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**The Tether**

by GertieCraign

**Summary**

There are two simultaneous themes in this story:

1.) Dean, Sam, Cas and Mary are living in the bunker, trying to create some semblance of 'normal'. The shell-shock is palpable, but they're Winchesters...they're coping. Sort of. Mary is coming to terms with the loss of both her husband and the last 33 yrs of her little boys' lives.
Dean and Sam are dealing with...well, we all know what they've been through. 'Dealing' is probably a strong word.
Castiel is quietly struggling. He won’t talk about it. Surprise.

2.) When an unknown and insurmountable force threatens to fling Cas to the furthest reaches of space and time, an ancient spell to tether his grace to a human soul is the only way to save him. The tether will require close proximity and, eventually, constant physical contact.
Guess who draws the short straw?

Notes

This is my first fic.
I'm super stoked, and would love any and all feedback that will help me to be a better writer.
I live for comments, so please, please don't hold back. Comments are my life-blood.
Comments keep me from pacing like a lunatic, wondering what you all are thinking. 'Cause apparently I'm really insecure.
Be gentle, Good Reader. Be gentle.
“Sammy,” Mary called out as she very slowly entered the library. Her hands held two plastic bottles each. Another three bottles were tucked between her left arm and her body. “Sweetheart, what are all of these?”

Sam looked up from his seat at the far table and smiled. He quickly shuffled a book out of his lap and stood to move toward her.

“I mean, they’re obviously hair products, but...what are...what’s an ‘emollient’? Is one of these shampoo? I just need shampoo. Oh!” She stopped, having finally seen the word ‘shampoo’ written in small print and essentially hidden among the endless marketing jargon on the bottle’s label. She clicked her tongue in annoyance.

“Yeah, that one’s pretty good.” Sam then pointed to another bottle. “This is the conditioner that goes with it.”

“These two are the ones you use? Your hair is so nice. I’ll use what you use, if you don’t mind.”

“Actually, I use them all. Kinda depends on how my hair feels, ya know? Sometimes it needs this one. Other times, it gets really dry and I use these…” Sam pointed to each bottle in turn, explaining it virtues and shortcomings.

Mary’s smile began to morph into a partial grimace, but she held it together pretty well. She gazed at the multitude of choices.

“Don’t you have a regular bottle of Prell I can use?”

Sam stared at her for a moment, as his mind tried to place that word. He knew he’d heard it before. Mary sighed, seeing his confusion, and decided to just use the two he’d pointed out.

“Nevermind. These’ll work.” She set the remainder of the bottles down on the table next to her. “What are you working on?”

Sam shook himself out of his staring reverie. This was a particularly disturbing new habit he’d acquired, since his mom’s sudden arrival. Dean had made a point of telling him to knock it off, more than once.

He moved quickly back over to his open laptop and sat down. Turning the screen so she could see, he began to tell Mary about the set of sigils he’d found in an old, handwritten book in the bunker library. He was researching any new info he might be able to find on them.

“I’m checking the reliability of the descriptions in the book,” he explained. “And seeing if there’s been any additional research done on them in the last hundred years or so, since it was written.”
Mary stood next to him, her hand resting lightly on his shoulder. She watched as Sam opened window after window, each one displaying volumes of information from all over the world. Her face showed the completely reasonable sense of awe that this fascinating piece of human technology should inspire.

“That is the neatest thing I’ve ever seen in my life. I will never get over this,” she murmured. Sam gave a little snort and grinned, as she leaned down and kissed the top of his head.

“Ok...gotta get cleaned up. Where’s your brother?” she asked, putting the two chosen bottles in her left hand and sweeping the remaining bottles up in her right arm, hugging them to her chest.

“The garage.”

Mary winced. “Still tryin’ to get the suspension right, huh?”

Sam shook his head and sighed. “Seems Chuck doesn’t really get how bad it is to drop a big car like that.” He grinned, then turned back to his screen. “He’ll find it. Somethin’s just bent.”

“Hopefully not the frame,” Mary mumbled, continuing toward the hallway.

“Oh, man…” Sam chortled. “Please don’t let him hear you say that.”

Mary giggled. “Dinner’s at six!” she yelled back over her shoulder.

“What?” Sam answered, a bit startled. “Mom, you don’t have to cook for us! We usually just throw a sandwich together or something. I mean, unless you’re cooking for yourself, ya know? Don’t just do it for us!”

Mary stopped and turned to look at her boy.

“Old habits die hard,” she said with a grin. “Besides, it seems like one of the very few things I can do without needing a lecture on the ways everything has changed over the last 33 years.” She sighed heavily. “It’s something I can do on auto-pilot, ya know? After the days I have now...by the time the evening rolls around, my brain could use a break?”

Sam smiled sympathetically and nodded.

"Can you let your brother know?"

"Sure."

“Thanks, Sammy. Oh! And please tell Cas, too.” Turning back toward the hallway, she took half a step and bumped directly into a large, solid lump of tan. She jumped and sucked in a lungful of air.

“Hello, Mary.”

“Jeez, Cas,” she breathed out, rocking back on her heels and closing her eyes, trying to collect herself. The bottles began to slip from her arm and he reached quickly to take them from her.

“Oh...thanks…” Mary said quietly, still a bit flustered. “This... arrival method of yours...it’s gonna take some getting used to.” She finally looked up and was greeted with a benevolent, but blank stare.

“You were looking for me,” Cas stated. He noticed that Mary appeared to be somewhat uncomfortable. Guessing at the problem, he took one step back, watching for her reaction. She seemed to relax just a bit and he made a mental note (‘Mary: 0.65 meters’.)
“Yeah...I just wanted you to know we’re gonna eat at 6.” Mary continued to stare back at him, completely unable to look away.

Cas paused for a moment, processing her statement. Then his eyes brightened. “Ah.” He said, smiling softly and nodding. “Dinner. Yes.” He seemed to shrink a little and dropped his gaze entirely. “Thank you. It’s...very kind of you to invite me.” He was fidgeting, now, Mary noticed.

With that, Mary relaxed completely and chuckled. “It’s not an invite, Cas, you live here. This family eats dinner together...whenever we can...that’s just how it is.” She tilted her head down and gave him a half-stern look, pointing the end of the conditioner bottle at him for emphasis. “So, don’t be late.” She grinned at him until he smiled back at her sheepishly.

“Oh,” he answered.

“Ok.” Mary playfully popped him once on the arm with the bottle as she moved past him toward the bathroom. He watched her go, remaining fixed in that position even after she’d turned the far corner. About 5 seconds later, Mary appeared again. She looked up and almost stopped, seeing him staring back at her. He hadn’t moved at all.

“Um…” she said, a little unnerved. “I forgot those.” She pointed to the bottles Cas was holding.

“Oh...yes.” He moved forward to hand them to her, then moved back quickly.

Mary couldn’t help but smile. “Thanks,” she said, taking the bottles and walking back toward the bathroom.

It was becoming clear to her why her boys seemed to care about him so much. He was a flake...there was no doubt about that...but he was trying so damned hard. And that’s really tough to not like.

She knew there was a lot more there...a ton of back-story, and she’d already gotten the impression that she wasn’t gonna like all of it, but...at the moment, he seemed absolutely desperate to please. She figured they were all still safe. He probably wasn’t gonna hulk out and smite anyone. She could relax. For now, at least.
“Hey.”

Dean looked briefly at his brother. Sam wiggled the beer bottle at him.

“Ah, Sam…” Dean sighed. “You’re alright sometimes. You know that?”

“I’ll do in a pinch,” Sam agreed. He stepped back as Dean rolled himself out from under his Baby and slowly rose. Nearly a dozen loud pops resonated out of Dean’s back, legs and shoulders, as he stood and tried to stretch out the strain of the last couple of hours. He looked like hell. Sam didn’t mention that.

Dean gratefully took the beer from his brother, as they both found a comfortable spot to sit for a few minutes.

“Mom says dinner’s at 6,” Sam announced.

Dean’s beer had only made it halfway to his mouth, when he froze for a long moment. He stared at his little brother as though Sam had just informed him he was considering becoming a professional go-go dancer.

“Dinner’s at 6,” Dean repeated.

“Yep.” Sam grinned and shook his head, sipping his beer.

Dean sighed. He got his beer all the way to his mouth and swigged down a third of it in one gulp.

“Is it just me, or…”

“Nope,” Sam answered.

“Yeah,” Dean said, a little dazed.

They sat quietly for a few moments, letting the music fill the void.

“d’You figure out what it is?” Sam asked, nodding toward the Impala’s front end.

Dean grunted and looked down at the shining black beast he was perched on.

“I’ve been trying to convince myself it’s somethin’ in the suspension.” He took another swig of his beer, and heaved a big sigh. “But, I think I’m gonna have to just admit it. Damn, I don’t want to.”

“Yeah. Sorry. Mom was hinting at that earlier. I told her to make sure you didn’t hear her jinx it.” Sam snorted a little and gave his brother a sympathetic smile.

“Man…Bobby’s garage? No problem. But, this place ain’t set up for that kinda work. There’s a whole crap-load of stuff I’d need. And it’s all expensive as hell.”

“What about Cas?” Sam asked, the thought having just occurred to him and making him wonder why they hadn’t asked Cas if he could help with stuff like this before.

“You think Cas is gonna know how to straighten out a bent frame?”

“I think if you told him…showed him…exactly what needs to be done…yeah, he might. He can do all kinds of other stuff. Why not?” He gave Dean a hopeful look. It seemed a little bit of a stretch, but no harm in asking.
“Yeah, maybe,” Dean shrugged, wiping his hands on a fresh paper towel he’d torn off the roll. “Where is he, anyway? He was in here a while ago, then he just disappeared. You know, we gotta work on that with him. I don’t know how the hell long I was under there, just talkin’ to myself. I looked up and he was gone. It was a good story, too.”

“Aww, Dean...did de angel huwt your feewings?” Sam frowned and stuck out his lower lip.

“Shut up, Bitch,” Dean mumbled, finishing his beer.

Sam chuckled and got up to leave. “I’m goin’ back downstairs, Jerk. You want me to send Cas back up, if I see him?” He strolled toward the door and sent a perfect two-point shot into the trash can with his empty bottle.

“Nah…” Dean shrugged, slowly lowering himself down onto his mechanic’s dolly and rolling back under the Impala. “If I need somebody to hand me tools, who doesn’t know what any of the tools I’m asking for look like, I’ll just call you.”

“Oh, fuck you, dude!” Sam laughed, as he opened the door and walked out.

Dean snorted. The huge grin on his face immediately began to fall, though, as he stared back up at the perfect suspension hanging on an almost certainly deformed frame. He thought for a moment, then closed his eyes. Within seconds, two legs appeared to his left. The knees and ankles bent and then a face was looking under the car at him.

“You think you could straighten out a piece of metal?”
**Breakfast in America**

Chapter Summary

**When Cas first appeared to Dean, and in several of the following appearances, the wind would pick up to gale force, lights would blow, electronics would go nuts and doors would burst open. And then, later, Cas would appear almost completely silently, with no blowing lights or electronics, no wind...nothing.**

"It was a tactic," Cas said, setting his coffee mug on the table and leaning back in his chair.

“Some angels, myself included, who’ve been selected to interact with powerful or influential humans in the past, have found it beneficial to...create an atmosphere that would...encourage rapid compliance.”

**Things are still mundane at the bunker, but that doesn't mean they have to be boring. Welcome back, BAMF! Cas. I missed ya, bud!**

Chapter Notes

***WARNING: TRIGGER ALERT***

I've been told that the amount of chewing and weird food-eating imagery in this scene can trigger misophonia. So if this is a thing for you, please beware. If you really want to know what happens in this chapter, but don’t want to endure the trigger, please send me a comment letting me know, and I’ll write you up a quick summary, to catch you up for the next chapter.

Title reference:


June 7, 2016

8:30 AM CDT

The walk from any of the bedrooms in the bunker to either of the main bathrooms could hardly be considered ‘long’ by anyone’s standards. But at 8:30 am, after a very late night of talking, drinking, losing to your mother at poker, and then drinking quite a bit more, the walk was nearly interminable.

Dean stumbled out of his room like a badly built android. Nothing was quite unstiffened enough for
proper human motion. Since he could actually smell his own mouth, when he opened it to groan, he was grateful to not run into anyone he cared about on his journey. That particular odor...a bouquet reminiscent of ass and death...would most likely end any relationship he had.

After scrubbing and rinsing his mouth at least twice and showering away the other lovely aromas that tend to cling to post-very-drunk skin, he threw on his in-house uniform: t-shirt, over-shirt, jeans, socks and those kickin’ MoL slippers. ‘The day’s starting to look better already,’ he thought, and headed toward the kitchen.

He was only a little surprised to see Cas standing at the stove, both jackets off and sleeves rolled up, warming a large can of pork ‘n beans in a sauce pan. He was much more surprised to see that Cas also had a pan of scrambled eggs cooking and was bouncing between monitoring both items and grating cheese over the top of a tray of texas toast, readying it for the oven. This was definitely new.

“Hey,” Dean said, as brightly as he could. It came out as more of a desperate grunt, so he decided he should shut up for now. He headed straight for the table and plopped down in one of the chairs. He was too tired even to get the glass of water and mug of coffee he’d come for. Instead he just leaned his elbows on the tabletop and rubbed his eyes and face for a while.

The radio was playing softly, as Cas cooked. The classic rock station, of course. Dean knew that Cas rarely ever changed the station, preferring to just listen to whatever was on when it powered up. So, Dean would conveniently ‘check the time’ on the radio’s clock, before bed each night. It was only coincidence that he’d need to reset it to this particular station, too.

The song that came on as Cas slipped the cheesy toast into the oven, had four slow beats from a drum kit, and nothing else to identify it. Cas paused, listening carefully. Dean watched him.

Between the fourth and fifth beat, the unmistakable strum of rhythm guitar began and Cas smiled slightly and nodded.

“Know this one?” Dean asked, grinning a little and wondering exactly why Cas seemed interested in this particular song.

“Slow Ride,” Cas said, still turned entirely to the stove and focusing on his cooking.

“Yeah!” Dean chuckled in surprise. He leaned back in his chair and, still grinning, asked, “Know the band?”

“Foghat.” The answer was immediate and definitive.

Dean threw his head back and laughed. “Yeah, Cas! Look at you!” he praised. “No jackets, cookin’, and throwin’ out names of rock bands!” He chuckled again, smiling hugely at his friend as Cas glanced over his shoulder, quickly, to grin back at him. He looked very pleased with himself.

“What the hell…” Dean said. “Who are you, man?!” He laughed again, delighted by this awesome new development.

Cas stopped and turned fully toward Dean.

“It’s me. Castiel. Dean, do you not recognize…”

“No, I know...I know who you are, Cas...it’s...it’s a figure of speech. I’m not...hexed or anything. We’re good. We’re good.” Dean’s glee retreated about 80% back under the intense fatigue, as he realized his friend hadn’t made quite the amount of progress he’d thought. A moment later, he smiled again, though. It was still pretty damned awesome.
“Foghat,” he mumbled to himself and chuckled.

“What?” Cas asked, setting a large glass of water and a mug of coffee in front of Dean. He also grabbed the sugar jar and set it down nearby.

“Ah...thanks, Cas,” Dean gratefully added the sugar and took a big gulp. It was good. Cas definitely had coffee-making down.

“It’s Fog Hat. Not Faw Gat, or whatever you said. Ya got it right, you just...said it a little weird.”

“[Faw’ ghatt’],” Cas said aloud, feeling the word in his mouth.

“No...FOG HAT,” Dean tried to enunciate louder. Cas was lost in thought, not quite listening, now.

“It sounds South Asian. Possibly Bengali,” Cas muttered. “Are the members of that band from Southern India? Sri Lanka, perhaps?”

“Mornin’,” Sam chirped, bounding into the kitchen, freshly back from a run.

“FOG HAT,” Dean tried again.

“What?” Sam asked, walking over to Cas. “Aw, great! Food! That for everybody, Cas?” He sniffed deeply in appreciation.

“Yes, there’s plenty for all three of you. Have a seat.”

“Awesome!” Sam plopped down opposite to Dean and began surfing through the applications on his phone. “So what’s the deal with Foghat? We playin’ mullet-rock Jeopardy or somethin’?”

“I was wondering about the origin of the band,” Cas chimed in, before Dean could try to explain. “[Faw’ Ghatt’]. The name sounds Bengali. Or possibly Icelandic.”

“FOG H..” Dean tried one last time.

“No, I’m pretty sure they’re not either of those, Cas. I see what you mean, though. If you pronounce it with the syllables split that way.” Sam said, diplomatically, nodding his head.

“Ghatt, of course, meaning ‘a set of steps that leads down to the water’ in many South Asian languages,” Cas expounded. “...and in Icelandic...”

“No, you know what…” Dean threw his hands up, waving almost wildly. “No...not before 9am. It’s too damned early for this, guys...come on. Just...can we eat and talk about stupid shit?” Dean was chuckling pitifully, almost pleading. “One more hour. It’s all I ask. Please.”

Cas and Sam both let it drop. Moments later, Cas set a large plate of food in front of each of them, then took his own mug of coffee and sat down midway between his two friends.

“Wow, Cas! Thanks!” Sam gushed, grabbing his fork and scooping beans onto the corner of the thick, cheesy toast.

“Wait!” Dean demanded. He grabbed a single bean off his plate and flicked it at his brother, hitting Sam squarely in the forehead.

Sam looked up, surprised and wondering for a second what had just hit him.

“Don’t just start eatin’, ya freakin’ chimp! Jeez…” Dean looked over at Cas. “We waitin’ for mom?
She up yet?”

“Oh, yes. Your mother has been in the armory since quite early. She’s decided to take an assessment of all of the weaponry. Checking for deterioration, blade condition, functionality, stores of ammunition... She’s being extremely thorough.” Cas said this last part with an approving nod.

‘I was wondering what they’d bond over,’ Dean thought to himself. ‘Documentation. Great. Just freakin’ great.’

“I informed her I’d be preparing food for you and she wished for me to tell you that she’d be down in a little while. You should eat whenever the food is ready.”’ Cas repeated Mary’s words and then leisurely sipped his coffee.

“Huh…” Dean said, looking at his friend. The guy looked positively peaceful. He hadn’t seen him look like that in a while. Dean pondered this for a moment, knowing he was missing some sort of clue...something that had been staring him in the face for days, but he just couldn’t see. Nothing was coming to him, though, so he decided to put this little scene into his ‘wth?’-file, for later.

“I believe your comparison of your brother’s manners to that of a chimpanzee was meant to be derisive, but in fact the social etiquette among the so-called Great Apes is quite intricate and demanding when it comes to food sharing.” Cas continued for another two minutes, until the timer went off, telling him to get the last batch of cheesy toast out of the oven.

Dean had been staring at him with all the enthusiasm of a man marching to his death. When the timer went off and his best friend cut the conversation short to attend to the toast, he felt a wave of gratitude for the little buzzing egg timer that he’d never felt toward any kitchen tool in his entire life.

“So…” Dean began, slowly, hoping to think of something non-taxing to talk about, before either of them had a chance to take away all hope of recovery from him.

“Oh, wow!” Sam almost shouted. “Sorry, Dean,” he said quickly, for cutting his brother off. “Cas, check it out. I just did the latest install for the Linda Hall Library.” Sam bounced over to Cas and held out his phone so his friend could see. “They’ve got Newton’s ‘Optiks’ letter to the Royal Society digitized. And you can totally zoom in on the diagrams…”

Cas barely got the toast out, before diving in with Sam to flip through the pages.

“The car’s fixed,” Dean mumbled under his breath. “Now we can actually go buy groceries and clothing...you know...so we can live. ‘Oh but Dean,’ he pitched his voice really high, still mumbling to himself, ‘look at this cool shit nobody’s cared about in a hundred years! And there’s a new app for it, too!’”

Dean piled beans onto his toast and shoved a huge quantity into his mouth. “I dunno why I got outta bed,” he barely said, through his food.

Cas came back to the table with a plate of extra toast and the coffee urn. He topped off his own mug and sat back down with them both, still chatting briefly with Sam about the wonders at that library and how they should visit someday, when they’re driving in the vicinity. It isn’t that far from the bunker, after all.

“Cas, it’s totally off the subject, but I’ve been meaning to ask about your wings. You mentioned they were fixed, but they were still kinda messed up? Or...”

“The soreness, you mean…” Cas nodded, finishing Sam’s question for him.
“Yeah,” Sam said. “They ok?”

“I believe the soreness was only partly related to my wings. It seems that during the time my wings were unusable, a few of the muscles in my vessel decided they weren't needed as urgently and they weakened. When I regained full use of my wings, the power required for flight was apparently a bit of a strain on them. I believe I 'pulled' one,” Cas said, using air quotes. “That seems to have been the cause of the soreness.”

“Cool! You're all healed up then?” Sam grinned and loaded another clump of beans onto the toast.

Cas nodded and gazed back at him, somewhat adoringly.

“Yes, Sam. I'm all healed up.” He watched him take another hearty bite of the food he'd prepared for him and grinned.

“Awesome,” Dean grunted, through a huge mouthful of beans and bread. “Good to hear.”

Cas looked back at the elder Winchester, watching his friend demolish the meal with gusto. He'd never seen anyone enjoy food to the extent that Dean did. Watching him was always entertaining for Cas, but watching him eat was...well...a special treat. The anthropological implications alone...

“So...when you takin us flyin?” Dean demanded. A couple of small chunks of...something...flew out of his mouth. He watched them land on the table in front of him, then quickly swiped them away with his paper-towel-napkin and acted like it never happened.

“Dean,” Sam scolded.

“What? I wanna see what it all looks like from Angel-Cam.”

Cas's demeanor changed slightly, and he shifted in his chair. He didn’t like where this was headed, but he wasn't going to let Dean know that, if he could help it. He went with the first diversion that came to mind.

“Sam told me you're afraid of flying,” Cas stated flatly, taking a sip of his coffee and fidgeting with a button on his shirt. It was an ugly tactic, he knew. He wasn't exactly proud of himself for using it, but, at the moment, a mild attack on Dean's pride would serve his purpose. And Dean's ego was definitely big enough to absorb the jab, so, no lasting damage.

Dean shot a quick glare at Sam and then looked back at Cas. “I don't like airplanes. That's all.” He shoved another huge forkful of food into his mouth and continued. “But it'd be cool to fly if it was...ya know...You. I mean...not locked into a big metal cylinder, just waiting for a bad o-ring or a pilot with a crack habit to nosedive us into the ground.” He reached up with his paper towel and wiped away a few bits of food stuck in his chin stubble. “If it was you, then...you know...you'd know how to not kill us if somethin' went wrong. That's all I'm sayin’.” He chewed and chewed, stabbing another forkful and pushing it into his already somewhat stuffed mouth. “I'm not afraid of flyin',” he insisted. “I ain't afraid of anything. Not anymore.”

Sam almost argued, but thought better of it. He went back to his food, grunting a little sound of satisfaction.

“You were afraid of me,” Cas said it as a statement of fact. He was gripping his coffee mug with both hands, carefully swirling and watching the sheen of savory oil try to pool on the surface. He didn’t look up, in hopes of avoiding further mention of taking Dean flying.

“I ain't afraid of you, Feathers,” Dean said without missing a beat.
“Maybe not now. But you were.” Cas continued. “When we met. You were afraid.”

Dean dropped his fork-holding arm down to the table and assessed his friend, as he chewed.

“What the hell are you talkin about, Cas?” He finished chewing his mouthful and swallowed. “If I was afraid of you, I wouldn't've summoned you right to me.” He pointed his fork in Cas's direction for emphasis. “And I sure as Hell wouldn't have just stood there. If I'd been scared, I'd've gotten my ass outta there.”

Cas didn't take his eyes off his coffee. He just listened.

“You know, one thing I always wanted to ask you about,” Sam interrupted. “How come you show up quietly now? Dean told me about your first meetings, and then I saw you do it once, too.” He finished the last small bits he'd been chewing and swallowed, resting his fork on his plate and giving Cas his full attention. “What happened to the lights popping and the roof nearly ripping off...doors blowing open? We barely hear you now?”

Cas was quiet a moment. It was a bit too long, and Sam was beginning to think he’d crossed some sort of line, when his friend finally spoke.

“It was a tactic,” Cas said, setting his coffee mug on the table and leaning back in his chair. He still didn’t look at either of them. Instead, he stared at a spot somewhere very distant and gave his companions the distinct impression that he was choosing his words with great care, now.

“A tactic,” Dean repeated.

“Some angels, myself included, who’ve been selected to interact with powerful or influential humans in the past, have found it beneficial to...create an atmosphere that would...encourage rapid compliance.”

Sam and Dean both brought their chewing to a slow halt and looked at him. Cas was still staring at some invisible object 1000 yards away.

Noticing their stillness, though, he finally relented and looked first at Sam, and then at Dean, who’s face had a multitude of emotions flickering across it like ripples on a pond. Cas realized he was going to have to continue. He sighed.

“A show of force,” he said, straightening up a bit. “A demonstration of Heaven’s power to help the person or people to understand with whom they are dealing. And, therefore, what could happen if they choose to...not cooperate.” Cas shifted in his chair a bit more and cleared his throat. “I believe the modern term for it is...ah...'making an entrance.'”

“That was all a show?” Sam nearly shouted. He couldn’t decide if he was impressed or pissed and his voice conveyed that. “What the hell, man? You guys can’t just talk to us? You gotta scare the shit out of us first?” ‘Pissed’ was quickly winning the internal emotional battle.

Cas raised a hand carefully up toward Sam, gesturing his understanding and trying to keep his friend calm.

“It’s a tactic I use specifically to keep from harming anyone unnecessarily. It is always my intent, Sam, to ensure that I do whatever I can to avoid the use of force with any human charge. I have never wished to harm anyone with whom I’ve been sent to interact. Nor have I wished to cause harm to anyone following the leadership of that person. Helping the influential person or persons to see the immediate need to comply would almost always spare their own lives and those of their followers. I only wished to avoid suffering. It was never just to...'scare the shit out of you.'”
Sam seemed to soften a bit with this information. It did make sense, even if it was in a really arrogant, controlling, insultingly domineering way.

“And you did the same thing with Dean,” Sam reiterated, making sure he was getting all of this. And also making sure his brother was, too. A few things were beginning to click in his mind, and he was hoping his brother just might have the self-awareness to put those pieces together, as well. Probably not, he knew, but...stranger things have happened...

Cas nodded slowly. “It works.” He lifted his mug to take another sip. “It always works. At least, for a time.”

“Bullshit!” Dean said, messily. “Didn’t work on me.” The paper-towel again resumed its duty. He was determined in his denial, but the facade was showing cracks. He was thinking this through...absorbing the implications of what his now very good friend was telling him about their first (mutually remembered) encounter.

“It did work on you…” Cas began.

“Nope!” Dean stated and shoved in another load of beans and bread.

“... it worked on Bobby, too,” Cas said, drily, ignoring Dean's outburst. “And I could easily do it again. This isn’t something I came up with 8 years ago, Dean. The method is time tested. It works.”

Dean was now ignoring him...focused on his food and acting as if the angel hadn’t even spoken.

Cas watched him. He almost smiled at Dean’s arrogant refusal to accept what had really happened, but he decided to instead see if he could dig under it a bit. Poke the hornets’ nest.

“You weren’t afraid,” Cas repeated back to Dean, getting him to confirm.

“Nope.”

“You’re in the habit of laying out your entire arsenal of weaponry in preparation for the arrival of those you summon?” Cas asked. “And you used every bit of it against me, as I recall.”

“Yep. Stupid not to. You were some unknown big bad. Until we knew what you were...we’d unload into ya and ask questions later.”

“Uh huh…” Cas said, leaning just a little toward Dean, now...gaze fixed squarely on his friend. “That usually works out well for you?”

Dean nodded, somewhat sagely. “It does.” He continued to chew his food, but he’d stopped shoveling more in, now. He wiped his hands together over his plate, to remove any crumbs, then wiped his mouth and chin again and set his elbows on the table to stare back at the angel. He forced his stare to be casual, but it was clearly a challenge. Cas was fine with that. In fact, it was perfect.

“Didn’t work so well with me, though, did it, Dean?”

Something about the way Cas said his name at the end changed the tone of the conversation entirely, and Dean felt his spine go just a little rigid.

“No, Cas,” Dean sighed. “We didn’t have the right weapons at the time, ok? Happy? It didn’t work on you.” He thought for a moment longer, not wanting to admit anything even remotely resembling defeat to this jackass. “If we’d had the right warding, though,...”
“Ah, the warding…” Cas interrupted, squinting his eyes and nodding condescendingly. “Yes, the warding was…very interesting.” He pursed his lips and actually sucked at his teeth, just barely making a clicking sound. “Utterly ineffective, but…interesting.”

Dean had a very slight knowing smile on his face at this point. Cas had him. There was no getting around that fact, and the little bastard was gonna milk it for all it was worth. Dean wasn’t gonna make it easy for him, though. If he wanted this takedown, he was gonna earn it.

“I noticed you’d gone to a lot of trouble…you and Bobby. Painted nearly every sigil you’d ever seen. It was…impressive,” Cas said, making it very clear that he wasn’t in the least bit impressed, but he’d pat the baby on the head anyway.

At this, Dean actually snorted a quick laugh. “You can be a real dick, you know that?”

“There were sigils from…all over the Earth. From all sorts of languages and cultures and times.” Cas spoke with a small flourish, now. “Even the ones you got wrong…it was still very thorough, Dean.”

“Many of the sigils would have done little to any supernatural creature, though.” Cas continued. “That was unfortunate. I was especially confused by one of the erroneously drawn sigils that was actually intended to be used to bring increase to a flock of sheep. You came very close to getting it right, but…well…as it was, it would have made the sheep more…ah…active. It just wouldn’t have resulted in young.” He took another quick sip of his coffee.

“All right, all right,” Dean conceded. “You’ve made your point.”

“I’ve made corrections to that one, and the other erroneous sigils, in John’s notebook.”


Cas took another sip of his coffee, and nodded once.

Dean returned to the topic of ‘making an entrance’, without a segue.

“I think you’re full’a shit about the whole ‘I didn’t have to make a big scene when I showed up’ thing.”

“Really?” Cas asked, eyes wide and seemingly sincere.

“See…I think you were adjusting to your new vessel. That you had to…get it all…tweaked and figured out so you could fly right. That’s why you made all that damned noise. I think the rest is a big smoke screen. Tryin’ to make yourself seem like you’re all in control…a big bad ass.” He paused and picked up his toast. “Yeah… you’re full’a shit.”

Dean said this with an air of challenge and fun. His body language and his face clearly showed that he was partially teasing his friend, trying to get a rise out of him… Which is why he didn’t expect the sudden and extremely disturbing reaction he got out of the full-powered seraph sitting less than two feet away.

Cas’s entire body posture changed. He leaned forward, closing the distance to Dean by half. His face now held the intense look he usually reserved for sentences like, “Watch your mouth or I’ll throw your ass right back in the pit!” - (Cas had never said those exact words, of course, but Dean’s mind had automatically translated Cas’s precise, eloquent English into Blue-Collar-Midwestern-ese, so…that’s the version he remembered from their second encounter, years ago.)

“Let me be certain I understand what you’re saying, Dean.” Cas began. He said these words slowly,
pausing for effect between each phrase and watching Dean's reactions. He leaned even closer, and Dean instinctively began to retreat. Just millimeters, but enough to encourage Cas to continue the intrusion.

“You thought...presumably until just this very moment...that...ah...after eons as a winged creature...it was only a few years ago that I finally mastered controlled flight?” Cas tilted his head down slightly. It was a tiny gesture, but it instantly changed his stare from intrusive and unnerving, to the single-focused glare of a raptor eyeing its next meal.

Dean stared directly into the angel's eyes. He knew he should take control of the situation. Say something dismissive. Crack a joke. Something. Anything. But he just sat there, stunned by this unexpected change in the conversation and utterly unable to look away. He swallowed. It was loud.

“Uh...” Dean barely said. Cas cut him off.

“I do understand you correctly, Dean? That is what you thought?”

At some point during this exchange, Sam had stopped eating. He'd managed to lean back in his chair and pull his phone back out, flipping silently through the apps to get the camera ready. He had a feeling he knew what might be coming and there was no way he was gonna miss getting a picture of his brother's face, when it did. Luckily, he didn't have to wait long. Photo op#1 was currently presenting itself and Sam deftly snapped shot after glorious shot. Video was up next.

“Cas...I…”

A deep rumble seemed to come from every corner of the bunker at once. It was thunder...distant, but powerful, and it was filling the entire space with an ominous sub-sonic growl. Cas never flinched. Never acknowledged the sound at all, but as he tilted his head, ever so slightly, the final pulse of the roar hit the bunker and the facility shook. Pans and glasses rattled lightly in the cupboard, and the wooden spoon Cas had used to stir the beans fell from the counter top onto the floor with a small 'thwack'.

“That's deeply insulting.” Cas's voice was low, slow and even, and, though Dean would go to his grave denying it, that voice paired with Cas's intense, unreadable stare sent a much bigger shudder through Dean's body than any thunder ever could.

Cas held the stare for a few moments, letting his prey squirm... before he allowed himself a tiny smile. It just barely tugged up the corners of his mouth... and then the corners of his eyes.

Dean's face darkened. “You son of a bitch,” he growled.

Cas's demeanor softened entirely. A wide, good-natured grin spread across his face. He leaned back into his chair, reclaiming his coffee for a well deserved victory swig.

“You SON of a BITCH!” Dean pounded his fist on the table for emphasis. It's then that he noticed his brother, red-faced from trying to remain silent, camera capturing every humiliating moment. Instantly, Sam was relaxing into raucous laughter so loud in the tiled echo-chamber they called a kitchen, that Dean was sure his ears would be ringing for a week.

“Oh...my...God...” Sam choked out, head thrown back and free hand slowly clapping against his thigh.

Cas chuckled at his friend's expression, and then nodded.

"You were afraid of me." He only held Dean's gaze for a moment, though, before dropping his head
and smiling somewhat bashfully down at his lap.

Sam leaned forward and clapped him on the shoulder.

“Cas,” Sam gasped between spasms. “That was freakin’ BEAUTIFUL!” Though, the last half of the word only came out as a wheeze.

Tears were leaking from Sam's eyes, now. Cas watched him, and the smile on his own face grew broader, until he finally huffed out a real, unrestrained laugh. The two of them stayed like that for a solid 15 seconds, while Dean was left to struggle with what just happened, all by himself.

“You both suck!” Dean barked. He shoved the remainder of the piece of toast he still had in his hand into his mouth and stood. The chair he’d been sitting in was roughly shoved back nearly a foot by the force of his departure. He strode to the refrigerator, puffing out his chest and desperately trying to regain his composure.

Leaning down to reach the remaining stash of beer in the back (gotta make a run, he thought briefly), he ground his teeth together and closed his eyes. *They sound stupid when they laugh*, his mind spat. 'Assholes'.

“Man oh man! What did I miss?” Mary asked, as she strode into the kitchen, taking in the uproar.

Cas’s smile and laugh dropped to nearly nil and he was on his feet in an instant.

“Hello, Mary.” He actually squeaked just a bit. Dean looked at him and furrowed his brow.

“You guys sound like you are having entirely too much fun in here without me.”

Sam, who was still very close to falling out of his chair, if he wasn’t careful, helpfully piped up.

“Mom...you gotta see this!”

“NO!” Two huge voices boomed in horror, simultaneously. Cas and Dean both glared at Sam with a look that actually stopped his humor in it’s tracks.

Dean looked at Cas again. The furrowing deepened.

Mary settled herself at the table and tried to start up some cheerful small talk. She realized immediately that she’d walked in on something she was not supposed to witness. The tension was thick.

Sam was still holding his phone, but was now watching Cas intently.

A plate absolutely heaped with food was placed in front of Mary. Cas then rushed about to supply her with every other possible breakfast need he could think of. It only took moments, but the whirlwind was somewhat startling for all of them.

“Wow!” Mary said, looking at the food, the coffee, the napkin, the spread of condiments. “Cas, you go all out! Thank you!” She glanced up at Dean and grinned sheepishly. He looked back at her with a crooked smile and a shrug.
“I don’t know whether to hug you or leave a big tip!” Mary turned to thank Cas again, but he was gone.

Dean groaned and rolled his eyes.

“What the hell is up with him?” Sam asked, dropping his phone onto the table and shaking his head, exasperated. “He’s gotten squirrelly before but this is just...weird.”

Mary giggled softly, lifting her mug of coffee and breathing in the rich aroma.

“It probably makes me a complete jerk, but I’m not gonna complain. I mean...I haven’t experienced this level of ass-kissing since Billy Felps in 8th grade. That guy would’ve set himself on fire, if I’d asked him to.” Mary pursed her lips to blow over the hot coffee...and froze.

Dean’s face went ashen. He looked at her and opened his mouth to speak, but couldn’t. He turned to look at Sam, who had also frozen. Sam’s eyes were wide and did not match the smirk he was trying to hold on to.

They all sat there for close to half a minute, barely even blinking.

Dean finally looked over at his mom and, with incredible delicacy, asked, “Mom? Um...so, do you...um...I mean...Cas?”

Mary gaped, then leaned forward and stared straight at Dean.

“No,” she stated with absolute finality.

Dean swallowed, horrified that he’d even asked.

“I’ll talk to him,” he whispered, getting up immediately and leaving to go find his friend...who’s ass he might have to kick. He wasn’t sure yet. In fact, he really wasn’t sure of anything anymore.
Finding Cas was easy. Getting him to talk? Not so much.

June 7, 2016

9:05 AM CDT

He could have just prayed to him. He knew that. But Dean wanted to keep feeling the sense of relief he got every time he checked a room and didn’t find Castiel. It gave him a few more minutes of believing that this wasn’t happening...that it was all a huge misunderstanding. Or that he was having a stroke and this was his mind starting to shut down. He’d have been happy with either.

He checked all of Cas’s usual haunts, but there was no sign of the angel. Even the two piles of books and papers that Dean had seen on the library table late last night were gone. He thought about that, for a moment, then walked back to Cas’s room. The door was open, so he looked in. Yep...Cas’s little stack of notebooks was gone, too.

Dean snorted.

“Thought you’d go hide for a while, did ya?” he mumbled to himself. “You big chicken.”

It took less than five seconds for him to determine where this hide-out would almost certainly be, and he trudged toward it.

When he reached the boiler room, he stood for a moment outside it’s closed door. He could hear the non-rhythmic, somewhat animalistic sounds attributable to an old steam-pipe system. This, of course, is exactly why he’d come down here. The constant, small noises would mask any movements, and this was also a room that no one was likely to enter, unless there were a major failure of one of the bunker’s systems.

Digging into his pocket, he pulled out his key ring and quickly found the bunker’s internal master key. He opened the door and stepped into the dark room. The door automatically closed behind him, leaving a thin line of light from the hallway glowing beneath it.

He crossed his arms over his chest and rocked back on his heels a few times, waiting in the dark for his friend to make the first move.
When that didn’t happen, Dean cleared his throat.

“Cas,” he said. It wasn’t a question.

A whispered word came from behind the boiler and main trunk pipe. It sounded Enochian, though Dean couldn’t translate it. He could, however, recognize the sound of an expletive, when he heard one... and he grinned.

The overhead lights flickered on.

A moment later, he saw one arm, a shoulder, and half of the angel’s face slowly appear to the side of the big pipe.

“You really shouldn’t pick THE best place to hide, ya know,” Dean said, making his way down the three steps and across the room to his friend. “Non-geniuses usually pick places that are more random. Makes ‘em just a little harder to find, most’a the time. It’s why I always kicked Sam’s ass at hide-and-seek.”

Dean rounded to the far side of the trunk pipe as he finished. Cas had gone back to sit on a little pile of pillows he’d pushed against the far wall. He had stacks of books and files all around him, as well as 4 empty coffee mugs. On top of the closest stack was his little pile of notebooks.

“Well, this seems cozy,” Dean said, surveying the makeshift nerd-cave with an approving nod. There were all kinds of things jammed back there and it did look pretty comfortable...by angel standards, at least. He realized Cas must have come down here many times in these last two weeks, and that worried him a bit.

Dean also made a mental note of the fact that moments ago, Cas’s arm and shoulder were covered only in his white shirt...sleeves still rolled up. Now, though, Cas was back in full battle gear...tie, trench coat and all.

“Mind if I join you?”

Cas looked at him with resignation. It was clear that he would much rather take a beating than have this conversation with Dean, but, there didn’t appear to be a viable way around it. He wriggled as far to the side of the pile of pillows as he could, to make room for his friend to sit.

Dean’s body language conveyed a sense of empathy, as well as fatigue, as he approached and lowered himself down onto the offered spot. He sat there quietly next to Cas, knowing there wasn’t a lot else he could do to try to make this easier for either of them. After a minute or two, he finally spoke.

“So…,” he began, quietly. “There anything you wanna tell me?”

“Like what?” His tone wasn’t defensive, but Cas was obviously not ready to cooperate. Dean sighed, heavily, and dropped his head back to thud against the concrete wall.

“Come on, man…” Dean pleaded. “Don’t make me drag this crap outta you. You know ‘what’!”

Cas shifted just a bit and kept his gaze fixed on his own hands in his lap. He remained silent.

“Look...it’s natural, ok? I mean, I dunno how angels usually do this, but you were a human for a while, so...I know you might kinda see women differently now. Might think about stuff more. And that’s good. It’s great.” Dean hesitated, trying to find the right words. “It’s...fine.” He took a big breath and let it out.
“But it’s my MOM, Cas! Hell, for her, she had a husband and two little kids, like, two weeks ago!”

Cas looked up at him. He seemed just slightly confused, but was listening closely.

“Look…,” Dean continued, “it’s not that I think you wouldn’t…like I think you’re not…” He shook his head and groaned. “Ah…this is fucking impossible,” he said out loud to himself and chuckled in frustration. “She’s just not ready, yet, ya know? Not for this. So…just…you know…Back Off!”

Dean was really, REALLY hoping that Cas hadn’t heard the tinge of rage he felt saying those last two words. He’d been prepared to deliver either good advice or a solid beat-down, when he’d left the kitchen to find their wayward angel. But all desire to kick Cas’s ass had left when he saw him huddled miserably in the corner of the worst room in the entire bunker. ‘You don’t kick a puppy,’ Dean’s mind had supplied, instantly. ‘You just don’t.’

Cas was staring at him. Squinting.

“What?” Dean asked, seeing the gears turning.

“Back off?” Cas’s confusion was deepening.

“Yeah,” Dean said, somewhat sharply. Puppy or not, he was finding Cas’s refusal to own up to his behavior a little annoying, now. “Back off! Stop tryin’ to get her attention.” He held Cas’s gaze as the angel watched for clues in Dean’s face.

“Dean, I’ve specifically tried to avoid attracting your mother’s attention,” Cas said, frustration creeping into his voice, as well as what Dean thought might be a tinge of panic. “I’ve made a point of only appearing when I could be of service. I don’t understand how I could…” He trailed off, his mouth now twisting into a grimace.

“What do you mean ‘avoiding her’?” Dean’s voice was rising. “You’ve been all over her about a million times since she got here! She can’t turn around without stepping on ya half the damned time!”

