *Gabriel.* The word was choked. *How are you…?* Alive, Samael didn’t say. There could really
be only one answer for that, even if it didn’t make any sense because He was *dead.*

And if He was dead, how was Gabriel’s current condition possible?

Gadreel was abruptly there, hovering uncertainly just out of reach. *Sibling?*

There was still no verbal *response,* even though this time there was a sense of acknowledgement,
even as Gabriel turned his attention elsewhere.

For all that the warmth radiating off Gabriel felt familiar, he also felt *alien,* not like the brother
Samael knew. There was a sense of love and care, but it was cursory, not one born of familiarity.

A flash of intention came from Gabriel, enough warning that Samael knew exactly where he was
about to go.
Asgard, Samael said hurriedly to the others. Gadreel, you know the way.

There was no traversing through the various realms to get to Asgard. One instant they were in Midgard, and the next they both landed in Asgard, Samael manifesting physically in nir vessel.

Gabriel didn’t, although he wasn’t as large as before, his true form seeming to shrink and consolidate into a human-sized figure of pure light. He seemed contemplative, tilting his head back to look at the sky.

Now that breathing was an option again, Samael found it difficult actually doing so, something wrapping tightly around nir chest and squeezing.

Ne wanted to reach out, but something held nem in place, freezing nir muscles. All ne could do was stare, taking in every bit of Gabriel that ne couldn’t before. All the scars and blemishes no other angel had, wounds inflicted by Lucifer and the times he’d gotten stabbed, and the familiar warmth that had always been there for Samael as ne grew up.

They weren’t alone.

By some grace, they’d arrived on the outskirts of Asgard, closest to the Bifrost, where almost no one could be injured by seeing Gabriel’s true form. But there were still people here, namely those Samael had left behind when ne left, all of them staring in stunned disbelief. And…

Fuck, weren’t they dead?

Samael stared as the original line-up of Avengers stood there, all of them very clearly no longer entirely human. None offered answers, meeting nir eyes with small smiles and a shrug in Clint’s case. Bruce actually looked sheepish, reaching up to push nonexistent glasses up the bridge of his nose before realizing they weren’t there.

Gabriel seemed to notice their presence, attention dropping to them. There wasn’t any recognition from him, simply curiosity and something like frustration.

“Dad?” Dummy sounded far too young, eyes wide. “Is that…” He glanced at nem. “Sam?”

Samael didn’t answer, focused on how Gabriel reacted to the sound of Dummy’s voice. Something sharper than curiosity laced through his Grace, a questioning wonder that still didn’t contain any sign of recognition.

He still didn’t even look human, although the light of his true form had sized down to a definite humanoid shape. If ne squinted, it was possible to make out finer features. Even if Gabriel didn’t seem to remember everything, his Grace had some idea of the vessel he’d possessed for so long.

“It’s him,” Sleipnir said slowly, disbelieving and hopeful all at once. “It’s…that’s how he looks.”

“He doesn’t remember,” Butterfingers murmured, fingers clenching and unclenching. She pressed back into Natasha’s touch.

“Like an angel gets memory issues?” Fenris huffed skeptically, although his eyes narrowed. “He remembers! Right, Dad?” he called. He moved to approach, only for Hel to pull him back with a shake of her head when something in Gabriel’s Grace changed with the movement.

“He doesn’t,” Hel said, both eyes on Gabriel. “And you don’t know how he’ll react to a god coming too close.”
It would be bad, since their energies were so different at the moment. Gabriel had always had some tinge of pagan magic in his Grace since being a pagan god, although at the moment Samael could sense none.

But Jarvis stepped forwards, eyes fixed on Gabriel. He was trembling, and the metal suit he’d been wearing melted away to retreat into the glowing circle under his shirt.

“Father.” The word was a whisper, hoarse and fearful, although Jarvis kept coming closer.

Gabriel didn’t do anything even as Jarvis came close enough to touch, although there was a palpable sense of curiosity about him. That and what finally felt like recognition.

Samael didn’t move, still frozen in place and watching. Breathing wasn’t any easier than before, the vice grip around nir lungs making it near impossible. When Gadreel, Balthazar, Raphael, and Castiel landed besides nem, Samael simply shook nir head lightly in response to their questioning glances.

The rest of the Host was scattered around Asgard, exhausted and relieved in equal measures. Unbelievably, no one had died.

Except for…

But he was alive.

“Father, please.” Jarvis reached out with trembling hands, touching what could have been Gabriel’s face.

Something echoed through Gabriel’s Grace, reminiscent of a sense memory. He leaned into the touch, Grace quivering. The light of his true form began to fade, dimming as a solid human body began to appear from the feet up.