“I’ve been down HERE most of the time! How could…she never stepped on me!” Cas snapped.

Dean looked at Cas. Really looked at him. There was something wrong, here, and it was starting to seriously bug him. He still couldn’t put his finger on it, but he was beginning to suspect that he was trying to help Cas deal with something that had nothing to do with the real something that was the actual problem. Then he wondered, absently, if he could say that three times really fast. And then shook himself and refocused.

“Cas, do you like my mom?!” For a moment, he had a very hard time believing it was even possible to fit those words together into a sentence. But, then, there it was.

Cas, squinted again. “Of course! Mary is a remarkable woman. It’s been an honor meeting her.”

“An honor,” Dean repeated.

“Yes!” Cas spat back, annoyed by Dean’s condescension.

“And that’s it? Just ‘an honor’?” Dean was shifting his tone, now, and Cas caught on.

“Wait!” Cas’s eyes went very wide. “I like her, yes, but not…Dean I’m not trying to woo your mother!”
Dean closed his eyes and breathed. He was often taken aback by Cas’s odd, overly precise, sometimes archaic word choices, but ‘woo your mother’ was just...wrong. And Cas’s face was so sincere. Absolutely no hint of irony. The guy made it almost impossible for Dean to not laugh.

With a valiant effort, though, Dean kept his face neutral. And he breathed another sigh. One of relief, this time. He wasn’t gonna have to beat Cas’s ass after all, and that was good news. ‘Cause Dean wasn’t entirely sure how he was gonna make that happen, with Cas at full power. Punching him now would be like punching a slab of granite. Not fun.

“So, what the hell ARE you doing? And what was that crap you pulled in the kitchen?”

The irritation left Cas’s face and voice. “Oh,” he said, quietly.

“Yeah, ‘oh’,” Dean mimicked. “What the hell was that?”

“Dean, I didn’t mean to upset you. Not really. I was trying to…’give you crap.’ (Air quotes.) I’ve been attempting to practice, when I can. Sam’s been giving me pointers.”

“What?” Dean tried to get what his friend just said to jive with the image of the insane scramble to impress his mom he had subjected them all to, before freakishly fleeing. Then the penny dropped.

“No! No, Cas...not that. That’s not what I’m talking about. That was fine,” Dean said, the quickly backtracked. “I mean it wasn’t fine, you dick, and I’m gonna make you pay for that somehow, but...it’s not what I’m talking about.”

A flurry of squints and tilts and tweaks flashed across Cas’s face as he took that all in.

“I’m talkin’ about the flakey shit you did after that. When mom came in and you fell all over yourself trying to impress her and then freakin’ vanished. What the hell was that?”

Cas’s voice was still quiet, but at least he was now on the same page.

“I...wanted her to have breakfast.” He squirmed a little, then reached up and rubbed the back of his neck.

Dean stared at him.

“You are horrible at this. Seriously...freakin’ horrible.”

Cas rolled his eyes and dropped his head back against the concrete wall in frustration.

“I want her to like me, first,” he blurted. “Before…”

“Before what?” Dean asked.

“I just want her to like me…” Cas put his forearms around his knees and pulled them up closer to his chest. It made him look like a 5 yr old who’d been put in the corner for a time out and Dean cracked a small grin.

“Come on, man,” Dean reassured him. “She’s gonna like you. Hell, you’re family, Cas. She’s gonna love you. You gotta stop worrying so much.”

Then Dean quickly added, “You keep doin creepy shit like you did at breakfast and it’s gonna start gettin’ iffy, but...I mean...just be you. She’s gonna like you. Don’t worry.”

“I do worry, Dean. If Mary doesn’t…”
“Don’t...man...come on. It’s gonna be fine. She’ll like you. She does like you. Just...relax. Jeez.”

Cas sighed, exasperated with Dean’s refusal to listen.

“Dean! She doesn’t know everything yet. When you tell her…”

Dean interrupted yet again. “When we tell her, she’s gonna know. And she’ll know everything. I promise. Nobody’s gonna just stroll up to her and say, ‘You know, Mary, there was this one time... Cas blew a gasket and thought he was God’ It’s not gonna be like that, man. She’s gonna hear the whole thing. You’ve gotta just trust us. It’s gonna be fine. Mom’s a hunter. She’s gonna get it.”

“That’s exactly why I’m worried, Dean. She’s a hunter. She’s going to need to know everything.”

“And we’re gonna tell her, but we’ll do it right, ok? The world is NOT ending right now...for once...so just...relax.”
The Big Reveal

Chapter Summary

It’s been two weeks, since Mary dropped back into the world of the living. She has 33 yrs of history to catch up on. The boys begin to sketch her a very big picture...Castiel would give anything for an eraser.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

June 7, 2016

6:55 PM CDT

Sam headed down the hallway to Dean’s room. It was almost 7pm, and he didn’t want to keep either his brother or his mom waiting any longer. They’d agreed that they needed to set up this time get their mom up to speed, and Sam wasn’t gonna give himself or anyone else a chance to chicken out.

He knocked softly on Dean’s open bedroom door to announce himself. Dean turned and nodded at him.

Sam walked over to his brother and handed him a single sheet of notebook paper. Dean, in turn, handed the one he’d been holding to Sam. There were handwritten notes on the pages, and each man looked over his brother’s work. They stood silently for several minutes, just reading.

Their expressions were grim.

Finally, Sam sighed and opened the thin folder he’d been holding. His slipped Dean’s page inside and waited for his brother to finish reading.

Dean pursed his lips and nodded once. “Yeah,” he said, softly. Sam took the page Dean was holding and slipped it into the folder as well.

Sam glanced briefly over his shoulder, toward the door. “You get Cas’s yet?”

“Not yet. He’ll be here in a minute.”

As though by summons, Cas walked through the door and met their gazes. He handed a piece of paper to Sam, without saying a word.

Sam gave him a very small smile and began to look over what Cas had written. After a moment, he shuffled just a bit and spoke.

“I’m gonna leave some of this out for right now, if that’s ok? He looked at Cas for agreement, which the angel readily gave. Sam grabbed his pen and dragged a line through just a few of Cas’s notes, leaving most of them intact. Then he handed the page to Dean, who read it and nodded,
handing it back.

With all three pages now in the folder, Sam took a big breath and let it out. He stood up straight and looked at Dean. There was no joy in the room. Only a heavy sense of resignation.

This was gonna suck.

“We could start this tomorrow morning, instead, you know. We don’t HAVE to do this tonight, if either of you isn’t ready.” Sam said this, glancing from his brother to his friend. They both looked terrible.

“Nah…” Dean said, not wanting any of them to give in to that temptation. “No, that freak show this morning...it’s gonna start happening more.” He looked over at Cas. “It’s ok, man...it’s not just you. We’re all ready to pop. We need to get this over with. Mom needs this, too.” He sighed heavily. “As much as I wish she didn’t.”

They stood silently for a few moments, each waiting for the other to make the first move.

“Ok,” Dean said, still quiet. “Anybody need to do anything before we get started?”

Sam and Cas both shook their heads, before all three moved to leave the bedroom.

“Mom’s in the kitchen already?” Dean asked Cas.

Cas nodded and waited for both Dean and Sam to exit before him. He flipped the switch to turn off the bedroom light.

The three of them walked slowly. Very slowly. Any pep Sam had been feeling recently was entirely gone. Dean looked even more haggard and sleep-deprived. And Cas, well, despair plus grim determination was a trademark expression of his, and at the moment, he was in rare form.

They reached a point just a few steps before the entrance to the kitchen and Dean stopped. He dropped his head and shifted his weight from foot to foot. Sam gave him a moment, before reaching over and putting his arm around him, pulling his brother in for a quick side-hug.

“You gonna be ok?” Sam asked very quietly.

Dean shrugged and looked up at his brother. “Yeah, Sam. I’m good.” He sniffed and dragged his hand over his mouth and chin. Clearing his throat, he stepped forward. Sam left his hand on his brother’s back until they passed through the entrance of the kitchen.

Mary was waiting patiently - stoically - for them to arrive. She looked up to greet them and gave them the biggest smile she could muster, but it quickly faded to a simple grin, when she saw their faces. ‘Oh, boy...’ she thought. ‘Not good.’

“Hey, Mom,” Dean greeted her with a smile, walking to her and giving her a hug and kiss on the cheek. Sam followed Dean and did the same.

Dean headed immediately for the refrigerator, withdrew 4 beers, and returned to the table.

“Do you need anything mom?” Sam asked. “Want me to get you anything?”

Hearing this, Dean set the beers on the table then turned quickly to grab the box of tissues from the far counter. He came back and set them lightly near his mom.

Mary looked at the box and grinned a little. She snorted softly and opened her mouth to make a little
crack about him just assuming she was gonna turn into the stereotypical bawling female. But her boy was close now and when she looked up and saw his face, all humor fled from her mind. He looked absolutely stricken. ‘Oh...this is SO not good,’ she thought.

Sam caught his mom’s eye and gestured that he’d like her to move to sit at the end of the table. She nodded silently and moved to take the seat he offered. Sam then moved a chair to sit at her left.

Dean slid a chair over to sit at her right. After a moment, Dean looked back over his shoulder to find Cas. He was still standing only a few feet into the kitchen, looking at Dean for some type of direction.

‘Come on, Cas,’ Dean thought, looking right at his friend. ‘Don’t freak out now. Keep it together, man.’

Apparently that translated into prayer, because Cas’s face changed a bit and he strode forward to take the last chair and slide it to Dean’s right. He sat and nodded at Dean.

A small smile crept across Dean’s face. ‘Thank you,’ he thought. Cas mustered a tiny grin and nodded again.

“Cas,” Mary said, leaning forward just a bit to look around Dean. Cas had positioned himself to all but disappear behind her son, so when she called his name, he too leaned forward.

“Dean told me that you were feeling a little uncomfortable. I just wanted you to know that I understand. This has been really strange for all of us.” She tried to give him some kind of reassurance with her expression. She really wasn’t sure if she managed it or not.

Half a dozen emotions flickered across Cas’s face, as he listened to her. In the end, he did his best to smile.

“That’s very gracious of you, Mary. Thank you.” He nodded humbly and continued. “Dean explained that my actions recently have been...confusing for those around me. I apologize if I upset you in any way.”

“I did wonder what you were doing, but...I wasn’t upset. It’s fine, Cas. I’m just glad we got it sorted out.”

Cas stared at her for a few long moments, and Mary got the impression that he was grateful but that this was certainly not resolved. There was more. She felt that same pang of hunter instinct that she’d felt when she first met him, but realized now was probably not the time to give voice to it. Maybe what the boys would tell her tonight would explain it. She hoped, at least. Because liking him AND feeling the urge to protect herself and her boys from him at the same time was really starting to wear on her nerves.

“I believe I was letting my own...um…’issues’ (air quotes)...get the better of me. It was selfish, I know.” He hesitated for a moment, and when he continued, his voice seemed almost pleading.

“It’s just that I…” He stopped and swallowed, dropping his gaze and trying to collect himself. “I was hoping for a little longer...just a few more days...before…”

Dean was watching him, throughout. He gave him a moment, but Cas seemed to have stalled. His whole body appeared to shrink a little, as he sat there, staring blankly down at the beer he held in his lap.

“It’s ok, Cas,” Dean said, very gently. He reached over and patted the top of his friend’s shoulder,
giving it a quick, encouraging squeeze, before turning back to his mom.

With a small nod, Cas leaned back into the relative obscurity of his chair. At least he was out of Mary’s direct line of sight. He opened his beer and took a swig.

“I know it’s not gonna be a real treat to walk through all this. Not for any of us,” Dean said, trying to mollify his family...and maybe even himself, too. He looked over at his mother and wished for the millionth time since she’d come back that there was a way to spare her from having to ever know any of what had happened to her husband and her boys. But, at least she wasn’t going to hear ALL of it tonight. That was a small mercy. He took a deep breath and then let it out with a shrug, and cleared his throat.

After a very brief pause, Dean straightened. He rapped the knuckles of one hand sharply on the table and nodded. His demeanor morphed and he now exuded the confidence and resolve of a battle-ready leader, and it instantly shifted the feel of the entire room.

“But we’re here, now,” he continued. “So...let’s just...do this.”

Sam shrugged and shook off some of the tension, readying himself.

Castiel straightened a bit and set his beer on the table. He nodded once to his friend.

‘There you are, John,’ Mary thought, feeling a bitter-sweet pang of deja-vu. She allowed herself a tiny smile for just a moment. ‘I miss you.’ Then, she also cleared her throat and straightened, preparing herself for what was clearly not going to be a pleasant discussion.

Dean looked over at Sam and nodded.

“Ok...so...,” Sam began, rather quietly, letting out another big sigh. “Dean and I talked and we came up with a list of the big stuff. Kinda the main points that we thought you should hear first. We sorta thought an outline would be good. Then you’d have a structure you could start plugging the details into later.” He looked at his mother, trying to gauge her reaction.

Mary looked from him, to Dean then back again and nodded. “Ok...yeah, that...sounds good.”

Sam grabbed the file folder that he’d placed on the table and opened it. He removed two pieces of paper, covered in handwritten notes. Then, without any delays that might give him an opportunity to chicken out...Sam began, giving her a short and heavily edited summary of each of the subjects in his outline:

-Childhood
-Hunting with Dad
-Bobby
-Dean always looking out for Sam (Sam emphasized)
-Sam was brilliant and got into Stanford Law School (Dean emphasized)
-Jess / Jess's death and The Yellow-Eyed Demon
-Dad went missing and the boys teamed back up.
-They found John, but John was killed in a car crash. (All three made sure to not look at each other when this was said.)
-The Yellow-Eyed Demon’s plan for Sam
-Sam's visions, and the other 'special children'.
-Sam was killed.
-Dean saved him with a deal with a demon
“What!” Throughout this incredibly abbreviated version of the boys’ lives, Mary’s face had been showing every imaginable emotion, but now it only showed horror. She was ashen and Sam reached to comfort her.

“Mom,” Sam said, very gently. “It’s…” He almost said ‘it’s ok’ and stopped himself. That would have been absurd. “I know this is hard. I do. I can’t imagine how you must…” Sam stopped again. He felt like the biggest dick in the world for even acting like he could say anything reassuring. But after a moment, he continued. “Let us get this out, ok? I swear we will answer all the questions you have over time, but there’s a lot we need to tell you. Please, let us just give you the main stuff in one go through. Please.”

Mary looked at him. She couldn’t believe she was being asked to just let any of this drop past her without stopping to freak out, or at the very least ask a thousand follow-up questions. This had already been the worst possible version of her boys’ lives that any horror writer could have come up with. And Sam was sitting there, trying to console her because apparently, there was a whole lot more to come. She was beginning to wonder if maybe the boys had been right to keep blowing off her questions for the last two weeks.

She reached over and grabbed Dean’s hand. She’d already held her boys’ hands or touched and reassured them many times as the story unfolded, but her grip was very tight now. Dean looked at her and hoped like hell his face wasn’t showing any of what he was feeling.

Sam continued.

-They tried to find a way to get Dean out of the deal, but they ran out of time.
-(Dean insisted his time in Hell was 4 months. No mention of time differences. Said he couldn’t remember all of it, but some of it was bad. No mention of him breaking, or torturing other souls.)
-Sam tried to help Dean, but couldn’t.
-(Dean insisted they leave out the fact that Sam had found Ruby and the entire story of Sam drinking demon blood. Just that Sam had killed Lilith, before knowing that she was the final seal.)
-The apocalypse was coming, and Dean was supposed to be Michael’s Vessel for the big fight with Lucifer. Heaven sent Castiel to rescue Dean from Hell.
-Cas brought Dean’s body and soul back.

“Cas,” Mary said, leaning forward to look over at him.

Cas had remained completely silent throughout the story. He’d listened intently, trying to ensure that if he had to say anything, he wouldn’t say too much. He knew he had a bad habit of including things that were best left out. It was for this reason, he told himself, that he was hoping - desperately hoping - that Dean and Sam would be the ones to tell her his story. That he wouldn’t have to do it himself.

He looked up at Mary. When he saw the gratitude in her face, he dropped his head back down immediately.

“Thank you,” Mary whispered, tears now streaming freely down her face.

He tried to meet her gaze again, but couldn’t. He simply nodded an acknowledgement and took an enormous swig of his beer...his fifth beer. Cas had had four before he’d even gone to Dean’s room to give them his list, and he was now regretting that he hadn't gone for the hard stuff, instead.

Sam reached back into the folder and removed the third piece of paper, with more handwritten notes, and placed it next to the other two. He kept his focus entirely on the task at hand. He looked like it was the only thing keeping him functional.
Dean wiped the tears off his mom’s cheeks and kissed her forehead. He had gotten up several times already to fetch little things for her, but he rose again now, to grab a full box of tissues and 4 more beers. He thought about grabbing the bottle of whiskey, too, but... they were only halfway through this evening’s portion of the re-telling of the shitstorm that had been their lives. They’d planned to stop for the night at Purgatory, so... couldn’t get drunk yet.

He looked at his mother, as he came back to the table. ‘I hate this,’ he thought, as he sat the beers down in front of each of them. ‘I hate this I hate this I hate this.’

Mary looked at the beer, wiping her nose for the hundredth time, with a couple of tissues from the big box. “I could do with somethin’ stronger, sweetheart,” she said hollowly through sniffles.

“Oh, thank god…” Sam breathed.

Dean was fetching two bottles and three glasses immediately. He opened one bottle, filling each glass nearly half full and moving them in front of his mom, Sam and himself. He opened the second bottle and set it in front of Cas.

Mary’s eyes widened when Cas grabbed the bottle, a little too eagerly, and tipped it back. As he got to the halfway point, Dean chimed in.

“Don’t worry. Angel mojo takes a lot of booze to override. This is just him keepin’ up.” Dean gave her a small smile and grabbed her hand, giving it a squeeze. Then he reached over and took the empty whiskey bottle from Cas and sailed it across the short distance to the trash can. He looked back at his friend, gave him a quick wink and a pop on the shoulder, before downing half his own glass in one gulp. Mary did the same. Sam’s was already gone.

It had already been two and a half hours by the time the boys had explained the bullet points of their history from childhood all the way to Sam’s sacrifice to stop the apocalypse. And that was the heavily abbreviated version.

Mary looked exhausted, but there was no way she was going to take a break until she knew what had happened to Sam. She was absolutely distraught, and Sam spent quite a while holding her to help her through it. It was awful.

Sam tried to console her a little, by telling her that Cas had gotten him out, too, but it only seemed to increase the sobs. Sam just held her. There was nothing else to do.

Dean downed another very large portion of whiskey and made sure to top off the supply for his mom and brother.

This was a nightmare.

‘So much for NOT ripping off the bandage in one go,’ Dean thought. ‘Fuck.’

Mary excused herself to use the restroom, and, presumably, to attempt to pull her shit together. She didn’t hold out a lot of hope for that, but she knew she had to try.

Dean almost followed her, crazy as that was. He instinctively did not want to let her out of his sight.
But Mary put her hand on his shoulder when she saw him begin to rise. She pushed down, giving him a quick peck on the top of his head, and moved toward the door.

But, she stopped just behind Castiel. Without a word, she wrapped her arms gently around his neck and shoulders, giving him a kiss on top of his head. Then she left.

“Shit,” Sam hissed.

Dean and Cas both sat silently. Barely moving at all.

There was nothing any of them could say. They all knew that. No words of consolation. No bright-side to any of this. All they could possibly say to make any of it anything other than The Worst Story Ever Told, was the fact that at least they all went through it together. And wasn’t that just a peachy fucking bonus? We both went to Hell, mom! And Cas was the one that pulled us both out. So we’ve got lots to bond over! Yay, team!

Dean stood and walked over to the liquor cabinet. Again. He pulled out three bottles this time. They were about to tell her how the angels tried to re-boot the apocalypse and he figured Cas was probably gonna need some extra for this part.

When Dean set the two bottles down in front of his friend, the look the guy gave him made him wonder if he’d ever seen anyone so grateful in his life. And Dean saves people from monsters for a living, so…it was a hell of a look.

Cas took one of the bottles and downed it. He didn’t bother having Dean throw it away for him. He just slid it to the side and opened the second one, taking an additional big swig, before slumping even further down into his seat. Dean was fairly sure he couldn’t curl up any smaller without disappearing altogether.

‘Yeah,’ Dean thought. ‘Right there with ya, buddy.’

Sam noticed the additional alcohol and sighed. He knew he wasn’t gonna turn it down, but it occurred to him that they had at least another hour or two before they’d planned to stop, so water and some kind of small snack was gonna be needed. At least, if they didn’t want to end up face down on the table, before the night was over. He wondered, briefly, if that would be any worse than what was currently happening, but then got up to get 4 glasses of water and a big bowl of pretzels. Nobody was gonna eat them, but...what the hell.

Mary was only gone a few minutes. When she returned, she looked like hell, but at least she seemed to have herself under control. She took her seat again and looked at the water and pretzels. With a heavy sigh, she grabbed the water and slugged down the whole glass. Sam refilled it for her and sat back down.

“You shouldn’t show me such gratitude, Mary,” Cas said. His tone was stoney...almost cold.

It came out of nowhere. All three of them looked at him, somewhat shocked, but Cas didn’t meet any of their gazes.

Dean stared at him, completely confused. He opened his mouth to ask what Cas meant, but couldn’t even form the question. He had no idea where that statement was coming from or why Cas had chosen this moment to say it. It seemed completely out of place.

“What?” Sam asked, looking at Cas with the same startled confusion Dean had. “Cas…” He, also, couldn’t form the question.
“You should wait to hear more, before you thank me.” Cas droned. “For anything.” He tipped his bottle up again, taking another hefty swig.

“What’re you…” Dean began, but stopped when his friend looked at him. Cas was ashen. He looked completely hopeless. Devastated.

“Your sons are very good men, Mary. Very kind. Compassionate,” he said, with a small smile as he looked at the two of them. “They have an enormous capacity for forgiveness...and empathy.” He paused, looking absent at the bottle of whiskey he was idly twisting in his hands.

“I fear they’ve been swayed by their better natures, in my case. Perhaps unwisely so, given all that you’re about to hear.”

“Cas…,” Sam began, trying to figure out what in the world the angel was getting at.

“It’s just that I was hoping for a little more time, here, with them,” Cas said, leaning all the way forward, resting his forearms on the table and setting the bottle down. “I do love being here. So very much.”

Dean suddenly realized what Cas was about to say, and it gutted him. He had no idea Cas had been thinking this. Feeling this. Not in these last two weeks, anyway. But now, all the little ‘wth?’ items were dumping out of his mental folder and clicking into place. He began a mad mental scramble to find a way to reel this situation back before it got out of hand, but he wasn’t fast enough.

Cas finally looked up to meet Mary’s gaze and Dean had to swallow a lump in his throat when he saw tears in his friend’s eyes.

“Cas…,” Dean whispered, wishing like hell he’d never gone down to that boiler room. Never pushed his friend to talk. He now realized Cas had been trying to tell him, but he hadn’t been listening.

“Just a little more time, here, before you found out, Mary,” Cas said, very quietly, “that I am the monster you feared I might be.”

Chapter End Notes

Ok, guys...if I did it RIGHT, then this chapter hurt, at least at the end. If I did it WRONG, then it didn’t. I’d really, really, really like to know either way. If you have time, after you read this, please let me know if I managed to bring the feels. I’m still trying to get my feet under me, as a writer, and I could use feedback to know when I’m connecting with the ball, or when it’s a swing and a miss.
(oh, for the love of Chuck...I just used a sports analogy! I’m fairly rattled by that.)

Thanks for reading! I really hope you enjoyed it. Or got your heart broken. Or both.

*******FOLLOW UP********

From the comments I got, it looks like the consensus is that I DID bring the feels! Ding, Ding, Ding! YAAAAAY!
I’m so grateful to all of you who took the time to comment. Thank you so much. It really
does help me to get a baseline for my writing. I can't thank you enough! You all are good sports!
Gildee-mish and Inky-dude

Chapter Summary

Here it is - the scene Cas has desperately needed for at LEAST 3 seasons, now, but never, EVER GETS! AAARRRGGGH!!

So...I wrote it.
Here ya go, Cas! You get your Dean-time, Boo!

{NOTE: It's not porn. Sorry, kids!}

Chapter Notes

Title is derived from a close-ish but erroneous attempt by Dean to remember the names of the two main heroes in the Epic of Gilgamesh: Gilgamesh and Enkidu

If you aren't familiar with The Epic of Gilgamesh, do yourself a favor and set aside a little time to read up on it. You will be blown away by its cultural significance and the staggering influence it has had on writing and story telling down through the ages.

Btw...apparently, Erik Kripke was a fan of Joseph Campbell's 'The Hero's Journey', which focuses heavily on concepts laid out in the Gilgamesh story.

UPDATE: In my desire to make this fic as accurate and realistic as possible (in the SPN world, that's awfully iffy, I know) I managed to spend all my time trying to get the physics right, and never bothered to check the phase of the moon on the 7th of June, 2016. Turns out, it was not even remotely close to full. So, I've gone back and changed what Mary said, before she and Sam go on their walk. For those of you who've already read this fic, I apologize for the screw up. For those of you reading this for the first time...just ignore this. ;-)
Dean sat there, watching him. The tightness in his chest was making it difficult to breathe and he wondered for a moment if he was being given the mercy of a massive heart attack. That hope vanished, though, when he remembered that Cas would save him. Cas would always save him. Always.

He found himself dearly wishing he’d listened more carefully. That he’d understood what his friend had been trying to tell him. He wanted a few more days, now, too. He wanted to give that to him... wanted to protect him, no matter how futile the effort.

Cas didn’t deserve this.

Dean looked back over at the spent and stricken faces of his mother and brother, and shook his head, slowly.

“That’s enough,” he said. His voice hoarse and quiet. He gave his mom’s hand another squeeze and looked at her apologetically.

“We’ll pick this back up tomorrow,” he said looking at her for approval. “I need to…um…” he said, tilting his head slightly back over his shoulder toward Cas.

Mary smiled at him and nodded, squeezing his hand as well.

“You gonna be ok?” he asked.

“Yeah, I am. It’s ok, sweetheart, really. I’ll be fine.”

Dean rose slowly and moved to put his arms around his mom. He held her for a long time.

Sam was watching all of them, wondering how any of them would be able to get out of bed tomorrow, himself included. It was one thing to take each fucked up tragedy at a time, he thought...to let it sink in, tear up the heart and mind and let it do the damage it was gonna do. Because, with a little time, it could be pushed down. It could be made to bend and mold itself into something manageable...or at least ignorable. But recapping each event, one after another...that was different.

Dean pulled away and kissed her forehead. Mary did the same to him. Then she handed him a tissue. Dean smiled and huffed out a quick laugh. He took the tissue and gave her one last quick peck.

Sam rose and reached over the table to give Dean a quick hug. When they pulled away, Dean gestured toward their mom. Sam nodded and grinned at him reassuringly.

Dean nodded at Sam once.

Sam slumped back down into his chair. He slowly took each of the pages and placed them back in the folder, closing it and laying the pen on top with something like relief.

Dean put a hand on Cas’s back and was leaning over, speaking very quietly into his ear.

“You don’t have to get up. Just get us both back to my room.” He reached out and grabbed the half-full whiskey bottle in front of Cas. A moment later, they both disappeared.

Mary flinched at the startling vanishing act, but quickly shook it off. She glanced over at Sam and found him gazing at the spot where his brother and friend had been. He looked exhausted.

“You know...I’m tired. I’m miserable...and my butt hurts from sitting in this...damned wooden chair!” Mary looked down at the kitchen chair with nothing less than contempt, but quickly reeled it
back in.

“But there is no way I’m gonna be able to go to sleep right now, so...how about we go for a walk, Sammy. Just you and me?”

Sam looked at her, wondering if she was serious.

“Why not, right? Clear skies, tons of stars. Its finally cooling off.” She did her best to grin. “Come with me?”

“Sure,” Sam said, slowly rising to follow her out of the kitchen.

“...now that we know you live here and will continue to live here...with us…” he trailed off. “If you wanna talk about it, we’ll talk about it. If you don’t…” he sighed heavily, “...we won’t.” After a short pause, he added, “Not like I’m winning any awards for being a great listener anyway.” He looked up and gave Cas a tiny, very apologetic grin.

Cas looked back at him. He tried to reciprocate, but it just wasn’t happening. He couldn’t even hold Dean’s gaze for long.

“Cas I am so sorry.” Dean said earnestly. There was no hint of humor, now. No attempt to deflect. “I don’t know what the hell I thought I was hearing, but I should’a listened a lot better than I did.”

Cas lowered his head even further.

“Forgive me. Please.” Dean moved closer, standing right in front of him, now.

Cas looked up at him and nodded. He was still leaking tears and Dean couldn’t take it anymore.

“C’mere,” Dean said reaching out and pulling his friend into a tight embrace.

Cas leaned into it fully, almost collapsing into him. Dean wasn’t expecting it and momentarily lost his balance, but regained his footing in time.

They just stood there. Neither gave any hint that he wanted to let go.

After a couple of minutes, Dean broke the silence.

“You ok?” he asked.

Cas had his face pushed into Dean’s shoulder, so Dean couldn’t see his expression. He only saw the small nod.

‘Hard ass,’ Dean thought. ‘You are NOT ok.’
Cas somehow managed to move just a little closer and fisted his hands into the back of Dean’s shirt.

As the minutes passed, Dean began to feel the real weight of the fatigue he’d been trying to ignore. The fact that Cas was leaning rather heavily into him at the moment wasn’t helping, and the two strains were combining to make the muscles in his legs and back tighten. Then cramp.

‘Shit,’ he thought. ‘Nice timing. Old Man.’

As if on cue, Cas moved one of his legs just a little, and Dean felt the weight his friend had placed on him lift entirely. Then, a small amount of his own weight was suddenly being held up by the arms around him. A pulse of grace, barely there, moved through the muscles of his back, shoulders and legs and he felt them relax. Dean smiled.

“You in my head?” he chided gently.

“Sorry,” Cas whispered.

“Eh...it’s alright. I’ll let it slide.” He leaned his head down closer to Cas’s ear. “THIS time.”

Cas snorted.

They were quiet for a while longer, and then Cas spoke.

“I didn’t mean to do that, Dean. I’m sorry. I wanted to be helpful.”

“I never doubted that, Cas.”

“You shouldn’t have to deal with me, too. You mother needs you. So does your brother. You shouldn’t… I’m sorry, Dean.”

Dean sighed.

“You’re supposed to be the rock, right? The one who takes care of everybody else, but you never crack. The big bad angel, come to save the little humans.”

Cas slumped.

Dean grunted with the sudden extra weight. 'Don’t think about him being heavy don’t think about him being heavy…'

Cas shifted and went back to supporting Dean’s weight.

‘Shit’.

“Now who’s being a martyr?” Cas asked, snorting once into his friend’s shirt.

“You’re saying I’m a terrible role model?”

“I am,” Cas agreed. “In this area only. In every other way, you’ve been the best teacher, during my time here, that I could ever have hoped for.”

Dean swallowed and closed his eyes. But only for a moment. He mentally shook it off and kept going.

“See…you say shit like that…and it just makes me an even bigger-headed asshole. You’re not helping yourself at all.”
“You’re not an asshole.”

“Aww…now you’re arguin’ just to argue.” Dean huffed and shook his head. “Me? Not an asshole? That’s just…that’s crazy talk!”

Cas did smile at that. Dean could see his cheek puff out…and he grinned back.

“Look…Cas…this whole hero thing…this ‘I gotta be strong for everybody every single second for the rest of… forever…’ It’s bullshit. All of it. All the hero crap, none of it’s true. Nobody goes through a tenth of the shit we’ve dealt with and doesn’t crack at least once in awhile.” Dean patted Cas’s back just a bit more, trying to drive home the point.

“That one dude you were tellin’ me about…the big bad-ass from back in the day. Gildee-mish or somethin’.”

“Gilgamesh.”

“THAT’s it…yeah…Gilgamesh. Him and his buddy Inky…Inky-dude. What was it again?”

“Enkidu,” Cas said, very helpfully.

“I like Inky-dude better. I’m gonna call him Inky-dude.”

Cas was smiling non-stop, now. Dean was ridiculous.

“Inky-dude. Ok. And Gilgamesh.” Cas nodded his acceptance of this renaming.

“Yeah…can’t come up with a better one for the other guy right now, so…” Dean had started rocking just slightly, side to side. He seemed to be talking to himself almost entirely. Cas knew better.

“So…these guys…they saw some serious shit. I mean, the stuff you described…not that easy, right? But…I can guarantee…the books left out the part where Gilgamesh freaked out and went on a bender…woke up face down in a ditch, wearin’ nothin’ but somebody else’s pants and a tiara.”

Cas huffed out a single laugh.

“And they didn’t talk about how he had to swing by the Nile and rinse off the glitter before he stumbled home, so Inky-dude wouldn’t be pissed about him blowin’ all their money on strippers again.”

“The Nile?”

“Yeah…the river…there. You know…the NILE, Cas! Moses ‘n shit!”

“Dean, the Nile is in Egypt.”

“Yeah.” Dean confirmed.

Cas was suspiciously silent and Dean realized that he’d probably gotten some part of this really wrong, but he couldn’t care less. Because this story was making Cas laugh, and that’s all that mattered, right now.

“I figure he probably got rid of the tiara, there, too.” He made a dramatic motion with one arm, grabbing at his own head and throwing an invisible object into the distance. “And there’s a ton of ways to explain the pants.”
“And you know this how?”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m tellin’ the story...shut up.”

Cas was smiling again.

“Point is...it happens. To all of us. Everybody gets pushed and pushed, and eventually we all crack. Hell, you’ve seen me do it a bunch of times. And you don’t hate me for it or think I’m weak or pathetic, right?” Dean waited for confirmation, and when Cas was silent, he followed up...a little sheepishly. “Cas? Right? You don’t, do you?”

“No! Dean...I’m sorry...I was...no, of course not. I’ve never thought that about you.”

“Right. So...just...don’t let it eat you up. It’ll be fine tomorrow. I guarantee it.”

Cas just re-positioned his hands a bit and stayed quiet.

Dean sighed.

“I’ll talk to mom. I’ll make sure she’s ok with everything. Ok? I got this.”

“You shouldn’t have to. You already have so much to deal with...”

“I fall, you pick me up. You fall, I pick you up. That’s family, Cas. That’s how it works. And I can promise you, it won’t be too much longer before we’re right back here, except it’s me all snot-nosed and gooey, and you’ll be the one telling me a story...but you’ll get all of it right. And that’ll bore me, so instead of laughing I’ll just fall asleep. Then it’ll be morning and I’ll be good again.” He resumed patting his friend’s back.

“Like I said...that’s how it works.” Dean said the last part into Cas’s hair.

He hung on to him for just a few moments longer, and then slowly pulled away. He looked at his friend’s face and grimaced.

“Dude...use your mojo or grab some of those kleenex,” he said, pointing to the box on his desk. “You’re pretty gross.”

Cas grinned again and ‘mojo’ed’ away the goo on his face. And before Dean could get too far away, he reached out quickly and removed the wet stains on his friend’s shirt front. Dean looked down and nodded.

“Awesome.”

He turned abruptly and grabbed his small trash can. Eyeing the area to the left of the door he found a suitable spot and pushed the little can up against the wall, then turned and walked to the head of his bed and looked back. He pursed his lips and nodded.

“Reach into the top drawer and grab the blue box,” he said, pointing at his desk. “And grab the whiskey, too.”

Cas complied. He handed the box to Dean, who was now sitting with his back against the headboard, pillow behind him and legs stretched out in front of him on the bed. Dean patted the spot next to him and pulled the other pillow up to match his. Cas took the hint and sat, mimicking his friend, holding the bottle by the neck and resting it between them.

“Oh...so if you miss a shot, you take a shot,” Dean said, pointing to the whiskey. “Whoever gets the
most chips into the trash can wins, got it?” Dean said this as he opened the box and took out a stack of white poker chips and a stack of blue poker chips. He handed the white ones to Cas and dropped the blue ones into his own lap.

“What do I win?”

“Whaddya mean, ‘What do I win’? Ya cocky fucker! And nothin’... you just win, so...shut up and throw the damned chip.” Dean fiddled with his first chip, waiting for Cas to take his shot. He quickly added, “And no mojo-in’ the chip into the can. Human skills only.”

“That hardly seems fair. You’ve had much more practice with these things.”

Dean looked at him.

“We’re throwing poker chips at a trashcan, Cas. You want a handicap? Throw the chip!”

Cas threw and the chip not only went into the can, but it sailed directly through the center, to land perfectly at the bottom. Dean stared at the can, then turned and squinted suspiciously at Cas.

“You hustlin’ me?”

The night air had done them both some good, so when Sam and Mary walked back into the bunker and heard laughter and periodic shouts coming from Dean’s room, they both grinned.

Sam followed his mom down the curving stairs and toward the hall leading to the bedrooms. Mary stopped just before they entered the hall...far enough away to be sure Dean and Cas wouldn’t hear.

“Just tell me you trust him.” Mary’s eyes were pleading. She spoke as calmly as possible, but she was struggling...trying to hold back the fear, the protectiveness, the urge to grab the angel and hold that silver blade of his to his neck until she knew exactly who he was.

“Yeah, mom...I trust him. With my life. With Dean’s life...and with yours,” Sam said quietly.

Sam still looked very sad, but at least not as bad as he had in the kitchen. It was only a small improvement, but it helped to placate Mary somewhat.

“But he has done some things...I mean, he wouldn’t be so worried if they’d been good.” She looked at Sam for confirmation.

“He’s made mistakes. All three of us have. Big mistakes. But what we were about to get to...that’s the one that’s still messin’ him up. Mom...Cas saved the world. Literally. The whole world. But the only way he could do that was to make a choice. And it was an impossible choice, ya know? Either screw over everything he’d ever known OR screw over everything he’d ever loved. And because he couldn’t make that choice, he tried some hybrid of the two. Tried his damnedest to get it right...and it was just...it wasn’t good.” Sam paused for a moment, seemingly remembering some long forgotten pieces of the story that would only add to the ‘not good’-ness of it. He swallowed and continued.

“But, he may have been right. I really don’t know. I don’t know how or even if he could have done it all differently. Maybe he really couldn’t have. But the point is... he honestly was doing the very
best he could. The whole time...he was trying to do the right thing. And with everything that’s happened...that counts for a lot, ya know? It’s kinda the only thing that counts, really.”

Again, Sam paused, collecting his thoughts. Then he nodded.

“I think after everything that’s happened, he understands, now...he doesn’t have to try to do it alone. He has a family that’ll have his back. I don’t think he’s ever really had that before. Even with all the angels, and Heaven. I think real family is new to him. And he’s learning. A lot. So...yeah...I trust him.”

Mary took a deep breath, still looking at her son, as he dropped that little bomb in her lap.

'Family,' she thought. 'Great.'

She sighed, resigning herself to the fact that this was not a problem that was going to go away. Then she nodded at Sam, with a very small smile.

At that moment, a loud peal of laughter came from Dean’s room and they both looked over toward his door.

“That didn’t go in.”

“It went in.”

“It didn’t. It bounced off the wall. It’s under the cabinet.”

“I don’t see it on the floor, so... I’m countin’ it. Hey! Where you goin’?”

“I’m checking. You cheat.”

“You know...this little competitive streak of yours is not attractive, young man.”

“He and Dean seem close.” Mary said, staring at her son’s door and listening to his joy. Her face was a whirlpool of emotions.

“They are,” Sam said, grinning. He put his hand on his mother’s back and walked with her down the hall, toward her room.

“Bullshit!”

Small pause.

Huge burst of Dean’s laughter, with Cas’s low giggle barely audible under it.

“Oh, god dammit!”

Low rumbling voice. Then another burst of laughter.

“Fuckin’ angels! Gimme that!”

Clink.
“OOOOHHHH!!!!”

Laughter.

Sam stopped at his own room, ran in and grabbed his noise cancelling headphones and gave them to Mary. With a quick explanation how to use them, he gestured over his shoulder.

“They sound like they’re gonna be up for a while. Dean doesn’t know how to be courteous, so...in case you’d actually like to sleep…”

Mary smiled brightly at him, then reached up and gave him a huge hug.

“I love you, baby.” She kissed his cheek, and released him. “Thanks for the walk.”

Sam smiled back.

“I love you, too.”

“Night, Sammy.”

“Night, Mom.”

Chapter End Notes

Ok...so...I'm supposed to be designing the next chapters to get our heroes from where they are - wiped out and gooey - to where they need to be to start the second, main theme of our story. That's what I SHOULD be doing right now.

Instead, I'm jumping ahead quite a few chapters and playing with the physics that will pop up much later on. HazelDomain told me about her science project and it 'made my meat-suit all dewy', so I'm off to nerdville. I've spent all day jumbling my way through what I remember of relativity and quantum entanglement (and let's be honest...shockingly little) to make sure that I don't write something utterly ridiculous. Which...I gotta say...I'm gonna try to do it right, but I can't make any promises. I'll attempt to back it up, though. Bad science is just...BOOO. Like the opening of Independence Day, where there's dust WAFTING across the plaque on the moon. What the fuck is it WAFTING in, huh? It's the moon. There's no WAFTING on the moon. FAIL.

Btw...If any of you is or knows a physicist, please feel free to shoot holes in what I come up with, while understanding that I'm clearly taking liberties, since what I'm gonna have happen is completely un-provable and un-doable, with today's technology. LOL. Just, if I do something blatantly wrong, please tell me, so I don't make a fool of myself and leave it in posted form for all time.

Anyway...I promise I'll try to be good and get the next chapter up very soon. Couple of days, max. In the meantime, I'm gonna go find my copy of 'A Brief History of Time' and try to understand what the hell Imaginary Time is, 'cause I don't remember ever
knowing. And Hawking threw out the 'Imaginary Time should be used in Fiction' challenge a while back and, by Chuck, that cannot go unanswered! I just wish this fic was gonna be porn, 'cause that would make it really fun.

Ugh! Can't believe I've forgotten all this. Like 90% of it. DAMMIT! That was clearly four fucking years of my life well spent!
For relieving tension by focusing the mind on the task at hand, there was nothing quite like sending a few test rounds through literally every firearm in an arsenal the size of the one in the MoL bunker. There were guns of nearly every type, minus the high-end military stuff. A lot of them were antiques or hand crafted one-of-a-kind masterpieces. A few were marked as ‘cursed’ and those, of course, were summarily shuffled into a locked-box with a gigantic note on top that read, ‘Cursed objects. Do not touch. Ever. This Means You, Idiot!’

Mary and Sam had awoken early, as usual, and had spent nearly the entire morning inspecting and firing the weapons. They checked for condition and accuracy, as well as confirming the type or types of ammunition each weapon could handle. It was the last step in Mary’s inventory of the arsenal and she was very grateful to be bringing it all to a close. It was also very satisfying. Something she could do was getting done. It felt like one tiny but significant step toward belonging in this world, again. It felt good.

Sam watched his mom inspect, load, fire, calibrate, disassemble, clean, reassemble and document this massive array of weaponry like a seasoned hunter. Which, he reminded himself, she was. It was so easy to forget that the woman Dean had always spoken of with such softness and affection...whose arms had held him for story time, and whose hands had created the world’s most phenomenal pies EVER...was the same woman standing next to him, ‘puttin’ two in the chest and one in the head’ of the distant target.

Sam completed the final write-up of the last of his half of the guns, and waited patiently for Mary to finish the last one of her’s as well. A few moments later, she closed the inventory ledger and tossed the pencil down on top of it with a dramatic flourish.

“Done!” she declared. She took in a huge breath and let it out, smiling triumphantly.
“We've needed to do this for so long,” Sam said, smiling back, just as pleased to know this was done. “Thanks, Mom. This was...a LOT of work,” he said with a chuckle, looking around at all the cabinets, shelves, pegboards, etc. He grabbed both his gun and hers and moved to place them back in the correct storage spots...which were now all marked with the original MoL item numbers along with tags for a new system, that would work much better for hunters...(i.e. People who would actually USE these weapons, not just archive them. Big difference.)

“Ok…”, Mary said, looking around one more time. “I’m starving and my hands are gross.” She reached to grab her carbon stained cleaning rag, and the bottles of oil and solvent. “So...cleaned up and in the kitchen. Last one there makes the sandwiches.” She said the last words as she chucked the bottles and the rag rapid-fire at her son, and took off at a sprint.

Sam caught each item as it flew at him, out of instinct. The look on his face must have been classic, because Mary was already laughing before she reached the door to the hallway. It only took a second, before Sam caught on to the game, and was out of the door and after her in a flurry of flannel and properly-conditioned hair.

The sound of Mary’s squeals and Sam’s laughter, plus the thudding of their shoes, made an incredible amount of noise in the tile-walled bunker.

For a moment, Cas was alarmed, and instinctively braced himself for a fight, as the activity drew closer. But when Mary and Sam emerged from the North hallway and blew past his position by the map table, he saw the delight in their faces and stopped. Mary was in front and Sam came past half a beat behind her, grabbing furniture or doorway mouldings to help take the turns without having to slow down.

“Hey, Cas!” Mary squealed.

“Hey, Cas!” Sam repeated.

And then they vanished down the opposite hallway, the sound of their running and scuffling still booming through the big room.

Cas stood there, the book he was reading still in his hand. He didn’t respond. Instead he watched this new phenomenon with great interest, wondering if this was a game he was going to need to learn. He hoped not. It looked like something that had a great potential for generating chaos and that never seemed to work out well. Somehow, he always managed to get it just wrong enough for someone to end up either really hurt or really pissed at him.

He went back to his reading.

Moments later, the ruckus escalated to a series of loud shouts and screams, accompanied by enormous amounts of laughter and then just the sound of Sam mumbling to himself in disgust. Sam’s head popped back around the corner of the entrance to the war room.

“Hey...where’s Dean?”

Cas looked up at him and was about to answer, but stopped.
“Why are you wet?”

“Yeah,” Sam said stepping around the corner so he could show Cas the full extent of the damage. His hair was dry on one side and completely soaked on the other. Water was still dripping off of him, saturating one shoulder or falling to the floor.

“Don’t stand next to my mom when she’s racing to get cleaned up first.” He dragged his hand through his hair, then shook it to get rid of more water. “She even wiped a bunch of handsoap on my shirt.” He looked down in mild disgust and shook his head.

“Anything to win. She’s worse than Dean.” He continued to try to wipe the water away from his face. “I didn’t think that was possible.”

“Would you like me to clean you?” Cas asked.

Sam almost said, ‘No’, but then thought about the fact that he had lost the race and was now duty bound to start slinging sandwiches. It might do to be really, properly clean. And fairly quickly, too. He’d seen what Dean could be like when he’s overly hungry. Not pretty. He didn’t really want to find out if his mom’s personality would deteriorate in the same way.

“Sure,” Sam said, walking over to his friend. Cas set the book down and reached up to touch Sam’s forehead. Instantly, Sam was clean and dry.

“Thanks, man.” Sam grinned at him. It still surprised him just how incredibly handy it was to have Cas around.

“Of course, Sam,” Cas said, with a small grin. He turned to reach for his book.

Without warning, Cas grimaced, jerked his shoulders and arched his back.

“Whoa!” Sam nearly yelled, reaching out to steady him.

Cas recovered very quickly, but it was clear that he was in at least some pain. He started rolling his shoulders, like he was trying to work out a kink in the joints.

“What happened?!?” Sam asked. “Is it the same thing with your wings again? I mean...that didn’t look like just a pulled muscle.” He kept his hand on his friend’s arm, just in case.

Cas looked at Sam. His face showed he was still hurting, but there was also confusion.

“I’m not certain. This has been happening occasionally, but...it’s never been this acute.” He said this as he continued to move his shoulders and try to stretch his upper back.

Sam moved around behind him and began pressing along his spine. He stopped and patted Cas’s shoulder.

“Take the coat and jacket off,” Sam said, and moved to help Cas get them off without making him move his shoulders too much. He then continued to press, searching for ropey muscles or sore spots.

Cas paid close attention to the sensation. It felt strange...as though Sam were pressing very close to the source of the pain, and yet missing it altogether. No matter how closely spaced the presses. He indicated when Sam got near the right spot, but... it didn’t seem to help.

“Wait,” Cas said abruptly, motioning for Sam to stop. “Give me a moment.”

Sam pulled his hands a few inches away and waited, watching Cas very closely.
Cas held perfectly still and closed his eyes, concentrating.

Sam was about to ask if he was ok, when he saw two faint lines of blue light radiate through Cas’s shirt, one on either side of his spine near his shoulder blades. It startled him and he stepped back half a pace.

“Uh...Cas?” Sam asked, quietly.

Another few seconds passed, before Cas turned. He was looking past Sam, rather than at him, as if deep in thought.

“It’s my wings,” he said. “They shouldn’t...that shouldn’t happen. I don’t understand.”

“What shouldn’t happen?” Sam asked.

Cas finally looked at him.

“It’s...a bit hard to explain, but...my wings shouldn’t be affected by stimuli in the physical plane. At least, not when they aren’t in corporeal form.”

“Wait...what?”

“Hey…” Dean’s voice interrupted. He was walking toward them both, still in the sweats and t-shirt he’d slept in. He’d clearly just woken up.

“What’s goin on. What about your wings?” he asked, with a yawn. He rubbed one hand into one eye and grunted.

“You just woke up?” Sam asked, surprised enough by this revelation to momentarily forget about Cas. “Dude, it’s eleven!”

Dean cracked his neck with satisfying pops and moaned.

“Ah, yeah…” he sighed. Then he looked at Sam, like he’d just figured out what his brother had said. “Eleven?!”

“Uh...yeah,” Sam said, somewhat sarcastically.

“Guess I needed it,” Dean shrugged, then turned his attention back to Cas, who’d begun to grimace again.

“What’s up? What’s goin’ on?” Dean looked much more awake, now. “Your wings are hurtin’?”

“It's not quite that simple,” Cas replied. He said nothing more, but he looked very worried.

“Ok...come on, Cas...use your words. Tell us like we don’t know anything about wings,” Dean said, leaning back against the map table, as he looked at him. “‘Cause we don’t…ya know... know anything about wings. So...what? What’s up?”

Cas looked back and forth between the two of them. He wasn’t sure where to begin, so he just jumped in.

“A vessel can feel pain. Pain is physical...a relaying of information over a neural network. But my true form doesn’t feel ‘pain’...not the way my vessel can. The equivalent is an interruption or disruption of the core harmonic...the main wavelength of...the central aspect of…” He stopped and clicked his tongue in frustration. “I don’t know how to explain this.”
“It’s ok, Cas,” Sam said. “I think I might understand a little bit so far.”

Dean stared at his brother. No way was he getting this.

“You’re saying that your true form has like one main wavelength? One that's a whole lot stronger than any others?”

Cas’s face twisted a bit.

“It’s not a single wavelength. It’s more a series of thousands of individual wavelengths that move together in unison, but are only cohesive because they work together to… ah…” He stopped, searching for the right words.

“Like in music. Large-scale choral music, specifically. There’s a central melody, around which multiple harmonies work to bolster and support. Often, these harmonies work together to make a richer, stronger sound. At times, though, the composer can use them to clash and work to reverse the fullness of the overall sound.”

“Wait...music is just an example, right? An analogy?” Sam asked.

“Yes...except the set of wavelengths that form the core of my being always work together to make the ‘sound’ stronger.”

“Are you talking about...like...constructive and destructive interference?” Sam wrinkled his brow, hoping he wasn’t completely off base.

Cas’s face perked up.

“Yes! That’s actually a very apt analogy. Much more concise.”

Dean rolled his eyes. ‘Figures.’

“A multi-dimensional wavelength has a far more complex structure than a physical pressure wave or even an electromagnetic wave, but the principles of interference are exactly the same.”

“Sure, sure...that makes sense,” Dean said, nodding his agreement.

Cas looked at him with a spark of hope...which quickly died when he saw Dean’s smirk. He set his jaw and narrowed his eyes at him, then looked back at Sam and continued.

“When my vessel feels pain, it is localized to the vessel. It has little impact on my true form. It’s still quite unpleasant, but it isn’t debilitating, because it isn’t experienced beyond the vessel.”

Dean sighed loudly and shifted his weight from side to side, crossing his arms over his chest.

Cas made a point of ignoring him.

“And the reverse is true. My vessel does not experience a disruption or interruption...a destructive interference of my true form. An angel blade is one of the few things that can override that separation, causing both pain in the vessel and destructive interference in my true form. The result being a combination of sensations that is...excruciating.”

“Huh,” Dean grunted. Once again, he nodded.

Sam gave his brother a caustic look.
“Stop bein’ a dick, Dean.”

Dean feigned innocence, holding his hands up and then motioning for them to continue. He re-crossed his arms and cleared his throat.

Cas refused to look at his friend, but his own face was growing darker by the second. With a great effort, he continued, focusing his attention entirely on Sam.

“My true form can only experience pain in the corporeal sense when all or part is present in the physical plane. Therefore, my wings would only sense pain if they were physically manifested.”

“Only if we could see them or touch them, right? In this reality?” Sam clarified.

“That’s right,” Cas nodded. “But my wings should never experience physical pain when they are not manifested in this plane. The physical/Earthly plane.”

Dean sighed again.

“Do you have something to say?” Cas asked, turning to glare at Dean, his voice uncharacteristically loud.

“Yeah...DO. YOUR. WINGS. HURT?”

Every part of Castiel clenched.

“My apologies, Dean. If this is boring you, I’m sure we could find a set of blocks for you to play with.”

Dean blinked.

“Ok...that was just mean.”

“Knock it off...both of you.” Sam warned. “Cas...lemme make sure I got this... Your wings are feeling physical pain but that shouldn’t be possible right now, ’cause they’re not in the physical realm? Not manifested?”

“Yes, that's right, Sam.”

“So…” Dean began, “what you’re saying is…”

Cas knew what was coming and preemptively gave Dean a stare that could freeze the entirety of Hell.

“...your wings hurt?”

Mary heard them coming long before they entered the kitchen. The bickering was fast and furious, and she almost expected to hear foot stomping and someone bursting into tears. Instead she saw Sam walk into the kitchen, looking as long-suffering as anyone she’d ever seen. Following him was the source of the uproar: her eldest son and his actual guardian angel.
She sighed. 'Yeah, this is normal. Wow.'

"Why not?! Why can’t you just say your wings hurt?! Why do I have to listen to twenty minutes of Professor Cas at the Nerdapalooza before you answer the damn question?!"

"Oooookaaaay…” Mary began, putting the last of the plates of sandwiches on the table. “That’s enough, guys.”

“You know, you’re right, Dean. Why introduce nuance when a bumper sticker will do? Unless, of course, it’s ESSENTIAL to understanding the reality of the problem!”

“Essential. Right. Your wings hurt, Cas! That’s essentially IT!”

"HEY! HEY!” Mary shouted, clapping her hands together loudly. “That’s enough! I’m tired and hungry, so sit down, shut up and eat.” She pulled out a chair and sat. “Cas, you too. I made you some coffee. Sit!”

“I was supposed to make the sandwiches,” Sam said, sheepishly.

Mary didn’t miss a beat.

“Got tired of waitin’ on ya.”

‘Yep,’ Sam thought. ‘Just like Dean. Lots more productive and much cooler, but pretty much the same, when overly hungry. Good to know.’

They ate in silence for several minutes. Cas threw a scathing look at Dean, who returned it with the world's most sarcastic smile.

“What ever happened to guys wrestling it out, huh?” Mary asked as she re-stacked her slightly skewed sandwich, before the next bite. “You’d both be much happier if you’d just spend 10 minutes knocking each other around. I’ve seen it. Works wonders, I swear.”

Sam looked at his mother, a little taken aback by that suggestion. Not that it didn’t make sense, but it’s not everyday you hear someone’s mother give her permission to someone else to physically beat the hell out of her kid. ‘Hunters’, he thought. ‘Maybe we really are all insane.’

“Nah…that woulda worked when he was low power, but… Right now, it’d just be like wrestling a grizzly made outta lead,” Dean said, once again through a mouthful of food.

“You feel your punch land and sink in just a little, but it KILLS your hand. Doesn't even make him blink, though, so...no sport in it for him, and if you’re the one fightin' him, you just get your ass handed to ya.”

“Yeah,” Sam chimed in. “The last wrestling match we had started out fun, but…”

“I had to call it off. Would'a ended in tears. Again,” Dean said smirking at Sam.

Sam’s expression was stoney. “That was only once. And only 'cause it really...REALLY freakin' hurt,” he finished, chuckling and wincing from the memory.

Cas froze. He was trying to keep his composure, but it was getting harder and harder as he listened to this retelling of his ominous-sounding abilities. He flicked more than one glance at Mary out of the corner of his eye.

Mary was only able to very thinly veil a mixture of anger and suspicion. Her eyes moved to Cas
more than once, and each time, her stare became longer and a little more intense.

Sam saw this...finally.

“Wow...so...” Sam said, loudly and awkwardly.

Dean looked at him.

“...yeah...this must make it sound like Cas is real scary, huh?” Sam was trying to be lighthearted, but it wasn’t helping much. It did make Dean realize what had just happened and he clammed up immediately.

Dean looked at Mary. He saw the way she was eyeing Cas and immediately started to divert the conversation elsewhere.

“Yeah...that’s probably enough of that...so...”

Before Dean could come up with the next word of that sentence, Cas flinched hard. He grunted once, clearly in pain...and then disappeared.

“Shit!” Dean hissed.

Sam closed his eyes and sighed. How could they have been that stupid. ‘After last night?’ he thought. ‘Tell mom a story about Cas, the Unstoppable Force of Destruction? Brilliant! Just freakin’ brilliant!’

Before the proper self-flagellation could begin, though, Sam’s phone buzzed. He pulled his phone from his pocket and checked the caller ID.

It was Cas.

Sam quickly accepted the call and put it on speaker.

“Cas?” he asked.

“Yeah, it’s me. I’m...I’m outside.”

“What?”

“Outside?” Dean asked. “How ‘r you...”

“Please...can you open the door? I don’t have my key.”

“How’re you outside?” Sam asked as he rose from the table. Dean and Mary followed suit and all three began moving toward the front of the bunker.

“How’d you get past the warding?” Dean’s voice was getting louder and more intense.

“I...I don’t know. I didn’t even mean...please, just...let me in.” He sounded upset, and Sam picked up his pace to reach the front door.

“Yeah, I’m comin’, Cas,” Sam said, as he trotted through the war room. Dean was right behind him, followed by Mary at a much slower pace.

Sam reached the top of the stairs very quickly and pulled open the door. Cas was standing right outside, clutching his phone to his ear. He met Sam’s eyes and just stared at him for a moment.
Eventually, he opened his mouth to try to speak, but he looked like he couldn’t figure out what to say first, as a flurry of thoughts blurred his mind.

“Cas?” Sam asked.

When Cas still didn’t answer, Sam reached forward to grab the sleeve of his coat and gently tugged him through the door. Cas allowed himself to be steered for a few steps, but quickly regained some of his composure. He descended the outer set of stairs and stopped at the war room landing, looking down at Dean and Mary.

“Cas?” Dean asked. “What the hell happened?”

Cas shook his head, just barely.

“Something that shouldn’t have,” he said, quietly. “Something impossible.”
Chapter Summary

A little hint of what Cas endured during his time with Lucifer.
“He mostly just leaves me alone,” was a true statement.
‘Mostly’...that was the operative word.
*sigh*

Chapter Notes

This is a short chapter. Sorry, folks. It just seemed like the best place to stop for a second and let all the Winchesters catch their breath.

Barring a freak accident or natural disaster, I’ll have another chapter out there for ya by no later than tomorrow night (very late night, as usual.) So...I won’t make you wait long.

:-)

June 8, 2016

11:05 AM CDT

“I need everything we have on angels,” Cas said, striding quickly past all of them, and blowing through the shelves of books closest to the door of the library like a minor tornado.

Dean was right on his heels, still trying to piece together what had just happened.

“Hold on,” Dean began, but Cas cut him off by shoving a heavy stack of books into his unsuspecting arms.

“And everything on summoning, compelling, teleportation, location shifting,” Cas was nearly yelling to anyone who’d listen. He’d already gathered another very large stack in his own arms and was heading to the first library table to set them down.

“Also everything we have on spellwork, regarding the movement of an object.”

“Cas!” Sam barked, stepping into the library and thumping his hand down on top of the stack of books Cas had just placed on the table. “Stop!”

Cas halted and looked up at him. He stammered just a bit, but then caught himself. With effort, he managed to slow down.

“Tell us what’s going on. What just happened? Where’d you go?” Sam asked, trying to keep his
voice calm.

“I don’t...I don’t know. What happened, I mean...I don’t know what happened. I do know where I went,” Cas said very quickly.

“Ok...slow down,” Dean said, as he set his stack of books down on the table, next to Cas’s. He opened his mouth to continue, but quickly turned and sneezed, instead. He looked back, but turned and sneezed again.

“Ok...where did you go?” Sam jumped in while his brother tried to recover.

“New Mexico. The mountains just West of White Sands,” Cas said. “They were waiting for me;” he added, mumbling to himself.

“Who?” Dean asked, and immediately sneezed again. “Ahhh, man...we gotta dust.”

Cas finally noticed the sneezing. He waved his hand briskly in the air, swiped it over the stacks of books and the table, and then reached to heal Dean. He moved his arm a bit too quickly, though, and ended up thumping him on the forehead, instead. He looked at his healed, but slightly stunned friend and winced an apology.

“The angels. The ones that…” Cas caught himself and stopped.

Sam and Dean looked quickly at each other. They knew from past experience that if Cas was hiding something, it was definitely not going to be something good.

“The ones that what?” Dean all but demanded. He leaned over a bit, trying to force Cas to look at him.

“There was...an incident,” Cas began, only briefly looking at Dean, before averting his eyes again. “When Lucifer was in control of my vessel.”

“Lucifer?” Mary asked, not hiding her concern.

All three of them turned to look at her. She was leaning against the end of the map table, watching them as they talked this through. She did not look happy.

“Um...yeah...Mom, there’s...there’s still a lot we need to tell you,” Sam stammered.

“Just...roll with us on this one, Mom. I’ll fill you in, in a minute, I promise.” He turned his attention back to Cas. “What incident?”

Cas had leaned forward, placing both hands on the table top. He was looking down at the stacks of books, now. He opened his mouth to speak, but, again, stopped.

“Cas!”

“It was punishment!” Cas nearly shouted. He still wouldn’t look at Dean, but lowering his voice, he continued. “A public, formal punishment. Lucifer agreed to it, presumably to...bolster his popularity with the rank and file. I don’t know, exactly. He didn’t let me in on the plan until I was already strapped…” Pause. “...until it was too late for me to...do anything.”

Dean stopped himself from asking the follow-up question, mostly out of fear that Cas might actually tell him what they did to him. He was pretty sure he didn’t want to know. But, this wasn’t just a chance to let his friend talk it out. This was something related to Cas getting yanked to New Mexico
5 minutes ago. So…

“What happened,” Dean asked, quietly.

Cas paused, collecting himself. After a few moments, he began.

“Lucifer waited until they had my vessel bound before he retreated. He summoned me forward and
the angels that were administering the punishment...those five angels I saw just now, they were the
ones…” Cas paused again. He closed his eyes. “They took them all...all of my feathers. Both wings.”

When Dean realized he wasn’t going to continue, he pressed.

“Cas...I know this will sound really stupid,” Dean began, trying to be as respectful as he possibly
could. “Bear with me, ok? What does that mean? Is it like...really not cool to not have your feathers?
Or does it cause some sort of other problem? Like...you can’t fly without them, right?”

Cas looked over at Dean. A range of emotions flickered across his face, but when he realized Dean
honestly had no idea what he was saying, his face showed only sadness...and then resignation.

“It’s humiliating, yes. Of course it is. Like being publicly stripped and shaved, for a human, I
suppose. But they didn’t just ‘shave’ or ‘clip’ my feathers off. They pulled…” He paused again, but
only for a moment. “They pulled them out...one at a time. And the ones they couldn’t just rip...the
ones with roots attached too firmly to the bone, they c’…” He stopped and cleared his throat. “They
cut them out.”

Cas’s voice changed. It became very quiet...like he was no longer talking to anyone but himself.

“They all watched,” he barely said. “I begged them...and they just watched. All of them.” He turned
to meet Dean’s eyes.

“There were hundreds of them. And not one…” Cas suddenly looked very, very tired.

‘Dammit!’ Dean thought. ‘Brothers and sisters, my ass!’

Dean had enough experience with begging for mercy and getting none to know that there was little
he could say to Cas right now that would be in any way helpful. The best thing he could possibly do
for his friend was to not let the moment or the thought pattern linger. So, he just put his hand on
Cas’s shoulder and gave him a second to recover, before diving back into the issue at hand.

“So…” he said, with a heavy sigh. “We’ve got 5 dick angels prowling around New Mexico. And for
some reason, they decided to summon you to them? What...they didn’t have enough fun last time?
Back for round two?” Dean didn’t bother trying to hide the fury in his voice.

“Honestly, I have no idea why they did it. But that doesn’t matter as much as how they did it. Dean,
Sam...I’ve never experienced anything like what just happened. I...didn’t even know it was possible.
If you’d asked me an hour ago…” Cas stopped, slowly shaking his head in confusion.

“Ok...so...what was different?” Sam asked, pulling out one of the chairs at the table and trying to set
the tone of the conversation to ‘let’s analyze the problem’. He knew this was where Cas would be at
his best. If he could get his friend to come along with him and stay with him...

“It wasn’t a summoning spell?” Sam pulled the first book off the top of the stack closest to him,
opened it up and looked from it to Cas, waiting for more information.
Cas snapped back into the moment.

“No...not summoning, not any type of compelling or even...attracting force…” Cas rattled off this list quickly, trying to anticipate Sam’s next questions. “Nor was it some type of...banishing or...reverse banishing, even if there were such a thing…which there isn’t…”

Cas paused for a moment, and reached for one of the books, as well, beginning to scan the table of contents.

Dean watched the two of them for a brief time, trying to absorb this quick reset of the conversation. He almost spoke, but then noticed Sam’s hand twitching unnaturally, as it rested atop the book.

As soon as Sam realized he had Dean’s attention, he quickly signed ‘MOM’, and watched for Dean’s reaction.

Yep, he caught it.

“Right,” Dean said, clapping his hands together once. “So...research. We’re not gankin’ anything? Not yet, anyway?”

“No...not ganking anything yet,” Cas confirmed in a mumble. He was already fully absorbed in the book he’d begun to peruse for information.

“Awesome.” Dean looked over at his mom and began to move toward her.

“But…” Cas added, a bit louder. “We may not be ganking anything anyway. At least not while these angels are in their present vessels.”

Dean halted mid-stride. He turned on his heel to face Cas...the hope of walking away from this without hearing any more horrible addendums quickly fading.

“These angels may have anticipated your helping me...you and Sam. Whatever they have planned for me, they seem to have done their research on the two of you as well. If I’m right about this...they may have identified the fact that the two of you show remarkable empathy for the human vessels of supernatural creatures. I believe that’s why they’ve chosen these particular humans to be their vessels.”

Nobody wanted to ask. Cas didn’t make them.

“A man, a woman, and three children, ranging in age from approximately 8 to 14 yrs...obviously related, from their resemblance to one another. If we kill them, we’ll be wiping out an entire family.”
Cas Blew a Gasket and Thought He Was God

Chapter Summary

Dean Winchester had a way with words. It was one of his most endearing qualities. But timing was rarely on his side, when really important and sensitive things were being discussed. This occasion was no different.

Essentially, he did exactly what he told Cas nobody would do...he gave Mary an incomplete version of the story:
"Cas blew a gasket and thought he was God."

But he had a good excuse for not finishing, this time - Cas was in trouble.

Chapter Notes

I really did want to avoid doing any full re-tellings of what happened in any of the given seasons, since all of you are already fans of the show and don't need it. But, in this instance, it seemed very weird to have cut this conversation between Dean and his mom short or to talk about it from a distance. I hope you guys don't mind. I also hope I did the story justice. It was a whirlwind...a big, crazy, omnipotent and scary as hell whirlwind. I think Mary got the picture a little too well.

June 8, 2016

11:18 AM CDT

The inner door of the garage swung open with a ‘whoosh,’ as the negative pressure pulled a gust of air from the hallway into the enormous room. Dean held it open for his mom. She entered, still wondering why they'd come all the way up here to talk.

“Just a sec,” Dean said, and moved quickly to turn on the boombox on his tool chest. He turned it down a bit, but left it high enough to somewhat match their voices. He looked back at his mom and took a very deep breath.

“Dean, really,” Mary began. “What the hell is going on? Why are we up here?”

“It’s far enough away, and with the radio on…” Dean sighed. “Cas can’t hear us, this way.”

Mary’s eyes grew wide and her mouth fell open. Before she could say anything, Dean cut her off.

“He can’t help it, mom. He’s like a damned...BAT! I forget sometimes, and…” He stopped, frustrated and struggling to figure out how to start telling his mom all she needed to know to understand what they might be facing.
“The point is, he's not trying to listen in, ok? He’s not. But he’s got a lot goin on down there and I don’t want him to have to hear me tell you the whole list of his greatest screw-ups.” Dean was trying to keep his voice calm, but...he wasn’t entirely succeeding.

Mary sighed heavily. She crossed her arms and dropped her gaze to the floor. Slowly rocking from side to side, she collected herself, and then looked back up at her son. Her gaze was direct.

“Ok,” she began. “Tell me.”

Dean opened his mouth to begin, but she cut him off.

“And how about we start with whatever’s got him so scared of me, huh? Whatever he doesn’t want me to find out about? That’d be a great place to start.” Her voice was growing increasingly irritated.

‘This is it,’ Dean thought. ‘Last chance to tell her or this all goes South. Don’t screw this up.’ He slumped a bit, putting out his hand to lean slightly against the roof of the Impala.

“Cas pulled Sam out of the Cage. That’s where we left off.”

Mary nodded.

“Well, he didn’t know it at the time, but he did it...wrong.” Dean said, and rubbed his hand down his face. “He got Sam’s body out, but he missed his soul.”

Mary stopped swaying, and just stared at Dean. He continued.

“Sam was out. Cas placed him right outside the house where I was living with a former girlfriend of mine and her son. Sam made me promise that once he was gone, I’d try to get out of the hunting life and be happy.” Dean sighed, again. “Cas didn’t know that and he thought Sam would go knock on the door, right? Let me know he was alive and safe and it was all ok. But he didn’t. Sam just walked away.”

“What?” Mary blurted. “Why?!”

“He didn’t have a soul, mom. He didn’t have a...conscience. He saw me living with a family and figured he’d hunt better on his own. Everything he did from that point was totally robotic...no empathy. It was scary as hell. And Cas had no idea he didn’t have his soul and was just completely confused by all of it.” Dean turned and leaned his back against the car, now.

“Right as Cas was gonna try to figure this all out, the Archangel Raphael decided he wanted the apocalypse to happen after all, and tried to re-start the whole thing. The exact thing Sam and Cas and Bobby and I had done EVERYTHING to prevent. And he could do it. Archangels are totally powerful enough to do it. It was gonna happen.”

“Ok…” Mary said slowly.

“Cas started a civil war in heaven. He tried everything he could to stop Raphael...but it wasn’t enough. He needed a LOT more juice.” Dean shook his head and reached up to rub his eyes.

“He was gonna lose, mom...and the whole world was gonna die. All of us. All of creation.”

Mary had uncrossed her arms and was now leaning against the car, as well, facing Dean.

“He made an alliance with Crowley,” Dean said with obvious disgust at speaking the name. “The King of Hell. They worked together to try to find an opening to Purgatory.”
Mary’s face was contorted. She had only a vague understanding of what he was saying, but it sounded absolutely insane.

“Why would…”

“He needed the souls,” Dean blurted, before she could finish her question. He had to get this out. Quickly.

“Souls are powerhouses...huge balls of energy, I guess. And if Cas could get access to the souls stored up in Purgatory, he could be powerful enough to destroy Raphael and keep the apocalypse from happening. Again. But he needed Crowley’s help, ‘cause he couldn’t find it himself.”

“I’m assuming God was still AWOL in all of this?” Mary asked, a little more quietly.

“Oh, yeah. Cas had nobody. No help, no...nothing. Just flyin’ by the seat of his pants and hoping like hell he wasn’t gonna screw it all up worse.”

Dean paused, hoping he wasn’t making this more confusing. When he looked at Mary, she seemed to be following, so he continued.

"It was almost a year before Sam showed up and let me know he was back. Turns out he'd been huntin' the whole time and caught a case that directly involved me, so he figured he'd make an appearance.” Dean paused briefly, then crossed his arms and continued.

“It didn't take long for me to figure out that something was seriously wrong with Sam, and I called Cas to ask for his help. Cas realized Sam was missing his soul, but he had no way of getting Sam’s soul out of the Cage. It was a miracle he’d gotten any part of Sam outta there at all. But...eventually, I figured out a way to get Sammy’s soul back.”

“You did,” Mary asked somewhat incredulously.

“Yeah...I...uh...I asked Death. And he did it. He got Sam’s soul and put it back in.”

Mary opened her mouth, but only weird little clicking noises came out. Her face had twisted into at least half a dozen contortions while she tried to process what Dean had just said. In the end, she closed her eyes, shook her head a couple of times to clear it, and said,

“Ok...you got Sam’s soul back. You and...Death.” She cleared her throat. “Ok...continue…”

Dean looked at her for a moment. He was fairly sure she was not at all ok with any of this so far, but he didn’t know what he could possibly do about that. She seemed to still be standing, breathing...blinking occasionally. Those were all good signs. So he did as she said. He continued. Tentatively.

“Uh...yeah. So...Sammy and me...we were back in the game. Back to hunting.” He stopped and backtracked. “Once Sam was back, I couldn’t just stay away from it. Eventually, Lisa and I...we split up.”

Mary nodded sympathetically. She needed no further explanation. Dean was grateful for that.

“We found out Cas had been lying to us. He WAS working with Crowley. He’d been denying it all this time, ‘cause he knew we’d go sideways on him if we found out he’d made a deal with that scumbag. And he was right. We jumped all over him for it, and when he kept saying he had to go through with this whole deal with Purgatory, I told him I was gonna stop him.”
“Cas knew me. And Sam. He knew we might actually be able to do it. That we were a real threat to the plan. And he really believed this Purgatory thing was his only chance to save the world. Again,” Dean emphasized. “And maybe he was right. We really don’t know. It may have been the only way to do it.”

Mary was listening carefully. Dean was putting a whole lot of emphasis on Cas having to do things and thinking it was the right thing...and this was all making her extremely nervous. She didn’t know what was coming, but with all this sympathizing, it sounded like it was gonna be something downright awful.

She braced herself. ‘Here it comes,’ she thought and silently groaned.

“Sam and I got close to stopping him. Really close.” Dean swallowed and dropped his gaze away from his mom for the first time in all of this.

“Cas hurt Sam. Put him out of commission. To stop us from stopping him.”

Mary clenched.

“Hurt him how?” Her voice had lost all softness.

Dean took a moment to compose himself again, before continuing.

“The soul thing...there was a...problem. And there was a kind of ‘fix’ in place to keep Sam okay... Cas pulled away that ‘fix’. It was the only way he could think to keep us off of him until he could complete the plan. And it worked. We stopped. For a while.”

Mary looked pissed. There was little nuance there, and Dean realized all the prep and explanation in the world wasn’t gonna take away a mother’s instinctive and extremely hostile reaction to hearing that someone hurt her kid. He didn’t blame her. He’d have killed somebody for doing that to Ben. Hell, he probably would have killed Cas if he’d made it to that laboratory in time.

“We almost stopped him. We didn’t make it in time, though, and Cas...he got the souls. Soaked them up into himself...somehow. And he took out Raphael. So, he did stop the apocalypse.”

Dean cleared his throat and looked very sheepishly at his mom.

Mary didn’t know his looks extremely well, yet, but this particular look was one she recognized. It was the, ‘Mommy, don’t be mad at me’ look...unchanged after 33 yrs. She audibly groaned this time.

“The souls and the...other things that were in Purgatory...they, uh...they messed Cas up. Messed up his head.”

They stared at each other for a few moments.

“He thought he was God, mom. Cas thought he was God. And he killed a bunch of people and then killed a whole lot of angels that fought on Raphael’s side in the civil war.”

Mary wasn’t sure what she thought her son was going to tell her...but ‘Cas ate a bunch of souls and thought he was God’ was not even close to being in the same ZIP Code as the list of possibilities her mind had come up with.

“What?!” Mary made no attempt to hide anything, now. Her mouth was hanging open and she was staring at Dean in sheer horror.
“Mom...I know...I know it sounds…”

Mary cut him off.

“It sounds fucking terrifying! What the hell, Dean?!”

“Mom...please...I know it’s…”

“Jesus Christ!”

“Mom…”

“DEAN!” Sam’s voice boomed from the bottom of the staircase, leading to the garage. It sounded urgent.

Dean switched modes immediately and dashed for the inner garage door. Mary had to shake herself a bit to respond, but then very quickly followed him. They both made their way toward Sam at a full run.

“SAM!” Dean called back to him, as he hit the stairs.

“He’s gone!” Sam yelled.

“Cas?!” Dean was almost to the bottom.

“Yeah...just now! He flinched like he did the first time, and then he was gone. He hasn’t called yet.”

“Shit,” Dean huffed out, still running. He scrambled toward the front door of the bunker and was at the bottom of the spiral staircase, when an enormous boom shook the entire facility. Dean stopped and looked at Sam. Both of them were wide eyed. Two seconds later, they heard a second boom, not as loud as the first, but still very intense.

Mary made it into the war room moments later and looked around, trying to figure out the source of the sound.

Dean reached the front door and whipped it open, sprinting outside. He stopped short, not sure what to do with what he was seeing.

There was a thick slab of concrete, about three feet in diameter and at least five inches thick that had been blown out of the side of the retaining wall just outside the door. It was resting at the bottom of the outer stairs and still rocking slightly from the force of the landing. The railing for the stairs leading down to the entrance was badly bent, like an enormous weight had sagged it down, right along the top.

Sam ran out just as Dean was shaking himself out of his stupor.

“What the…” Sam began.

“Cas!” Dean yelled, having looked to his left.

The lump of fabric and broken flesh huddled in the corner of the entrance enclosure wasn’t moving, and a lot of blood was rapidly pooling beneath it. Dean would probably not have known that was his friend, were it not for the unmistakable flap of tan. The angel’s vessel looked nearly destroyed. Nothing was angled correctly.

“Jesus…” Dean breathed, kneeling down to try to help him.
“Cas,” Sam called out to him, gently. He, too, knelt down and reached to attempt to help. But he stopped. There just didn’t seem to be a good place to touch him. Anywhere.

As both men stared in shock, Mary rounded the corner and saw the grisly sight.

“Oh my God!” she whispered, putting her hand quickly up to her mouth.

“Is he…” Mary began.

“I…I don’t…” Dean stammered, as his eyes and hands darted all over Cas’s body, wondering what he should be doing right now.

Just as Dean and Sam both started to come up with a plan to try to move him...check for vitals of any kind, a glow of blue light washed over the angel. The broken, contorted body shifted back into something resembling a human with two arms and legs, each broken bone and un-hinged joint clicking back into place with the most sickening sounds any of them had ever heard. Sam turned away briefly, shocked to realize he was actually nauseated by it.

The last thing to clear was the head and face, but when the light faded, two large, confused, blue eyes blinked open and looked around.

Dean sagged visibly. He put his hand to his face and dragged it down, roughly.

Sam took hold of his coat and tried to help him rise to a sitting position. Cas obliged, still blinking. After a few moments, he finally spoke.

“Ow.”

“Holy shit,” Sam whispered to himself. “Come on, man. Let’s get you inside.”

Cas accepted the help of both men as they got him to his feet. He moved toward the entrance to the bunker somewhat stiffly, but stopped when he met Mary’s gaze. She was staring at him wide-eyed, her hand still over her mouth.

He thought about trying to reassure her, but something about the look in her eyes let him know that she was not wanting him to tell her anything, at the moment. In fact, she looked like she was staring at something extremely dangerous and wasn’t sure if she should fight or run.

Cas slumped and let his eyes briefly close, before he let Dean coax him to move through the door into the bunker.
He's Not an 'It', Mom

Chapter Summary

Cas and Sam are in full research mode.
Dean is still trying to resist the urge to just jump in the car, head in any direction, and
gank anything that smells Heavenly.
Mary is still not on board. At all.

Chapter Notes

We're still digging through some of the mechanics here, folks. I promise the story will
begin to progress a bit faster soon, but we gotta get Mary fully on board with Team Free
Will.
At least, in practice...if not in spirit. We'll take what we can get, for now, right? *sigh*

NOTE: Shout out to Tisha_Wyman for making me think about the boys' instincts being
the best possible reason to trust their judgement. She sent me a comment that really
made me think, and I'm so grateful! Thanks again, Tisha! You were absolutely right!
The boys would have been long gone, if their instincts weren't amazing!

June 8, 2016

11:32 AM CDT

“Cas...you gotta talk to me, man...tell me what the hell is goin’ on!” Dean said, as he got Cas settled
into a chair at the first library table.

“Dean...if I knew, I would tell you. I don’t understand what’s happening.”

“New Mexico, again?” Sam asked, taking the seat across from him and dragging his laptop over. He
quickly opened a document he’d created when they’d first begun the investigation.

“No. This time the location was an unstable orbital position approximately three quarters of a million
kilometers from the surface of the Earth,” Cas said, somewhat absently, as he reached for one of his
open notebooks and began to jot something down.

“They threw you into outer space?!” Dean nearly shouted.

“Well...still within the confines of the Earth’s immediate gravitational influence, but...yes,” Cas
affirmed. He reached into the inside pocket of his trenchcoat and pulled out a thin, beautifully crafted
wooden box, about the size of his open hand. He flicked the latch and pulled out what looked like an
incredibly old brass device, also beautifully made, and covered in thousands of runes and marks.
Sam stared at it, a little stunned.

“Is that...an astrolabe?” Sam asked, his brow wrinkled and a look on his face that would certainly have made Cas smile, had Cas been looking at him.

“Yes,” Cas said, vaguely, as he clicked a couple of pieces together to properly assemble the instrument.

Sam was watching as Cas did this. It occurred to him that he’d never asked how the guy had managed to store that enormous and very sharp angel blade up his sleeve. And now, this fairly large box appeared. He’d never seen an impression of it through the coat or any other indication that something that probably weighed at least three pounds was hanging out in that inner pocket.

‘Huh...no wonder he wears that crappy thing all the time,’ Sam thought. ‘It’s his duffle bag.’

“I need to get a reading.” With that, Cas vanished from the library table and appeared at the front door. He opened it and stepped outside, before anyone could say anything else.

“An astro...what?” Mary asked. “What was that thing?”

“Astrolabe,” Sam said. “Old school scientific instrument. Like...really old school. I’ve only ever seen pictures.” He snorted and grinned, shaking his head slightly.

“Cool,” he said to himself, looking back down at his laptop and typing in a couple more notes.

“Cool?!?” Dean boomed. “The guy was strawberry jelly on the pavement five minutes ago! Nothing is 'cool'! Focus!”

Sam only barely acknowledged his brother and kept typing.

Cas re-entered and closed the door. Then appeared back in his seat at the table, jotting down more notes and repacking the astrolabe back into its case.

“So...this was those angels again?” Mary asked, a little hesitantly. She was standing on the top step, leaning against the stone entryway to the library. Her arms were crossed and she was watching.

“Yes...they were there. Waiting for me. But they vanished immediately, when I arrived. As if they wanted to make sure whatever they’d done had worked.” He was still looking down and writing as he said this.

“Sam...did you happen to notice the time, when I was taken?”

“Uh…” Sam began, thinking. “I didn’t...but...I do know what web page I’d just pulled up and I track packet flow...so…” Sam was typing furiously, and then began repetitively hitting one key to scroll down. “Ok, I can give you roughly to the minute, ‘cause it was a few seconds or so before you left.”

“That’s close enough, for now,” Cas mumbled.

Sam called out the time to him and Cas continued to write.

“Cas,” Dean said, quietly, his arms crossed over his chest and head down. “I know this is all...very interesting...but I swear if you don’t tell me what the hell is goin’ on here, those angels aren’t gonna need to kill ya...I’ll do it myself.”

Cas put his pencil down and slowly leaned back in his chair. He looked over at his friend. When he spoke, his voice was gentle. Almost comforting.
“Do you want the short answer?”

“That would be great.”

“I don’t know.”

Dean stared at him for a few moments, and he was tempted to lose his temper entirely, but Cas’s face was calm. There was no hint of challenge or argument—and that took all the wind out of Dean’s sails. He sighed heavily and moved to take the chair next to his friend. He caught a glimpse of his mother, still standing in the doorway and gave her a pleading look. She simply stared back. Unmoving. Dean dropped his gaze.

“I’m listening. What’s the long answer?”

“When I fly, I’m able to perceive that I’m flying. My wings are moving, I’m aware of the direction I’m heading, in control of the speed… Exactly the same as you are aware of your body moving when you choose to walk across the room.”

“Ok…” Dean nodded.

“What’s happening right now is more like…I’m holding still and space itself is shifting around me. I am unable to perceive the movement at all. The only thing I can sense is that there is a tiny amount of time spent in transition from where I was to where I end up. And… I feel some sort of… pull or…attraction, but only with my feathers. No other part of my true form or my vessel. It’s…a bizarre sensation. Highly disorienting.”

“So…you get there…and then what? You fly home?”

“Yes, but both times, the pull or attractive force I’m experiencing tries to keep me in place. In New Mexico, the attraction was very weak. I was able to overcome it easily. This time, though…” Cas paused, visibly trying to shake a disturbing memory. “The attractive force was much stronger. But it was also very unstable. Almost as though I was trying to fly through… pockets of it or… maybe it was coming in bursts or waves.” Cas saw Dean’s face twist and he tried a different approach.