Slowly, the light parted, fading into wisps around Gabriel’s form and sinking into his skin as it appeared. Eventually it was just his eyes, but a second later they were brown, only a flash of Grace-light visible as he blinked and it disappeared entirely.

Bringing his hands up to Jarvis’s, Gabriel blinked again, a shiver running through his frame. “Jarvis…”

Jarvis’s smile was watery. “Welcome back, sir.”

Vague confusion flickered across Gabriel’s face before clearing, and he lowered his head, shuddering. A moment later he drew Jarvis into a hug, one hand going to the back of Jarvis’s head as Jarvis clung back, trembling. “It’s okay.” His voice cracked slightly.

If Jarvis said anything, Samael didn’t hear it as Gabriel was swarmed an instant later by three bots and three gods, although Jormungandr turned into a small snake a second later to bypass the worst of the crowd and curl around Gabriel’s neck. If Gabriel hadn’t been an archangel, there was no doubt he would have been laid out flat on his back.

Hel hung back, longing written on her face but clearly reluctant to join the crush of people already there.

“He seems no worse for the wear,” Raphael murmured besides Samael.

Samael mutely nodded, hands curling into fists at nir sides. Ne could breathe now, but it was hitched, lungs not working properly.
Gadreel glanced at nem in concern. “Samael?”

It was fine – fine. Samael wasn’t the one who had just come back from the dead.

Hel was drawn in as Gabriel managed to edge his way forward, pulling her in for a hug and a gentle smile.

“Hey, it’s okay,” Gabriel told her quietly. “I’m back.”

“You were dead.”

Gabriel’s only reaction to the words was to extend his wings around the others soothingly, not releasing Hel. “I’m not anymore.”

“You think that matters?” Hel’s voice was thick. “You were dead once before and I waited for years. This time I knew you wouldn’t come. I don’t know what was worse.”

“I’m sorry.” Gabriel cupped the living side of her face, smiling sadly.

Hel leaned into the touch. “I know you are. Please…don’t do it again.”

“I make no promises but…” Gabriel inhaled, light flickering through his eyes. “I think I’m a little more resilient now than I was before.”

“Are you?” Loki’s question was quiet.

Startling slightly, Gabriel looked past Hel to Loki. “Loki…”

“You were dead.” The words were tight, spoken through gritted teeth. “The third time now, is it not?”

“I’ll try not to make a habit of it.” Gabriel’s weak smile disappeared as quickly as it came when faced with Loki’s furious glower. “It wasn’t intentional,” he added gently, moving closer to Loki. “I don’t…you think I like dying?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea what to think,” was Loki’s acerbic response. “Since, clearly, you do seem to be making a habit of it. Are you truly well, or are you hiding something else?”

Gabriel inclined his head. “I’m not hiding anything. I’m fine – I’m better than fine.” He inhaled, light briefly flickering across his skin before fading on the exhale.

“That was not normal,” Loki pointed out.

“No, it’s…” Gabriel grimaced. “I’m not used to having so much power to access. That’s going to take some getting used to.”

Loki’s next words were cutting. “You are changed, then.”

“No – yes—” Gabriel cut himself off, shaking his head. “Not in the ways that matter,” he said eventually. “You can see that, can’t you?”

“I failed to see what was wrong before.” Loki looked away, eyes dark. “How is this any different?”

“I promise I’m fine,” Gabriel said, coming close enough for Loki to touch if he wanted. Samael half expected him to reach out, but Gabriel didn’t move. “Nothing bad is going to happen. If it does… you can kick my ass, okay?”
“Shit,” Clint muttered, shifting his weight. “He’s really serious.”

“Not helpful,” Natasha informed him.

Loki’s eyes flickered behind him and back to Gabriel, although something in his face seemed to relax. “I may very well do that.” His wry smile was only slightly tight.

“Okay,” Gabriel answered easily, his smile loose and eyes crinkling.

Samael wasn’t sure what exactly happened, only that ne must have made some sort of noise. There was no other reason for Gabriel to turn and look at nem, brow furrowed in concern for a brief moment before it disappeared.

Ne was barely aware that the others gave nem some space as Gabriel slowly approached, no fear in his Grace even though ne had killed him.

Gabriel stopped just short of touching nem, his voice quiet as he said, “Samael.”

The tight bands around Samael’s chest squeezed and released, nir breath hitching. For a second ne didn’t think ne could say anything, but then the words fell out. “I’m sorry.”

Confusion flickered across Gabriel’s face. “For what?”