“It was a strong pull, then weaker, then stronger, over and over, as I tried to fly back. As I approached the lower layer of Earth’s atmosphere, the pull became extremely strong and I had to fight very hard just to go a few dozen kilometers. But right as I was lining up my landing, the opposing force abated almost entirely, and I hit the ground at full speed. Thus, the damage you saw outside.”

“Almost entirely?” Sam asked. “At what point did it stop?”

“It hasn’t,” Cas answered, turning to Sam. “I can still feel it. But it’s incredibly weak. It takes almost no effort to keep it from pulling me away.” He turned back to Dean.

“Something tells me it won’t stay that way.”

Dean sighed, and gave his friend a doleful grin.

“Yeah…that sounds about the way our luck runs.”

Cas just nodded.

“So, five angels,” Mary began, “each one as unstoppable as him, I assume.” She motioned toward Cas, but was addressing Dean and Sam.
“And they know where we are and how the two of you are likely to react.”

All three looked at her.

“I’m not certain that they know where we are, but I think we should assume they do and plan accordingly, yes.” Cas solemnly nodded at Mary.

“Ok…” she said. “And these angels are possessing a whole family, including kids, so…how do we stop an angel without killing it?” Then she added, “But if it comes down to it…how do we kill it?”

The word ‘it’ was not lost on any of them.

Cas chose to ignore the implication.

“There are two effective ways to temporarily neutralize an angel. The first being to trap the angel, by enclosing him or her in a ring of holy oil and igniting it. The second would be banishment. There is a sigil that must be created, using blood. The banisher would then…”

“He’s not an ‘it’, Mom,” Dean interrupted.

There was another long silence, before Mary spoke again. Her tone was conciliatory, but there was little warmth.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to imply…”


Again, there was silence.

Dean sighed very heavily. He took a moment to try to piece together what to say...or do, but came up with nothing other than being direct. So...that’s what he did.

“Look...right now, I would give anything to go back about a week and start fillin’ you in on all of it. I shoulda done it. It was stupid of me not to...and, of course, right on schedule, we’ve got a major crisis forcin’ us to drop everything and deal with it.” He chuckled weakly. “‘Cause God forbid we get a whole three weeks of down time. I mean, hell, two weeks was pushin’ it, but three… Well, damn, that’s like winnin’ the lottery for this fuckin’ family so I dunno why I thought…” He sighed and slumped back in his chair.

“I can tell you that with everything we’ve been through, if we didn’t have great instincts...if we weren’t really good at what we do, we wouldn’t be sittin’ here right now.” Then he added, “And neither of us would have even had a chance to fight at all, if it hadn’t been for this guy,” he said, gesturing toward Cas. “I’d still be in Hell and the apocalypse would have happened. End of story.”

He sighed and rubbed his eyes.

“Look...Mom...I don’t know what you need to hear or what it’s gonna take for you to just trust me on this. And trust Sam. All I know is that we shoulda told you everything and we didn’t, and now we’re outta time and we need to focus on fixing this thing that’s happening and I gotta have you on board. And I don’t know how to do it.”

Mary snorted and let her head fall back, still amazed that she was being asked to just trust...again...with no real explanation.

“What I do know, though, is that Cas isn’t gonna make me choose,” Dean continued. “He knows I
can’t do it, so he won’t make me try. He’ll leave. I know him. I can already see the gears turnin’ in his head. It’s exactly what he was tryin’ to say...if you don’t accept him he’ll have to leave, and Mom…” Dean huffed and shook his head. “I’ve lost so many people. So many. To everything from demons to angels to hell hounds...to run of the mill dick-humans. But I’m NOT gonna lose Cas because of something so stupid as, ‘I didn’t have a conversation early enough’. It’s not gonna happen.”

Dean paused for a moment, trying very hard to keep his emotions in check.

“I can’t lose any more of the people I love. I just can’t. So...whatever we need to do, here...” He looked at Mary, again almost pleading with her. “What do you want, Mom? Just tell me.”

Mary looked at him and at Sam. She thought very hard for a moment about what she actually did want in this situation. The answer was obvious...not to have this creature roaming the halls of the bunker at night, while they all slept. That's what she wanted. But what she said was quite a bit different.

“I want...to know that we’re safe.” She sighed. “I want to be able to just trust that you both know what you’re doing. I want…” she paused, shaking her head, “to know everything that happened and why you trust him so much.”

She uncrossed her arms and strode slowly over to the nearest open seat at the table. Dropping down heavily, she stared across at Cas.

“It’s not that I don’t like you, Cas. I actually do. And I hate what’s happening to you. But I’m not gonna lie and say that I’m all that comfortable having you around here. Nothing about you says ‘safe’ to me. And maybe that’s just my hunter instincts kickin’ in, or maybe it’s just that I’m still not ok with everything that’s happened.” She chuckled and shook her head. “Of course I’m not ok with everything that’s happened. That was a stupid thing to say…”

“Mary…” Cas began.

“Don’t...Cas, just...don’t. I’m not gonna insist you leave. You’re in trouble. That’s obvious. You need our help. That’s obvious, too. And...both my boys love you. That’s crystal clear. So…” She rubbed her hand over her face and then tucked her hair behind her ear. Reaching over to grab the nearest unopened book, she cleared her throat.

“What are we looking for again? Anything that can move an angel, right?"
Chapter Summary

Again with the pulling! Ugh!

Research is great until it isn't.
More beer, coffee and food, as well as a couple of well-endowed wood sprites, and the members of Team Free Will are no further than they were 6 hours ago, when Cas came in hot and took out half the retaining wall at the bunker's entrance.

It's time for a new plan.

Chapter Notes

This is the last chapter of mechanics before we get to the start of some real fun, folks. Hope you're enjoying the domestic fluff and the nerdiness.


*June 8, 2016*

*5:35 PM CDT*

“Ok...I got a spell for bi-locating a tree sapling,” Dean said, without preamble. All three of his companions raised their heads in unison to stare at him. Dean noticed the distinct lack of excitement.

“So...prob'ly no?” he said, looking at each of them in turn.

“Oh...no,” Sam said, trying hard not to be too dismissive.

“How about simultaneous sightings of a wood sprite? They didn’t have accurate clocks at the time, but there was a really big distance between them. There are drawings by both witnesses and it was definitely the same sprite. Sheesh!” Mary said, blinking and shaking her head.

“How do they know,” Sam asked.

“Well, I can’t imagine there are two of them this...uh...well endowed,” Mary answered.

“No, they all are,” Cas said, only briefly glancing over toward what Mary was looking at. “Wait,” he said, and reached out toward the book. “May I?”

Mary handed it over to him. Cas took a brief look at the first drawing, then turned the page to view the second. He snorted derisively, and handed the book back to her.
“They were mistaken. That is not the same sprite.”

“How do you know,” Dean asked.

“The second one is Eldevaeir. He has a very distinctive mark along the upper right side of his...‘endowment’. He’s very proud of it, so he makes sure everyone sees and takes note. The first drawing doesn’t show that mark. It’s not him.”

Sam’s eyebrows shot up.

“Friend of yours?” he asked.

“Of Gabriel’s. I’ve met him. He’s…exactly what you’d expect.”

Sam grinned, and looked back down at his book. After a moment, though, his face fell.

“How the hell are there so many spells for corn? I mean, I get that it’s important, but...it’s corn. It grows or it doesn’t. There must be 450 spells in here for it!”

Cas reached over and lifted one side of the book to see the title.

“That’s a new world compilation. It has the spells from all of the various cultures listed in groupings.”

Sam also looked at the book cover, and sighed heavily.

“I’m not even looking at the titles anymore…” He groaned. “That’s it...I’m fried. I need to stop and eat or I’m gonna start missing stuff.”

“Yes…” Dean agreed, stretching as he rose from his chair.

Mary was already up and heading for the kitchen.

Castiel remained seated and entirely focused on the three books in front of him, still jotting down occasional tidbits in one of his little notebooks.

“Cas,” Dean said, lightly clapping his friend on the shoulder as he passed him by. “Let’s take a break. Come on.”

“I don’t need to eat. You three go ahead.”

Dean hesitated.

“Well...I don’t wanna leave you…” he stammered. “I mean...what if that pull-thing happens again?”

“Oh,” Cas said, finally looking up. “I suppose if you come back and I’m not here, just come to the front door and I’ll likely be there or will be arriving there shortly.”

Dean stared at him. He wasn’t sure if he should laugh or punch him.

“Right, ‘cause it’s no big deal if you’re layin’ outside for a while as...you know...a big pile of goo,” Dean snarked. “I’ll just grab a snack and bring it out here. Keep doin’ what you’re doin’. I’ll be right back.”

“You’ve been working for hours. You should take a break....”
“Eh...I’m fine,” Dean said moving quickly toward the kitchen. Sam looked at Cas, somewhat guiltily, then turned and went after him.

Moments later, Dean returned to his seat with two beers, two bags of chips and a candy bar. Cas looked at his friend’s dinner choices and groaned.

“Dean...even I know that’s absurd.”

“Drink your beer,” Dean said brusquely, sliding a bottle at Cas. He pulled open one of the bags of chips and began to loudly demolish his snack.

Cas hesitated for a moment, watching Dean. But then he complied, taking a swig from the bottle, before going back to writing in his notebook.

Several minutes passed, as they both quietly read. Neither of them felt comfortable. Neither of them mentioned it. Until, finally, Dean broke the spell.

“Promise me you’re not gonna leave.”

Cas stopped writing...his pencil frozen in place on the page. He looked over at his friend, but said nothing.

“I wanna hear you say it. No slippin’ outta here when nobody’s watchin’ or sending me a text from who knows where, tellin’ me ‘it’s better this way’ or some shit. Just...tell me you won’t do that.”

The silence made Dean clench his jaw. He was waiting for Cas to answer, trying to give him some time to really think about it and make a decision, but Cas was taking too long. When he couldn’t wait any longer, Dean glanced over at him, and the look on his friends face answered his question.

“Jeez...” Dean huffed, with a disbelieving chuckle. He slumped heavily into the back of his chair, and rubbed his eyes with one hand. “I freakin’ knew it. You already had a plan.” He kept his voice low, not wanting the conversation to carry toward the kitchen.

“Dean...” Cas began, but was cut off by the sound of Sam’s footsteps moving through the war room toward the library.

Before Sam rounded the corner to the entrance, Dean pointed one hand toward his friend and stared hard into his eyes.

“Don’t,” he barely said.

Cas’s face showed a multitude of emotions, before ending with an accepting nod. Dean stared at him a moment longer, only looking away when he realized Sam was watching them.

“Whatcha got there, Sammy?” Dean asked in a very poor attempt to seem upbeat.

“Sandwiches,” Sam said, sliding a plate toward his brother. “And the bowl of pretzels nobody ate last night.” The bowl was unceremoniously plopped in the center of the table. “And more beers.”

“Awesome,” Dean declared. “That’s what I call service. Hell...I’ll even give you a tip.”

Sam groaned.

“Cut your hair, ya hippie.”

“Once. It was funny once. Like, a decade ago, but now it’s just...sad.”
“It’s hilarious. You have no sense of humor, Bitch.”

“That’s a ninety-year-old’s humor, Jerk.”

“Actually,” Cas mused, "I’ve known some ninety-year-olds to be…”

“Shut up, Assbutt.” Sam said it smoothly, without any hesitation.

There was a tiny pause, then he raised his eyebrows and grinned at Dean, who had the same look on his face.

“I like it!” Sam said with a firm nod toward his big brother. "You were right. It works."

“Yep,” Dean agreed. “I’m sold. It’s all yours, buddy,” he said, reaching over and clapping Cas once on the shoulder.

Cas grimaced and pulled both hands into loose fists.

“I don’t understand why neither of you will let… I was under enormous pressure…it was my first attempt at…”

“Hey...hey...relax. This is a rite of passage, ya know? It’s not a bad thing. We’re just...openly making fun of you. To your face,” Dean explained.

“‘Cause that’s what brothers are for,” Sam said, with his most sincere expression.

“Finding anything that’ll make you mad or embarrassed…”

“And then camping on it until you get all worked up…”

“So we can laugh really hard at the faces you make. See? It’s all about the love.”

“And now you know what it’s really gonna be like, being our brother,” Sam said, with a huge, encouraging smile. Then very, very quickly, under his breath, he mumbled, “Assbutt says ‘I don’t understand.’”

Cas’s eyes were so squinted, now, it was hard to see them. He was looking back and forth between the two men, trying to catch up.

“I don’t...I don’t understand. Why would…” but he was cut off by both brothers laughing. Not loud, just clearly getting a joke that had gone right past Cas. When the angel began to look even more frustrated, Sam let loose a solid belly laugh.

Dean chuckled a little louder, and then sighed, looking over at his friend.

“Welcome to the family, Cas.” Dean smiled and winked at him.

“But...I still don’t underst…”

“All you need to get outta this is that I’m ninety...Sam’s nine ...and you’re Assbutt, now. So, just...you know...own it. It’s all yours.”

“Ok,” Mary announced herself as she climbed the steps up to the library level. “Coffee.” She walked over to the spot next to Cas and set one of the mugs she was holding down, filling it from a carafe in her other hand.
“Here ya go. Figured even with the beer you wouldn’t turn down a fresh batch of joe,” she said with a small smile.

“Thank you,” Cas said, very softly. He looked utterly bewildered.

“Welcome,” Mary said, as she turned and walked back around to her seat. She put two of the mugs in the center of the table, then poured coffee into her own mug and set the carafe next to the empties.

Cas looked around the table. He pondered the fact that the two men who profess to care for him as a brother had just openly declared war on his self-esteem and ego. He then noted that the woman who might want to gank him later tonight, had just brought him a fresh mug of delicious coffee. And it occurred to him: in all this time, he may not have been the one causing the confusion. Instead, these may literally be the three most contrary creatures ever to roam the surface of the Earth. He decided that if the ego-assault was about to begin in earnest, he’d cling to the latter view, until proven wrong.

A sharp pain shot through both of Cas’s un-manifested wings and he drew in a small hiss. Closing his eyes, he managed to counter the pull, aware now of it’s telltale warning sign.

“What,” Dean demanded.

“Pain?” Sam was reaching for his laptop, ready to log the time and any other information Cas could give him. “Is the pulling there as well?”

“Yes. Both,” Cas said through a grimace, and then he relaxed.

“You’re able to control it, now?” Mary asked. She put down the sandwich Sam had brought out for her. She looked ready for action.

“I’m able to suppress it,” Cas explained, rolling his shoulders a bit and wincing. “The pull is considerably stronger than last time. I have to assume that trend will continue. Whatever they’re doing, it isn’t working, so they’ll try harder.”

“We still don’t have any idea why they’re doing this, though, right? What the end-game is?” Mary asked.

“No.” Cas leaned forward a bit and began to jot down a few short notes. Moments later, he let out a quick, loud cry, before stifling it, his back arching and his hands grasping at the table, tearing a page in his notebook.

“Sam, note the time,” he gasped out. His face was screwed up in a tight grimace and he closed his hands into fists.

Dean reached over instinctively to grab onto Castiel. To keep him from flying off.

“Don’t!” Cas yelled. “I don’t know what would happen if you were touching me. Just...don’t...” He stopped talking and tensed, eyes screwed tightly closed and knuckles turned white with the strain. Moments later, he relaxed...not entirely, but mostly.

“Please,” Cas said, quietly. “It’s best that none of you touch me, until we understand what’s happening. My power is weakening and if I’m pulled to another inhospitable place, I’m not certain if I’d be able to create a livable bubble for you and still get us home.”

“Wait...your power?” Dean asked. “This is draining your power?”

Cas looked at him at bit sheepishly.
“Yes. It wasn’t much at first,” he continued, when he saw Dean’s reaction.

“So...what...each time it’s taking a little more? Are you able to...recharge? I mean...are you...connected to Heaven enough?”

“I am able to...recharge. But it takes time. It’s more of a trickle, now. I don’t spend time in Heaven and there isn’t a direct connection anymore.”

“So…” Sam began, “how much are you down right now? Like...that whole crash landing. That had to take a lot to recover from, right?”

“I’m still not recovered from that, no,” Cas admitted.

“What happens next time, then? This just keeps draining you? Until what?” Dean’s voice was rising in volume each time he spoke.

“We’ll need to wait until...” Cas clenched hard, once again curling his hands into fists and screwing his eyes tightly closed.

“Sam,” he gasped out, through clenched teeth. “Note the t…” And he was gone.

It took a little over fifteen minutes this time, before Sam’s phone buzzed that he had a text message. It was from Cas.

“He’s in the field that leads down to the creek. Northeast of us. Says he’ll be home in about ten minutes.” Sam sent a quick, ‘OK’ and put his phone back in his pocket.

“Ten minutes,” Dean repeated from his position, pacing around the stairwell by the open front door. “So...he’s walking.”

“He’s not flying?” Mary asked, somewhat knowingly. And they all looked at each other.

Immediately, Dean was out of the door and racing around to the Northeast of the bunker. Sam rushed out after him, telling Mary to stay behind and keep an eye out for Cas, should he somehow get back before them.

Dean was at a full run, when he saw Cas’s head and shoulders appear over the top of the small ridge that led down to the creek valley. Cas was walking slowly, but steadily. He looked tired and a little shaken, but not injured. This did nothing to calm Dean.

“Cas,” he shouted, as he approached him. “You ok?”

“I’m fine,” Cas assured him. Sam reached them a moment later.
“Hey,” he greeted Cas. “What happened this time?” Sam put his hands on his hips and tried to take in a few deep breaths to slow his heartbeat down.

“Same place, but the pull was much stronger. And it still is.” Cas motioned toward the bunker and once again began walking back toward it.

“Why’d you land so far away,” Dean asked. “And why didn’t you fly back? Somethin’ wrong with your wings?”

Cas looked over at him, impressed by his astute observations and also dreading having to tell him the truth.

"I'm selecting landing speed over landing site, to prevent another 'pile of goo' (air quotes) incident,” Cas explained. “And my power is much lower, now. I’ll need to conserve to buy myself time, so...no flying when I don't have to."

Dean halted. Cas realized this after taking only a couple of steps and he also stopped, turning back to look at his friend.

“Cas,” Dean began, hesitantly. “What’s happening, here?” His voice was level. Serious. “Is this...is this thing gonna pull away all your power again? Make you human? Is it takin’ your grace, too?”

“No,” Cas said. “It’s not taking my grace. That’s the good news.” Cas shifted his weight from one foot to the other, trying to choose his words. But he gave up and just decided to be blunt.

“It’s taking away my ability to fight it. Right now, I have enough power stored to keep myself from being held at the site I’m being pulled to. I do not have enough power to prevent myself from being pulled to that site to begin with. Though I believe I would be able to prevent the pull if I were to remain at full power at all times. It’s just a guess. I still have no idea how they’re actually doing the initial pulling. But, as of right now, I do have enough power to fight my way back home.”

“But?” Sam coaxed, sensing that Cas hadn’t told them everything yet.

Cas looked at Sam. He took a deep breath and sighed heavily.

Sam caught it.

“You’re breathing.”

Cas tilted his head. He was actually very surprised by the level of attentiveness of both of them, at the moment, and he almost grinned.

“Also to conserve energy. It requires less effort to simply let my vessel breathe than it does to maintain it entirely with my grace.”

Cas paused for a few moments, then took another deep breath and continued.

“The pull is much stronger, now. And as my power declines and my ability to recharge does not increase...I fear it will be only a few more times before I won’t be able to get back.”

Dean closed his eyes. He shook his head slowly and shifted his weight, kicking at the dirt beneath him, to relieve some of the frustration. Finally, he raised his head and looked at Cas.

“Ok...new tactic...we figure out how to power you up. And then we work on knowing what’s happening. So...how do we do that?”
“I could go back to Heaven,” Cas said quietly.

“But...they aren’t exactly happy to see you these days, so…” Dean said, questioningly. “I mean...you could get a repeat of what they did, right? Or worse?”

“That’s very true,” Cas acknowledged. “But it’s the only way to bring me back to full power quickly.”

“No...there’s another way,” Sam stated, crossing his arms over his chest and looking at Cas solemnly. “You could touch a human soul.”

Cas looked at him in shock. It absolutely amazed him just how much Sam and Dean had come to understand how all of this worked, even though they had no real conceptual understanding of the mechanics of the Heavenly dimensions. There truly was no end to what these two could learn or do.

“That is extremely dangerous, Sam,” Cas chose to say, instead of praising his ingenuity. “Yes, it would work, but I’d need to do it many times. Each time would be risking the life of the human and everyone around that human. Including me.”

“Well…” Sam sighed, exasperated. “Isn’t there some way to...like…link to a soul or something? Like...have a constant, low level contact with it? So you only have to do it once? I mean, it’s the contacting in the first place that’s dangerous, right?”

“Yes, that’s true…” Cas said, and his face showed that something had occurred to him that he was not sharing.

Dean jumped on it.

“What?” he demanded.

“No…it’s not…”

“What?” Dean repeated, louder.

“It’s an old technique...and it’s meant to be temporary. Very temporary. No more than a day or two at the most.” Cas shook his head dismissively.

“Cas,” Sam said. “We’ve got nothing at all right now. Come on...what is it?”

Cas sighed, exasperated. He knew he had only a brief moment before Dean’s head would explode, so he dove into the explanation.

“I could create a tether. That’s what the spell does...it tethers an angel’s grace to a human soul, for exactly the kind of power transfer you’re describing.”

Dean and Sam looked at each other and squinted. Then Sam looked back at Cas.

“So...let’s do that. Until we figure out how to stop this,” Sam said. He looked very confused by Cas’s hesitance.

“This sounds like exactly what we need right now, Cas. What’s the problem?” Dean wasn’t shouting yet, but he was definitely gearing up. “What...does it...turn one of us into a newt?”

“It would…” Cas stopped and squinted at him. “What?”

“Just...ignore that,” Sam said. “Go on...what would it do?”
“It would be extremely uncomfortable for the human. And for me, I’m sure, given the...necessary proximity requirements.” Cas looked down and cleared his throat. “And I promise you, Mary will not be ‘on board’ (air quotes).”

“Ok...stop with the air quotes.” Dean barked. “You look crazy.”

Cas just stared at him.

“Are you saying Mom would be the one you’d have to be tethered to?” Sam asked, confused.

“No!” Cas shouted. He looked horrified. “No, I’m not saying that at all. Thankfully.” He swallowed hard at just the thought of her face, if he’d had to ask her for this particular favor right now.

“Ok...so, one of us, then,” Dean said, very matter-of-fact. “You tether your grace to one of us, and then you’ve got enough power to fight this off until we figure out what’s up. Great.” He began walking back toward the bunker now, quick and determined.

“Dean...this could take a long time. We haven’t gotten anywhere with the research, yet.”

“Exactly. And that’s why we’re doin’ this to keep you from gettin’ stuck behind the moon like the Enterprise, with no way back and five dick angels shootin’ photon torpedoes at ya!”

Cas had been trying to keep pace with Dean, but slowed. His face once again a tangle of confusion.

Sam was behind him and threw an arm over his shoulders, urging him forward. He looked down at Cas and just shook his head.

“Don’t worry about it. We’ll figure it out, Cas.”

“The Enterprise and the photon torpedoes...that’s Star Trek, right?”

“Yeah!” Sam said, with a grin.

“Why would the angels...I’m not going behind the moon...I mean, the moon isn’t even lined up with the position…”

“Don’t...don’t try to think it through. It’s what Dean has in his head and...ya know...it works for him. Just roll with it.”

Cas nodded slowly, seeming to somehow grasp what Sam was saying to him. It was as good an explanation as any, he supposed.
Chapter Summary

Subtlety is not a Winchester specialty. Unfortunately, no matter how hard he tries, Castiel seems to fit right in.

And more ‘80’s movie references. Yay!

Chapter Notes

References:

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The spell would be simple: five ingredients, a quick prayer, and the marking of the human whose soul would become the shared power source. Even the mark itself would be simple, and for either Dean or Sam, nothing new... a sigil carved on the back of the sternum.

“Good thing the angel warding didn’t require both sides of the rib cage,” Sam mumbled, as he scanned through the supply pantry for the necessary ingredients. Cas was next to him, carefully grating and measuring a portion of myrrh into the brass spell bowl.

“Woulda gotten kinda hard to read in there.” Sam grinned at his own joke. “And somethin’ tells me they don’t make ‘white-out’ for bones.” He glanced at Cas for a response, but the angel was totally focused on his work.

“If you’ll add the yarrow flower, I’ll get the last ingredient,” Cas said, setting the bowl down on the counter, next to Sam. “I’ll be a few minutes.”

“Wait...this is all five ingredients. What else do we need?” Sam asked, sifting in the yarrow.

“Just one more thing. I’ll be back.”
“ARE YOU OUT OF YOUR MIND?!” Mary made no attempt to avoid letting Cas hear her objections, as she ‘discussed’ this new plan with her eldest son. She was done being polite.

“Didn’t you just tell me the last time this guy got his hands on a soul he went completely bat shit and killed thousands?! What the hell is wrong with you two?! Am I the ONLY one around here who has any sense left at all?!”

Cas winced. He was standing just out of sight, at the entrance to the war room, listening to Mary and Dean battle it out next to the map table. If he was going to make it to the garage, he’d have to pass them. There was no way to avoid it.

There had been few times in his existence he’d wanted to fly more than right then. It stunned him how fearful he was of this woman and every ounce of his pride was screaming at him to pull it together. ‘You led a strike force to harrow Hell! You can walk past Mary Winchester!’

He took a deep, calming breath, which didn’t work at all, and strode around the corner. His gait was fast enough to have been comical under any other circumstance.

Dean saw him before Mary did, and he had to make a quick decision - ask what all the rush was about and bust his friend, or say nothing and worry. He waited until the last possible moment, and gave in.

“Where ya goin’?”

“I need to get something in the garage,” Cas nearly yelled, without breaking stride or turning.

“HEY!” Mary yelled, and immediately started after him.

Dean caught her arm. “Mom...stop!”

Mary turned and slapped Dean’s hand very hard. “Do NOT do that!”

Dean released her, slightly wincing at the powerful sting, and holding up both hands in surrender.

“Let me explain. This isn’t the same thing.”

“The hell it isn’t! No way is that guy getting his hands on your soul!”

“IT wouldn’t be the first time!” Dean shouted.

Mary stared at him, still horrified and now confused.

“How do you think he got me outta Hell, Mom?! You think he flicked me into a dustpan with a piece of newspaper?! He’s handled my soul before!”

“And that’s supposed to make it ok?! He’s about to suck the life out of you like a freakin’ Skeksis!”

Dean opened his mouth to continue arguing, but quickly slammed it shut. He stared at her in awe.

“What?!” she demanded.

“Did you just compare this to a Muppet movie?”

“That movie terrified kids! I told John not to take you!” She yelled. “And DON’T change the subject!”
Dean blinked at her.

“You have no way of knowing what this...TETHER will do! Or how long it’ll have to last...or even if it’s gonna work! You’re just taking his word for it?!”

“Yes!” Dean yelled. “That’s exactly what I’m doin’! His word is plenty good enough for me, and if you can’t get your head around that...” He stopped, not wanting to go any further. He wasn’t sure what the consequences would be, if she didn’t ‘get her head around that’, and he had no idea if he could pull off whatever threat might have rolled out of his mouth anyway.

The two of them stared at each other, both fuming and both completely at a loss for what to do next.

Thankfully...sort of...at that moment, two overhead lights dramatically blew out and a loud roll of thunder boomed from just above the bunker. It was quickly followed by two more loud booms and a third light blowing out.

Sam was just entering the war room with the spell bowl when it happened, and all three of them flinched, covering their heads against the sparks showering down.

Dean sprinted for the garage. It took seconds for him to clear the 4 flights of stairs, before whipping open the interior door and yelling for his friend.

He froze. He definitely did not expect to see...what he was seeing.

Cas was taken completely by surprise. He spun, wide-eyed. His two enormous wings instinctively shot outward and then began to rise up, fully engulfing more than half the length of the garage bay and scraping the ceiling as they rose. He accidentally hit several of the pendulum lights, only two of which were still working, and they swung wildly, sending weird shadows over the back wall.

He and Dean stared at each other for a long moment, before Cas found himself unexpectedly self-conscious and reached to grab his shirt, which sat folded on top of the Impala. He swept it clumsily over his bare chest, but managed to cover almost nothing. The shirt was slipping all over the place and Cas was too frantic to correct it.

“Whoa!” Dean finally managed, just as Sam and Mary arrived. Their reactions were nearly identical to his.

Cas’s wings snapped back down in a blur and he held them tightly behind his back. It was amazing how small they looked now, compared to the size of them fully extended, but they still stuck out almost a foot and a half above his head and a few inches to either side of him. That baggy shirt didn’t have a chance at covering anything other than his torso, and he still hadn’t really managed to do that.

“I told you I’d be down in a few minutes!” Cas snapped, and quickly averted his eyes, still scrambling with the shirt.

The swinging lights were making everything seem ten times more eerie and after a very short time, Cas had had enough. He reached up with both of his wings and grabbed the two working lights by their stems, halting their motion.

Slowly this time, he pulled his wings down to settle behind him. He gave up on the shirt and let it drape uselessly over his crossed arms. A few more seconds passed, and Cas cleared his throat.

“Could I have some privacy, please?” he asked quietly. His right wing opened just a few inches and flicked twice, adjusting a few feathers, then slowly closed again.
They were all still staring at him, when Dean stuck out an arm and scooped his mom and brother back out onto the staircase landing. He backed out, looking at Cas the whole time. He couldn’t stop. Even as he grabbed the inner door to close it, he paused to take one last look, before pulling himself together and shutting the door.

Cas took a long, slow breath, and then slumped, letting his head drop back.

Outside, the three of them were silent, still too stunned to walk away. Moments later, they heard what sounded like something small slamming into the exterior garage door, followed by the same expletive Dean had heard in the boiler room. It was much louder this time.

“Yeah...we need to give him a minute,” Dean said, ushering his family down the steps.

It seemed like an eternity, but it was actually only about 10 minutes before Cas entered the library, holding out a single small feather to Sam.

“This is the last ingredient,” he said in almost a whisper.

They were all staring at him again. They couldn’t help it.

Cas was still shirtless. His garments were draped neatly over his arm and after surrendering the feather, he pulled both arms tight across his torso and stood by Sam’s side. He wasn’t sure what else to do. Where to go.

“So...Cas...um...” Dean stumbled. “Those gonna stay out for a while?” He made a small nod toward the enormous wings still tucked tightly against his friend’s back and sides, and did his best to grin reassuringly. It was tough, though. Cas looked...like an angel.

“I attempted to manifest them without the usual disturbances, but... in trying to conserve power, I was unable to reduce the impact on my surroundings. I apologize for the damage.” Cas’s head was still bowed, and he was taking tiny steps back from the table, trying to figure out a way to disappear while staying visible and in the room.

“Since you’ve already seen them, I thought there was really no reason to risk trying to put them back. I’ll wait until I have enough power and then de-manifest them into their natural state.” He swallowed and fidgeted a bit, before continuing. “I also apologize for my state of undress. It would require additional power to physically alter my clothing to fit around my wings.”

“Yeah...it’s cool, Cas. Don’t worry about it,” Sam assured him. He also tried to smile, but found himself staring, again. Those wings were just...

“This is bullshit,” Mary barked. She sat with her arms crossed, watching her sons, clearly furious. “He’s about to suck out your soul and all either of you can do is stare at his ‘cool wings’,.” She shook her head and nearly growled in frustration. “How can you possibly be considering this?!”

Dean was getting very close to his breaking point. He wasn’t sure what to do to keep this situation manageable, but he knew that eventually he was going to stop caring what she thought, and that scared him more than this spell ever would. He looked over at his mother with a wry smile.
“Clearly...I’m an idiot. That good enough for ya, Mom?” The sarcasm was thick. He didn’t want to go this route, but...he couldn’t keep this up.

Mary shot him a scathing look. She really didn’t appreciate being dismissed, but she could see she’d get nowhere by openly fighting with him. Dropping her gaze, she raised both hands a bit, to motion that she was giving up.

The rest of Mary’s body language showed no indication of surrender, but...Dean would take what he could get right now. He looked back at Cas.

“Ok...tell me exactly what’s about to happen?”

Cas nodded solemnly. “I’ll place one hand on your sternum and the other on your spine. Sam will ignite my feather and drop it into the bowl, as I recite the prayer and complete the ritual. A single sigil will be carved into the back of the lower part of your sternum. Once that is finished, the tether will be in place.”

“Sounds easy enough,” Dean said with a nod. “Let’s do it.”

“Once the tether is in place,” Cas continued, not yet ready to dive in, “I’ll be able to draw power as needed, but only so long as I stay within a certain proximity to your physical body. At first, it may be a comfortable distance, but as the necessary draw of power increases, the distance we’ll be able to maintain will decrease proportionally. It’s possible that if we do not find a solution soon, the tether will require direct physical contact at all times.”

Dean took that in and let it sink all the way down to the bottom of his psyche. He had heard Cas when he’d told him that it might be uncomfortable. He figured he’d meant painful or achy or maybe even itchy. He really wasn’t expecting this kind of discomfort.

After thinking about it for several long moments, he nodded his head.

“Eh...we can get through that. I figure after everything that's happened, if we haven’t driven each other insane yet, we probably won’t, so...I’m good.”

Cas was looking at him. And it was worrisome look. It had an air of ‘this is about to get so much worse’ and with Cas that could mean almost nothing or something really, really bad. Dean swallowed.

“What else?” he asked, not really wanting to know the answer.

“If it does come to that, once we are in direct contact, it will be extremely difficult for me to not hear your thoughts. Especially any thoughts that happen to be emotionally charged. I will try, but I will almost certainly fail to block them out. I can promise you that nothing I detect will ever be repeated or acted upon without your express consent. Nevertheless, I imagine it will be somewhat unsettling for you.”

Dean pursed his lips and continued to stare at his friend. He nodded slowly, the gears in his head almost audibly clicking. After a very long moment, he stood up.

“Come with me,” he said to Cas, and strode past him toward his own bedroom. Cas followed.

Once they were in Dean’s room, Dean grabbed his headphones and handed them to Cas. He turned on the music at a fairly loud level and handed over the mp3 player.

“Listen to this. Don’t take those out or turn this off until I come back.”
Cas gave him a very small nod and complied.

Dean closed the bedroom door behind him and immediately trotted back to the library and squatted down by Sam’s chair.

“Ok...this is gonna suck.”

“Oh, man…” Sam said, totally in agreement.

“He’s both of ours now. So...we play for it.”

Sam’s face paled. He’d definitely hoped Dean was gonna take the bullet on this one and had gotten himself settled into the mindset of being the supportive one, and not the participant. He knew that was shitty of him, but...damn. This was...SOOO gonna suck. That was exactly the right description for it.

After a few long seconds, Sam pulled it together. He nodded at Dean and settled his right fist over the open palm of his left hand.

Dean counted.

“One. Two. THREE!”

“Shit!” Dean spat.

“Two outta three. Ready? One. Two. THREE!”

Dean slowly leaned down, putting his forehead on the armrest of Sam’s chair. He lifted his head half an inch and let it thump back down, repeating a few times.

Finally he rose. He took a deep breath and started walking toward his bedroom, but paused just past the entrance to the war room. He took another long moment to get his head wrapped around this, then continued the rest of the distance to his room.

He found Cas exactly as he’d left him, patiently waiting for his friend with the plugs fixed in his ears. He looked over at Dean with mild trepidation and pulled out the plugs.

Dean, on the other hand, was once again stunned into a silent stupor by Cas’s wings. They were magnificent. He couldn’t stop staring at them. Even with the weight of what he’d just resigned himself to, he couldn’t override his awestruck reaction to how gorgeous they were or how strangely appropriate they looked on Cas. It was almost as though he were seeing the real Cas for the very first time.

“You know what this reminds me of? Seein’ you like this?” Dean asked, still staring, but with a small smile softening his face.

“What?” Cas asked apprehensively. He wasn’t sure he wanted to know.

“Star Trek IV. It was a stupid movie, but there was some good stuff. So...” Dean began, taking a step or two closer to him and relaxing a bit. "Spock had spent all this time trying to blend in on Earth among the humans, right? And he was wearin’ this crazy robe and crap, so he looked like a damned hippie, and he had a headband on to hide his ears and he just...looked really weird. Like he didn’t fit in at all, and tryin' to hide it just made it worse. And then he’d say crazy crap and everybody’d just stare at ‘im.”
Dean realized he was describing the staring he was currently subjecting his friend to, and tried very hard to stop.

“And then, near the end, this scientist chic they’d been hangin’ with finally boards their starship and she sees Spock standin’ there with no headband and totally back to being just Spock, ya know? Not tryin’ to play like he’s something else. Like...he’s just standin’ there at those controls on that Klingon ship, and he’s completely in his element...right where he belongs. And she just gets it. ‘Cause he looks...right. He’s not freaky or weird. He just looks...right.”

Dean wasn’t entirely sure what it was about what he'd said that did it, but Cas’s face suddenly lit up in a way it almost never did. The look of absolute relief was something he really wished he’d had a camera for. It was an amazing transformation, and it actually surprised Dean enough to make him start to laugh.

“What?” he asked through a chuckle.

“Thank you,” Cas said through a widening smile.

“Well, hell, Cas...it was just a dumb movie!”

Cas just kept looking at him. His smile was huge, now, and it wasn’t a bashful one. Finally! Dean was getting tired of seeing those. He wanted his hard-ass friend back. The one that smiled when he was actually happy, and not because he was trying to appease someone. This Cas was the one he’d been hoping would show up soon. The one that was in the kitchen yesterday, playing the intimidation card. The one that actually had scared the crap out of him in that barn eight years ago.

“Ok, ok...stop, now...this is no time for us to have...a moment! We’re about to get hitched.” Dean stopped immediately, closed his eyes and shook his head. “That came out...ALL the way wrong!” He put his hand on Cas’s shoulder and pointed at him with the other.

“You ever tell Sam I said that, I’ll drop you where you stand, you got it?”

Cas nodded. He had no idea why it would matter, but he didn’t care. He promised anyway.

“Ok. Tethered.” Dean sighed heavily and turned to head back to the library.

‘Tethered,’ he thought. Then his chest tightened. ‘To Cas. For days. Maybe weeks.’ He looked back over his shoulder at the angel and saw the huge grin still on his face. He wondered why, if it was so easy to make Cas happy he didn’t make an effort to do it more often. Then he wondered why he was being such a girl about this. Then he thought again about Cas being able to read his every thought.

‘This...is gonna...suck.’
Chapter Summary

Drama. There’s always too much drama.
At least Dean and Sam get to spend some time on the hood of the Impala, star gazing.
And meteor watching. Or...something watching...
It turns out, seraphs can put on one hell of a show...when the need arises.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the wait, folks! I had a little ‘episode’ over the last week and my brain went
down for the count. Took me FOREVER to write this chapter. I hope you find it worth
the wait.
The next chapters will be out very soon!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

June 8, 2016

7:30 PM CDT

Mary forced herself to stay for the ritual. She wasn’t about to abandon her son. But when she
watched the angel return his vessel to fully rested, clothed and wingless, by draining some of the
power off of Dean’s soul, she decided she’d had enough.

Without a word, she stood and strode out of the library. Moments later, her bedroom door slammed
shut.

Dean sighed.

“I’ll...uh...fix the lights,” Cas said quietly and began walking toward the war room.

“Don’t we have to stay close to each other, now?” Dean asked, still slumped in his chair.

“We will soon. Now that I’m at full power, though, I’d like to allow the pull to occur one more time,
to gather a third set of data points.”

Dean blinked and let his mouth fall open. No words were coming out, so he just looked over at Sam
for help.

“Cas?” Sam said, rising to follow him. “That seems really dangerous. You sure it’s worth it?”

Cas stood in the war room, looking up, surveying the damage.

“There is some risk, of course. But until we have a better understanding of what we’re dealing with,
we won’t be able to progress.” He vanished.

Sam crossed his arms and waited, a little annoyed, but used to this. Three seconds later, Cas reappeared exactly where he’d been, with an armful of replacement bulbs.

“I’d like to attempt some additional observations, as well. The last pull was only mildly enlightening. The location I am taken to appears to be exactly the same, relative to itself. The Earth, the Sun, the galaxy...all have moved relative to that location, so it is considerably further away from the Earth. And we now have at least some idea of the expected time between pulls. If it’s linear.”

Again, Cas disappeared, and one by one, the overhead lights blinked back on.

He reappeared and continued, “I want to try to triangulate the source of the pull and calibrate its strength, if possible, as I try to return. There seems to be a pattern to the pulses, but I haven’t ascertained it’s meaning. That information might be helpful.”

“What if you get stuck up there?” Sam asked. "I mean...is there anybody we could call on to try to help you? We can do stuff if you’re down here, but...I don’t see us bein’ able to do much for you, if you’re in space!”

Cas looked at him, thinking that through.

“There may be one...possibly two angels who might be willing to help, but I’d be hesitant to ask them, given the general attitude toward me, in Heaven. I’ll write down the names, though. If something were to happen in the next few hours, you could try praying to them, to see if one of them might be willing to help.”

Sam was going to respond, but stopped short. ‘One or two?’ he thought. ‘Might?!’ He stood there for a moment, replaying it in his mind. He knew things were bad for Cas in Heaven. And after what he’d told them about all of those angels just watching as he was tortured...it was pretty clear he wasn’t winning any popularity contests up there. But...one or two? Out of thousands?

It was an overwhelming thought. After so much sacrifice and loss, this was the reward -Cas’s life as a soldier of Heaven, the only life he’d ever known, was over. Permanently. His reputation and legacy were ruined. And, ironically, Sam and Dean were likely the only two creatures in the universe that weren’t, at least passively, hunting him.

‘No wonder...’ Sam thought. He noticed he was just staring at Cas, so he nodded.

“Ok,” he said, very quietly.

Cas could see he was upset. He wasn’t certain why, or what he should do, but Sam seemed to need some type of reassurance. Taking a guess, he put his hand on his friend’s shoulder.

“Don’t worry, Sam,” he said, with a small smile. “I’ll be able to fight my way back.”

“And you know that how?” Dean demanded from his chair. “You can’t know that! You don’t even know how they’re doin’ this!”

Cas turned and strode back into the library.

Sam didn’t move. He listened as the angel tried to walk Dean through the mechanics of what he intended to do. And he listened to his brother continue to shoot holes in the plan, looking for anything that would convince Cas to not go through with it.
Eventually, Sam wandered off toward the kitchen, returning a minute or so later with a beer for each of them. It was the one automatic response to awfulness that seemed to actually help, somehow...sort of...not really.

“Hovering will not help,” Cas said, as he flipped to the next page of the tattered old book he was reading. He was trying to be patient. He really was. He knew his friend was upset, and he would have loved to have been able to give him the answers he wanted. But he couldn’t.

What he could do, though, was wait until Dean was distracted, and then, with a touch, gently knock his ass out. That option was becoming more and more tempting to the angel, as the evening wore on.

“So...nothin’?” Dean tried to get Cas to confirm. Again. “It’s not any stronger? Hasn’t changed?”

“It is exactly the same as it was eight minutes ago.” Cas didn’t bother looking up. He was now busily jotting down all manner of equations and diagrams, and filling in little make-shift tables.

It was all incomprehensible to Dean, even the stuff that was in English, and that just served to make him more uneasy. How was he supposed to catch Cas holding back info if sneaking a peek at what he was writing was just as useless as asking him questions outright?

“As I’ve promised, I will tell you the moment I sense any change.” Cas stopped writing for a moment and looked over at his friend, who was pacing around the library. He empathized. He was all too familiar with what Dean was feeling right now.

Dean rubbed his eyes and sighed. He strode back to his chair. Spinning it around, he straddled it, crossing his forearms over the back rail and resting his chin on them. He stared bleakly at the spread of papers and folders and books on the table.

He’d run out of ways to fight Cas on this, and he knew it. That didn’t make it any easier to stop trying, though.

“Sam should be back by now,” Dean mumbled, grabbing his phone and checking for messages. Again. “Who the hell runs at night?!”

“Someone who’s been intensely researching for hours and needs to relax,” Cas answered, still writing.

They sat in silence for a few minutes, as Cas worked. The ticking of the old clock on the wall was suddenly very conspicuous, and Dean decided that it needed to die. He thought about ripping it off of the wall and smashing it or just pulling out his gun and shooting it, but he didn't feel like cleaning up the mess. So...the clock would live another day.

“You’re really gonna let them do it again? Throw you out into space?” Dean asked. He sounded exhausted.

Cas stopped. He laid his pencil on top of his notebook and leaned back, allowing himself to slump uncharacteristically low into the back rest. He laced his fingers together across his midriff.

“We need the information,” he answered, quietly.
Dean looked at him.

Cas looked back.

In their present state of mutual droop, neither of them felt the need for any social etiquette so they both just stared. After a very long while, Dean broke the silence.

“You think I’m ever gonna win one’a these?”

“One of what,” Cas asked, already partially amused.

“One’a these little staring contests?”

“Ah!” Cas said, mock dramatically and rolled his eyes. It was a great attempt at imitating what he’d seen humans do, but it was slightly off, as usual. He looked just weird enough to make Dean grin and snort out a single laugh.

“I don’t know. I’ve been told I’m pretty good at it.”

“Pfft! Who told you that?” Dean asked grimacing and shaking his head.

“You.”

“Eh...I lie a lot.”

“You’ve told me that, too.”

The contest continued.

Without an interruption or other pressing matter to bring it to an end, these strange little episodes seemed to drag out for an eternity. Dean had found himself brooding over this phenomenon, when he’d had time to just think. It was usually while driving at night, the dull rumbles of the road and Baby’s engine combining to lull him into an alert trance. He didn’t let himself do it too often. There were usually too many horrific things ready to jump up and take over the thought process. But this topic could usually trump them...keep them at bay. At least for a while.

The most upsetting aspect of these episodes for Dean was the fact that he always broke first. He could stare down anyone else, no matter how scary or intimidating. He’d learned to do it from childhood. It was a matter of survival. Don’t show weakness. Ever. But, with this particular angel...

All he knew was that meeting Castiel’s stare was different. For some reason, it always seemed to hurt a little. When they’d first met, Cas had just been bizarrely terrifying and that had been enough for Dean to drop his gaze. But over time, that terror had morphed into a gut-level ache that was impossible to explain.

As he sat there, watching that familiar, mostly blank face staring serenely back at him, Dean wondered if maybe it was the shared experiences...the horror and pain and constant dread they’d both endured? Or was it simply the fact that most people, even most creatures, would stare at Dean’s face or his body? He knew how to handle that.

Cas always seemed to be staring directly at his soul, and that was...different. Kind of embarrassing, actually, but also comforting, in a weird way. Dean was certain his soul must be grotesque - filthy and mutilated and horrifying. Cas had seen it. For all Dean knew, Cas could still see it. And he never looked away.
When the idea that this may be the last time he’d ever see that stare flashed through his mind, he felt the beginnings of a lump forming in his throat. Dean refused to let that continue. It had become far too frequent an occurrence in the last few weeks and if he didn’t pull it together...

He dropped his gaze. ‘Dammit,’ he thought.

“Yeah...this one’s yours,” Dean said, slowly rising from his seat. “I need coffee.” He stretched and grunted, then started toward the kitchen.

“C’mon, Cas.”

The next pull occurred roughly six and a half hours after the prior pull, exactly within the window of time Cas had predicted it would. ‘If the periodicity is linear,’ he’d added.

Dean had rolled his eyes at that. He’d forced ‘The Professor’ to ‘say it in English’, so Cas had explained that it meant ‘if the length of time between pulls was going to be the same each time, instead of getting shorter or longer by some set amount.’ Dean had then asked why Cas hadn’t said that in the first place, at which point Cas had pointed out that his way required five words and Dean’s way required twenty five. They’d both thought about getting pissed at each other. Both had decided to let it slide.

Sam had been grateful.

Cas experienced the same warning signs before the pull - a steady but rapid increase in the attractive force he’d been experiencing at all times, and then acute pain in his wings, particularly the roots of his feathers.

He alerted Dean, as promised, and then had to again forcefully demand that his friends keep their distance from him, as the pull was happening.

Dean’s instinct to grab onto Cas was incredibly strong...similar to a mother throwing her arm out to protect her child in the passenger seat, when the car in front slams on the brakes. It’s a useless gesture. It can’t possibly save anyone. And yet, that arm shoots out every single time.

Sam had actually anticipated this somewhat and stepped between the two of them, gently pushing his brother back and away. He watched Cas over his shoulder.

“See ya in a few,” Sam said, quietly. When Cas met his eyes and tried to grin reassuringly, Sam found that he, too, had to fight the urge to grab onto him. He’d known Cas must have been at least a little worried. There was no way to predict what might happen to him out there. So, when Sam saw the hint of real fear in that normally stoic face, he felt a strong urge to do something. To try to protect him. Somehow.

Cas closed his eyes, forced himself to stop fighting...and disappeared.
June 9, 2016
1:50 AM CDT

It was a beautiful night. Dark and still. The quarter moon had long since set and the sky was pitch black. The stars were amazing. It was something both brothers appreciated about the remoteness of the bunker. Lebanon proper didn’t put out that much light, so even though it was close, the sky would get dark enough to clearly see the Milky Way in all of its brilliance. It was magnificent. Shooting stars were a given when the sky could get this dark, and, of course, airplanes and satellites stood out shamelessly against the inky backdrop.

The buzz of summer insects was reaching full force, and in the absence of any other ambient noise, the sounds they made seemed to come from every corner of the world.

Cas had been gone nearly an hour and a half.

Dean had pulled the Impala out of the garage, preparing for the possibility that Cas might return at an even greater distance this time. He and Sam were both lying on the hood, watching the sky, wondering where the angel might be right now.

They had their cell phones out, waiting for the call. Each of them checked regularly, ensuring his phone was on and receiving coverage, even though the idea that both of their phones would spontaneously shut off at the same time was ridiculous, and there hadn’t been an outage anywhere nearby in years.

Sam breathed deeply, trying to release the tension.

“You have any idea what to say to Mom?” he asked, breaking the silence.

Dean sighed and shook his head slowly.

“No.” He thought for a moment and continued. “Other than to do my best to keep catching her up and hope like hell she listens.”

“Maybe we need to tell her at least one thing each that we choked on, ya know? Forget about Cas and…”

“And tell her just how insane every person she’s living with is?” Dean interrupted. “How I was Hell’s pride and joy, and then spent a little while as a demon and nearly murdered you? In this bunker? Then you can tell her how you walked around soulless and wound up feeding me to vampires.”

Sam pursed his lips and nodded. “So...you’re thinking ‘no’?”

“Oh, no...I think it’s exactly what we should do. It’d put Cas’s crap into perspective in one hell of a hurry.” Dean answered. “I also think the poor woman isn’t gonna want to live in the same State as us, much less under the same roof.”

Sam snorted out a humorless laugh.

“Seriously, Sam…” Dean continued. “By the time she knows it all, if she doesn’t barricade herself in her room at night, it’ll only prove that we’ve cracked her. She’s done. Totally nuts.”
“Yeah…” Sam groaned. He looked down to check his phone again. It was almost a nervous tic, now.

Dean sighed again and let his eyes roam across the sky. The stars were incredible in every direction, but they’d lost their luster at the mention of their mom. He was way too worried to appreciate them tonight.

“I dunno, Sam. We’ll fix it...somehow.” He rolled his head to gaze out toward the Southwest, and a small, extra bright dot caught his eye.

“What’s that,” Dean mumbled, squinting at it.

“What,” Sam asked, following his brother’s gaze.

They watched for a moment, trying to bring it into focus. Whatever it was, it seemed to be pulsating brighter and dimmer, and the movements looked erratic.

Dean curled upward and threw his legs over the side of the car, staring intently at the object. It seemed to be approaching, but he couldn’t be sure. It was still a very long way off.

“I don’t think it’s a plane,” Sam said. “I don’t know of anything that can bank like that.” He paused, as they both continued to stare at it.

“Please tell me that’s not Cas,” Dean said, more to himself than to Sam.

“Is he...on fire? Or it’s his grace, maybe? Why would he be shining like that…” Sam wondered aloud.

The object appeared to bank hard again, changing its trajectory to head due North, across the brothers’ line of sight, instead of toward them. The glowing object streaked across the sky at astounding speed, slower than a regular meteor, but much faster than any military jet.

They heard a dull ’boom’ come from the direction of where the object had been almost a minute ago.

“Jeez…” Sam breathed. “If that is him, he’s breaking the sound barrier.” Then Sam caught his breath. “Oh, crap!”

“What?” Dean asked, wide-eyed.

“I might know why he’s glowing!”

“Do I wanna know?!”

“I think he might be coming in fast enough to be heating the air in front of him. Turning it into a plasma. Some meteors can do that.”

“So he IS ON FIRE?!?” Dean nearly yelled.

“I have...no idea…”

They both stared at it, tracking its movements as it turned abruptly West. It then began a long, hard bank, turning a full 180 degrees. It was now heading straight toward them.

At first, they were glad. They weren’t sure how far they were gonna have to go to get him when he landed, and they’d been a little worried that if it was too far, they wouldn’t get to him in time to power him back up before the next ‘pull.’ But, as the object approached, they both saw it dip sharply
downward, and level out at what seemed like a very, VERY low altitude.

“Uh…” Sam said.

“That’s…uh…he looks really low…” Dean mumbled.

“Yeah…” Sam answered. His voice was starting to sound tense.

As they watched, the object split violently into a large fireball that appeared to slam almost straight down into the ground, and a tiny glowing spec that shot upward. Neither man was able to really gauge the distance.

Immediately afterward, the tiny spec was gaining in size and brightness and still heading straight toward them. It now appeared even lower than the first fireball had been.

“What’re ya doin’, Cas?” Dean breathed.

“Dude…pull up. Pull up.” Sam was now standing. His instincts were gearing him for a sprint.

The object once again split as it did before. The sound of the first fireball hitting the ground had just reached them. It was a rumble through the ground more than an actual sound. But it was strangely disconnected from what they were seeing, because of the distance it had to travel. The sound of the second fireball had yet to reach them.

“What the hell?” Sam whispered, relaxing a bit, now that he could tell it was a greater distance away.

One last split occurred and the tiny spec of light was thrown tremendously high as the fireball slammed into the ground beneath. It must have only been ten or so miles away this time. The concussion was enough to shake the ground, now.

“Holy shit…” Dean said, putting his hand up to his mouth.

The small, shining spec began a very rapid descent. It’s glow was fading as it dove, but it was still just bright enough to see against the very dark sky. It fell in a graceful arc, swooping from an almost vertical dive into a smooth, controlled line, heading straight for the bunker. It was still going tremendously fast.

“Do we need to…” Dean began, but never finished, as the object shot past them, about a mile to their South and at least a couple thousand feet up. Another sonic boom hit them, and this time it was intense. Both men reflexively crouched and threw their hands over their heads and ears. Two of the Impala’s windows cracked. One shattered entirely.

They recovered as quickly as they could and turned to continue watching the streak. One final time, a pulse of fire, very dull, compared to the others, shot downward from the object. This time the small glowing shard had lost an enormous amount of speed as it was flung high into the air. It now appeared to have little horizontal motion and was simply falling vertically to the Earth from a great height. They guessed it would fall a few miles away, not far from where the last fireball had hit.

Dean immediately dove into the driver’s seat and started the engine. Sam barely had time to get his door closed, before Dean was spinning the car 180 degrees and racing toward their friend.

Right then, the sound from both of the last fireballs slamming into the ground finally arrived, one after the other. The roar was tremendous and Dean swerved from the shock of them, before continuing to speed toward their target.
The last fireball had left a wide crater in the ground, very close to the side of the road, so when they drove past it, they knew they were in the right general area.

Sam’s phone buzzed. He had a text.

‘E of Bb Ln N of 130 pls hurry’

“Bb North of 130,” Sam read it off to Dean. “He’ll be on the left.”

Dean shoved the pedal all the way to the floor, taking the flat, straight, country roads at well over 100 mph, braking hard and fishtailing on each of the three remaining turns on the route.

It took less than three minutes.

When they reached the right place, though, they realized they still had a problem. It was pitch black and Cas’s directions had left them with at least a square half a mile to search.

They both jumped out of the car.

“Cas!” Dean boomed, angling his voice toward the Northeast. They both listened for a moment.

“Cas!” Sam shouted to the Southeast.

They were about to scream for him again, when Sam caught sight of a tiny flicker of light, waving above the tops of the young soybean plants, about a hundred yards into the field. He slapped at Dean’s arm and took off. Dean followed.

The little light would appear, move from side to side, then disappear for a few seconds. It would reappear and repeat the same pattern.

Sam nearly tripped over him. Cas was lying spreadeagled on the ground, his cellphone in his hand and his arm still trying to repeat the pattern of flashing the lit phone screen toward them as best he could. Sam knelt down next to him and called back to his brother. Dean dropped down next to Cas a moment later.

“Cas!” Dean called to him. “Cas, I’m here. Can you use the tether thing?” Dean said, reaching forward and groping for Cas’s face. “Here...I’ll touch you, that’ll make it easier, right?” He sounded a little frayed and Sam tried to keep his brother grounded with a firm grip on his arm.

Cas didn’t make them wait. The glow of his grace began washing over his body almost the instant Dean’s hand touched him. A few seconds passed, and the angel pushed himself up to a kneeling position. Dean stayed close. Logically he knew his friend was fine, but it would be a few minutes before his system would catch up to that fact and stop dumping adrenaline.

“Thank you,” Cas said. He reached out and put a hand on each man’s shoulder. “Are you both alright? You sound very out of breath.”

Sam chuckled. “Yeah,” he said and laughed again.

“We’re good, Cas,” Dean said, still gasping from the sprint. “You?”

“I’m completely repaired. Thank you, Dean.”

“Good,” Dean panted. “That’s...that’s good.”

Both men took several deep breaths to try to relax, as they rose and began to walk back toward the
“Let’s just get back,” Dean said. “You fill us in on the way.”

“And tell us what the hell we just saw,” Sam added. He chuckled slightly. “That was some show, dude!”

Dean momentarily lost track of Cas in the dark and reached out to feel for him. Finding his coat, he curled his fingers into the fabric and held on until they were all the way back to the car.

Cas didn’t protest.

Chapter End Notes

On the off chance that they happen to be reading this fic, Castiel wishes to extend his apologies to the owners of the fields to the West and East of Bb, North of 130, in Lebanon, KS. And to the owners of whatever fields the other, much larger fireballs landed in. He wishes to assure these farmers that he will bless each field to ensure plentiful future yields...if he makes it out of this alive.
Throwing Matches at a Powder Keg

Chapter Summary

The car ride home, geekery, and Dean finally blows a fuse.

Also, lots of talking and feels. It’s a fluff-a-ganza, folks! Enjoy.

Oh...and Mary comes out of her room at the end. There’s milk and cookies. How could she not?

Chapter Notes

Sorry this is taking so long, folks! I thought I’d have more done by now, but...ya know...shit happens.
I do hope you enjoy this chapter. Drop me a comment. Let me know what you think. It’ll make me happy, regardless.

References:

June 9, 2016
2:08 AM CDT

“I could have ridden in the back seat,” Cas said, wriggling his arms to try to reposition between the two men. “It isn’t yet necessary for us to remain this close.”

“Yeah, well…” Dean began, also trying to shift to give himself a little more room. He finally let his left arm hang out of the window. “The back seat’s covered in glass.”

Looking back over his shoulder, Cas winced.

“I assume that’s my doing?” he asked.

“These grand entrances of yours’ll definitely keep the local glaziers in business,” Dean half-joked as he peered out through a cracked windshield. Hitting a small bump in the road informed him that his side window was now a jangling pile of safety glass inside the door. He slumped a bit and shook his head slowly.

“You had us worried,” Sam said, giving Cas a nudge on the arm. “We didn’t expect you’d be gone so long.”
“I didn’t intend to be. I was able to get some of the readings I needed. Others were unsuccessful. But my return was...problematic.”

“Uh, yeah...we kinda picked up on that,” Sam said, drily.

“It seems that the more time I spend in the location to which I’m being summoned, the greater the attractive force becomes. I didn’t realize it was happening until I tried to move away. Having spent time at that position to take measurements was a mistake. It required nearly all of my available power just to break free from there and begin the journey back.”

“So...it IS a summoning spell?” Sam asked.

“It appears to be. I’ve never encountered anything quite like it. Some type of summoning and catchment spell combined. But summoning only my wings. It’s very strange.”

“And the light show? What was that? You couldn’t just fly back?” Dean asked.

“I didn’t have enough power to make it the entire distance. I had to use as many of the available resources as possible, just to ‘catch up’ with the Earth again...I even had to use the gravity of the Earth’s moon to alter my trajectory.” He looked over at Sam and nodded conspiratorially. “I haven’t had to do that many calculations that fast in a very long time!”

Cas reached down absently and plucked at something stuck in one button hole in his coat. It was a soy plant leaf. He looked carefully at it in the faint glow of the dashboard and stereo lights.

“So...wait a minute...”Sam said, shifting a bit to be able to look at Cas better. He let his right arm and shoulder dangle out of the open window.

“You’re saying you actually DID come in like a meteor?!” Sam asked, unable to believe that the angel could possibly be sitting next to him right now, if that were true. “That WAS plasma glowing and shooting off of you?!”

Cas looked over at Sam and grinned.

“I have to say, Sam...your base of knowledge is remarkable. It’s so broad. Did you ever consider studying science or mathematics as well as law?”

“Focus...Cas,” Dean breathed, exasperated and very ready for this conversation to move toward anything he could actually do something about.

“Yes. The glow was from the highly compressed air in the wake-front caused by my movement through the atmosphere. I had enough power to protect my vessel, but not enough to manifest my wings for flight...though I couldn’t have used them during the majority of my return. The forces on them would have been far too great.”

Cas went on rambling for more than half a minute, very quickly giving a list of options he’d had for each stage of his return, and giving his reasons for or against each choice. It was so fast and intense and the things Cas was saying sounded so impossible, neither of the men could come up with anything to say that would stop his roll. So...they just listened.

“Then...with the little power I had remaining,” Cas said, finally coming to the end of his manic list, “I had to figure out how to get down to the ground, while still protecting my vessel. I didn’t have enough power to do both, so instead, I allowed the Earth’s gravity to capture me and pull me in. Once I was certain I’d entered the upper atmosphere correctly and wouldn’t skip back into space...and after I’d made it down to the thicker layers, I used a small amount of power to
encapsulate the dense, compressed air in front of me. I then threw it forward and downward as hard as possible...thus gaining altitude while reducing my forward momentum. It took multiple tries. I almost didn’t have enough power for the last one. I’m very glad I did, though. Hitting soft ground at terminal velocity is survivable for my vessel, if my power is replenished quickly enough. Hitting the ground at greater than Mach 1..." he winced and shook his head. "That would have been messy."

Cas paused briefly, lifting the leaf to study it more closely. "I’m actually quite surprised I survived," he mused.

At that moment, they pulled into the bunker’s garage. Dean brought the Impala to a very abrupt halt, just barely squalling the tires on the smooth floor. Cas and Sam both had to reach forward to brace themselves, to keep from sliding into the dash.

Dean slammed the gear shift into ‘First’ and removed the key. His movements were almost violent and Cas was flinching a bit next to him.

He threw open his door and stepped out, but before his right foot hit the floor, he reached back and grabbed a fistful of Cas’s shirt, tie, and coat and pulled him bodily out of the car.

Cas’s eyes went wide, as he gripped Dean’s forearm and reached for any available handhold inside the car to keep from tumbling out onto the floor. He barely got his legs under himself, before he was being dragged toward the far wall of the garage.

Sam watched this interaction and sighed. Clearly his brother was not handling the situation with his usual panache. It was easy to see why - there was nothing to fight. Not yet, anyway. Helpless and lacking information was the one position Dean had never been able to tolerate for long.

Which is why Sam wondered how Cas could be this oblivious to the fact that he was sitting right next to a cracked-open powder keg, and that every blasé comment the angel made about nearly dying was essentially lighting a match.

Sam found himself actually hoping the bad guys would pop out of the woodwork. It wouldn’t be fun, but it might save his brother’s sanity.

Dean headed straight for a length of rope that was coiled and hanging from one of the wall hooks. He grabbed one end and let the rest fall to the floor. Quickly fashioning a loop with the end he was holding, he roughly grabbed Cas’s forearm and slipped the loop over the angel’s wrist, tightening it just a little too much.

Cas was momentarily alarmed. He looked at Dean, then down at his wrist, flinching a little as the rope bit into the sensitive skin. His concern faded, though, when Dean began uncoiling the rope and didn’t reach for his other wrist.

“You’re angry,” Cas said quietly. It was partly a question, but he was fairly sure he knew the answer.

“What tipped ya off, Cas?” Dean snarked, still fussing with the rope. When he had it untangled enough, he grabbed Cas’s arm again and lifted it straight out to the side. Cas just watched him, allowing himself to be manhandled without complaint.

“Stay!” Dean glared at him, daring him to move. He began very cautiously taking small steps away. “You tell me when i’m just about to be too far. Whenever you feel that attraction-thing pullin’ on ya or...whatever.”

Step by step, he moved, waiting for Cas to stop him. At a little less than ten feet, Cas spoke up.
“There.”

Dean took one stride back toward Cas, essentially cutting the separation down to about seven and a half feet. He pulled a knife out of the holster around his ankle and cut the rope, quickly fashioning another loop and tightening it around his own wrist.

“No mistakes this way. I’m done screwin’ around. You’re stayin’ put. Got it?” He pointed his finger right in Cas’s face, as he walked past his friend to put the remaining rope back on the wall.

“Dean—” Cas began as Dean passed him again.

“You wanna know why I’m pissed?” Dean cut him off, barely containing the urge to scream at him or punch him. “Because you don’t tell me the stuff I need to know. THAT’s why I’m pissed! It’s a thing with you, Cas. You just suck it up and take the hit, like that’s supposed to be better for everybody somehow!”

He bent down to put his knife away.

“If there’d been more to tell you...”

“No! That’s bullshit! And you know it. You don’t have to explain all the science-y crap or give me all the little details about your feathers or your...wavelengths. You just need to tell me when you’re about to do something that could get you killed!”

“I didn’t know that it would drain that much of my power.”

“Yeah...but you DID know what would happen, if it DID drain your power. And you didn’t say anything. You just sat there...tellin’ me about how important the data was. You somehow failed to mention the fact that you might have to Apollo 13 your ass back through the fuckin’ atmosphere! You had NO plan!”

Cas opened his mouth to speak, but thought better of it. He simply waited for an indication that his friend was finished. Dean soon gave it to him.

“Look...” Dean said, as he put his hand to his forehead and slowly dragged it down his face. He took a deep breath and let it out, forcing himself to calm down.

“We’re gettin’ nowhere with this in a big hurry. And all I’m seein’, is you doin’ what you usually do...and you’re scarin’ the crap outta me, Cas!” He sighed once again. “Sam’s fried. I’m fried. You’re...just getting over bein’ almost fried. Air fried! So...”

He looked around the garage, thinking.

“So...we need to get a few hours of sleep, and we’ll get back on it. In the meantime,” he said, staring right at Cas. “You’re done makin’ the decisions. We decide this stuff together. All of us. And you don’t go off doin’ crap without tellin’ us what could happen!”

Cas squinted at him. He wasn’t certain he’d understood him correctly.

“Why would I not be making the decisions about this? I’m the one affected.”

Dean smiled and chuckled humorlessly.

“That’s your problem, Cas. You don’t get it. You go and get yourself stuck in outer space...or you throw yourself under the bus to try to make things right...and I am affected! Sam is affected!
Everybody who needs you or cares about you is affected!” He paused, trying to figure out what to say. In the end, he just shook his head.

“Just...don’t do anything. Ok? Can you at least promise me you won’t do anything while I’m asleep? Can I count on you for that?” he asked, frustration building once again.

Cas nodded. “Of course.”

“Thank you.” Dean sighed again and turned to walk toward the interior garage door. “So...we’re tethered for real, now, so you can’t get too far.” He stopped abruptly and turned to face Cas again. “But I swear, if you take that rope off your wrist for one second…”

“I won’t,” Cas interrupted. “It will stay where it is.”

Dean looked at him. He almost wanted him to fight back, because he was still pissed and Cas caved too quickly. He still had at least two more rounds in him. Where was the asshole that tells him to go play with blocks, when he needed him? Maybe his mom was right. Maybe he and Cas did need to knock each other around for a while. Or maybe... Maybe he just needed for this freakin’ horrible day to be over. That was probably a better answer.

“Ok,” he said, deciding this was enough. “I need to sleep.” He looked over at his brother, who was already at the door, waiting for them.

“C’mon, Cas,” Dean said, quietly. “We need to get you set up in my room. Getcha somethin’ to read or...somethin’.”

He walked slowly toward Sam. Cas followed, taking up the small amount of excess slack in the rope.

“Lorna Doone’s and milk? What’re you doin’?” Dean asked, observing the small stash of items Cas had carried back to Dean’s room, after their trip to the kitchen.

“I thought I’d try them,” Cas answered quietly. He set his items on the bedside table and pulled the desk chair close by.

He followed patiently, as Dean went through his nightly routine. Trip to the bathroom; brush teeth; wipe the road grime off his face, arms, and hands. He politely turned as Dean undressed and put on his usual t-shirt and boxers. They coordinated the first ‘unhooking’ of the rope-tether, as Dean removed it from his wrist to change his shirt.

“I’ll find us a set of cuffs, tomorrow. And carabiner clips, so we can unhook when we need to.” He looked at Cas. “ONLY when we need to.”

Cas nodded once.

Crawling into bed, Dean looked back over at Cas’s little stash.

“You’ve never had milk?”

“I’ve had goat’s milk. But never cow’s milk. Not skimmed and heated, like this. I did try raw cow’s
milk, once. A very long time ago. And cultured milk. I like cultured milk.”

“Cultured? Like...curdled?” Dean asked, curling his lip in disgust.

“Fermented. With a culture of yeasts and bacteria,” Cas explained.

“That sounds...unbelievably gross.” Dean pulled the covers up and adjusted himself to a comfortable position. He looked over at Cas, who was sitting quietly in the chair...watching. “You're a weird guy.”

Cas snorted and grinned.

“I’ve been told.”

Dean’s eyes were already heavy, but he was still too amped to let himself doze off. He checked his phone, his email, etc. He looked up the price of replacement glass for the Impala at a local auto-glass shop and groaned.

“Old and cheap ain’t so cheap anymore. Gettin’ harder to find used.”

“I’m sorry about the glass. I might be able to repair some of it,” Cas offered.

“We’ll look at it in the morning.” Dean set his phone on the side table and settled down into the bed. He let his eyes drift closed.

“I’m sorry, Dean,” Cas said, again. He clearly meant it for far more than the windows.

Dean opened his eyes and looked at him for a long moment, then took a deep breath and let it out. The communication breakdown between the two of them was becoming a real burden...and a very dangerous one, Dean realized. It had to change. And that thought was the trigger for another very deep sigh.

“I know,” he said. He continued to look at his friend for a while. There was so much more they needed to talk about. So many things that had been shoved to the side or skimmed over. So much that needed to be cleared up. It was hard to even think about where to begin, and at times like these, it just seemed overwhelming. Dean had no idea where to start. So...he went with the most basic idea.

“I don’t understand why you think we don’t need you. Like you’re expendable and we could just replace you. Or...trade you in for a new angel.” Dean watched his friend, searching his face for some kind of clue. He knew the answer he’d get from Cas would be just as guarded as his expression and it made him feel even more tired.

Cas dropped his gaze and shifted in his seat. He looked like he wanted to answer, but instead remained silent.

“Have we treated you that badly?” Dean asked. He was still frustrated, and that came through in his voice, but the question was sincere. “Do we make you feel like you don’t count?” He thought for a moment and rephrased. “Do I?”

Cas looked back at him. His expression softened and he gave his friend a small smile.

“No. It isn’t you,” Cas answered quietly.

“Sammy?” Dean asked, a little confused. He thought Sam probably treated Cas better than he did. At least Sam seemed to understand him more often - the stuff he talked about.
“No, neither of you,” Cas said. “You’ve both treated me very well, under the circumstances. And in those brief moments when we weren’t completely wrapped up in fighting to hold the world together...those times have meant a great deal to me. I’ve enjoyed them immensely.”

“Under the circumstances?” Dean asked.

“You have to admit there’ve been times when I’ve made it very difficult for you to treat me as a trusted friend,” Cas answered.

Dean resisted the urge to groan or lash out at him in frustration. It would have been incredibly hypocritical of him to jump on Cas for holding on to guilt and shame and failure...for not allowing himself to be forgiven. That particular skill was a Dean Winchester specialty, after all.

“Cas...you were alone, powerless and human...and instead of helping you, I kicked you out. Completely abandoned you. And wouldn’t tell you why.” He let that sink in for just a second before continuing.

“You tried to save me. To stop me from becoming the guy who would murder the world. And I nearly beat you to death. Nearly killed you for it with your own blade...while you begged me to stop...for MY good, not your own.” Dean had to pause for a moment. The memory was still a bit too fresh for him.

“Have you really forgiven me for all that? I mean...you can’t have.”

Cas’s face changed immediately.

“Of course I’ve forgiven you,” Cas said emphatically. “Dean...you were trying to save Sam. I told you I understood. And with the Mark having such a strong hold on you...you can’t possibly believe I would hold that against you!” Cas looked worried and concerned, but mostly he looked hurt.

“There,” Dean said, moving his hand slightly and pointing at his friend’s face. “The way that felt. Right there. That’s how I feel when you act like I shouldn’t forgive you.”

He watched Cas’s face twist. Dean knew he wanted to believe him...wanted it so badly...but he could see the angel’s mind fighting to hold on to the vicious labels he’d given himself: Fool, Thief, Murderer, Liar, Burden.

“I hate it. Just as much as you hate it when I do it.” Dean watched him for a bit longer, and then closed his eyes and groaned softly.

“Oh...I need to... It’s been way too long a day to be having this talk, so...just do me a favor, ok? Stop actin’ like you don’t matter. ‘Cause you do.” He was starting to mumble now...sleep rapidly overtaking him, as soon as he closed his eyes. “‘n if you don’...f’r...you...then ‘cuz y’ matter t’ me. ‘k? Cas? Y’r ‘mportn’ t’ me.”

He made a few more small sounds and then was still.

Cas waited for about a minute, then reached out and touched Dean very lightly on the forehead, sending him into a much deeper sleep. All traces of care or worry disappeared from his friend’s face, and Cas marvelled at how young he looked when he was peaceful. He smiled, though it was bittersweet. The transformation was a stark reminder of the heavy weight this man carried every day and Cas found himself once again wishing he had the power to take that burden away. Because he would. In a heartbeat.

Without really thinking, he let his fingers brush gently through his friend’s hair a few times. When he
realized what he was doing, he stopped. It was far too intimate a gesture. Dean would almost certainly disapprove.

Very reluctantly, he withdrew his hand and sat back. He continued to watch him sleep for a few minutes, before retrieving his phone from his pocket and typing up a text. He re-wrote and re-read it several times, and let his thumb hover over the ‘Send’ icon for a long moment, before pressing it.

The phone buzzed and rattled on the hard side table. Mary had been trying to remember to lay it on a soft surface at night, so the noise wouldn’t sound like some rodent snarling next to her head, if it went off, but this evening had been rather...well...it had sucked. Badly. So...the text scared the hell out of her and she jumped.

Reaching for the phone, she knocked several wadded tissues that hadn’t made it to the nearby trashcan off of the bed and onto the floor. Her cheek rolled onto a very cold, very wet spot on her pillow, where the last round of tears had yet to dry. She wrinkled her nose in disgust and rolled away from it.

She opened the text.

‘i know i’m not ur 1st choice. but i am an angel. i know how 2 listen. if u’d like 2 talk.’

Mary sighed. She was way too tired to have an attitude with anyone. Closing her eyes, she let the phone plop down on her chest.

It vibrated again. Mary jumped.

“Uhn!” she grunted, scrabbling for it.

‘in D’s rm’

‘i have milk and cookies’

She looked at the text. And kept looking at it.

Another text came through.

‘ :-{ ‘

Mary squinted. She brought the phone closer to see if she was missing something, and quietly said the name of each character aloud. “Colon Dash Parenth…” And then she tilted the phone sideways.

“Oh, for God’s sake,” she said, exasperated. Looking back at it, she grinned. Then snorted out a quick laugh.

She set the phone back on the side table and sighed heavily, thinking. It was still the middle of the night. It sounded like both of her boys had gone to sleep just a short time ago. She’d be alone with the angel. Not at all smart or safe. Which made her wonder why in the world was she considering his invitation.

She sighed and let her head roll back to the picture she’d been holding before the texts startled her
into reality. It was a more recent picture. He was older. But it was still the same face. Same eyes and
smile. Same hands. Rougher. Harder. But still him. She brought it briefly to her mouth to give it
another kiss, before letting it drop onto the side table, next to the phone.

Wiping her eyes once more...certain that they were puffy enough to make her look like she was
approaching anaphylactic shock...she pulled off the covers, grabbed a fistful of fresh tissues and
padded her way out of her room and down the hallway, toward her son’s slowly opening door.

Cautiously, she peered around the doorframe into the dimly lit room. She could see Dean, bundled
under a thick layer of covers, with only his hair poking out of the top. To his right, on the floor,
curled into a tiny ball, knees tucked up to his chest, forearms across his shins, and leaning back
against the side table, was Castiel. She could only vaguely see what looked like a piece of rope tied
to his wrist and extending up underneath the covers on Dean’s bed.

In front of the angel, was the desk chair, positioned invitingly. A tall glass of milk and a plastic-
covered sleeve of cookies waiting on the seat.

He looked up when he saw her, and did his best to give her a warm, friendly, non-weird grin. He
almost got it.
The title of this chapter is a lie. Total sarcasm. There’s very little 'nice' or 'happy' at this picnic. At least, not until much later. But, it may change things for Cas...if he can overcome the urge to rage-quit and smite something. I’m calling 60/40 odds he keeps his shit together. He’s tough. Just be prepared to close your eyes, if this goes South.

WARNING: Those of you (including me) who adore Cas...prepare yourself. You may want to gank Mary during the read of this chapter. But...please...give her a chance! Hear her out! She really is trying to help him, and her sons, and herself. Personally, I think she’s right. It’s my opinion, I know, but...I think Cas has been so wrapped up in the sheer horror of what he’s done, for so long, now, he’s missing the vital lesson that would have helped him to not make the terrible mistakes he made afterward.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

June 9, 2016

3:08 AM CDT

“Won’t we wake him?” Mary barely said, as she moved slowly into the room. She watched Dean to ensure she wasn’t already doing just that.

“As long as we keep our voices low, he’ll sleep.” Cas looked over at his friend, watching for any movement that might prove him wrong. “If he stirs, I’ll nudge him back down. Dean always asks for at least four hours, so...I wouldn’t be doing anything he doesn’t want.” He paused, working at the loop on his wrist. “Though I do hope he’ll get more than that. He needs it.”

Mary considered the angel for a moment. His strange mannerisms and constantly tense demeanor were gone. Right now, he seemed a lot less like an intangible threat, and more like a regular guy who’d been running himself ragged and finally found some tiny corner of the world where he could stop and catch his breath.

Once again, she found herself sympathizing with him, in direct conflict with all her years of training. It was maddening. She had to figure how to deal with this or she was going to lose her mind.

Noticing the cookies and milk, she pursed her lips, crossed her arms and began rocking slowly from side to side.

“That’s not fair, ya know,” she said, her face a transparent mask of mock-seriousness. “How am I
supposed to stay all tough and defensive, when you’re giving me cookies, huh? Shortbread, no less.”

Cas looked at her, and when he noticed the stance, he grinned and huffed out a single laugh.

“It amazes me...even still,” he said as he watched her, “how mannerisms can transfer so exactly from parent to child. The ties are...very strong.”

She looked down at herself and realized she’d seen Dean do exactly the same. She smiled, as well.

After another few moments, she sighed, dropping her arms and moving tiredly to the offered seat. She took the milk and the cookies and rested them in her lap, slowly sliding the plastic sleeve off so she could indulge. They sat quietly through the happy consumption of two cookies, before she spoke.

“Explain it to me. What you’re doing to him,” she said quietly, as she watched her son sleep.

“A human soul generates an enormous amount of energy. Most of which is simply dissipated into that human’s surroundings. The amount that I require to fully repower myself, even from a very low-power state is only about 3% of what his soul outputs at any time. He would recover that quickly and never notice it’s loss.”

“This force, though...this ‘attractive force’...it’s not just the pull to the spot out there in space that’s tapping you, right? It’s a constant drain now?” Mary asked, cracking another cookie in half.

“That’s true. It is possible, at some point, that the consumption of power could become so intense that the drain off of Dean’s soul would be noticeable...and possibly harmful. I’d be aware of that type of change immediately, though. If that were to happen, I’d simply break the tether.”

“You’ve...explained all this to him?” she asked with something of a knowing look on her face. She hadn’t been around them very long, but she’d already noticed that these three guys seemed to clip a whole hell of a lot of pretty important information out of their conversations. There was no reason to think Cas hadn’t left that little nugget out of his explanation.

“Dean knows, had there been any risk to his safety, I wouldn’t have agreed to this,” Cas answered. Then he considered that statement, and grinned sheepishly. “At least...he knows he would have had to have fought a lot harder to get me to agree.”

“But you would have agreed? Even if there’d been risk?” Mary asked. She tried to not sound accusing.

“Hmm,” Cas grunted, considering his response, as he continued to fiddle with the loop on his wrist.

“I’ve found,” he began, very slowly, “that in these situations...when there is no clear direction or path forward...if I give him all of the important information...Dean has an uncanny ability to make the correct decision.” He smiled and shook his head. “It’s been somewhat frustrating for me, actually. As I’ve watched him...fought alongside him these 8 years, I’ve had to accept that this man...who’s only existed for a few decades,” he paused and again shook his head, “is able to choose the correct path forward better than I can. And I’ve commanded thousands. For eons.” He looked up at Mary and winced, slightly.

“To be honest, it’s... rather embarrassing.”

Mary grinned at him. She’d noted how like her husband Dean seemed to be, when the situation called for someone to take charge. And if he really was like that during every crisis, she had the feeling she knew exactly what Cas meant. John had always been a very good leader. It was one of
the things that had attracted her to him in the first place. Of course, it was also one of the things that had caused a lot of fights in their marriage, but...in a life or death situation, that skill would be invaluable.

“So...you were the commander, huh?”

Cas nodded.

“Were you ever the ‘General’? The one setting the whole direction? Deciding whether or not you should be fighting in the first place?” Mary took a swig of her milk and set the glass on the floor, before popping another cookie in her mouth and tucking one knee up, resting her foot on the edge of the seat. She chewed absently, watching the angel.

“No,” he answered. “Angels are...um... We were created to follow orders. To do the will of our Father. We never made the over-all decisions. Not even the archangels.” He lowered his head. “When our Father left, he put us in an almost impossible position. We weren’t prepared for it. Only a few angels knew he was gone, though, and they apparently believed someone had to make the decisions, or the entirety of the Heavenly Host would disintegrate.” He paused for a moment, thinking.

“I don’t know,” he mumbled to himself, “maybe they were right. I’ve now seen what happens...when angels find out that our Father isn’t the one giving the orders. That maybe no one is in charge. It’s...not pretty. The decisions those few angels made, though...they weren’t...our Father would never have chosen the apocalypse. The destruction of humans. It was madness. It’s what finally opened my eyes. Made me f…”

He seemed to have drifted into his own reverie, as he spoke. Mary waited, watching as the pain and loss of whatever past events he was mentally reliving flickered across his face. This was nothing new to her, of course. She’d seen this happen with every hunter she’d ever known. Even John had his own set of traumatic memories from his childhood and his brief tour in Viet Nam. Apparently, only a few months in that war had been enough to rack up some major damage. Thoughts would sneak in, sometimes without warning, and shut him down. Leaving him angry. Raw. Completely unable to tolerate the slightest additional stress.

It was this ‘reliving’ of the traumas of hunting that Mary had most wanted to spare her family. To spare her children. She already had her own horror reel that played in her mind from time to time. She didn’t want that for them. And in the hunting life, it was unavoidable. No one walked away clean. Now, watching even an angel go through it only served to confirm she’d been right to try to avoid it for her boys. Of course...that hadn’t worked out. And she knew why.

“Still hard to say it out loud, huh?” Mary asked, sympathetically.

“It shouldn’t be. I still believe it was the right course of action.” He shook his head. “I know it was. But...it’s been...difficult.”

“Sorry.”

Cas nodded his thanks, and they were quiet for a few moments.

“So...you were the go-to guy, right? In Heaven?” she asked, not wanting to let him continue too long in his private nightmare. “The one who got the job done? Somebody else set the direction and you were the guy that made it happen?”

Cas looked up at her and nodded. He seemed a bit relieved that she was able to ascertain that from
what he’d said. It was one little thing he didn’t have to explain at length in order to be understood.

“So...if that’s what you did all that time, why would you think you should know how to make the direction-setting, big-picture decisions?” Mary asked this seemingly innocently, but it had suddenly become pretty clear to her what might be a major issue with this guy. She was kinda surprised that it could be this simple, especially since he wasn’t even human. There was almost certainly a lot more, but this was likely the thing that was holding him down...standing on his neck so he couldn’t get himself back up. ‘I guess even angels have their weird emotional shit,’ she thought.

“You’ve never done it,” she continued. “I mean, you think Dean would’a known how to do it if he hadn’t had John teaching him from a young age? Good Generals aren’t born, Cas. They’re made. They have to be taught. They have to practice. And they have to be able to do it in an environment where they can fail a lot, until they get it right. Gotta have somebody there to save their ass, until they’re good at it.” She took another bite of a cookie and chewed.

Cas stared at her, squinting. Mary stayed quiet, wanting to let her words sink in for a bit. But when the staring just...continued, she realized she was going to need to move the conversation along. ‘FUCK, that is creepy!’ she thought, and fought back the urge to shudder.