“I’m sorry,” Samael repeated, voice raw. Now that ne could say it, the floodgates opened, words spilling without conscious thought. “I was too late. I couldn’t pull you out. I didn’t know what else to do, but I couldn’t just — I couldn’t just—”

“Sam – Samael.” Gabriel touched nir shoulder, both his skin and Grace warm against Samael’s. “It’s all right. I…I don’t remember a lot of what happened, but I know you tried. And I know you did save me.”

Samael’s eyes dropped to his chest, shivering at the memory of the sound of nir sword driving through it. “I killed you.”

“Then it was a mercy killing,” Gabriel said easily. “What do you think would’ve happened if they had their way? I wouldn’t be standing here.”

“It shouldn’t even have happened!” Samael was dismayed to realize that ne was crying, shoulders hitching with every breath. “I was supposed to protect you! But instead I—” Nir lips moved against Gabriel’s fingers, voice dying in nir throat.

“You did protect me.” Gabriel was unusually serious, eyes somber. “And…well… I was protecting you, too. I didn’t want you to have to do that.” His smile was sad. “It didn’t work out exactly as I thought it would.”

Samael couldn’t help a small miserable laugh. “It didn’t?”

“No,” Gabriel murmured, blinking rapidly. “It didn’t.”

“You’re here,” Samael managed, finally able to reach out and touch, hands coming to frame Gabriel’s face. “You’re here. I thought…” Ne let nir head drop to Gabriel’s shoulder, shuddering violently. “I killed you before,” ne whispered. “And by the grace of our Father you lived again. I couldn’t expect that to happen again, so I knew – I knew that if it you died again, it would be for good.”
“I know.” Gabriel’s voice was thick. “I know.”

A high-pitched sob broke free before Samael realized what was building in his throat, and his hands dropped to clutch at Gabriel’s arms, fingers tightening in his sleeves. “I didn’t want to do it,” he gasped. “I didn’t.”

“You did.” There wasn’t any recrimination in Gabriel’s tone. “And thank you. Because you saved me by doing just that.”

Samael shook his head, rubbing his forehead against Gabriel’s chest. “It doesn’t feel like it.”

“Samael…” Gabriel’s hands framed his face, gently tilting it up so he could see his face. He was also crying, but there was a faint smile as well. “It’s okay. I forgive you.”

Those words—those words—

Something wrenched in Samael, and he broke down crying, lunging forwards to wrap his arms around Gabriel, around his little brother, warm and solid and alive.

It was a relief when Gabriel hugged back, gently rocking back and forth in a soothing motion that Samael recognized from his childhood. His heart beat under Samael’s head, reassuringly steady and there. His Grace wrapped around them both, Samael’s meeting his until their true forms mingled together.

With a rush of overwhelming relief and giddiness, Samael knew that it was all right. It was really going to be fine.

And that was all he could ask for.

Chapter End Notes

Oh man, that last SCENE. With Jarvis and Gabriel. With Samael and Gabriel. With the HUG PILE. They so needed that. Samael, for sure, because he was stricken with a type of grief that wasn’t going to go away. Even if they did win against the Dark and Gabriel didn’t come back, Samael wouldn’t have recovered from that. (But thankfully that didn’t happen, eh?)

Michael is…not here. First Born is set before, during, and after the plot of this fic. Which will become more apparent as I get deeper into that story.

But we still have an epilogue left! Up tomorrow!
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

Ahhhh, goshhhhh, we've reached the end. I can't believe it. There haven't been as many readers as for the other stories, but I've LOVED reading all your reviews! They're all awesome, and I hope all of you will leave a comment at the end of this to tell me what you liked about this! Or didn't (although if you didn't, then why did you read this?).

And while this is kind of the chronological end of the timeline (kind of) excepting First Born, there will be some other stories in the interim that deal with events earlier. Such as Ultron's story and Samael's childhood and just how Balthazar came to be involved again.

But, anyway, please enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I’m just saying, I can’t believe you moped around the tower for years before finally moving up here!”

“Yeah, like you’ve said the last so many times,” Tony said dryly, but he was unable to hide a smile.

“But you haven’t even answered.” Clint stared at him accusingly. “You just keep making that creepy smile!”

Tony promptly wiped it off his face, keeping a blank expression. “Do I?”

“Just because you wiped it off your face now doesn’t mean anything!”

“I didn’t know my face mattered that much to you.” Tony tilted his head. “Let alone my choice in living arrangements.”

“He gained a sense of interior fashion,” James drawled over by a bookshelf, not looking up from the book he was skimming. Bruce was besides him, crouched down to inspect the scientific books on the lowest shelf. “Yours appalled him.”

“He watched all the home renovation shows,” Rhodey told Tony, bumping his shoulder. “At least, all the ones he could remember.”