“Look...I know I don’t know you very well,” she said, and then backtracked. “Actually, I barely know you at all. But from what I’ve seen and heard so far, you’re sharp, you’re highly educated and experienced, and you must be one hell of a fighter. I’m also assuming that if Dean was supposed to be Michael’s...vessel...for the big showdown, then these jerks that were running things wanted to make sure they got him back up here on Earth, healthy and strong...no delays or screw ups. Which means, they wouldn’t have sent the junior squad to go get him. They sent their varsity team. The A players. That, alone, tells me you must be very good at what you do.”

She paused again to take a drink and when she looked at him, she realized he was not only fidgeting with the loop of rope, again, but actually blushing, as well. ‘Yep,’ she thought, ‘this is the issue.’ And then she noticed his wrist. The skin looked angry and his hand was just a little darker than the rest of him.

“Let me see that,” she said, reaching for his hand.

Cas was momentarily confused, but then understood what she was asking and lifted his arm to let her see his wrist.

“What is this, anyway?” she asked, gently tugging on the rope to see where it led.

Cas quickly grabbed the part leading up toward Dean, to hold it still, watching for any response from his sleeping friend.

“Oh!” Mary whispered. “Is that attached to him?”

“Dean was rather upset by my method of return from the last ‘pull’. So...I, uh...I’ll be staying close to him, now. No further than this allows,” he said, gesturing to the rope.

He sounded embarrassed. Mary couldn’t blame him. It would have to suck to be tied to someone all day every day, no matter how close the two of you were. And even worse to know that you are the one that has to have it and the other person is just doing it out of the goodness of his heart. It would be humbling, to say the least.

“Well, it’s too tight. And this kind of rope is gonna scratch you up anyway.” As she said this, she carefully loosened the knot, giving the loop a bit more length. She looked around just a bit, but didn’t
seem to find what she wanted. Then she looked at Cas.

“Gimme your tie,” she said, looking carefully at his wrist, to make sure she was getting this right. Cas complied and handed her his tie, which she then carefully began wrapping around the rope that made up the loop. When the area in contact with his wrist was completely covered by the tie material, she quickly knotted the tie ends together and then re-tightened the knot in the rope.

“That won’t last too long, I’m sure, but it’ll keep that scratchy rope off your skin ‘til he wakes up.”

Cas looked down at his much more comfortable wrist and smiled.

“Thank you,” he said, as he was finally able to heal his wrist one last time. “I was finding it difficult to loosen the knot with one hand. And I didn’t want it to come off entirely.”

“Welcome,” Mary said, tucking back into her curled up position in her chair, and biting another cookie in half.

“So...you’ve been in command...” she said, jumping back into the former topic. “What’s the first thing you do when given command of a new group?”

Cas thought about that for a moment, a little surprised by the question, but happy to answer as best he could.

“Well...” he began. He let his head tilt back to rest against the side table. “There are a number of things that must be done,” he answered.

“And they all have to be done, essentially at the same time, right? Or at least very quickly. And you can’t do all of them yourself,” Mary prodded. “So what’s the very first thing you need to do?”

Cas nodded.

“Establish a chain of command. Designate a lieutenant. Then...”

“Yep,” she interrupted him. “It’s the very first thing, ’cause it’s the most important thing. ’Cause a good lieutenant...a good second in command is vital. Right? Somebody you can just hand things to and know they’re gonna get done. You get a good second, and things are gonna run smooth. You don’t have one or you have a lousy one, and the whole thing unravels really quick.” She took another sip of milk. “People who’ve been generals a long time...they usually don’t make good seconds. It’s a completely different skill set, and they’re out of practice. Being a good second takes just as much training as being a good general. It’s a totally different job. But it’s a vital job. And if the wrong person is doing that job, it makes the general’s life a hell of a lot harder. Might even make the whole thing fall apart.”

Cas snorted.

“You’re saying...I should let Dean make the decisions. Trust in his leadership and not make things harder for him. Not question him.” He grinned. “I’ve wondered the same thing. Perhaps I should.”

“I didn’t say that,” Mary interrupted. “I never said you shouldn’t question him...or argue with him, when you think he’s wrong. When was the last time you had a really good second that didn’t question you, at least some of the time?”

“But I should just accept my limitations. Recognize that Dean is the better leader and...defer to him.” Cas sounded calm. Sounded as though he was humbly accepting his own statements and questions...but Mary noticed the clenching. The tightness in his tone. The sudden fire behind his eyes
and she had to stifle a smile.

‘Wow,’ she thought, watching him fight his internal battle. ‘This guy’s not a monster. He’s a freakin’ mess!’

She took a moment longer, considering exactly how blunt she should be right now. In the end, recognizing that time had not been on their side at all in the last two weeks, she decided on the nuclear option.

“Actually...I’m saying it probably didn’t take much to convince you that you were the new God, ‘cause you already thought you could do the job.”

To say that Cas’s face showed every emotion at once would have been an understatement. His entire body instantly went rigid.

“I...” He stopped and swallowed, every scrap of unbearable pain suddenly laid bare on the surface. His mind scrambled for a good response...a viable defense against such a vicious accusation, but it was too unexpected. He wasn’t prepared.

“That’s not true,” he finally whispered.

The look on his face almost made her regret having said it. ‘The guy definitely has the wounded puppy look down pat. Dammit!’ she thought, as she mentally shook off the intense pang of empathy and prepared to deepen the cut.

“Sure it is,” Mary stated flatly. “You were already practicing for the role when you decided on the Purgatory souls thing all by yourself.”

“You don’t...know…” He closed his eyes, clenching his jaw.

“You did it all by yourself, Cas. Dean and Sam had just done an amazing job saving the world. They’d ripped up the big plan and made their own. And they were just men! Surely, you could do it, too!” Mary shook her head in amazement. “You actually thought you were so awesome that you could do something you had absolutely no experience or training for. But, hey...why not, right? It was just the fate of the whole fucking world you were playing with! No reason to think maybe you were gonna have to have help! You’re the Great and Powerful Castiel! You could do this!”

Cas was trying to speak, but every thought he had was being shot down by his own internal filters, so nothing was coming out.

Mary leaned just a little closer to him.

“It needed to get done. Nobody else was stepping up, so you were gonna have to be the man for the job. You didn’t ask Dean for help, which means you thought you could do it, if you just tried hard enough. Tell me I’m wrong.”

Cas looked up at her briefly.

“It’s not...I didn’t think that.” He was still whispering, “I didn’t have a choice.” Then, he reached up and rubbed the back of his neck.

“You know that’s your tell, right?” Mary said, very casually. “The neck-rub thing. You do it when you’re not being honest about what you’re actually thinking. When you’re holding back, because you’ve thought of something you don’t wanna say, or you feel like it’s ‘wrong’ for you to be thinking it.” She took a swig of milk.
Cas glared at her, very briefly, before squeezing his eyes tightly shut and looking away again.

“You had a choice, Cas. You made the wrong one. You had no business making decisions like that on your own. And the one guy you had left in your life that could help you to figure it all out...you decided you wouldn’t burden him. With, ya know...the lives of everyone on Earth. You didn’t wanna impose.”

Cas shook his head. He could feel the tears beginning to form and he couldn’t let that happen. He couldn’t. Not in front of her. Not again.

“I won’t have this conversation with you,” he said, very quietly.

“Hey, man...you invited me. It’s not like things have been perfect up to this point. What the hell did you think was gonna happen here, huh? This was gonna be a nice, happy little picnic while your buddy takes a nap?”

At that moment, Dean stirred. Just a little, but Cas reached over and touched his forehead anyway. He stilled.

“You have no idea what...” Cas began, but once again, forced himself to stop.

Mary gave him a moment, to see what he’d do. When he continued to refuse to speak, she set the milk and the cookies down on the floor and leaned over, putting her elbows on her knees and staring right at the angel...a small sneer on her face.

“You self-righteous son-of-a-bitch. Dean told me when he first met you, he thought you were an arrogant little prick. Of course, he said that like he thinks you’ve changed. You haven’t changed. You’re exactly the same. You’re just covered in the stink of your own bullshit, now, and you don’t know what to do with yourself.”

She sighed heavily and frowned.

“If you haven’t figured out your problem by now, it’s not gonna happen. So, how ‘bout I clue you in, huh?”

Cas glared at her, again. No turning away this time. His expression was holding back very little, and it was clear he wanted to scream at her. Wanted to hit her. Wanted to do anything to shut her up before he lost all control.

“You can’t believe you fucked up,” Mary said. Cas’s glare lost some of it’s venom and he froze.

“Because you always did the right thing. You were always good. You’ve been golden for so long. The good son. The good angel. Righteous and Holy. Brilliant and capable. Respectable. Amazing. Before all this started, how long had it been since you’d tried to do something and fell flat on your ass, huh? A hundred years? A thousand? Do you even remember the last time you were incompetent at something? The last time you screwed up and got somebody hurt? Or killed? I mean, losing soldiers in battle is one thing, but I’m talking about you personally making a really stupid or selfish mistake and somebody else paid for it? Had that ever happened before?”

“I don’t know!” Cas shot back, barely able to keep his voice lowered, as he spat the words at her. “They erased my memories! I don’t even know how much I don’t remember!”

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“Well...” Mary said, wincing and letting out a sigh, “that sucks. It really does, Cas. They had no right to do that, whoever they were, and I’m sorry about it. But that doesn’t change any of this.”
“You messed up,” she continued. “And you killed a lot of people and a whole lot more angels. And that hurt. Bad. Of course it did. ‘Cause you’re NOT a monster. I don’t care what you said. Or what you think. You’re not. You just have an ego big enough to make you really stupid.”

“So...without even knowing any more of the story...how about I tell you what’s happened since then, huh? You just stop me if I get something wrong.”

Cas remained silent...and very still. When Mary continued, she’d lost some of her intensity.

“That mistake sent you absolutely out of your mind with guilt and grief and shock when you realized that you’re actually capable of something that horrific. And you had no idea what to do with that. How would you, right? You’d never done anything like that before. Not even close. So you tried to make up for it...and you fucked things up even worse. Then you panicked, and tried even harder...and made things worse still. Eventually, you did enough reckless and stupid shit that even Dean was pissed at you...and then, you did something really horrible AGAIN. Now...you’re scared of your own damned shadow, ‘cause you’re finally realizing that you can’t seem to take more than a step or two on your own without tripping a damned land mine and blowing up yourself and everyone around you.” She paused for a moment, watching him.

“How am I doin’ so far?” Mary asked, not expecting an answer.

Cas’s expression had lost most of it’s anger, by this time. It was such a callous retelling of his worst failures, that the pain was rapidly overtaking every other emotion.

Mary sighed heavily, gearing herself back up, to finish the job.

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“Then there’s the horrible crap that happened in between all that. Stuff that you take responsibility for, ‘cause maybe it wouldn’t have happened if you hadn’t done that other stuff to cause the chain reaction. And last, but certainly not least, there’s all the other things that have happened to you, or you’ve had to watch happen to those you care about...that weren’t your fault, but wore you down in between fuck-ups. All that has piled up so that now, you’re exhausted and looking for a hole to crawl into to hide and try to recover.”

She stopped and shook her head, looking down at her hands. A moment later, when she looked back up at him, her heart broke. He’d lost his battle. A few tears had made their way down his cheeks and she could see the humiliation in his eyes.

Mary had to look away for a moment, to keep from cracking herself. Without looking back at him, she continued.

“Do you have any idea how many times I’ve heard this exact story? Seen this identical form of emotional and mental ‘engine-seize’? How many young hunters I’ve seen my Dad walk through this?” She looked back at Cas, now, hoping like hell he was still listening.

“It was never the ones that had been raised in the life. Who’d been trained by older, experienced hunters and had a solid foundation for on-the-fly decision making. No...it was always the young guys who’d jumped in later on. The idealistic ‘invincible’ ones with big hearts, who were still a little green, but were smart and good fighters and had lots of talent and energy and drive and wanted so bad to save the world. They’d have a bunch of success, maybe for a really long time, and they thought they could do anything. Until...they couldn’t. And everybody would mourn the ones who didn’t make it out of their first major screw up. But...everybody would be really scared for a while to work with the ones who had made it out alive. ‘Cause if they hadn’t learned some humility? Hadn’t figured out that they actually couldn’t have done it right on their own? And if they couldn’t recover and were now on a mission to ‘make it right?’ Those are the guys that always got other
hunters killed. It never failed.”

“Cas...,” Mary said, dragging her hand over her face and sighing. “I thought, at first, I was worried about you because you’re not human. You tripped all my instincts. But, I just figured it out...just coming in here tonight, what it really is. You scare me because you’re unstable. And you’re unstable because you haven’t really learned from your mistakes. Not the important lesson, anyway. And that’s terrifying. ‘Cause if you don’t get it, really soon, it’s very likely you’re gonna wind up getting one of my boys, or me, killed. And probably yourself, too.”

The two of them sat in silence for several long minutes. Both of them avoiding the other’s eyes. Both of them considering the sleeping man next to them, and wondering how in the hell their lives could possibly be this screwed up.

Mary heard the soft sniffle Cas allowed himself, and closed her eyes. A moment later, she was up, reaching for the box of tissue she’d noticed on Dean’s dresser. She plucked a few out and offered them to Cas, before setting the box gently on the ground next to him. She thought about sitting back in the chair, but...

She turned, grabbed the box back up and plopped down on the floor, right next to him, letting the side of her arm rest against his. She set the box in her lap.

Cas looked at her, a little confused. This was certainly much closer than the 0.65 meters he had designated for Mary’s personal space. He began to shift to move and give her room, but she put her hand on his forearm.

“Don’t,” she said, softly. “It’s ok. I mean, you don’t have to move. I want to sit this close. Unless you don’t feel comfortable? I’d understand if you didn’t, after...everything. Just tell me, I’ll move back to the chair.”

Cas relaxed and stayed put, and again, they were silent for a few more minutes.

“I hope you don’t think...um...I don’t enjoy...this...” Mary said, quietly as she fiddled with the box of tissues. “I don’t ‘get off’ on brow-beating a good man when he’s down.” She cleared her throat...a lump having begun to form.

“And you are a good man, Cas. You are. I only have to listen to the way these two talk about you to know that.”

Cas glanced over at her, and Mary smiled sadly at him. She handed him another couple of tissues. He was still leaking.

“They love you. You know that, right?”

Cas glanced over at Dean. Almost instinctively, he reached up and made a tiny adjustment to the blanket covering his friend. It made no difference at all, but...

“I love them,” Cas whispered, and dropped his gaze back to his hands in his lap. “Which is new for me. It’s all new...all of it. I find it very difficult to know what to do with what I feel.” He paused, wiping his nose and face.

“We’re taught to not feel,” he continued. “Angels, I mean. And we’re forcefully discouraged from developing attachments to our charges.” He grinned, briefly. “I appear to be a lost cause in that area. And apparently, this isn’t the first time. Though...those are memories that have been taken from me. I have no way of knowing who or when...” He paused, another wave of loss and regret washing over him. He forced himself to not let it overwhelm him.
“Any strong emotion is discouraged. Especially with an angel of my rank. I have little experience dealing with the very negative ones. I’m finding I’m...more and more affected by each difficult situation I experience. Struggling to even function afterward.” He sniffed and cleared his throat. He was immediately handed another wad of tissues.

“I think the only thing that’s kept me from collapsing entirely has been the fact that I simply haven’t had the luxury. The fight has been nearly continuous. Only severe debilitation has given me brief down-time...and for much of that, I didn’t even remember my name.”

Mary groaned at that. She let her head lean back to rest against the side table.

“Oh, man,” she sighed. “There really is a lot more I need to hear, isn’t there?” She didn’t really need that answered. After another long pause, she reached over and placed her hand on his forearm again. She gave it a light squeeze. “I’m so sorry, Cas.”

“You know,” he said, once again wiping away tears and a newly formed string of goo, “the first time I remember ever having cried, was when I lost my grace. When I was, essentially human. I didn’t understand what was happening to me. It was terrifying for a minute or so, until I figured it out. The tightness in my chest and throat. The inability to stop. I thought I’d been hexed. That my vital fluids were leaking out.”

“Oh, crap,” Mary breathed, huffing out a humorless chuckle.

“Looking back on it, it was rather stupid of me,” Cas said, with a small but real chuckle. “I’d seen humans cry. I...just wasn’t...thinking.” He looked very sheepishly over at Mary, still holding a tiny grin. “It’s...probably best that Dean and Sam never know that.”

“It’s our secret,” Mary nodded.

Dean stirred again. This time, in the beginning stages of a nightmare. He curled tightly into a ball and a mal-formed yell for Sam began.

Cas quickly placed his hand on his friend’s forehead to quiet him. He rolled onto his hip, to get closer to the bed, and spent a few moments gently stroking the side of Dean’s face and mumbling something, until complete peace returned to the man’s features and his body relaxed. Cas watched for a moment longer before rolling back to his previous position next to Mary.

“That was amazing!” Mary gushed quietly, sincerely impressed. “Does that always work? On anybody?” She was quickly calculating the amount of agony this guy could potentially have saved nearly everyone she’d ever known and...it nearly took her breath away.

“Usually,” Cas answered, and grinned a bit, when he saw her wide-eyed expression. “Though it’s more effective with those I’ve taken on as my charges. And even more so with Dean. He and I share a more profound bond.”

Mary snorted and put her hand over her mouth. Cas squinted at her and tilted his head.

“Uh...yeah...Cas...you really should come up with a different way of saying that.” She cleared her throat and tucked away the smile as best she could. “The boys told me that little story about a week ago. They...uh...they’re still laughing about that.”

Cas huffed, instantly annoyed.

“Laughing?” Cas barely finished saying the word, before he stopped and shook his head, grimacing. “They both have so little respect for the sanctity…”
“Hey...hey...” Mary said, with a giggle. “Don’t get your shorts in a wad. They weren’t trying to be mean. They thought it was cute.”

“Cute,” Cas repeated, clearly even more annoyed. “It is a deeply solemn oath I take when I accept a new charge. Eternal. Breakable only under the most extreme conditions or upon my death. And with Dean…” He dropped his head, dramatically and huffed out one humorless laugh. “They think it’s cute.” He huffed again, stunned by their flippancy.

Mary was trying very hard not to be loud as she openly laughed. She was watching him, with her hand over her mouth.

“Yeah,” she said between giggles. “They’re Winchesters. Irreverent assholes, the lot of ‘em. Campbells, too. These two come by it honestly, at least.”

Cas let his head rest back against the side table again. “Cute,” he mumbled to himself. Mary giggled again.

They sat quietly for a few long moments, enjoying the break from the grinding conversation they’d been having. They were both emotionally exhausted, at the very least. It was Cas who eventually broke the silence again.

“What do I do?” he asked. He looked over at Mary with such a sincere, pained, desperate expression, Mary nearly burst into tears again. She quickly put her arm around his shoulders and pulled him closer.

“You start small, Cas. The simplest things first.”

“What does that mean? How do I know what I should be…”

Mary could see him already spiraling into a frustrated panic and she shushed him, giving his shoulders a tighter squeeze.

“Try not to think too hard. You don’t have to get everything right all the time. That’s too much pressure to put on yourself.”

Cas sighed heavily, still confused and losing steam.

“Ok…” Mary continued. “When does the next...'pull’ happen?”

“I’ll be able to fight it now, so I won’t be pulled...”

“No...I mean, when is it scheduled to happen again? You’ve figured out a rough time between them, right?”

“Yes.”

“And this is the first time you’ll experience that while directly tethered to Dean? Like, close enough to be able to fight it off?”

“Yes.”

“Except...you have no idea what’s actually going on. Meaning, you don’t know for sure what’s gonna happen. You could, potentially, be in a little trouble when it happens, right?”

Cas let his head drop back, frustrated again.
“I’m perfectly capable of...”

“You don’t know for sure, Cas. Right?” Mary was stern, again, trying to get him to come along.

“I’m not absolutely certain, no.”

“Ok, then,” she nodded, lightly slapping the top of her thigh for emphasis. “Your team, at least one of us, needs to be awake when it happens. So...you’ll wake Dean up. Unless I’m awake, then you can make sure I’m here with you.”

Cas shook his head.

“That’s completely unnecessary. There’s no need for either of you to...”

“Cas...” she said, pulling back and making direct eye contact. “Dean will want to know when you could potentially be in trouble. I’m surprised he didn’t insist on this before he fell asleep.” She considered him for a moment and squinted. “But...maybe he got you to promise to stick close by or something? Maybe that’s what the rope is about?” she prodded.

With that, Cas lost all his protests. He cleared his throat and rubbed the back of his neck.

“He did. Good. So...that’s settled then. Someone will be awake and with you during the next pull.” She gave him another squeeze and smiled at him. Cas slumped.

“Oh...so dramatic,” Mary chided, as she shifted away from him so she could reach her abandoned cookies and glass of milk. When she’d retrieved them, she resumed her position, shoulder hugging her new angel buddy. “These are absolutely delicious,” she said, spraying several bits of dry shortbread onto her night shirt and the floor. “You really should try one.”

Cas saw the spewed bits and grinned. There would be additional entertainment for him at the dinner table. Excellent.

He reached over awkwardly and took one of the cookies from the sleeve. Sizing it up for a moment, he took a small bite and pondered it. Then wrinkled his nose.

“Nope,” he said, disappointed. “Molecules.” Mary grinned at him.

“Bummer.” She saw the remainder of his cookie, snatched it out of his hand and popped it in her mouth. “More for me.” She smiled hugely at him.

Cas snorted.

“It’s just a couple more hours, ‘til the next one, right?”

“About three hours,” Cas answered.

“Ok...well...you can let Dean sleep. I’ll stay with you until then. If something happens, I’ll wake him up and we can both try to help. But you won’t be alone.”

Cas looked at her like he wanted to say something, but instead very gently bit his bottom lip. Mary rolled her eyes.

“It doesn’t matter that we don’t know what we could do, or even if we could do anything at all, dammit!”

Cas grinned.
“Sorry.”

“Jesus!” she groaned, exasperated. “You are an Olympic-level arguer! They should give you a freakin’ medal!”

He snorted at that.

“You know...when I invited you, I was planning to try to comfort you,” Cas said, grinning at the irony. He looked over at her and his voice softened. “I know it’s been difficult for you. Especially at night.”

Mary looked at him thoughtfully. Then it clicked.

“You can hear me,” she said pursing her lips and letting out a big sigh.

“I don’t mean to intrude. It would have been difficult for me to not hear anyway, but, as I mentioned, I’m especially attuned to my charges, so it’s not really an option for me to-”

“I’m your charge? I thought it was just Dean and Sam?”

“Of course,” Cas said, a little surprised she hadn’t guessed. “I took you on as soon as we established you were really...you.” He turned more fully toward her and squinted quizzically. “Of course, Mary.”

She didn’t know what to do with that. Honestly, she still didn’t know what being his 'charge' meant at all, but...she now knew it was a really serious thing for him to have done and...well...a moment later, the tissues were back in action.

“Thanks, Cas,” she said, swallowing the lump in her throat, as a few tears found their way out. She leaned further in and gave him a peck on the cheek, before laying her head down on his shoulder.

“That was really nice of you,” she sniffed. Discarding the tissue, she placed her free hand back on his forearm and gave it another squeeze. “And I don’t think it’s cute at all.”

Chapter End Notes

This...was a really...really...really hard scene to write. I kept trying to think about what Mary would know, and what Cas needed to hear more than anything else. And the amount of incredibly important, helpful crap that no one has ever taken the time to say to the guy is just overwhelming. So, what finally came out of my head was that Cas needed someone to lance the wound, so he could start to heal. And that’s what I decided to let Mary do.

Of course, I handed her a scalpel. Mary just rolled her eyes at me, and pulled out a machete.
I thought we were done with Mary’s picnic with Cas, but then this happened. And, hey, what’s a SPN fanfic without at least one graphic depiction of suffering and/or torture? Probably won’t be the last one, either.
Eh...definitely won’t be the last one.

June 9, 2016
6:35 AM CDT

Sitting on the floor, next to a quiet-natured angel for three hours, doesn’t seem like such a challenge. In fact, it sounds like it would be very pleasant. Until you try to do it. And in the very early morning hours, the fatigue of the ruined night’s sleep weighed heavily on Mary’s whole body...the same whole body that was currently weighing down just as heavily on her very numb ass. Both legs were in various stages of falling asleep, as was her left arm, which had spent much of that time still draped over Cas’s shoulders.

She’d avoided moving, knowing that it would cause all those nerves to swiftly come back online and she would make very undignified faces and noises as they did so. But when Cas’s phone buzzed an alert that the time of the next pull was approaching, she did her best to sloppily wriggle a couple of feet away from him, as he requested.

Within seconds, pins and needles coursed through three limbs and both unhappy cheeks. It belatedly occurred to her that had she mentioned this, Cas likely could have just ‘healed’ her and she wouldn’t be flopping around like a snake on hot pavement, right now. ‘Timing,’ she thought. ‘We’re terrible at it.’

She watched him, putting on her most encouraging smile and continuing to talk with him about whatever came to mind, as they had been. She hoped it would keep his spirits up, while he waited for the pain to begin.

Cas was looking over at Dean more frequently, and fidgeting absently with the loop that was now very loosely draped over his wrist. It had taken a good deal of prodding, over the previous half hour, but she’d convinced him to at least fully loosen the loop, just in case things did go bad and he was jerked away or needed to extricate himself quickly. She failed to convince him to take it off entirely. He’d insisted he would not break his promise to Dean. Fair enough.

Any discomfort Mary was still feeling seemed ridiculously inconsequential, as she watched the first wave of the pull hit Cas full force. The lead-up had been minimal and hadn’t adequately prepared him for what he was now silently enduring. His body spasmed and began to shake from the strain of clenching every muscle. It looked like it was taking everything he had to not cry out.

Mary had to stop herself from reaching over to help him. It was a difficult impulse to control.
The first wave lasted about ten seconds. After a very brief delay, the second wave hit. This one was clearly worse, because Cas arched his spine very abruptly, throwing back his head and shoulders and instinctively trying to reach behind himself...to protect his wings, Mary assumed. His head knocked hard into the side table, as did the back of his right hand. The small lamp fell over on it’s side, as the table tipped roughly to bang into the wall and then settle it’s front legs back on the floor again.

The noise was huge in the silent room, and Dean immediately awoke, eyes as wide as possible for someone who’d just been soundly asleep. He reached out to Cas, but Mary had already moved to intercept him.

“It’s ok! It’s ok! Don’t touch him!” Mary said, grabbing his arm.

Cas fell sideways, in the next quick reprieve, and rolled to lay himself flat on his back. When the next wave hit, he wasn’t able to keep from gasping out a single choked cry, but at least he didn’t hit his head when he arched up off of the floor. Instead it was an anchor point, along with his feet, as he scrambled with his hands to grasp and protect feathers that weren’t there.

The loop came off of his wrist, but Cas didn’t notice. Dean moved closer to him, just in case, letting his hand hover near Cas’s leg, without touching him.

The ordeal took less than three minutes, but watching Cas go through it made it seem more like an hour. He was sweating, panting...each reprieve giving him only enough time to let down his cramping muscles and choke on the spit he’d been unable to swallow, before another wave sent him back into a convulsive arch. As the muscles finally fatigued, he was unable to rise off of the floor and instead spent each wave writhing and grasping at furniture legs or the room heater...anything he could anchor himself to for a few seconds before he’d let go to grasp uselessly at the pain in his non-materialized wings.

It was agony. Dean could see that. And he could tell Cas was trying very hard to not scream.

“Cas...don’t hold back, buddy. It hurts like hell, and you need to scream? You scream. You do what you gotta do. It’s ok,” Dean called to him, hoping he’d hear.

Cas was at the end of a reprieve, when Dean said this. He looked at his friend for just a second, before the next wave hit and his jaw slammed shut.

“NNNNNOO!" he growled, through clenched teeth.

Dean sighed. He knew this game. ‘You won’t make me scream.’ The proverbial ‘Fuck you’ to throw at your tormentors. ‘I won’t give you the satisfaction.’ It always felt good at the time...a tiny semblance of control, while you still had your dignity. Still felt like yourself. It never lasted, of course. Not with real torture. He’d always screamed eventually. Screamed, begged, pissed himself, promised anything...but for those few seconds...

“Yeah,” Dean whispered. He reached out and put his hand on Cas’s shin...no longer caring what might happen. Mary tried to pull his hand away, but as she did, they both realized that Cas had quieted a bit. The writhing was just a little less intense. His vessel’s instinctive need to pant and gasp and...breathe...a little easier for him. Mary took her hand away from Dean’s arm and they looked at each other.

Cas suffered through the last two waves...and then it was over. He sank into the floor, every muscle completely spent. The leg Dean was holding slowly unfolded and lay straight and motionless. He lay there for several seconds, recovering, before the blue light of his grace shone dimly over his whole body.
With one final sigh, he raised himself to a sitting position and looked blankly at his two companions.

“That was unpleasant.”

“Yeah, we got that, Cas,” Mary said, tenderly.

They were quiet for about a minute, before Mary sighed and let her head drop back.

“Oh,” she groaned. “Crisis number two for the day has passed. And if I don’t get at least a couple hours, I’m gonna be useless.” She staggered to her feet and looked down at Cas. “You’ve got about another six and a half before the next one, right?”

“Yes,” he responded, gazing up at her. He looked tired. Really tired. Mary knew he’d just healed himself so he shouldn’t be, but...maybe it wasn’t physical?

“Okay...so...” She looked at Dean and made a motion for him to move. “Scooch over.”

Dean stared at her, not comprehending.

“He needs to lie down.”

“I’m fine, Mary. I’m completely healed.”

“Humor me,” she said, flatly, and offered her hand to help him up off of the floor.

Cas slumped just a bit, but then took her hand and got up. He looked over at Dean, who was looking between the two of them, wondering if they were serious.

“Scooch!” Mary repeated, emphatically.

Dean rolled his eyes and wriggled over to the far side of the bed.

Cas assessed the situation critically. He was well aware of Dean’s feelings about sharing a bed with another guy. ‘Only if there’s no other place to sleep,’ he’d said, explaining the rules to the angel. ‘And even then...you know...probably not. A couch. The floor. The hood of the fucking car! Just...NO!’

“Coat. Jacket. Belt,” Mary said, curtly. When Cas just looked at her, she grimaced and snapped her fingers a few times. “Come on, now...don’t fight me on this. I’m tired. Let’s go.”

Cas reluctantly complied, removing the items and handing them to Mary. She draped them over her arm. As she did, she noticed that the sleeves of the coat were empty.

“Where’s your blade?”

Cas jerked his right arm downward, and the blade dropped into his hand from beneath his white shirt.

“I thought,” Mary said slowly, “you kept it inside your coat?”

Cas nodded.

“So what’s it doing inside your shirt sleeve?”

“I...took off my coat,” Cas said, squinting at her.
“You mean earlier?” Mary asked.

Cas increased the squint and tilted his head.

“Just now. You asked me to remove my coat.” He shook his head and shifted his tilt to the other side. “That’s it right there.” He said, pointing at his coat on her arm.

“So...wait…” Mary stumbled. “You take your coat off and the damned thing jumps under your shirt sleeve...you know what...nevermind.” She huffed out a huge breath. “I’m WAY too tired to even understand what you’re probably gonna say, so...whatever. Just put it on the little table. And take off your shoes, too.”

Cas complied and, very hesitantly, placed himself on the bed, on top of the covers, next to Dean. He looked like a plank of lumber, straight and stiff, arms clenched awkwardly to his sides.

“Wow...Cas...you are...tightly wound,” she said, as she placed his garments on the chair. She grabbed the extra blanket from atop the chest at the foot of the bed and gently laid it over the angel. He relaxed just a bit after that.

She reached over and squeezed Dean’s shoulder.

“Good night, baby,” Mary whispered to him.

Dean’s gruff snark melted away entirely and he took her hand, giving it a kiss before letting go.

“Night, Mom,” he whispered back. “Thank you. For...all this.” He motioned toward the area they’d all just been.

Mary smiled at him. As she pulled away, she reached down and gave Cas’s hair a quick pet.

“Night, Cas.”

He reached out quickly from under the cover and took her hand.

“Thank you, Mary.”

She looked at him, then back at her son. They both had such heartbreakingly sincere looks on their faces that Mary’s exhausted mind and body nearly burst into tears again. And she was SO done with crying for one night. It was just annoying, now. So she smiled at them both, squeezed Cas’s hand once and let go, before walking out of the room and closing the door behind her.

“You boys get some rest. No staying up giggling and braiding each other’s hair,” she said, just as the door closed. She heard Dean give one pained groan and she grinned. Four minutes later, she was in her bed, fast asleep.
Sam was wide awake. His eyes were protesting any exposure to air, so remained closed, for the most part, but the rest of his body, including his brain, was quite certain that it was time to get up and go do...something.

“Great,” Sam mumbled to himself, after he’d pried his sandpaper coated eyelids open just long enough to read the clock. It was 7am. He’d gone to bed just after 3am, so...almost four whole hours.

In the past two weeks, he’d had the luxury of waking at the same time each morning and had easily reset his natural alarm clock...whether he’d wanted to or not. So now, everyday, 7am. No matter what.

He rubbed his hand over his bleary eyes and threw his legs over the side of the bed. Bare feet landed on the cold concrete and he grimaced. As he sat there, eyes still closed, slowly breathing his way through how much this sucked, he wondered if his body might change its mind, when the reality of just how shitty it would feel to get up and walk around right now sank in. But...no dice.

Sam grabbed the robe he had started wearing for trips to the showers, now that his mom had arrived. He stumbled out of his room and down the hall toward the bathroom, unaware that he’d missed crossing paths with his mom by only ten minutes or so, as she’d made her way back to her own room to sleep.

A quick shower and shave had him feeling at least most of the way alive, but his brain was still offline, for the most part. Very little quality research would be done until that changed, so...get dressed and...caffeine. Immediately.

It was a good plan. Would have worked out, too, but Sam realized, as he opened his nearly empty
dresser drawers that the clean underwear and socks supply was running dangerously low. When he opened the next drawer down, he groaned miserably...he was out of clean jeans. Well...down to that one last pair. The pair he didn’t like to acknowledge he still had. The one with the torn back pocket, that forced him to carry his wallet on the other side. Which he always forgot about at inopportune moments and would momentarily panic when he needed to pay for something and reached back and felt nothing but denim covered butt cheek.

But the main reason Sam had often thought of taking a machete to these jeans, was the fact that they’d shrunk. They were too short. Maybe they weren’t full-on high-waters, but to Sam, they looked and felt ridiculous. If he wore dark socks, most people probably wouldn’t notice right away, but as a tall person, Sam just...knew. He could feel the shortness, as he wore them...the wrongness of it. The occasional slight breeze on his ankles that would remind him and piss him off.

Plus, Dean enjoyed calling him Frankenstein or Lurch far too much already. He really didn’t want to deal with his brother's bullshit today.

Looking in the other drawers, he realized that both pairs of sweatpants must have been piled up with the laundry, as well. So, he was now down to two options: really awful jeans or safety-orange running shorts with reflective stripes on the hems...which would come with the wonderful added bonus of gay deer hunter, Daisy Duke and exhibitionist jokes. Dean was so predictable at times, it made Sam wonder how, in this particular line of work, the guy was still alive. Then he remembered he had gotten killed, WAY too many times...and immediately axed that particular train of thought.

He pulled on the blazing running shorts, the white t-shirt with the stain and the little hole just above the waistline and a very old flannel. As an ensemble, it looked like the beginnings of a last minute Halloween costume.

He looked at himself in the mirror, and after the initial disgust at the realization that he actually owned each of these articles of clothing, he grinned and then gave the mirror his best Blue Steel.

“You can definitely still bring it, Sam!” He realized, as he caught himself doing this a little too long, that he was somewhat delirious and the caffeine thing needed to happen...like...now.

Still giggling, he picked up anything lying around that looked like it could do with a wash, and headed toward the laundry room.

A quick survey of the piles of waiting laundry made Sam forget his dream of being able to wash jeans first. He remembered that he’d just used the last clean towel, and his mom might want one when she got up. So...towels and linens went first into the big, industrial washer, and then Sam made his way directly to the coffee maker in the kitchen.

He began making a short mental list of the things he intended to start researching this morning, but his train of thought was disrupted when he opened the cabinet to grab a coffee mug and the entire shelf was empty. Not a single mug was clean and put away. He looked over at the sink full of dirty dishes and grimaced.

‘Ok...’ he thought. ‘We’ve gotta get our shit together.’ It was worrisome. Neither he nor Dean were the models of good housekeeping, but they had a system and they stuck to it nearly all the time. In fact, that system breaking down was often the first sign that things were getting very out of control. It was a sort of early warning signal, to whichever of them was the least fucked up at the time, that the other needed help. So, if the whole bunch of them were now slacking off of basic housekeeping duties...

Sam sighed. He wondered again if they had any chance at all of this turning out ok, but stopped
himself from going down that road. As the coffee maker began dripping out the beginnings of a new pot of high-caliber liquid stimulant, he cleared out enough space to work and started in on the dishes. Mugs first.

It was close to 9am when Dean emerged from his room with Castiel in tow, and began his morning ritual. It was quick...at least, it went quickly after he’d realized his t-shirt would be adequate as a make-shift towel.

They headed into the kitchen to grab some coffee. Dean made a bowl of cereal and the two of them carried their provisions back toward the library to start the next round of research. They were greeted by the sight of Sam emptying out what looked to be a third enormous basket of clean laundry onto the far table. Nearly the entire surface was now covered.

“No, it’s fine, Sam. Just leave that stuff right there,” Dean said, as he set down his mug and bowl on the other table and fished an open book out from underneath a pile of sheets.

“You want it gone? Fold it and put it away,” Sam said evenly. At that moment, he moved the basket enough for Dean to get a good look at his attire.

Dean didn’t miss a beat.

“You know, Daisy, I saw a nail polish the other day in just that color. Should look great with your open-toed huntin’ boots.”

Sam ignored it completely.

“Somebody’s gonna need to make a grocery run, too. We’re just about out of coffee, and a bunch of other stuff.”

“It can wait one more day, can’t it? We need to make some progress on this…” Dean argued.

“And we’re almost outta beer. And whiskey.”

“Yeah, so...groceries. Got it.” Dean nodded. “I’ll make a run.” Then he looked down at his wrist. “Oh...I guess...that’s gonna probably need to be you, Sam. I can make up the list, though,” Dean added guiltily, as he looked at all the clean laundry and the sweat on Sam’s brow. He’d clearly been working hard for a couple of hours already. Who knew what else he’d taken care of, while Dean slept. And the guy looked pretty damned tired.

Sam sighed. “Yeah, ok...I got it. And I already made a list. You guys have anything that wasn’t in the laundry room that needs to get washed?” When Dean shook his head, Sam looked at Cas. “You need to wash anything, Cas? Your coat or somethin’? Save some power?”

“Thank you Sam, but that won’t be necessary. Dean’s soul is providing for all of my needs.”

Sam had been pulling a couple of errant socks out of the basket. He stopped short for just a moment, trying to deal with what he’d just heard, before tossing the socks on the table. Cas noticed his sudden change in demeanor.
“Are you alright, Sam?”

“Yeah...I’m...that’s just not a sentence I ever expected to hear.” He looked up and smiled reassuringly at his friend. “It’s cool.” He shot a quick glance at Dean, who was silently shaking his head, as if to say, ‘Welcome to my private hell: Day 2.’

“Be sure to put that nail polish on the list,” Dean said, after a brief pause to recover from the 'Dean's soul gives me everything I need' comment. He then sat and dug into his cereal.

Sam was searching through the latest pile of laundry to find a pair of his jeans and a t-shirt.

“I think it’ll have a slimming effect on those flippers of yours.”

“Well,” Sam said, continuing his search. “You’d know. I actually saw a pair of five inch stilettos in your size at the flea market last week. Almost picked ‘em up for ya. Add to your little collection of unmentionables.”

Sam peeled off both shirts and pulled on the clean tee.

“But they were a warm red and I know how you prefer cool tones.”

Dean just barely grinned, making sure his brother didn’t win the battle by making him laugh.

Sam added the flannel back, before stepping into his jeans.

“You’re gonna wear shorts and jeans?”

“Well, it’s either that, or I flash you both, ‘cause these are pullin’ underwear duty, too.”

“You walk around here commando in those little shorts! What the hell?!”

Sam ignored him and grabbed his keys and wallet from his prefered ‘important stuff dumping spot’ - the shelf in the side cubby near the front of the library.

“I’m surprised you’re puttin’ jeans on over ‘em, though. Thought you’d want everyone lookin’ at your legs. And commando, too...hell, stand over one subway grate and all your little fantasies could come true, Sammy!”

“There’s no subway in Lebanon, Jerk.”

“Well that’s a damned shame. How’s a fine young man such as yourself supposed to get his flasher kink on?” He said, lifting his mug of coffee for a sip. “Bitch.”

Sam was already across the war room and heading for the stairs to the garage when Dean realized he actually did need something. Pulling out his phone quickly, he dialed Sam.

“Enough with the stupid jokes, you idiot!” Sam answered.

“They’re awesome jokes! Hey...I called earlier to have them bundle up some new glass. Should be ready by the time you swing by and pick it up.”

“Which place?”

“Lenny’s.”

“Yeah, ok. Pay for it with one of your cards. Mine’re runnin’ low. I’m gonna fix that later today.”
“Yep.”

Dean hung up and tucked his phone back in his pocket, resuming his attack on the cereal.

Cas had reached for part of a pile of laundry and pulled it to the edge of the table closest to Dean. He sat and quietly began folding towels, as Dean ate.

“There’s somethin’ you don’t see everyday,” Dean said with a grin. Cas stopped and looked at him.

“Towels?” he asked, as his brow quickly furrowed. He turned his attention to the utterly common object in his hands and tried to come up with any possible context for what his friend had just said.

“An angel folding towels.”

Cas’s face didn’t change at all.

“There wouldn’t be laundry...there aren’t towels to fold every day.”

Dean sighed, only barely hiding his immediate irritation.

“Nevermind,” he said, finishing off his breakfast and focusing on the coffee. It was decent. Not as good as Cas’s, but it’d do.

“You know...I noticed...I feel good. My mind is sharp and when I looked in the mirror a while ago, I didn’t wonder who the old, haggard bastard is, that’s usually starin’ back at me. ‘Cause I didn’t see him.” Dean wrapped both hands around his mug and briefly pursed his lips.

“I’m guessin’ you did the sleep-thing? Used your mojo?”

“There was a very small amount of mojo used, yes,” Cas admitted, watching his friend’s reaction and hoping he wouldn’t be told to stop in the future. That must have shown on his face, because Dean’s slightly defensive posture dissolved and he nodded.

“Just enough to allow for deep, restorative sleep, since your four hours were interrupted,” Cas added, the unmistakable tinge of hopefulness now in his voice.

Dean continued to nod slowly, pursing his lips and taking another sip. He looked back briefly at the angel and stood to move to the other side of the laundry table. As he passed, he gave his friend an appreciative pop on the arm.