“Which was more than any of us expected,” Pepper added.

“Excuse you.” Clint looked affronted. “Just because you guys couldn’t remember anything beyond movies doesn’t mean I had to suffer in silence!”

Rhodey gave him an unimpressed look. “At least we had variety. And we did remember TV shows!”

“You guys only remembered the pilots and maybe the finales, because you never bothered to actually watch anything in-between. At least my shows didn’t end on cliffhangers!”
Tony couldn’t help but snort, bringing a hand up to his mouth to hide the broad grin. Clint definitely didn’t need any more encouragement, and he would take Tony’s obvious amusement as an incentive for more.

“I can tell you’re smiling and laughing over there,” Clint said, eyes glinting briefly. “Have I said before how weird it is to see that and your face?”

“Yes,” Natasha said before Tony could. “Multiple times.”

“It’ll take a little practice,” Tony said, letting his hand drop and giving a small shrug. “You can always dial it back to how humans see.”

“It’s not as easy as you make it sound,” Rhodey said.

Tony flashed a quick smile. “Maybe not, but you’ll get the hang of it.”

“It’s amazing actually seeing you,” Steve said earnestly.

Raising an eyebrow, Tony tilted his head, a slow grin spreading across his face. “Yeah?”

“Of course!” Steve’s smile was utterly sincere.

“Well, he’s brighter now,” Clint said offhandedly. “Comes from the whole ‘being God’ thing, I guess.”

A shudder ran down Gabriel’s spine. “Yeah, no, let’s avoid saying that.”

“Saying what? That you’re effectively God?”

“You didn’t have any issues with saying you were a god for a while,” Natasha pointed out curiously.

“Small ‘g.’ There’s a difference.” Gabriel paused, seeing all their faces. “I know I said this before! Well, not to you, Peggy, or Rhodey and Pepper, but to the rest of you! It doesn’t really matter if it’s true or not, it’s the equivalent of blasphemy for us. That, and it’s just really weird swearing to our Dad.”

“You always blasphemed,” Pepper said slowly.

“Did I ever once say the big ‘G’ word?”

Rhodey tilted his head, surprised. “Huh. Didn’t even notice that.”

“So what?” Clint sounded grumpy. “Now we can’t say it either?”

“You guys operate under different rules,” Tony relaxed, grinning. “Feel free to drop it whenever. It’d be fun seeing some of the others get all up in arms over it.”

“You’re ridiculous,” Peggy said, but she was smiling.

“If I weren’t, you guys would think something’s up.” Tony glanced over to James, who was frowning down at the book he was reading. “The later ones are better than that. The author was still working out sex.”

“Who was the author?” James asked, turning the book over to look at the cover.

Tony managed to hide the smirk. “Some guy in Asgard.”
James eyed him. "You know more than that. I know you do."

"Ten bucks he wrote them," Bruce said, pulling out a hefty science book and letting it fall open to a random page.

"Excuse me." Tony let his insulted tone say everything.

"That's his way of saying that if he wrote it, it'd be better," Rhodey said. "Because of course it would be."

"What kind of bet is that?" James asked Bruce. "Ten bucks? You can't get anything for ten bucks these days. You saw the kids buy that chocolate!"

"Dollars isn't even the current currency," Natasha said, lips twitching.

"Maybe I felt like being nostalgic," Bruce said.

"Or maybe it's because you still have ten bucks sitting in your pants and you need to get rid of it."

"I will neither confirm nor deny."

"I can see the ten bucks," Clint informed him, squinting. "Right pocket?"

Bruce moved the textbook to cover himself. "Please stop."

"I can give them lessons," Balthazar offered from his seat on the balcony window, where he'd appeared a second earlier. "Since all you seem to be doing is smiling like a loon."

Tony managed to wipe the smile off his face, which he hadn't even noticed was there. "Yeah? What kind of 'lessons'?"

"Don't be so suspicious, Gabe." Balthazar stepped down, clapping Tony on the shoulder. "You trust me, don't you?"

Tony peered at him. "Yes?"

"I won't do anything you wouldn't," Balthazar told him.

"That's a terribly short list," Pepper said, unimpressed.

"Well..." Tony considered Balthazar's earnest face. "In this case he's actually serious."

"That doesn't make me feel better."

"It should." Tony gave her a soft smile. "I could help out, but I'm guessing Balthazar's here for a reason that isn't entirely altruistic."

"You're right; I'm not." Balthazar glanced outside. "Might be a good idea if you take a stroll or something."

Tony glanced askance. "Yeah?"

"Or a swim." Balthazar's grin was mischievous. "Whatever you'd like."

"You're not throwing me into any suspicious lakes," Gabriel said.

"It was one time." Balthazar threw his hands up. "One time. And I was saving my hide, thank you!"
"My taste buds will never be the same," Gabriel continued mournfully.

"Your taste buds are fine." Balthazar gave him a disgusted look, ignoring the muffled snickers from the others.

"Says you. Do you have my taste buds?"

"No, and neither do you, since you made this vessel yourself." Balthazar gave his arm a poke. "Now go on. I promise no one will come to any harm while I give them all basic how-to lessons on angels."

"Joy," Clint grumbled, although his excitement was palpable.

It was that more than anything that convinced Gabriel to leave. For the first time in a while, everything really was fine.

The concern of the Host was a little tiring. It was understandable given that he’d been dead and then just somehow dramatically popped back into life in front of them, with a major power boost to boot.

So he indulged them and took that stroll Balthazar had suggested, although Gabriel didn’t so much stroll as fly a short way and land in the midst of his kids, who were giving a tour to a curious group of angels.

"Sir." Jarvis inclined his head, eyes skimming up and down Gabriel like he was checking he was in one piece.

"J," Gabriel said, giving him an easy smile and bumping their shoulders together. "Having fun?"

Jarvis’s eyes flickered back to the angels, who were being roped into a sparring session with some eager Asgardians. A few actually accepted, inquisitive expressions on their faces. "Of a sort."

"He’s having a blast," Fenris said cheerfully, sliding up against Gabriel’s other side. "I had no idea how many random facts he knew about Asgard before he started talking."

"We’re artificial intelligences," Butterfingers said long-sufferingly, like she’d said it many times before. "We’re supposed to store information."

"Yeah, but we live here. And we’re gods. You’re not."

"You mean we don’t live here?" Butterfingers put on a confused expression. "Does that mean we’ve been staying in a mock Asgard all this time?"

"Play nice, guys." Tony tweaked Butterfingers’s nose before she could blink. "She has a point, Fenris."

"Besides," You said from behind Butterfingers, "you don’t like studying."

"I can learn all that stuff without a book," Fenris protested.

"Say that next time you’re faced with flying a spaceship and you crash it because you didn’t read the manual," Jormungandr said, showing an angel a fine sword.

Tony hadn’t heard this one before. "Oh?"

Fenris made a face. "So…maybe I crashed a spaceship when we were with the Guardians. But we got it fixed up really quickly!"
“Did you learn anything from it?”

“The manuals can be helpful?”

“That, and it’s a good idea to listen to any pilots on board.”

Fenris studied him for a moment. “Do you listen to pilots? Or read manuals?”

“He has you there, sir,” Jarvis said.

“Shush, you.” Tony bumped his elbow against Jarvis’s “accidentally.” “I know electronics and machines. There isn’t anything I can’t fly after I take a look through the controls.”

“So modest,” Jarvis said dryly.

Tony shrugged, unable to resist a grin. “I try.”

Butterfingers glanced back to where Dummy was holding up scorecards for the various angels trying out weapons with Asgardians. “Are you staying for the tour?”

Tony considered the question, taking in how the Host felt. They were marginally more relaxed now, which had been the goal. “Nah,” he said eventually, giving her a smile to soften the blow. “I’ve got some other things to check up on.”

It wasn’t even a lie.

Nodding, Butterfingers returned the smile. “Okay.” She darted forwards to kiss his cheek. “Be safe!”

“Aren’t I always?”

The unanimous response from all his kids, even the ones supposedly distracted, was loud. “No!”

Putting his hands up, Tony backed up a few steps. “Okay, point taken. Have fun!”

He took flight again, this time to where he could sense Loki. Aside from the brief conversation they’d had after Gabriel miraculously came back to life, they hadn’t been able to talk.

And judging from the emotions Gabriel could feel coming off Loki, talking would be a good idea.

“I see you finally managed to tear yourself away from your friends,” Loki said when Gabriel located him in a relatively small sitting room. By “small,” that simply meant it was hidden away in the palace with no windows and only a few couches. But these were the comfortable couches.

“Balthazar’s giving them lessons,” Gabriel said after an awkward pause when Loki said nothing else. “He shooed me out.”

“Hm.” Loki tilted his head, not looking up from the book he was studying. He wasn’t reading it – his eyes were too distant for that – but he clearly didn’t want to look at Gabriel.

Hesitating, Tony decided to sit next to Loki on the couch, keeping a foot of space between them. Loki didn’t seem to react to him, but his shoulders tightened minutely.

Tony let the silence hang for several more minutes before saying quietly, “You’re upset.”