“Thanks, Cas,” he said quietly, and sat opposite him. He too began digging into the massive pile of fabrics to hopefully un-bury the books and papers that he knew lay beneath.

Several minutes passed in silence, as Dean surreptitiously watched Cas fold each new item he pulled from the pile. He noted the things Cas chose and the things he avoided. Towels he could do. But he avoided washcloths. And he set the socks aside in a pile, slowly pushing them away from himself. It was clearly in the hopes that Dean would eventually take care of those. He also avoided shirts of any kind, but when they got to the jeans or any pants, he could fold those. Even the boxers. He was also somewhat able to figure out which pants or boxers belonged to which person. Dean saw him look at the tags. He knew those could be misleading or missing entirely, so he tried to see what Cas would do in those cases. Cas was making four little piles. And since one of those piles was not for himself, Dean had to assume that was the ‘I don’t know’ pile.

With recognizable items in each of the other three piles, it was easy to identify which of the four had the ‘unknowns’. He waited until that one got just a little taller, before he grabbed it without a word
and separated each item into the correct person’s pile.

Cas stopped and watched this closely. There didn’t seem to be any real pattern he could identify, even after they’d been correctly sorted. So...he just looked up and nodded once at Dean and went back to folding.

They continued this way for a while longer, before Dean spoke.

“You can ask, you know,” he said quietly. Cas didn’t respond so he looked up at him. “If you don’t know how to do something, you can ask me.”

Cas continued his folding, but slower. Dean could see the gears turning, so he let him think about it for a while. Eventually, Cas began to fidget a bit and then forcibly stopped himself and cleared his throat.

“I don’t know what to do with sleeves.”

Dean nodded...and taught Cas how to fold shirts. All the kinds that were there. It took very little time, before the angel was able to imitate him perfectly, and they were again back to silently picking through the pile. That damned clock was ticking way too loudly again, and for at least a couple of minutes, Dean’s mind ran through several very satisfying scenarios that would result in it’s demise.

“It’s been my observation,” Cas began, very slowly, “…that much of the time, you respond negatively to my not knowing things.”

They weren’t looking at each other. And that didn’t change. They simply continued to work through the laundry in silence for quite a while. Cas knew from what he could see of Dean’s posture and movements that his statement had bothered him… and that Dean was thinking very carefully about his response. He didn’t necessarily regret what he’d said, but he was really hoping he hadn’t destroyed the olive branch his friend had just extended to him.

Dean looked like he was about to respond, but Cas cut him off.

“Your mother is having a nightmare.” He was looking toward the bedrooms as he spoke. He sounded alarmed. “I’d like to help her.”

Dean switched track immediately and the two of them were jogging toward her room. They didn’t have to knock to know that she was definitely asleep. The half yells and partially formed words were all too familiar to both of them, so they opened her door, without knocking and Cas moved quickly to her side.

Dean watched him perform the same soothing ritual on her forehead and face that he knew his friend must have used on him many times, in the past. Perhaps as recently as last night. But he’d never seen him do it. Not like this. He’d witnessed the ‘touch-the-forehead takedown’, but...this was different.

Mary lay still, now...the thrashing and crying out had abruptly ended the moment he’d touched her. The words Cas was very quietly speaking to her were putting her further down and she looked completely at peace. Dean listened to the barely audible Enochian and found his own mind responding to their familiarity, though he’d swear he’d never heard them before.

It had only taken a few brief moments. Fifteen seconds at most. Such a tiny amount of time for such an enormous impact on someone’s well being. Dean marveled at his friend. He’d thought that, after all this time, he was mostly past that sense of awe he’d get when Cas would unexpectedly do something really cool, but...apparently not. It was still just as amazing each and every time. Watching the angel, now, so carefully tending to his mother, Dean couldn’t help but smile.
As if on cue, the thought of Cas being torn away from them crashed into his mind like a wrecking ball. Images of his friend writhing in pain on the floor of his room. Flashes of him slowly drifting in space, alone and afraid, unable to communicate or get home, crying out to brothers and sisters who would never come for him...his power slowly draining away, until his human vessel succumbed, and the angel was forced to vacate. An image of a beautiful orb of blue light trapped and helpless in the darkness next to a frozen corpse for eons made Dean nearly choke and he had to mentally shake himself out of it.

He realized he must have closed his eyes at some point, because when he blinked them open, he found the angel standing inches away from him - his face furrowed with concern.

“Don’t let yourself think such awful things,” he said softly. “They serve no purpose but to bring you pain.”

Dean swallowed and looked at his friend with a tiny flicker of hope.

“Can you make it stop?” he whispered, a little desperately.

Cas just shook his head. The hope disappeared.

“I wish I could.”

“Yeah,” Dean said, then looked at his mom. “She ok now? How long does it last?”

“She’s at peace. There’s no way to know how long she’ll stay that way. It’s different for each person.”

Dean watched her. For the thousandth time, he wished he could do something to make this all better. To fix it for her. For all of them.

“I’ll monitor her. We should give her privacy,” Cas said, clearly knowing what was happening in his friend’s mind and not wanting to let him linger in such thoughts.

Dean did linger, but not for long, as his companion at the other end of the rope tugged lightly at his wrist. ‘Cuffs. Right,’ he thought. That was something he could do. Fold laundry, and rig up a better tether. He sighed. ‘Yeah. Wow. Don’t hurt yourself, Dean.’

10:36 AM CDT

Getting out had done him good, and Sam was now wide awake, skimming through the radio stations, as he made his way back toward the bunker, with groceries in the trunk and a back seat stacked with bubble-wrapped replacement windows. There was so little selection in this part of the country, that finding a good non-country song even once on a twenty minute drive was a lot like winning the local lottery...not impossible, and not big winnings, but very cool when it happens. The trick, Sam realized, was to simply lower your standards and if you find something that you know or that is so bad, it’s actually funny...you roll with it. Even if it’s country.
Which is why, when he stumbled across ‘Friends in Low Places’, he smiled, turned it up loud enough to drown out the sound of the wind and road coming through the nearly windowless Impala, and began belting out the lyrics like a true enthusiast.

It was a beautiful day, bright and sunny with big puffy white clouds set against a very blue sky. Most of the fields were turning a uniform shade of emerald green as the crops grew big enough to hide most of the drab soil. It wasn’t too hot. It was perfect, really, and Sam’s eyes wandered a bit, taking in the unique beauty of farm country as he drove the straight, mostly flat county road.

His eye was drawn to a figure standing still at the side of the road about a hundred yards ahead. Which was strange, because Sam could see much further than that at any given time, and the person had not been there a second ago. At least, he hadn’t noticed. He kept watching as he approached.

“Think I’ll slip on down to the OOOAAASIS!” Sam belted, with a ridiculous chuckle, as he passed the stranger by. It was a man. Plain clothing. Nothing unique or out of the ordinary. Except that he appeared to be staring at Sam, as he approached and passed by. He wasn’t moving and his expression was curious. Focused.

Sam stopped singing. He watched the stranger in the rearview mirror for a few moments, then flicked his eyes forward, then back to the rear. The man was gone. When Sam again looked forward, the man was standing in the middle of the road, no more than sixty feet in front of the swiftly moving Impala.

Sam slammed on the brakes, the Impala’s lighter back end sliding to the side as the tires left long, dark lines on the faded pavement. He managed to stop less than two feet in front of the man, who seemed completely unfazed by the prospect of his own near death experience.

A thought occurred to Sam and he very quickly looked in the rearview mirror at the back seat. He was so grateful he’d agreed to let them use tow straps to secure the glass to the Impala’s rarely used lap belts. He’d almost said ‘no.’ If that expensive glass had broken, and this crazy guy didn’t kill him, Dean most certainly would have.

Sam reached just under the dash and grabbed the spare gun, before opening his door and slowly stepping out.

“There are better ways to hitch-hike, ya know.” Sam tried to sound both casual and slightly threatening. There was always the possibility that this guy was just some unstable civilian, wandering around the local fields. But his instincts were screaming ‘not human’ almost the instant he saw the guy by the side of the road. He really hoped the gun was gonna be enough. He’d left in a hurry, and only had one small knife on him for backup. ‘You’re getting too comfy, Sam,’ he told himself.

“You’re Sam Winchester,” the man said, as though he already knew.

Sam’s hackles raised. No one around here should know his real name.

“This a habit of yours? Stalkin’ drivers? Makin’ ‘em damn near flip the car, tryin’ to keep from hittin’ ya?” Sam thickened his accent just a bit, trying to seem a bit less out of place. Though the hair and the car didn’t exactly fit the locale very well.

The man smiled slightly. It was very familiar and Sam’s mind scrambled to place it, wondering if they’d met before. He very carefully disengaged the safety on his pistol and readied for a fight.

“Not at all. But, after visiting your home and finding it to be entirely warded against angels, I was forced to devise a more creative way to make your acquaintance.”
Sam froze. An angel. ‘Fuck!’ he thought. ‘Not good!’

The angel must have read the instantaneous change in attitude, because he smiled a bit wider.

“Please, Sam. Don’t be alarmed. I’m here in answer to your prayer. I apologize for the delay. I needed to complete my mission elsewhere, before I could come to you.”

“Who are you,” Sam asked, not wanting to give away the name of the angel he’d prayed to. He knew it was a flimsy security layer. They can all hear prayers, if they’re listening to specific people, but at least he wouldn’t make it even easier for an impostor.

“Aneran.” He looked through the windshield at the vehicle’s interior and disappeared. Sam was immediately looking every direction, bracing for an attack... but then... he slowly bent down to look in at the front passenger seat. Sure enough...

Chapter End Notes

This chapter introduces the one angel Castiel thought might be the most likely to help him.
Aneran - Yazad of ‘endless light’

Yazads are from the Zoroastrian religion, which I’ve always thought was kinda cool. I’ll be taking enormous liberties with both the history and the characterizations/descriptions/etc of the Yazads whom I’ve selected to be angels in this fic. I hope that no one will be offended by that. My knowledge of Zoroastrianism is extremely limited and these names and descriptions are used solely for the purpose of story-telling. I mean no disrespect to the faith or any of its followers. Anyone interested in Zoroastrianism should do his or her own research and not take anything I’ve written here to be in any way factual or representative.
Some Angels are Cool

Chapter Summary

When Sam had prayed, he'd been hoping that the angel who responded might be similar to Cas, and not at all like Uriel or Zachariah. He’d braced himself for the latter, just in case.

He absolutely did NOT expect...Aneran.

Btw...is it too dumb a pun to say that an actual clock is 'running on borrowed time?'

Chapter Notes

Originally, there was a whole section of Enochian that I spent a bunch of time putting together. And I finally decided to rewrite the scene, because THAT DAMNED ENOCHIAN WOULD NOT WORK ITSELF OUT NO MATTER HOW MUCH I BEGGED AND PLEADED AND THREATENED AND SCREAMED AND BEAT UP ON IT!

So, at the prodding of a dear friend (HazelDomain - Awesomeness personified) who was SOOO right to suggest I do it...I pulled it out entirely.

Kiss my ass, Enochian! *double flips the bird* You're an unusable, pseudo-language. You don't even have plurals, you freakin' poser!

*sigh*

Ok...I feel better now.

Sorry to all of you who read it in it's original form. I hope this version reads much better.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

June 9, 2016

10:40 AM CDT

“Sam,” the gravelly voice greeted him over the phone’s speaker.

“Hey. I, uh... I may have bumped into a friend of yours. Was wondering if you could verify that he is who he says he is, before I bring him your way?”

Cas was silent for just a moment, but then he caught on.

“An angel,” he stated. “Who does he say he is?”

“The one you told me might be willing to help.”

“You prayed to him?” Cas sounded surprised. “I thought you’d wait until we were out of options.”
He sounded both pleased to hear the angel had responded and frustrated at the fact that he’d been called. Sam wasn’t sure what to do with that.

“Well...I mean...we’re not exactly making a lot of headway, ya know? I figured it might take time to find a vessel, make himself available...all the standard...angel...stuff.” Sam shook his head and winced. ‘Angel stuff,’ he thought. ’Nice. Make the new guy think you’re an idiot.’

“I wanted to make sure we had a backup plan.” Sam finished.

“I see. May I speak with him?”

“Yeah, hang on,” Sam said as he ducked down and passed the phone across the long bench seat to the angel. He was still standing outside the car, not really wanting to be next to this guy until he knew for sure he was legit. An angel could kill him just as easily where he stood, but...it felt safer to be outside...somehow.

Sam noticed the guy had an even bigger smile on his face already, and that just made him more leery. If Heaven was so insistent that Cas was a criminal who should be shunned, then why did he seem so pleased to be here? It made him wonder who this Aneran actually was, and how well Cas knew him. He was supposed to be a last ditch effort, after all.

“Hello?” the angel spoke into the phone. Sam noticed he held it as though he wasn’t new to cell phones, the way Cas had been.

Cas answered in what sounded to Sam like a much more casual version of Enochian. Quick and somewhat accented...the way people speak to each other in everyday conversation.

On hearing the familiar voice, Aneran drew in a deep breath and sat up just a bit straighter. He forced the smile into a more dignified grin, and launched into what seemed like an endless stream of High Enochian so formal and precise that even Sam found himself standing a bit straighter. And he had no idea what any of it meant.

Aneran paused for a moment, giving Cas a chance to respond with his own short statement in the same formal version of their native tongue. His smile grew wide, once again.

In all of this, Sam was only able to make out their names and the Enochian word for ‘brother’, which seemed pretty typical, for angel banter. But whatever this guy had said had clearly made Cas very happy. Sam could hear the smile on his friend’s face when he next spoke. He also sounded a little embarrassed.

“Aneran,” Cas said, very fondly. There was a long pause, before he cleared his throat and continued. “Forgive me. I’m a bit taken aback. You honor me with such high praise... I fear I do not deserve it.”

“Perhaps it is best left to the one bestowing the praise to make that determination, sir,” Aneran said, fidgeting slightly with his free hand. “I do not offer it lightly...nor out of ignorance. I am aware of all recent events.”

“Then even more so, I am grateful.” They were both silent for a beat, somewhat signifying the end of their formal greeting.

“It was very good of you to come,” Cas said, his voice now softer. “I’m aware that assisting me...may expose you to criticism. Or admonishment.”

“That’s of little concern to me. I’m pleased to be of service. Also, your charge’s prayer was quite
compelling.”

“Sam is my friend, as well as my charge. Please, I ask that you treat him as such.”

Aneran’s smile never faded, as he nodded acceptance.

“My mistake,” he said into the phone. He then looked over at Sam and gave him a conciliatory nod. “Forgive me, Sam. I meant no disrespect.”

“Uh...yeah! I mean, uh...no...I, uh...it’s cool,” Sam blurted awkwardly. Aneran looked back to the phone and listened as Castiel continued. ‘Jesus!’ Sam thought. ‘Yeah, no, it’s cool? D’uh! Snap out of it!’ He shook his head, trying to clear it.

“You are both on your way, then?” Cas asked, as they finished their short conversation.

Aneran looked to Sam for confirmation.

“Yes,” Sam said, realizing that Cas was totally onboard with this guy. “Be there in about five minutes.” He hopped back into the driver’s seat and started the engine. “And, Cas...why don’t...”

“He’s...hung up,” Aneran interrupted and handed the phone back to Sam. They looked at each other for a moment, the angel’s smile now far more knowing and he was clearly stifling a laugh.

“Yeah...he’s...uh...not great with ending conversations,” Sam grinned, stuffing the phone back in his pocket.

“Nice to know he hasn’t changed.” Aneran shifted in his seat, getting himself a bit more comfortable for the ride ahead. He spread out a little, too, stretching his legs further into the footwell and letting his upper arm sit on top of the door, fingertips lightly resting against the rim of the roof. He tapped out the rhythm on the metal trim, as the radio came back to life and filled the interior with the dulcet sounds of Travis Tritt.

Sam was about to reach over and turn it off, when the angel began singing along to the chorus...loud and unabashed. The shock almost made Sam drive off the road.

“Ah-ee-Ah-ee need one good honky-tonk angel...to turn my life around. That’s reason enough...for me to lay...this ol’ bottle down...”

It was surreal, to say the least. Aneran laughed when he looked over and saw Sam’s face. “Come on, Sam. You gotta know this one.” He laughed louder when Sam’s mouth fell open just a bit. The chorus continued and he went back to his crooning.

“A woman warm and willin’...Lord, that’s what I’m lookin’ for...’cause the whiskey...ain’t workin’ anymore...Lord...the whiskey...ain’t workin’ anymore...”

Aneran had slipped into a disturbingly accurate imitation of Travis’s intensified accent on the line ‘Lord, that’s what I’m lookin’ for’ and Sam buckled. It was absurd. Nothing about this guy matched what was coming out of his mouth...least of all the fact that he was an angel.

‘Where the hell have they been hidin’ him?!’ Sam thought. ‘What...Heaven’s got some sorta broom closet where they shove the ones that grow a fucking personality?!’

The radio announcer had begun a brief interlude for a weather report, and Aneran looked over at Sam. He made a small motion with his hand, indicating the speakers in the back.
“Solid audio,” he said, still grinning. “Sounds almost as good as that engine.”

Sam burst out laughing.

“Oh, man...my brother is gonna LOVE you!”

10:50 AM CDT

“They’re here,” Cas informed Dean, as the two of them team-folded sheets.

“You’re sure about this guy? I mean...they could have gotten to him,” Dean said. He looked as worried as he sounded. “You know...the angel warding is there for a reason.”

“There is always the possibility that he’s been compromised, but...he spends so little time in Heaven, it’s unlikely. From what I know of him, he tends to avoid most angels, other than those he works with here...his trusted friends. And he especially avoids any political players.”

“So...what...he hangs out with us mud monkeys? I didn’t think that was ‘allowed,’” Dean said, derisively. Cas blew it off.

“From what I understand, he does spend nearly all of his time on Earth. And, no...it’s not exactly...allowed, but...he’s managed to find ways to...get around the rules.”

“Huh,” Dean shrugged. “Sounds like a guy I’d get along with. Still keepin’ the blade handy, though,” he said, gesturing toward the holster he’d pushed into his belt at his back.

“If he is still as I remember, I believe you will find him...acceptable.”

They listened, as Sam walked down the stairs with the angel. They were chatting as if they’d known each other for years, instead of less than ten minutes, but with the echo, Dean couldn’t make out what they were saying. He only knew that he heard his brother let out a sincere and hearty laugh, right as they reached the entrance to the war room, and Dean shook his head. He looked at Cas for some kind of explanation.

“He has...better people skills than I,” Cas admitted, with the beginnings of a grin.

Dean snorted, then turned to watch the newcomer enter the room.

“Hey,” Sam greeted them both, before stepping aside to let Aneran move toward Cas. But the angel stopped just inside the library entrance, watching Cas and waiting for him to make the first move.

Dean eyed him warily, searching for the slightest sign of aggression or shiftiness. He scanned the guy from head to toe.

It was the complete lack of anything noteworthy that took Dean off guard. The guy was...average. Disturbingly so...in fact, he was the quintessentially average white American male. Average height, average build, average looks...even his hair was an average length and shade of brown. Dean didn’t even think that was possible. The clothes would pass in literally any situation, though Dean figured
they may have been some of the best clothes this vessel owned, because he’d noticed the guy’s hands - they were rough and stained, obviously used to some hard work. The kind of work that would quickly ruin clothes like those he was wearing. And there wasn't a stain or tear anywhere on the pressed, short-sleeved button down tucked neatly into the plain, dark tan, belted trousers.

The guy obviously didn’t have the right shoes for this outfit, though, because his dark brown work boots had been thoroughly scrubbed and cleaned and Dean could tell he’d rubbed in leather conditioner and polish to even out the tone. They were as immaculate as well used boots could be. ‘The best he could do,’ Dean thought. ‘Huh. Why would the vessel get all dressed up?’

“Aneran,” Cas said warmly. He set down the sheet he and Dean had been folding and moved toward the angel. The cuff on his wrist stopped him, though, when the rope became taught. He tried to avoid looking down at it.

“It’s good to see you, sir,” Aneran responded, also avoiding any sign that he’d noticed the cuff.

Cas slumped his shoulders just a bit and sighed.

“There’s absolutely no need for such formalities. We are not soldiers when inside this place. It is...something of a haven.” He motioned for him to approach, as he said this. “You and Sam have already met. This is Sam’s elder brother, Dean.”

Aneran moved quickly toward them and extended his hand. It was completely casual and Dean was a little taken aback.

“Dean,” Aneran repeated, with a huge smile, waiting for his hand to be taken. "It’s a pleasure to finally meet you.”

“Yeah. Hey...” Dean fumbled, and then quickly reciprocated. “Sorry, I...uh...the angels I’ve met don’t usually do a handshake. They’ve...mostly been...” He paused.

“Aloof?” Aneran offered.

“Dicks,” Dean declared with a very tight grin.

Aneran huffed out a surprised laugh, and quickly reigned it in, glancing over at Cas and then back at Dean.

“Yeah, I...I get that,” he said, barely containing his delight at the man’s directness.

Dean’s eyebrows shot up. This was new.

“He was complimenting the sound system in the Impala,” Sam chimed in, with a very knowing grin. “Said the only thing that sounded better was the engine.” He had his arms crossed and was rocking on his heels as he looked at his brother in disbelief.

Dean drew in a long breath and pursed his lips. With a nod, he looked back at Aneran.

“Yep. Ok. You can stay,” he said and plopped back down in his chair. He reached over and began scooting some of the stacks of folded laundry to the side.

Cas snorted.

“My apologies, Aneran, but Sam didn’t tell me he’d reached out to you. I don’t know what you’ve been told about our current situation.”
“Uh...not much, Cas,” Sam interrupted. “I wasn’t sure who might be listening in, or even if he would still...you know...be...a friend.” His voice trailed off a bit at the end.

“I see,” Cas said quietly. “Then the first order of business will be filling you in on what we know so far.” He moved to take a seat and motioned for the angel to do the same. “Or...actually...forgive me, I never asked...what is your availability? Are you needed elsewhere?”

Aneran grinned.

“I’m available for as long as you need me, sir. I’ve made certain of that already.” He looked back over his shoulder at Sam and then to Cas again. “Hearing the urgency in your friend’s voice...and also knowing that you wouldn’t call for me, unless it were important, I turned over my remaining responsibilities to one of my colleagues.”

“And...you’re certain you understand the implications of assisting me, this time?” Cas asked, looking very intently into the angel’s eyes. “The potential cost to yourself and those who hold counsel with you? I want to be very clear that if you have reservations, I will understand entirely.”

Aneran’s face fell just a bit as he listened. He suddenly looked much older and his expression held the same deep sadness so often seen in Castiel’s.

“I have no reservations, sir,” he answered quietly. “Whatever I can do to help.”

There was a long moment where neither spoke and they simply looked at one another. A lot of information seemed to be exchanged in that silence. But when confusion appeared on Cas’s face...a glimmer of a memory long forgotten, slowly trying to rise to the surface...Aneran shifted in his seat and spoke.

“Perhaps you could tell me a bit about your new fashion accessory,” Aneran said, trying to be light-hearted. He motioned to his own wrist, to clarify, and gave Castiel an encouraging grin.

“Ah...yes…” Cas said, lifting his arm. Dean raised his arm as well, to show Aneran the situation.

“At the moment, my grace is tethered to Dean. It was the best solution we could find to allow me to continue to fight against the…” Cas stopped, realizing he was about to make this much more confusing. “Perhaps I should start over. There’s quite a bit I’m leaving out.”

As Cas launched into a detailed retelling of the events of the past few days, Dean looked over at Sam, who was still standing near the library entrance. He gave his brother a confused look. Sam shrugged and shook his head. Neither of them had any idea what to make of this guy. He was completely outside the norm of their angel experiences.

After only a minute or so, it became very clear that the two of them were no longer needed for this part of the conversation, but Dean couldn’t go anywhere and Sam didn’t know if he should stick around or not. It was extremely rare for both of them to be at a loss about how to react to a situation. And yet, here they were...hovering awkwardly like little kids on the edge of the playground, unsure of what to do, because the big kids had commandeered the swings AND the slide.

After a few moments, Sam started fidgeting and Dean realized he’d have to distract him. When Sam got insecure, it never ended well. He tended to get a bit ‘blurty’, so, to avoid letting his little brother make a complete fool of himself, Dean raised his empty coffee mug and wiggled it at Sam, with a questioning look.

Sam frowned and shot him a glare that very clearly communicated: ‘Are you honestly suggesting that I scamper off to the kitchen to fetch everyone some coffee?’
Dean shrugged his shoulders and winced at him, which translated into: ‘I dunno, man...you got a better idea?’

‘So...you’re tethered and I gotta do everything now?’

‘Whatever. Stop bein’ a bitch, Bitch.’

‘You’re enjoying this and you suck, Jerk.’

‘I’m delightful. Everyone thinks so. Especially me.’

Sam sighed and turned, begrudgingly, to mope off toward the kitchen.

Dean smiled. It still amazed him, sometimes, to realize just how much information they could pass to each other with a few facial expressions or gestures. ‘Screw psychic,’ Dean thought. ‘Just stay around each other constantly, for decades, while hunting monsters and saving the world. You won’t ever have to speak another word again.’

“Dean, please, could you pass me that notebook?” Cas pointed across the table.

“Yep,” Dean grunted, suddenly jerked out of his reverie and getting up to grab it for Cas. He passed it over, and immediately found himself again completely ignored by the two fully engrossed angels.

“I’ll just…” Dean began, pointing back at his chair, as he slowly lowered himself back into it. He never finished his sentence. He looked around for a moment, letting his gaze fall across each of the library tables in turn. Neither of them had anything super appealing laid out on the surface. There were a couple of sheets left to fold, but he figured standing up and folding them right next to Cas and his friend while they were trying to talk would be fairly obnoxious, so...he nixed that idea.

He began tapping out a rhythm with his thumbs against the armrests of his chair. But then he realized that was making noise, so he stopped. He looked around again. Nothing. He pulled out his phone. Checked his email, manually checked his texts...just in case...then shoved it back in his pocket. He sighed, lightly.

Letting his eyes roam, he noticed the texture of the stone decorating the entrance to the library. ‘I wonder how they used to get stone so smooth, like WAY back in the day, pyramid-times...before power tools,’ he thought, and then wondered why in the hell he cared at all how they used to do it, when people now have...ya know...power tools. He sighed again, trying to make sure he did it quietly and didn’t interrupt.

‘You’re bored,’ he thought. ‘Ok. That's ok. You're a big boy. You can handle it. Don't be a dick. There are worse things than boredom. Much worse things. So...suck it up. It's not that bad.’

He’d just about gotten himself settled into this stoic and accepting frame of mind, when suddenly...there it was. Like a bad case of herpes, that only showed itself right before a hot date or a job interview, the unbelievably irritating sound always stayed under the radar until just such a time as this, before lurching unceremoniously back to the forefront of his attention. Dean almost snarled when he heard it.

Tick, tick, tick…

Cas’s head was directly in front of the clock face, from Dean’s vantage point, so it wasn’t an option to glare at it with the promise of future vengeance, as he usually did. Instead, he closed his eyes and let his mind think about all the glorious ways of turning it’s ticking gears into a quivering, but silent heap of scrap metal. After a few moments of this, he noticed that the conversation next to him had
stopped. He opened his eyes.

Cas was staring at him.

“Hey,” Dean said...because he had no idea what to say and suddenly felt completely exposed. He wasn’t even sure why.

Aneran was looking at Dean, too, but only because Castiel was. He quickly resumed his conversation, when he realized that somehow things had just gotten really awkward. Cas turned back to the angel.

Sam arrived with two mugs and a carafe full of fresh coffee. There was a spoon in one mug and he had both the sugar jar and a carton of half and half tucked under his arm. He looked like a seasoned waiter.

Dean had heard him coming when he was still in the war room and had quickly kicked both legs up to rest casually across the corner of the table. He leaned back in his chair and laced his fingers together behind his head, elbows out and relaxed, wearing a smile that would surely glow in the dark.

Sam had made it halfway to the table when he saw him. The momentary hesitation in his step let Dean know he’d successfully gotten under his skin. The smile grew even wider.

Sam shot him a look that promised a slow death.

Dean mouthed a silent, “Thanks,” through the huge smile. He immediately followed up by grabbing imaginary locks at the side of his face and using the other hand to imitate scissors opening and closing, and mouthed, “Cut your hair.”

Sam’s mouth twisted into a half smile, half sneer as he squinted and nodded his head. Still locking eyes with his brother, he grabbed one of the coffee mugs and filled it. Setting the carafe back down, he reached to pull out of one of the chairs, but Aneran interrupted the action.

“Sam…” he said, abruptly. “Hey...sorry, man...I hate to impose, but is there any chance I could talk you outta one of those beers you bought, instead? I’ve been kinda craving one ever since I saw you put ‘em in your shopping cart.”

Sam blinked at him...then the realization hit him.

“Shit,” he breathed and pushed the chair back under the table. “I forgot the groceries. De…” he stopped abruptly when he looked at his brother, who was holding up his cuffed wrist and smiling victoriously.

Sam closed his eyes and let it wash over him.

“Yeah...sure, Aneran. Just gimme a minute, though.”

“Thanks, Sam...I appreciate it,” Aneran said with a grateful smile.

“I’ll take one, too, Sammy,” Dean called after him, as he left. “A cold one, though. Outta the fridge.” Sam ignored him.

Aneran and Cas went back to their conversation and were hurriedly scribbling out additions to a small diagram they drew for each other, trying to determine the correctness of some conceptual conclusion Cas had drawn, when Sam appeared back in the entrance to the library.
“Wait...you saw me put the beer in the shopping cart? You were following me?”

Aneran turned to look at him.

“Oh, uh...yeah. I was looking for a good place to introduce myself. There were too many people at the grocery store, though.” He noticed the look on Sam’s face and continued. “I know it’s a little...stalker-esque. Sorry about that.”

“So...instead of just talking to me...you decided to scare the shit out of me on the road? Nearly made me wreck to avoid killing you?”

Aneran smiled guiltily and shrugged.

“Huh,” Sam said, and then a very small smile crept onto his face. “Well, thank you. It's kinda nice to know you thought I was powerful or influential enough to warrant making an entrance.” He shot a look over at Cas and winked, before turning to head back toward the garage.

Cas smiled hugely at him. Aneran turned back with a slightly accusing smirk.

“You know...it only works if they don’t know it’s coming, Castiel,” Aneran mock-scolded.

“Actually, even when they do know…”

“Shut up,” Dean snapped. He cleared his throat and then looked over at the two of them. He saw Aneran begin to ask the question and he cut him off. “You, too. Just...go back to your...thing...you were doin’...with the drawing.” He sniffed and rolled his shoulders back, like he was stretching, as he repositioned in his seat.

Aneran’s smile increased, but he said no more about it. He simply gave a small nod to Castiel, before diving back into the diagram...as instructed.

With no one to tease and nothing else to do, Dean resumed his boredom cycle and before long, his attention was again focused on the certain future demise of the library wall clock. This time, Cas ignored the onslaught of creatively violent thoughts pouring out of Dean’s mind.

“Hey, guys,” Mary said with a small smile as she entered the library.

“Hey...MOM!” Dean had started that sentence with a casual, happy grin, but ended it in wide-eyed panic. In all his haste to worry about the new angel being a possible threat to his family, he’d completely forgotten to come up with a plan for introducing said new angel to the one person least likely to handle his presence well...at all.

Mary stopped short. She had been looking at the new person in the room, but was now focused on the crazy-eyed expression on her son’s face. She opened her mouth to speak, but her gaze flicked over to Cas and she closed her eyes, slumped, and sighed very heavily.

“Ok...I don’t know what’s going on, but...Cas...it would go a long way toward improving our friendship if, when I walk into a room, you didn’t look like you’re about to piss yourself.” She sighed again. “Just...can you lose the panic-face? Please?”

Cas barely managed to swallow, much less ‘lose the panic-face’, but he at least nodded an acknowledgement and that was enough for Mary.

“Thank you,” she said, and then turned her attention toward the stranger. She smiled. It was tight, but she was clearly trying her best to be friendly...even though she now knew whoever he was, she
wasn’t gonna like it. ‘What else is new?’ she thought as she extended her hand to him.

“I’m Mary...Dean and Sam’s mom.”

Aneran rose. Dean and Cas both followed suit.

“Aneran,” he said, shaking her hand. He was clearly confused, but he didn’t voice the questions. “I’m a friend of Castiel’s.”

“He’s an angel, mom,” Dean supplied very quietly.

“It was Sam’s idea,” Cas immediately blurted. He threw a quick glance at Dean to gauge how pissed he was that he’d just thrown his little brother under the bus. Before Dean could properly react, though, Cas felt the weight of the shame and lowered his eyes.

‘Chicken,’ Dean thought at him. Cas rubbed the back of his neck.

Mary had ignored most of this exchange in favor of forcing herself to not show the newcomer just exactly how much she’d like to scream and start throwing things. She kept her smile even.

“I take it you’re here to help us out with...what’s happening to Cas?” she asked as pleasantly as she could.

Aneran nodded. He was about to expand upon it, but Mary jumped back in.

“Good, that’s...great. Thank you. We’ve not gotten very far with it, so...we appreciate all the help we can get.”

“Of course,” Aneran said graciously and nodded.

It was a very familiar gesture. Mary had seen Cas do it dozens of times and it turned the forced smile on her face into a genuine one. She still didn't know if she was ok with this, but…

“Ok...groovy,” she said with two thumbs up and mild sarcasm. “I’m...gonna go get food, now.” She nodded her head and turned to leave. “Anybody need anything?”

“We’re good,” Dean grunted, through a tightly clenched throat.

“Awesome,” Mary said, as she walked out.

They remained silent until she was past the war room and starting down the hallway.

Dean cleared his throat and sat back down.

“So, that went well.”

Cas looked at him incredulously. Dean glanced back and shook his head.

“You’ll...fill me in on that later, yeah?” Aneran asked Cas.

“Yes...that’s...probably best,” Cas answered and sat back down.

Sam dragged himself back into the room, carrying three beers. He was now sweaty, clammy and looked like he needed to sleep for at least a hundred years to recover.

“Jeez, Sam,” Dean said when he saw the state he was in. “What the hell?”
“I was gonna sit and have a beer with you, but...I’m crashin’ guys. It hit me all of a sudden.”

“Are you unwell?” Cas asked, quickly rising to assist him.

“No...no, Cas, I’ll be ok. I just gotta catch some shut-eye. Sorry, Aneran.”

“Of course, Sam. I understand. Castiel and I were just finishing up anyway and I’ll be leaving shortly.”

Dean perked up.

“Wait...what??!”

“It’s alright, Dean. He needs to gather a few things and talk to some of his colleagues. He’ll be back soon.”

“Very soon, actually,” Aneran added, trying to ease his concern. “No more than a couple of hours.”

Cas began very slowly walking Aneran toward the entrance, as they continued to talk. Dean followed...not just because he had to.

Aneran ticked off the list of items he’d bring back, double checking that they hadn’t missed anything, and Cas assured him they’d be ready when he returned. It didn’t sound ominous, but Dean wondered what he meant by that. He suddenly realized that maybe he should have been paying much closer attention to their conversation after all.

Cas ensured that Aneran had all of their numbers saved into his phone, before he left, so he could announce himself with a text, instead of beating on the door. Aneran smiled at him. He looked like he very much wanted to give Cas a hug, but when Cas didn’t make the first move, he simply said good-bye, lifted his beer in a casual ‘cheers’, and left. Cas closed and locked the door behind him.

“There are three portable chalkboards in the storage closet near the boiler room. We’ll need those, and a supply of chalk.” He rattled this off, as he turned and began making his way down the stairs. “But first, we have to prepare a space in the dungeon. We’ll need the impact drill, several anchor bolts and a knife.”

‘Uh...yeah,’ Dean thought, ‘I definitely should have been listening.’

Chapter End Notes

[UPDATE: I got a comment questioning the way Dean tuned out during the conversation between Aneran and Cas. The more I re-read that section of this chapter, the more I see she’s right. I need to add a bit there, to explain what’s happening. This chapter will get some additional work before I put the final lid on this project. Apologies to those who've already read it.]

(This song is country the way country is SUPPOSED to sound, Dammit! I can totally
get next to this. It’s ridiculous, danceable and awesome! LOL And, on a side note, it’s disturbingly appropriate for Destiel. This song will show up again in the sequel to this fic - Shh!...don’t tell anyone!

PS: In researching this, I’ve found that angels show up A LOT in country music. It’s...weird.)

I’ve grown to love this song, but I was hesitant to put in a link to the youtube video for it, because not everyone appreciates this hellish level of cheese. It’s beyond bad. But it’s also done ironically...sort of...at least, I really hope they meant it that way...and to me that’s funny enough to warrant at least one watch - painful as it is.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ibEfVcKo9X4
Aneran starts singing along at approximately 1:51.

For intentional cheese, though...nothing will ever beat the Beastie Boys’ ‘Sabotage’ video. Nothing. Ever. I will defend that statement to my dying day. It has nothing at all to do with this fic, but it’s fucking hilarious, especially if you ever watched bad ‘70’s cop shows.

Enjoy.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z5rRZdiu1UE

SWAMPBOT, my friend...thank you for 26yrs of finding cheesy crap and making me watch it. I love you.
Chapter Summary

Warded shackles and anchor plates...
Yeah...doesn’t sound like something really positive is about to happen, does it?

Dean just wants a little time with his family.
Cas just wants to keep him safe.
They’ll both get WHAT they want...just not the WAY they want it.

Chapter Notes

WARNING:
Here There Be Cursing. Lot’s of it.
Dean’s pissed and frustrated and worried about his friend.
(In my head, the HBO version of SPN would sound like this. Actually, the cursing I’ve written here is comparatively very mild. But, originally, there was one MF in this chapter, so...it’s getting there. I had to pull it, though. Couldn’t get the phrasing right. LOL Go figure.)

Merry Fucking Festivus, Everybody!

June 9, 2016
11:18 AM CDT

“You plan on tellin’ me why I’m about to drill holes in a perfectly good ceiling, or is it all part of a big surprise?” Dean snarked, as he followed Cas to the dungeon.

“Really, really belated birthday present?” He jostled the duffel he had slung over his shoulder. “Or maybe today is the first day of Angel Festivus! Which is cool. I am totally on board with another summer holiday. As long as it’s not stupid. Like...painting eggs. I never got that... Or, a May-Pole… What the hell is that thing supposed to be, anyway?”

“Aneran will be returning with a set of warded shackles and anchoring plates,” Cas mumbled as they entered the pseudo-storage room. “We need to be ready to do the installation immediately upon his arrival. There won’t be much time before the next pull.”

The two of them pushed aside the shelves to reveal the entrance to the dungeon.

Dean waited for an explanation.
They entered the room and Cas looked around, assessing the ceiling and walls, presumably looking for a good location for...the thing...they were...about to do.

Dean was still waiting.

Cas stood on his toes and reached up as high as he could.

Waiting.

Cas squatted down and drew an ‘x’ on the floor with chalk.

Done waiting.

The duffel was filled with mostly metal tools and supplies, so the clatter it made when it was thrown roughly onto the concrete floor was almost deafening in the enclosed space. Cas flinched and turned. Dean had his arms crossed over his chest and was staring at him.

“I...suppose I should explain why we’re down here,” Cas said quietly.

“That’d be good, yeah,” Dean nodded with a tight, mock-grin. All his new-found holiday cheer had faded.

Cas dropped his gaze. He crossed his arms as well, shifting his weight just barely and fidgeting, again.

Dean sighed. He hated seeing Cas like this. He’d figured out long ago that this posture was an additional ‘tell’ of Cas’s...one that would let him know when his friend was very frustrated or worried. Occasionally, it had been the precursor to an ugly battle of wills. Most often, it had been a signal to Dean that he was about to hear something he definitely would not like.

But, lately, Cas had been doing it so much that it was no longer an early-warning beacon. Now, it was just a frequent reminder that 8 years of friendship with Dean had reduced one of the most powerful and self-composed creatures in the universe to an emotionally raw, nervous wreck.

‘You usually destroy people quicker, Dean. Must be losin’ your touch,’ he thought, while forcing his face to stay blank.

Cas looked up. For a split second, he seemed startled, but then his face returned to it’s usual blankness. He stopped fidgeting and let his arms drop to his sides.

“The last pull was far stronger than the previous one. I found it difficult to control my vessel’s reactions. I can only assume that the trend of increasing strength with each pull will continue.”

Dean waited. He could tell Cas didn’t want to say whatever it was he was thinking about, so he gave him some time.

And a little more time...

And...then...that was enough time. This little game was getting old really fast.

“You know...Cas...maybe you could draw a picture...” Dean snarked. “Help yourself ‘get the ideas out.’”

“You’ll already have to be close,” Cas snapped, and then visibly reeled himself back in. Again, he paused.
“Or sing it!” Dean suggested, with an infuriating grin. “I hear that helps.”

Cas forced himself to not react.

“Last time, it was a little easier, when you were touching me,” he finally said. He started fidgeting again, but caught it almost immediately. With a huff, he shoved his hands into his coat pockets.

“I’m worried I might hurt you.”

“You...wait...” Dean stammered, completely confused. “I put one hand on your shin. How would that hurt me?”

“It wouldn’t be the touch. It’s...you have to stay close, whether or not there is any physical contact.”

“Right...” Dean coaxed.

“I need to ensure that I won’t injure you.” He was giving Dean only a sidelong glance, as he spoke. “I want you to restrain me...so that if I...”

“No,” Dean shook his head. “No way.”

“Dean...”

“I’m not gonna chain you up! Not just to keep ME from...what? Takin’ an elbow to the face?! No!”

“I’m at full power! It wouldn’t be just ‘an elbow to the face.’ You know that. I could very easily kill you.”

“We’ll get Aneran! He can...hang onto your arms or somethin’, Cas! Come on!” Dean implored.

When Cas gave no indication that he might back down, Dean grabbed the duffel up off of the floor and slung it over his shoulder, preparing to storm out of the dark, horrible room.

Cas looked solemnly at his friend. He hated asking this of him. It would so closely mimic some of Dean’s worst memories. Asking him to be involved with this at all was cruel, but...it was the only way to keep him safe. Physically, at least.

From the moment they’d decided to create the tether, Cas had considered this a possible eventuality. He’d thought he’d have time to come up with a way to spare his friend this trauma, but the last pull had made it very clear he wouldn’t have that option. He wondered, now, if it wouldn’t have been better to have just let himself be taken.

Aneran’s assurance that he could procure warded restraints on such short notice had been an enormous windfall. Cas now found himself immensely grateful for Sam’s prudence. He didn’t dare mention the ideas he’d begun to formulate prior to Aneran’s arrival.

Dean was still struggling to come up with a decent argument as he debated whether or not to try to just drag Cas back upstairs. Forget they’d ever come down here. He knew that wouldn’t work, if Cas didn’t want it to, but he couldn’t just fold. He had to find a way out of this. For both of them.

“I’m sorry, my friend,” Cas said quietly.

Dean looked back at him, but he was barely listening.