“Am I?” Loki murmured, thumb stroking absentmindedly at the corner of a page.
“You haven’t looked me in the eye since I came in and you’re not talking.” Tony paused, studying Loki’s profile. “It goes both ways, you know,” he continued. “I know you’re upset.”

“Does it really?” There was a note of irritation in Loki’s voice, and he did look up now to meet Tony’s eyes. “I clearly misread something, as none of what happened should have.”

Tony blinked, taken aback. “That—none of what happened is on you. I didn’t know anything was wrong—let alone Samael!”

“You think that matters?” Loki snapped the book shut with a hand, knuckles whitening. “I see things differently than you. I should have seen it—realized something was wrong. You were acting oddly, but then you had just visited Earth. I thought it was due to that, and I chose not to look further into it. I trusted that you would be fine as you usually are, but—” He broke off with a hiss, abruptly standing.

“I am fine.”

“Are you truly?” The words were cutting, but there was no venom in them. “You were dead, Gabriel. That you are alive now does not change that fact. And you are changed as well.”

“Not in the ways that matter.” Gabriel stood, hand clenching briefly before he reached out to take hold of Loki’s wrist. He could feel the tension vibrating under the skin. “I’m still me, Loki.”

“So you have said.” Loki met his eyes, something flickering behind his that Gabriel wasn’t sure how to read. But the distress was clear enough, along with a vague undercurrent of anger. “Why are you here?”

The question took Gabriel off guard. “What do you mean?”

“Why are you here, Gabriel? Should you not be with your friends? They are alive now, are they not?”

“We have time.” Gabriel considered Loki, loosening his grip in case Loki wanted to pull away. He didn’t. “Besides, we had a chance to talk before I came back, and I showed them around the place when we got back. I haven’t been able to talk to you.”

“Am I simply an obligation, then?”

“You’re my friend.” Gabriel frowned before he could stop himself. “Fuck, Loki, you think I’m blind? I don’t even have to try to see what’s going on. You’re upset—”

“And why do you think that is?” Loki sharply pulled away, mouth curling into a snarl. “You were not supposed to die—”

“It’s not like I wanted to—”

“And yet you did!” Loki snapped, eyes flaring. “As you did last time!”

“Dying isn’t fun,” Gabriel bit out, folding his arms across his chest. “You think I do it for shits and giggles? It wasn’t fun the first time or the second time or even this time. I’m sorry that it happened, but it wasn’t like I intentionally set out with a plan to get myself killed!” Energy surged through him with the anger that sparked, unexpected and unwelcome.

Rearing back, Gabriel closed his eyes, forcing himself to breathe and push the energy back to where it belonged. When he was sure his eyes weren’t glowing anymore, he opened them, only to meet
Loki’s wary ones.

“You are not the same,” Loki said quietly, no anger left in his tone. “I may not have the eyes of your world’s gods or children, but I can see that you have changed. As have your friends with their return. You are happier now as well; I have seen you smile more within the last day than you did in a century.”

Gabriel wasn’t intentionally looking, but Loki was broadcasting loudly enough for him to catch it regardless with his newly heightened senses. It was only a glimpse, but it was enough for Gabriel to see what he was thinking.

The shield in his room flashed through Loki’s mind, the white star in the center glistening.

“Of course I’m happy they’re back,” Gabriel said eventually, slowly. “I’ve missed them. But I’ve been happy here, too.”

“You never stopped grieving.”

“You can’t be both happy and sad?” Gabriel couldn’t help a small smile. “I’m ecstatic they’re back, but it doesn’t actually change anything. You don’t have to be worried about that.”

Loki stiffened slightly. “We had an arrangement.” The words were stilted. “The terms of that arrangement are no longer in place.”

“We’ll make new terms, then.” Gabriel slowly reached out to touch his face, fingers light against his skin. “You’re not just a friend, Loki. You haven’t been one in a long time.”

Loki carefully didn’t move, eyes dark. “Then what am I?”

“Something else.” Gabriel didn’t have a name for it.

“You are not in love with me.” Loki said the words carefully, like he was tasting them as he spoke.

“No.” Gabriel didn’t mask the truth; Loki deserved that. “That’s not in me. But I do love you, and that isn’t going to change. Don’t doubt that.”

“And if I were to say…?”

“You can if you want.” Gabriel almost let his hand drop, only for Loki to catch it. “As long as you know.”

Loki was silent for several moments, Gabriel’s hand clasped in his own. He shuddered briefly, eyes closing. “I would rather you not die again,” he said quietly, almost a whisper.

Gabriel smiled wryly. “So would I.”

“I would also rather you not change.”

Now Gabriel snorted, grinning. “Archangel, Loki. We don’t change easily.”

Loki smiled in response. “You know what I mean.”

Sobering, Gabriel inclined his head, closing the distance between them. “I do.”

Loki met him the rest of the way, words caught in the middle that Gabriel didn’t quite catch but didn’t need him to repeat.
Some things didn’t have to be said out loud.

Later, Gabriel sought out Samael. Ne felt different now, much like he himself did. It wasn’t strange, though. It gave Samael an added sense of familiarity, the new wealth of power ne had hugged close to his own, two sides of a coin.

Samael wasn’t alone when he arrived, so Gabriel hung back, giving Samael and the guest some privacy. It was a reaper, dark-skinned and curly-haired. She didn’t seem to know what to make of Samael, and Samael’s slight amusement doubtlessly wasn’t helping matters.

“I’m not changing anything,” Samael was saying. “It’s worked all these years, hasn’t it? You know what you’re doing.”

“I find it difficult to believe that you won’t change anything,” the reaper said, the words sounding like she’d said it before.

“Do I seem that bad?” Samael tilted nir head. “I told you already, I didn’t ask for this job. But I have it, so I’m going to do my best with what I’ve been given. Now,” ne continued before the reaper could, clapping her on the shoulder, “you seem capable. I’ll do my job, but it would help if I had a second-in-command.”

The reaper’s eyes narrowed. “Me?”

“Death trusted you. And,” Samael added, “I’d prefer not to flounder my way through this. Advice from an experienced reaper would help.”

“Flattery won’t help,” the reaper said, unimpressed. “But you make a good point. Let me know when you need me.”

“Of course, Billie.”

Billie’s eyes flickered over Samael’s shoulder to Gabriel. She inclined her head in a nod, something like respect flickering over her features before she was gone.

A breath later, Samael turned, giving Gabriel a small smile. “Hello, Gabriel.”

Gabriel smiled back, breathing out as he felt Samael’s Grace extend in welcome, more familiar than ever. “Hey. Everything all right?”

Samael made a face. “You’re lucky you don’t have anybody about to show up and question your ability to do your job.”

“There might be. Some of the pagans would be in snits at the idea of an angel taking on the big name.”

“Good thing you didn’t ask them.”

“There was very little asking going on,” Gabriel said dryly. “More like…what should I be doing here?”

Samael snorted. “You think it was any different for me?”

“I dunno. You were a little more alive than me, I think. And you had Death talking to you. I got Dad’s words secondhand through my friends. Great friends, not so much concise messengers.”
Samael paused, face pained. “I’m not sure how alive I was,” ne said slowly. “At that point, I’d…

disintegrated Earth. I probably did myself in, too.”

“Well, you look remarkably alive for someone supposed to be dead.”

“Likewise.” Samael’s grin was mirthless. “And FYI? Death’s not so good at explaining things either. You think Dad would’ve been any better?”

“Probably not, but I could’ve given Him a punch for what He pulled.” As it was, he’d have to live vicariously through Bruce.

“So could I,” Samael muttered. “Was it too hard to leave a note?”

“Apparently. It would’ve ruined the suspense.”

“Suspense? What suspense? More like giving us all heart attacks.” Samael shot him a look. “And don’t say we don’t get heart attacks.”

“We don’t,” Gabriel said seriously, only to grin a second later. “Nah, I get what you’re saying. I was close to one a few times.”

“Yes,” Samael sighed, dropping nir head to rub the back of nir neck. Rolling nir shoulders, ne relaxed, turning nir gaze out to Asgard.

Eventually, ne said, “Death talked about a cycle, things beginning and ending.”

“And we’re the new beginning.” Gabriel rubbed his mouth. “Eventually there’s going to be an end.”

“Or not.” Samael glanced at him, the corner of nir lips ticking up in a brief smile. “I think…part of what they were hoping for was that the cycle would end. That there wouldn’t need to be a new beginning again, that things could move on.”

“Nothing lasts forever.”

“Maybe not, but the type of ending that they had?” Samael closed nir eyes. “They don’t know how they were born – and the memories I got aren’t too clear on that – but there was something before them. There had to have been.”

Breathing out, Gabriel let himself remember what he’d seen in that lost dimension. The visions had been disjointed, but he could link them together well enough. “Wanna bet that they ended up destroying each other before the new cycle started and they could try again?”

Samael shot him a look. “That’s a sucker bet.” Ne hesitated, then said, “We almost did that. Just…on a smaller scale. But now…if we tried that…”

“End of everything as we know it?” Gabriel couldn’t help a mirthless smile. “Let’s not, yeah? They made their mistakes; let’s not repeat them.”

Samael huffed. “We’ll just make our own.”

“With less emphasis on destroying things.”

“Please.” Samael shook nir head, exhaling. Looking back at Gabriel, ne said quietly, “I’m glad. I’m glad it’s over. I can’t do that again.”

Silent, Gabriel touched the back of nir shoulder, letting comfort wash into nem. Honestly, he
couldn’t either. It was a literal miracle he’d made it this time.

“It’s not yet over,” he said eventually.

Samael glanced at him, brow furrowed. “It isn’t?”

“We didn’t get all of them.” Gabriel closed his eyes, remembering how it felt to be something more than himself. It had been all too easy to feel the Dark escape through the cracks in the dimensional walls, seeking refuge elsewhere.

“Fuck.”

“Hey, no worries.” Gabriel squeezed his shoulder. “We’ve got this. Together, right?”

“Easier said than done.” Samael shook his head. “But yes. Together.” He turned to look at him. “You have a plan?”

“When don’t I?” Gabriel saw the look on Samael’s face and quickly said, “Don’t answer that. Do not.”

“You walked right into that,” Samael complained.

“Which is why I said don’t answer that.”

“How are we doing this?” Samael murmured, attention briefly on the rest of the room before returning to Gabriel.

“The easy way.” Gabriel snapped his fingers, turning the lights off. “By finding the needle in the haystack.”

“How is that easy?” Gadreel sounded confused.

“If the haystack’s yours? Real easy.” Gabriel ignored the eye rolling from the peanut gallery, along with Castiel’s muttered “That makes no sense.”

“The haystack being all of Creation?” Samael raised an eyebrow.


Before his vision had been relatively limited unless he strained, but now… Oh, now it was the easiest thing in the world.

Snapping his fingers again, Gabriel pulled into form a map of the universe. It shrunk down, only to be replaced by others. More universes popped into life, whole realms blinking into being and spinning in slow orbits that mirrored their real-life counterparts.

Gabriel let an amused smirk cross his face at the gasps his friends made. Loki and Thor weren’t unaffected, and even the other angels were wide-eyed. “Not quite the entire thing, but we can move the camera if we need to.”

He reached out, touching one spinning realm to let it glow. “But here’s where we start. And here…” He touched the blank space outside the universe, small dots lighting. “Here’s where the trail starts.”

“Isn’t this…?” Samael eyed the realm darkly.
“It’s ours.” Gabriel touched a blank space next to it. “This is what you’re thinking about – or where it was before. It’s not there anymore, and I’m not about to look into the past to get a view of it.”

“So we follow the trail?” Raphael asked, stepping closer to look at it.

“If you want.” Gabriel tilted his head, letting his awareness expand. “Or I can just go to where there’s something not quite right. It’s a bit like a bruise.”

Reaching out again, Gabriel pulled forth a single universe, letting the rest of the glowing map float above their heads. “Can you sense it?”

It took Samael only a moment to sense what Gabriel had. “Yes.”

“I’ve not seen that universe before,” Raphael said slowly, eyes fixed on a distant location. “It feels…”

“Newer,” Castiel said, eyes closed. “Yet old.”

“As if time was sped up to let it grow to this point,” Raphael agreed.

Letting his awareness draw back from the void he’d sensed in that universe, Gabriel realized what they’d seen about the universe. They were right in that it was new, their Father’s energies stronger there than elsewhere.

But also…

Gabriel’s fingers twitched in surprise, his eyes widening. “Is that…?”

“Michael,” Samael breathed, meeting his eyes in stunned amazement.

“He’s alive?” Raphael sounded disbelieving.

Gabriel didn’t answer immediately, breathing in as he felt his brother’s Grace, warm and alive. And inside the new universe that their Father had Created not long ago.

Meeting Samael’s eyes again, Gabriel let himself smile, holding the universe between them. “What do you say about a little trip?”

Chapter End Notes

And, NOW...I’m going to make a comment on Loki’s and Tony/Gabriel’s relationship. I’m guessing it could be defined as queerplatonic, but I’m not entirely sure of that. In any case, it’s kind of its own category, and it deserved to have its closing of sorts here.

Didn’t I tell you this would have a happy ending? Didn’t I? And it does! It's happy! Even if the path we took was really bad...

Please, if you enjoyed this story, let me know what you thought! I love hearing all your feedback. It's the reward at the end of writing a long story, and this was quite an adventure for me as well.

I'm not entirely sure what my next project will be, but First Born is still ongoing.
However, I have also started a long-term project for Dragon Age, so if I have any readers who are also Dragon Age fans, keep an eye out for it! You can also follow me on tumblr for updates on how that's going. The tumblr for this series can be found here for updates specific to this series.

Now, I'm going to clock off. Again, please drop a note! <3 Thank you so much for reading!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!