“It might help to remember that it will be much easier for me, if I’m not worrying that I might harm you.” Cas glanced up toward the ceiling. “And this way, I’ll have something to brace against that I
can’t break.” He hesitated again, fumbling for the right words. “It helps a bit to have something...secure...that I can grab onto when…” He struggled for a moment, searching for words that would make it less awful. But he didn’t find any. There was no easy way to say it. He closed his eyes. “When it hurts. Something I can hold onto...when it hurts.” He ended the sentence in a mumble and turned slightly. He couldn’t bring himself to directly face his friend anymore.

Dean continued to stare...and then slumped. He was right. Handling pain was easier if you weren’t worried about someone else. And it was easier if you had something to grip or bite or pull against. But… ’Cas shouldn’t know that!’ Dean's mind screamed.

It was the blatant unfairness that made this situation so much harder to accept. After everything...all the crap they’d been through... for this to be happening? Now? It was bullshit! They’d stopped the damned Apocalypse! TWICE! They’d fought archangels, Satan himself, God’s freakin’ SISTER, for fuck’s sake! And they’d WON!...Mostly...

And now...this was the jacked-up prize for having saved everyone and everything over and over again: Cas suffering horribly, chained in the basement of the one place he felt safe and at home, with his best friend standing right by his side, but completely unable to help him. It was just...perfect.

For the first time since Cas had told him about those five angels, Dean began to seriously consider whether or not he’d be able to kill an entire family, including the little kids. The idea sickened him. He still didn’t think he could do it. But right now, watching Cas struggle to cope with yet another crisis, when he so desperately needed a break...listening to him try to ‘logic’ his way through this...try to make the idea of what was about to happen to him easier for his friend to bear...Dean wanted nothing more than to see five sets of black, wing-shaped stains on the sun-baked ground of New Mexico. The fact that each stain would have a corpse in the middle of it seemed to matter just a little less than it had.

The two of them stood quietly in the empty room. Each had his head down, and avoided looking at the other.

There would be no miraculous intervention this time. They both knew that somehow. This was going to happen...and the best they could hope for was to make a small amount of progress in the six and a half hours that followed...before it happened again. And again.

Eventually, Dean closed his eyes and sighed heavily.

“Every time, now, right?” he asked, just to confirm. “We gotta come down here and do this four times a day?”

Cas nodded slowly.

“If nothing changes...yes.”

“We gotta stop this,” Dean said, shaking his head. “We gotta find these fuckers.”

“We will.”

“How?” Dean asked as he rubbed his eyes with thumb and finger. He ran his hand down his face and looked up at his friend. “We can barely move. We can’t even... I can’t even get in the car and go look for ‘em! And every six and a half hours it just gets more… What the fuck are we doin’?!?” Dean growled, tossing the duffel back onto the floor. He dragged his hands through his hair.

“How does this always happen, huh?” Dean asked. His entire body tensed like a loaded spring. “We’re constantly ready for a fight, and they still manage to catch us with our pants around our
ankles...every damned time! I don’t…” He stopped. That train of thought would go nowhere.

“Ya know...it would be really nice…” he continued, the rage bubbling up to the surface, “…if just once...for a decent stretch, like...maybe a whole month... we could have good shit happen! And just good shit! Ya know?! Not...little sprinkles of it on top of another GIANT CLUSTER-FUCK! I MEAN...JUST...THE GOD DAMNED SPRINKLES!”

Cas stood quietly, watching and listening as Dean worked through it. There was nothing helpful he could say, anyway, and this explosion was necessary. He knew that.

“One month! It doesn’t seem like such a huge fuckin’ demand, ya know? Just one month,” he trailed off and was quiet for a long moment. When he spoke again, his voice was much softer.

“It took me the whole first week to accept it. That we were all here...and that mom was here...and we were actually ok. I totally expected to ‘wake up’, ya know?” he said, turning to Cas. “I’d be workin’ on the car or just sittin’ and listening to you or mom or Sam and I’d think, ‘Any minute now…’ Just...couldn’t believe it. It was too good. Couldn’t be real.” He shook his head and huffed. “NOW I can! This is EXACTLY the way our lives go! I have NO doubt THIS is real!” He made an exaggerated motion toward the ceiling and the room in general.

He began pacing, and ran his hand through his hair again.

“It was gonna be me and Sam, and mom, and you…” he continued. “And YOU were finally gonna be stickin’ around, for once! Not runnin’ off, and leavin’ us not knowin’ what was up with you, and us just gettin’ a phone call once in awhile, outta nowhere!” He huffed and let that roll off, before continuing.

“We were gonna bring mom up to speed and get her settled in. And then, if she wanted to...I thought we could hunt. Together. All of us. It was a crazy-ass thought, I know, but, God, Cas...it was a good one!” Dean let a tiny grin light his face as he looked at his friend. “It was gonna be all of us on the road, ya know? Mom swappin’ stories with us, and Sam bitching about my music...tellin’ me I need to update it for mom’s sake...which would be a total bullshit ploy to get me to listen to his douchey crap! And you’d be back there, jumpin’ in at the wrong time, or sayin’ some weird shit that'd shut the whole conversation down. And Sam would come up with some way to cover for ya, so you wouldn’t feel like a dick...and mom would wonder what the hell she was sitting next to back there…”

Cas squinted. He couldn’t tell if Dean was actually going somewhere with this or if he was simply finishing his rant. It was extremely hard to follow.

“You know...I’d actually started making plans for shootin’ off fireworks out in one of fields around here.” He shook his head and grinned. His eyes were brighter, now. “I figured, maybe the week before the Fourth, I could get a bunch of stuff and then...wait for a good day...and we’d take mom and she could be there with me and Sam shootin’ off fireworks like we did when Sam was a kid, ya know? Kinda...recreate one of the things she missed. So she wouldn’t feel so…” He sighed and drifted off for a moment.

“Maybe I’d teach you how to barbecue. Or you could help with the fireworks or somethin’.” He grimaced and reconsidered. “Yeah...actually those might be iffy for you, so...maybe not. But, we’d think of somethin’ for ya, Cas. It’d be awesome! We’d eat too much and drink too much and blow shit up! And then just...hang out. See who could spot the most shooting stars. Perfect summer night!”

“Why would...those things be ‘iffy’ for me?”
Dean considered him, and then pursed his lips.

“I’m thinkin’... 5 minutes, tops, before you’re on fire. That’s just a guess. And I know...you can put it out and heal yourself, but...a guy burning alive kinda kills the mood, ya know? It’s fine, though, Cas. There’s always stuff to do. Maybe you could help me get the meat marinated? And the cooler! Yeah! No schleppin’ a heavy-ass cooler all the way to the party, if you’re around, Muscles! You’d just fly it out there!” He stopped and thought about that for a moment. “Huh...you’re pretty handy to have around, actually.”

“These things aren’t impossible,” Cas said quietly. Dean was clearly struggling with all of this, and he wasn’t sure how he could help him, but he couldn’t let the rambling continue. They had to finish the task at hand. “We may be able to do all of that. Perhaps in the very near future. But right now, we have to focus.”

“Right,” Dean sneered. “We have to focus. On this,” he said, again gesturing to the ceiling. “And that’s the point.”

Cas thought for a moment.

“Perhaps,” he began, very slowly, “we could try to...find some fireworks to...um...’blow up’? And we...”

“It’s not the fireworks, Cas,” Dean interrupted. “Or the barbecue or the hunting...I don’t care about that. It’s the little shit. The good shit. That’s what I want! The rest is just...” he sighed. “I dunno...nice, I guess.” He started pacing again, but much more slowly.

“So...” Cas began, still somewhat confused. “Sam arguing with you about music? And what appears to be a very long list of ways that I worry or annoy you,” he said, only slightly begrudgingly. “You’re saying...that...is ‘the good shit?’”

“It’s the GREAT SHIT!” Dean bellowed, spinning on his heel to look back at him. His face quickly lost much of it’s intensity, and he now looked incredibly sad. “It’s the best shit!”

They were both quiet again. The entire conversation seemed to have shifted in a completely new direction and neither of them knew how to get it back on track.

The enormity of emotion that Dean could convey often made it difficult for Cas to know how to respond. He didn’t want to make it worse by saying the wrong thing. Logic never really seemed to work well. His own recent experiences with this kind of despondence and longing made him able to empathize, but he still had no idea how to comfort someone who was feeling it.

He briefly considered offering a long hug, like the one Dean had given him the night before last. It had been deeply comforting. More than he’d ever imagined it would be. But he knew the offer would almost certainly be rejected. Once again, he found himself unable to help in any meaningful way. It made the idea that he could really do anything or be anything other than a physical guardian or an obedient soldier seem...ridiculous.

“Yeah...I dunno,” Dean mumbled. He looked completely defeated. “Maybe we’ll do the fireworks. Sometime.” He was silent for a few moments, but then he looked over at his friend. “You ever done that, Cas? Shot off fireworks? Or been around for it?” he asked, very quietly. The thought allowed a tiny glimmer of happiness to return to his voice.

Cas looked at him very fondly, and shook his head.

Dean grinned. It was barely there, but...it was a grin.
“Ok,” he nodded, and for just a moment, the grin got a little bit bigger. “We’ll do that.”

Another staring contest had begun. But it was interrupted, when Cas’s phone buzzed with a text message. He reluctantly looked away from his friend to check it.

“Aneran says he’ll be returning in half an hour. He was able to coordinate with his colleagues much more quickly than expected.” He sent a short reply, then looked back at Dean.

“We can beat this,” Cas said, hoping to convey all of the confidence he truly wished he felt.

“Yeah,” Dean replied. He clearly wasn’t sold. All of the fight seemed to have drained out of him.

“We did just save the world, again...a couple of weeks ago,” Cas coaxed, his face slowly softening into a wry grin. Dean looked at him and grunted out an exhausted chuckle. “I think we can probably save one fallen angel. If we work as a team.”

“Ah...Cas...” Dean groaned and tried to keep himself from either throwing up or hugging the guy. Neither option seemed right. He groped for some humor and was stunned to find that he almost wasn’t able to muster a single joke. Which seemed impossible. Cas had lobbed a slow cheese-ball...right over the plate. Easy pickin’s. So...where was the damned joke?

“You found more of those dopey after-school specials, didn’t ya?” Eh...not his best, but it’d have to do.

Cas snorted.

“No...I was reminded of that particular truth just last night...by a woman with a very direct approach to mediation.” Cas grinned. “And a clear addiction to shortbread,” he continued, but the grin lessened and he looked a little confused. “She ate them all. That seems rather excessive.”

Dean was just watching him, as he said this. It hadn’t really occurred to him that Cas and his mom had talked, while he slept. He hadn’t questioned why she was in the room, when he awoke. The horrible scene happening right next to his bed had made everything else unimportant. He hadn’t even thought about it again, until right now. It sounded like there might be quite a story, there, though, and he made a mental note to ask him about it later.

‘Later,’ he thought. ‘It always has to be later.’ He breathed deeply and swallowed the lump in his throat. He was beginning to think it might already be far too late.

“I should begin drawing the surrounding warding,” Cas said, obviously sensing or maybe overhearing his friend’s resurging melancholy. “I believe this spot will work.” He pointed to the ceiling just above himself. “Do you agree?”

Dean shook his head to clear his mind, and looked up. He mentally assessed the location of the structural beams and ran a quick and dirty calculation for the number of bolts needed to hold about one ton of weight off of the floor. Cas barely weighed one twelfth of that, but the jerk force a human can generate is often far more than the total body weight. Quadrupling total weight would keep the plate secure. But with Cas, who knew how much the warding would reduce his strength. He figured double it and round up to an even ton. They didn’t have anything on hand that would secure more weight than that, anyway.

“Yeah,” Dean barely said, and bent down to open the duffel. “You’re gonna do it in blood, right?” He looked up at him. “Mine or yours?”

“Mine,” Cas answered quietly.
Dean retrieved the small collection bowl from the duffel and pulled the three inch blade from his ankle holster. He handed both to Cas and went back to retrieving his tools.
An Unexpected Party

Chapter Summary

The arrival of Aneran's 'colleagues'.
And some unpleasant warding troubles.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

June 9, 2016

12:00 PM CDT

Mary received a text asking her to man the bunker door. A brief and completely insufficient explanation as to why she was being asked to do this was provided...also via text.

She thought about resisting. She really did. But at this point, she figured…‘why?’ Plus, rolling with it just seemed like the least energy draining option. For everyone.

The first entry request she received was a short, clipped text:

‘Erethe. open, pls.’

Mary considered that for a moment, chewing on her lip. It was really tempting to make these new angels jump through some hoops...make each of them understand that this place would not be taken over. The Winchester family was firmly in charge. So, if any of them were feeling particularly cocky, controlling or smitey, they could just step-the-fuck-off right now.

It was a good thought. She liked thinking it. It scratched an itch that had built up all the way down deep in her bones. And then she remembered Cas's text:

‘some friends coming 2 help’

She sighed, letting go of the happy, scratchy thought, and just opened the damned door.

She wasn’t sure what she’d been expecting. Maybe, just some non-descipt looking man or woman. Or maybe a fully-winged renaissance statue, complete with flowing garments and one boob flashing. (She couldn’t remember if angel statues also adhered to the one-covered-boob minimum standard or if that was just reserved for people statues.) But what she saw didn't fit.

Erethe’s vessel was a tiny, female US Naval officer, probably in her early fifties, with dark olive skin, large, liquid-brown eyes and long, dark hair perfectly pinned up under her hat. Her ‘Summer Whites’ were a little reminiscent of the angel garments Mary had just pictured. Except they weren’t flowing. And both boobs were covered.
The only things breaking up the crisp white of the uniform were the assorted pins and the very impressive-looking rack of badges on her chest. This woman was clearly not from the rank and file. Whoever she was, she certainly didn’t give the impression that she would be easily duped by an angel. That made Mary feel marginally better.

“You must be Mary,” she said, and her face lit up in a truly stunning smile.

“Hi,” Mary said, trying to be pleasant, but managing only a slightly slanted grin. “You’re Ee-reeth?” she asked tentatively.

“Eh-reth’ or ‘Eh-reth-eh’. Whichever you prefer. I’ll answer to either,” she supplied helpfully. It sounded rather practiced. She obviously had to answer that question on a frequent basis.

They stood looking at each other for a moment, as Mary assessed her. Erethe didn’t seem to mind, but her face began showing at least a little hesitancy, when Mary seemed unwilling to continue the conversation from her end.

“I’m sorry...I was told you were expecting us. Have I arrived at a bad time?” She was extremely pleasant. So much so that Mary began feeling guilty that she’d had any thoughts of hostility or defensiveness at all. But she quickly shut that down. She had to be cautious. There was no reason to feel guilty about being good at her job.

‘My job,’ she thought. That was something she hadn’t let herself consider, yet. It had just been old habits up until now. She’d still been ‘out of the game.’ Not a hunter anymore. Clearly, that was changing. Fast.

Mary shook herself out of her reverie.

“Yes! Sorry...I...uh...yeah. Come in,” she stepped back and out of the way, so the angel could enter the bunker.

Erethe walked past Mary, still giving her a very warm, friendly smile, and turned to begin her descent into the war room. After closing and locking the door, Mary sighed quietly and followed her...at a slight distance.

“So...what do you...um...” Mary began, but realized she had no idea how to greet an angel. The boys had taken care of Aneran’s arrival, so...

She felt the conditioned impulse to go into ‘host’ mode...which she immediately kicked herself for even thinking, ‘This isn’t a neighbor dropping by for coffee, for Christ’s sake!’ Mary thought, and tried to come up with an alternative. Of course, her second instinct was ‘hunter etiquette’ (a.k.a. gank first and ask questions later.) That, also, would be unhelpful, here.

“Sorry...I don’t know what to...um...offer...you. Or if...you’d... I mean, I know you don’t eat or drink, but Cas likes coffee. I can make some,” she babbled and immediately winced.

Erethe gazed at her for a moment and then her eyes lit up.

“Aww! You call him ‘Cas’,” she said, sounding as though she’d just been handed an adorable puppy. Her smile became even more brilliant. “That’s really sweet! And yes, I’d love some coffee, if you don’t mind.”

She was lovely. There wasn’t a hint of mischief or insincerity in that face and Mary smiled back in spite of herself.
“Sure,” Mary said a bit more pleasantly. She turned and motioned for Erethe to come with her to the kitchen.

“I can help, if you’d like!” Erethe chirped.

Mary turned to see the tiny angel almost skipping toward her and her smile went a little lopsided. Something told her the woman who was serving as Erethe’s vessel, did not normally move in quite that way. She wondered how the decorated officer felt about this creature’s habit of using her body to flit about like a thirteen year old girl. But that would be a question for another time.

“Actually, we do eat and drink, when we want to, or need to. Those of us that will be coming here, today, I mean,” Erethe chatted, casually, as they made their way into the kitchen.

“Oh,” Mary said, a little confused. “I thought food just tastes like...molecules, to you? That’s what Cas told us. Except with coffee...and beer...for some reason...actually, I have no idea why those things work for him and I haven’t had time to talk to him more, so…” she shook her head and gave Erethe another smile.

“So...I’m rambling. Looks like coffee’s probably a good idea for me, too.”

Erethe giggled.

“Please, Mary, don’t feel you need to do anything special or different. My friends and I have lived among humans for a very long time. And, we’re all familiar with the customs of this culture. Feel free to treat us exactly the way you’d treat any human.” Her grin became a little sheepish and she continued. “And I promise, we’ll all try really hard to not leave too much of a mess...or do anything too freaky.” She giggled a little longer than expected, and Mary got the sneaking suspicion there might be a good story or two in there somewhere.

“If anything, I hope you’ll see us as helpers, and not guests you need to fuss over.”

Mary let out a quick sigh of relief. She was sure Erethe thought her words had calmed Mary’s worry about having to play the happy host, but Mary was sighing for a completely different reason. ‘Finally...’ she thought. ‘Someone in this bunker is going to tell me things... when I need to know them, not after the fact. And she’ll use whole sentences! In context! Without prodding!’ It was like a cool breeze on a hot day. Mary sighed a second time.

She’d begun to show Erethe where the coffee supplies and mugs were, when another text came through. It was Aneran.

Mary slumped, disappointed. Erethe was a talker, and there were so many questions to be answered. Mary really wanted to get a handle on this whole ‘vessels vs. true form’ and ‘angel power’...thing. Food and sleep, or the lack thereof, seemed to be an integral part of it, and she was sure it could help her to gain a much more useful understanding of what was happening to Cas.

She’d asked him for an explanation, during their first week together. Then she’d asked him again when they were in Dean’s room, awaiting the next pull. But Cas had been unable to explain any of it either time. There’d been incomprehensible sentences, followed by half thoughts, that he then backtracked over, trying to find a better starting point. Both times, they’d spent three or four minutes in conversation Hell, before Mary had finally shown him mercy and changed the subject.

He’d tried, though. She knew that. The poor guy always tried.

“Ooo...okay...” Mary said, answering the text as quickly as she could. It was still a clumsy process for her, but she was getting faster. “I’m gonna need to go let Aneran in...”
“No problem,” Erethe said, taking over for Mary easily and getting the coffee maker going.

Mary grinned at her again, but still found herself unsettled. Erethe was a stark contrast to Cas. She was comfortable in her surroundings. Smooth in her interactions. It suddenly occurred to Mary that she’d patterned her concept of angel behavior on the Winchesters’ awkward guardian, without even thinking about it. So, now, the ease with which this angel operated was almost jarring.

Another text buzzed her phone. It was from Cas.

’aneran at front door. pls send him 2 dungeon.’

Mary cracked a smile and chuckled just once. Then her face fell. She typed very quickly.

‘pls tell me we do not have a dungeon’

There was a brief delay before the next message.

‘on our way. meet in war room’

Mary went quickly to the front door. She opened it and was met by the pleasant face of Aneran, who was clumsily trying to corral a couple of large, heavy-looking metal plates back under his arm. As he did so, the two lengths of heavy chain that ended in what looked like shackles and leg irons rattled loudly.

“Whoa! Hey! Whatcha got there…Marley? I’m not diggin’ the Christmas Past vibe.” Her tone was sharp and suspicious. Aneran picked up on it and tried to lighten the mood with a small chuckle at her references.

“Not a ghost. Promise. Uh…” he stammered, and jerked hard against the top plate, getting it to finally settle back into place under his arm. “These are…”

“They’re for me, Mary. Please let him in,” Cas called up to the front door from a spot by the map table.

“It’s ok, Mom,” Dean quickly followed up.

Mary sighed, gesturing with her head and arm for him to enter. She had to press backward into the side wall so he could get by her with those awkward plates. After he’d gone through, she reached blindly behind her for the door handle, to pull it closed.

“Hello,” a deep, sonorous voice said from a spot right near her side.

Mary yelped loudly and jumped. And the look on her face made it very clear she was not happy about that.

The owner of the voice took a quick step backward, holding up his hands in a show of surrender. His face held both shock and amusement, as an apologetic grin spread across it.

“I am so sorry,” he continued, with a chuckle. “I thought you saw me arrive.”

Mary tried to get her heart out of her throat for long enough to start asking questions. She was not about to just let him stroll in. There’d been no text and Aneran didn’t indicate he’d known this guy was behind him, so…

“Vanya!” Aneran called out from halfway down the staircase. Mary heard the metal plates beginning to slide away from him again.
“Shit,” Aneran mumbled. “Ok...could use some help. Someone. Anyone!” He then yelled back toward the door. “Mary, that’s Vanya. Vanya, Mary Winchester.”

“Mother of Dean Winchester!” Vanya’s grin turned into a broad smile. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Mary looked him up and down. Late twenties. Ivy League academic, she guessed. The very hip blazer/vest/shirt combo with jeans that had just the right amount of ‘torn and worn out’ kinda gave him away. He was even wearing boat shoes, which seemed a bit of overkill. Of course, the long dreadlocks and abundance of beaded jewelry against his dark brown skin did skew the look in a much more favorable direction. He seemed to have the same sparkling brown eyes that she’d seen on Erethe. He, too...was lovely.

‘Who are these guys?’ Mary thought, as she shook the hand that was offered to her.

“Wait! Don’t!” she heard Aneran holler.

Vanya moved immediately to enter and help his friend, but stopped and looked at Mary one more time.

“Yeah,” she grumbled. “Come on in.” She swung the door shut behind him.

“But… No, wait!” Aneran warned. He then let out a very disappointed groan.

Mary looked around Vanya’s shoulder as he stood at the top of the stairs, watching the drama unfolding several steps below him.

Aneran was standing sideways, feet on two different stair treads, back pressed flush to the wall. He was slightly red-faced and clearly about to lose control of the metal plates. Cas was standing just in front of him, looking thoroughly annoyed.

“That’s why I was telling you not to…” Aneran said and grunted. “‘Cause now the warding is exposed.” He made movements like he was trying to struggle to free himself from something, and then stopped, letting out a big breath.

“Ok...I’m stuck.”

Aneran looked pleadingly down at Dean, who was standing on the tread just below Cas.

“I think you’re gonna have to rescue us.” He chuckled and gave him a hugely embarrassed grin.

Dean looked at Cas, confused, until he noticed his friend was motionless, one hand on the end of the upper plate, as both pieces of metal continued to very slowly slip out of Aneran’s grip. Cas seemed to be doing nothing to stop the progression.

“You gotta get the plates lined back up so the warding is sandwiched between the two. Not showing.” Aneran said very quickly, eyeing Dean with good humor that was rapidly turning into open panic.

Dean realized what he was saying and quickly grabbed the two plates.

“You’re stuck?” he asked. “Both of you?”

Cas nodded and rolled his eyes.

Dean giggled. He didn’t bother trying to hide his delight as he tried to get the plates to slide. They weren’t moving for some reason and he started looking for where they might be hung up. Every few
seconds or so, additional bursts of giggles overtook him. Cas looked less and less amused each time.

“How many angels...does it take...to carry warded plates down a staircase?”

“Yeah, yeah…” Aneran scoffed. “Get it outta your system, hero.”

“Pfft! ‘Outta my system.’” Dean mocked, as he continued to survey the hung up plates. “Yeah...this is never goin’ away.”

Dean tried to shift the plates without stabbing a sharp metal corner into Aneran’s ribs or pinching Cas’s fingers between the two.

“But...the really good jokes’ll have to wait ‘til after I’ve swooped in and saved you from the big, bad etchings!”

Cas clicked his tongue loudly, and then looked up at the top of the stairs.

“Hello, Vanya,” he greeted the angel.

Vanya was watching all of this with amusement.

“Hello, sir! It’s good to see you.”

Cas nodded and turned back to the disaster at the end of his arm.

“Just slide them back together,” Aneran said, trying not to show his frustration.

“They won’t…” Dean began, bending down to angle his head around the plates. “They’re stuck on something.”

“They’re interlocking,” Aneran said, as his face turned a darker shade of red. His vessel’s muscles were beginning to shake uncontrollably as they struggled to hold their unmovable and awkward position without the assistance of the angel’s power. All of that metal was very heavy and he couldn’t let go of a single piece of it, nor could he shift position.

Vanya sighed contentedly, as he sat down on the landing with his feet on the first step. He rested his elbows on his knees and his chin in his hands so he could comfortably watch the show.

“You’re gonna be a big help,” Dean snarked at Vanya. “I can tell already.”

“If I reach in there, I’m gonna freeze up, too. That warding is flashing right at both of them.” Vanya was barely hiding his smile. “Plus...you look like you got this.”

Dean shook his head and looked back at the plates.

“Interlocking does not mean secure,” Cas snapped at Aneran. “You should have tied them together. They could have come apart during flight! This was very irresponsible!”

Aneran closed his eyes and forced his voice to stay calm.

“Yes, sir.” He grunted with the strain and then continued. “And thank you. Always nice to have my failures pointed out while the crisis they’ve caused is still happening.” The sarcasm was thick enough for Cas to catch it.

Dean snorted.
“If these had come apart mid-flight…” Cas paused to collect himself.

Dean glanced up at him and just shook his head. ‘Ah, Cas…’ he thought. ‘It’s tough bein’ you, ain’t it buddy?’

“Aneran, you have to be more careful. I won’t have any of you risking yourselves trying to help me. Do you understand?” Cas’s voice slid from harsh and critical to something with an underlying tone of anxiety.

“Yes, sir. I understand,” Aneran acquiesced. He was still struggling with the heavy weight, though, and his answer was tinged with the gasping sounds of a man about to pass out.

“I hope so!” Cas snapped, clearly not ready to let go of being pissed about it.

“Take it easy, Cas,” Dean said, without looking away from his task.

“That kind of careless mistake could have been disastrous!” Cas argued.

“Yeah, well...I think we’ve ALL gotten the point, now, so…” Dean made a quick move to try to jerk the top plate past the sticking point. It didn’t work and Aneran let out a miserable grunt as the force of the move rattled his vessel.

“Sorry,” Dean winced, quickly flicking his eyes to look at Aneran, before going back to the plate. With a sigh, he reassessed the position of both plates and tried a different angle.

Cas still looked upset, and Dean was sure he’d be fidgeting up a storm, if he could move any part of his vessel below the shoulders.

“You know…” Dean began, as he pried the plates just a tiny amount apart, “I think you’re just pissed, ‘cause I’m finding out about your little ‘off switch’.”

He didn’t bother looking up at Cas’s face. He knew exactly what he’d see there, and the thought alone made him grin evilly.

The plates were still stuck and Dean knew he wouldn’t be able to determine the sticking point and re-align them before Aneran’s vessel’s head popped. The guy was purple, now.

“What if I just grabbed the whole top plate and pulled it off? And then I…” Dean glanced up and his eyes went wide. Both angels had jerked their heads to stare at him with expressions of overt terror.

“OK, I WON’T...do that,” he quickly backpedalled, raising his free hand up to assure them. Apparently, there was a bit more to this particular warding, than just a straightforward entrapment spell. He sighed...thinking.

“Well...I can’t see what they’re still catchin’ on. And even if I could, they’re not gonna close ‘cause you both have fingers in the way…”

Dean took a few more moments to run through their options, before thinking of a totally different approach.

“So...what happens if… Can I wrap the whole thing in aluminum foil, and pry your fingers off with my hands, once the warding is covered? Will that work?”

The two angels looked at each other. Aneran shrugged clumsily and nodded.

“I see no reason it wouldn’t,” Cas concluded.
“Ok,” Dean nodded. “Mom, can you go get the aluminum foil?”

Mary had taken up a seated position right next to Vanya, on the top step. It had looked like a comfortable place to hang out, while the stairs were blocked. Plus, she had silently agreed with the hipster angel...this was a very entertaining show.

She stood quickly and descended the stairs. Squeezing past the frozen angels wasn’t easy, but sliding her hip over the top of the railing made her just small enough to fit behind Cas, and then she hurried away toward the kitchen.

It was suddenly very quiet. Dean sighed in exaggerated contentment and looked up at Cas.

“Hey,” he said, with a nod and an overly casual smile. “So...this plan’s workin’ out great so far, huh?”

Cas glared at him. Dean cleared his throat and sniffed.

“You know, Cas...the last person who looked at me like that…”

Cas squinted hard and Dean saw his own mortality in those blue eyes. The angel tilted his head. It was a clear warning.

“...slammed a door in my face,” Dean finished. He grinned hugely as his friend realized he’d changed the script. Cas’s glare held a tiny amount of confusion, now.

“‘Course...the time before that …well...we’ve talked about what these ‘come hither’ looks can lead to.” Dean lifted his chin and winked.

It had the intended effect. The seraphs features tightened into the beginnings of what Dean and Sam both affectionately referred to as his ‘kill-face’ - a pinched, childlike rage-sneer that would be absolutely adorable, if it weren’t usually followed by a blast wave of death so cataclysmic and terrifying that it left any survivors quivering on the floor with their hands over their eyes.

In fact, years ago, when they were in that diner with Eve, and Cas took out all twenty of those monsters in half a second…well, Dean would never, ever, EVER admit it, but...he’d peed a little.

So, he wondered, now, for the thousandth time, why he couldn’t resist the urge to antagonize a guy that could squish him like a soft-bodied bug. Sure, it was fun as hell, but...it wasn’t exactly smart.

Also, if one of the new angels decided to not put up with Dean’s shit and instead began beating his ass, Cas would be much less inclined to intervene right away. In fact, he was pretty sure Cas would pull up a chair and watch.

His reverie was broken by a single huff of laughter, followed by a string of desperate and miserable grunts coming from the angel to his left.

“How you doin’, man? You got 60 seconds left in ya?” Dean asked. Aneran looked very close to collapse, but he nodded and resumed his focused straining. Dean stepped at an angle and used his own hip to help prop him up.

“Just don’t make me laugh,” the angel barely managed to say. Dean grinned.

Mary returned, handing Dean the roll of foil, and putting her own hands right beside her son’s, to relieve him.

Dean kept his hip against Aneran and with both hands free, quickly covered the plates with three
layers of foil. They were loose, so he could get the angels’ hands out, before sealing the foil around the edges.

He reached under to remove Cas’s hand first and was amazed to find that he could pry each of his friend’s fingers away from the plate with almost no effort at all. But, even with his hand fully detached from the metal, Cas was still frozen. Apparently, just having his hand in the warding’s ‘line of sight’ was enough to immobilize him.

Dean hesitated for a split second, as a spectacularly fun thought shot through his mind. He realized it was irrefutable proof that he was a truly horrible human being, but he just couldn’t help himself.

Right now, if he chose to, he could manipulate the limbs of a venom-spitting Castiel like a life-sized marionette...and there wasn’t a damned thing the angel could do about it. It was just...glorious. Painfully tempting. And the only thing keeping him from being the evil dick that would do something that shitty to his best friend, was the fact that he didn’t have time - Aneran’s legs were giving out.

But that was the only thing stopping him. The ONLY thing.

‘See, Cas...I’m definitely an asshole,’ Dean thought, as he pulled Cas’s arm out from under the foil.

“It worked,” Cas said and quickly stuck both arms under the plates. He swallowed hard and shot a very anxious look at Dean, before focusing back on the plates.

Dean eyed Mary and nodded. She released her grip on the plate and quickly slid her arm out from under the foil. Cas could get a much better grip, now, and was able to take the weight of the plates off of Aneran. The relieved angel let out the huge breath he’d been holding in, under the strain.

Mary pulled Aneran’s left hand off of the plates and away from the foil, while Dean took care of his right hand. Cas was now able to step back, holding both plates. Dean quickly tore off another long piece of foil and draped it over the tops and sides, before grabbing the entire bundle and pulling it away from Cas.

Both angels visibly relaxed. Mary grinned and patted the top of Aneran’s shoulder.

“Ya did good! For a minute there, I thought we were gonna watch you take a header down the stairs.”

Aneran returned the grin.

“Yeah, me too,” he said, and leaned forward to try to stand up straight. He stopped midway and looked down at his leg. With a heavy sigh, he looked back to Mary.

“I’m gonna need just a little more help,” he said, wincing at her. He looked very ready for this ordeal to be over, so he could go find a hole to crawl into. He caught Castiel’s gaze out of the corner of his eye, and visibly shrunk. His former commander still did not look pleased. At all.

“Oh!” Mary said, when she looked down and saw that the warded chains and irons had gotten fully wrapped around one of the angel’s legs. She began extricating him from them and bundling them into her arms. They were very heavy and she struggled for a moment to get them settled enough for her to carry.

“Warding, warding, everywhere!” she teased him, grinning. “What’s an angel to do?”

Aneran looked enormously embarrassed, but he took the teasing like a trooper. He smiled back at her
and offered his sincere thanks, as the warding gave way and he let his grace wash over his vessel. The sweat, shaking muscles and facial discoloration disappeared. He straightened and turned to follow Castiel, who’d already walked the rest of the way down the stairs.

The phones buzzed with another text. Mary groaned and set the chains down noisily at the bottom of the stairs, before climbing them again. She checked the text for the name and opened the door.

There were two this time, a man and a woman, maybe in their thirties, who were likely the shortest duo Mary had ever seen in person. If she had to guess, the guy might have cracked five-foot-three, and he literally towered over his companion. They both looked South Asian and were dressed in the same nondescript clothing style that Aneran wore. Except they wore dress shoes, not work boots. And the woman wore a gorgeous, beautifully ornate gold necklace, and several bracelets that were just as amazing. And huge. On her, at least.

They both smiled at Mary. The man made a motion toward himself with his thumb.

“Usha,” he said.

“And I’m Faral,” the woman said with a nod and the vague hint of a bow.

Mary shook her head. They both had the same twinkling, liquidy eyes that the other two had and they appeared to be very friendly. It would have been the ideal set of people to have shown up for this little ‘save Cas’ party...if, that is, they had actually been people, not angels wearing people. But, once again, Mary forced herself to shake it off. She stepped aside, gesturing graciously for them to please enter the fully-warded-against-angels bunker. That concept was beginning to seem pretty damned absurd.

As the couple reached the threshold, another stranger winked into existence 10 feet behind them. She was a tall, thickly-built woman with bushy, bright red hair and her cell phone already in her hand. She looked up, a bit startled and quickly put the phone away.

“Hey,” the woman said, moving toward the door.

“Hey, back,” Mary answered. “Nice t-shirt.”

The woman glanced down and grinned.

“Oh, yeah...last time we were together I showed her some warding sigils. She had about a dozen of these made afterward,” she said, pulling aside the plaid overshirt she was wearing to reveal the entire design. “They’re all different. This one’s a stripped down anti-possession warding. It’ll still work but one bad trip through the wash could scrape off enough that it won’t anymore.” The angel was looking down again, considering the design with a partial grimace.

“I warned her that she was kinda playin’ fast and loose with the goods,” she said, gesturing dramatically to the whole length of her vessel’s body with one hand, “but...she dug this version.”

She was still looking down at the shirt when Mary cleared her throat and grinned.

“Got a name?”

The angel shook her head and sighed.

“Sorry. Been a very long decade. I’m Roz.”

“Mary.” They shook hands and Mary stepped aside. “Come on in, Roz.”
As the angel moved through, one more appeared, where she’d just been. And then another.

Mary sighed. She had a ridiculous thought, but acted on it anyway by stepping around the door and looking at its external surface. Seeing nothing out of the ordinary, she opened it wide again and turned her attention to the newcomers.

“Looking for something?” the woman asked. She appeared to be in her fifties, with shockingly white hair, lots of jewelry attached to her clothing so she tinkled and chimed when she moved, and a long flowing skirt and poet blouse. She smiled, but it was more poised than Erethe’s or Vanya’s. She still seemed very pleasant, though.

“Yes, uh…” Mary began. “Just checkin to see if Gandalf carved a rune last night.”

The woman grinned. Her companion rolled his eyes and smirked derisively. The woman didn’t even look over at him. She just reached out lightning fast with the back of her hand and landed a solid smack in the center of his abdomen. It surprised him and he grunted when his vessel instinctively tightened the muscles.

“I’m Ringa,” the woman said, offering her hand.

Mary obliged.

“And this ray of sunshine is Mahtazar. But we call him Tazar, for short.”

“Which I’ve asked you not to do.”

“Yes, but you don’t ask nicely.”

Mary watched this little exchange with interest and apprehension. She’d been waiting for the asshole that would show up. There’s always one, at any party. Apparently, this group’s resident dick had chosen as his vessel a man in his sixties, who looked like he was probably a farmer or otherwise someone who worked out on the land. The tough, tanned skin, the calloused hands and the clothing said a lot, but it was the John Deere cap that kinda completed the picture.

Mahtazar sighed heavily. Then stepped forward. He stuck out his hand.

“I assume you’re Mary?”

“Yep,” Mary answered curtly, shaking his hand. She wore a tiny grin but the look in her eyes could have frozen an oil-well fire. It wasn’t lost on him, and he seemed to calm down just a bit.

“Come on, Tazar,” Ringa said, pulling on his shirt sleeve and moving them both through the door.

Mary took a moment to grit her teeth and just breathe. Then she relaxed her shoulders, turned, and pulled the door shut behind her.

She shut the inner door as well, and surveyed the war room from the landing. The atmosphere was jovial and excited, much like a reunion of old friends should be.

Erethe had made her way out of the kitchen with two mugs of coffee, but she immediately set them down on the nearest counter and began a squealing charge toward Roz. The tall redhead immediately threw her arms open and squealed back at her, catching the tiny angel in her long arms and lifting her off the ground. She set her back down and they continued to hug for several seconds, rocking back and forth, before they leaned back to see each other. They both began gushing in what sounded like
a romance language. Mary listened for a moment and was able to rule out French, Italian and any Spanish she’d ever heard. So...Portuguese, maybe?

The other angels were approaching Castiel, one by one. They were all beaming at him, even Mahtazar, Mary noted, but they were saving handshakes for Dean, and hugs for each other. Cas didn’t seem to be bothered by the fact that no one touched him.

At this point, Erethe managed to break away from Roz for long enough to run excitedly toward Cas. She was about to explode with excitement and the smile on her face looked like it might actually hurt. She stopped a couple of feet in front of him, peering up expectantly, waiting for him to do...something. Mary wasn’t sure what was happening, but then she saw Cas’s posture change just a bit.

“Yes, alright, Erethe.” He nodded, letting his arms just barely come up from his sides in invitation.

Erethe squealed again, but tried hard to keep it in check, as she threw her arms around his chest for an enormous hug. He patted her back awkwardly.

Dean watched this whole interaction. He was smiling by the time the hug was over. And that’s when the attention was turned on him.

Erethe’s eyes went wide and she drew in a sharp breath.

“You’re Dean!” she exclaimed.

Dean snorted. She was adorable.

“In the flesh,” he agreed, as he began to extend his hand. Erethe was having none of that. She leapt toward him and gave him the same enthusiastic hug around the middle, not bothering to wait for an invitation.

“It’s so good to finally meet you!” she gushed.

Dean hugged her back instinctively, not having enough time to really process what was happening. It seemed very natural, though. And then it occurred to him why. He chuckled and put his hand up to rub his eyes for just a second.

Erethe pulled away enough to gaze up at him.

“Don’t laugh! I know...I’m a hugger. Can’t help it. Gotta be done!”

“No, it’s...it’s not that,” Dean said, still chuckling, but looking back at her now very affectionately. “You just remind me of someone.”

“Who?!?” Erethe demanded, like this was the best game she’d ever played.

“A friend. A very good friend.” He still looked pretty delighted by her, but she could see the sadness in his eyes.

“Well, I’m honored,” she said earnestly, while trying to keep the mood light. Then she leaned back in for another tight hug.
When she finally pulled away, she gazed up at Dean, somewhat lost in the moment, and sighed. Her eyes literally twinkled in the overhead lights of the war room.

“Wow...Castiel is right. You’re beautiful!” She said it without the slightest hesitation, and continued to stare at Dean with a humbling level of awe.

“Ok…” Dean groaned and closed his eyes. His entire face and neck went beet red and he made a point of not looking at Cas. “Thank you. That’s...um...that’s very nice.”

Erethe smiled even more brightly at him, and when she noticed the blush, she giggled again. Then she turned to say something to Castiel and her smile lessened by half. Apparently, it was only upon seeing his reaction that she realized her mistake.

“I should...um...get back to the others,” she fumbled, pulling herself together. “It’s wonderful to see you, sir! And Dean, I’m so happy to meet you in person!”

“Yeah, uh...you too.” Dean stammered. “Ok.”

Erethe giggled bashfully and skittered away to greet another of her friends.

Dean was still blushing. And grinning. He rubbed his eyes again, trying to breathe through this.

There was a long, uncomfortable pause before he could even consider looking over at Cas. When he finally did, it was only a quick glance...just enough to register the waves of stress radiating off of him. Dean wondered if the tether allowed for a little mind-reading in the other direction, because he could have sworn he could hear Cas’s voice murmuring, ‘No.No.No.No.No.No.No.No.’

“Dean,” Cas barely said. He swallowed hard. “What I said...it wasn’t...exactly...she...there was context...”

“Cas.”

“Yes?”

“Stop.”

“Ok.”

“Sir,” Aneran called to him from a small distance. “Forty-eight minutes.”

Cas nodded and snapped out of his panic.

“Everyone,” he said, letting his voice fill the room. “A moment, please.” He waited for the chatting to stop. The angels all seemed to fall into a type of attendance line on the other side of the map table, giving Cas their full attention.

Dean watched this and grinned again. He knew Cas could command, but it was always cool to see him do it.

“I understand the sacrifice each of you is making on my behalf and I want you to know that you have my sincere gratitude. Unfortunately, Dean, Aneran and I must attend to a task awaiting us downstairs. We will return in approximately one hour. I hope to properly greet each of you then.” He
stopped and looked at all of them. It took a moment, but a small smile finally turned up the corners of his mouth. He looked at Aneran and nodded.

“Ok...we need to get set up,” Aneran said, turning to face his friends. “Usha, Faral, Tazar, all their research is laid out on those two library tables. That includes Castiel’s notes. Familiarize yourselves with the information. Tazar, start building a timeline. Erethe, work with Mary. Learn the basic layout of this place. Find somewhere for us to sleep in shifts and get the kitchen ready. Roz...your vessel ok with springin’ for supplies again?”

“Yep. She’s good.”

“Tell her I love her and she’s gettin’ copies of those out of print books, if I have to freakin’ time travel to make it happen!” Aneran threw her a kiss. “We need to be fully stocked. Expect two weeks. We’ll get more, if needed.”

Roz nodded.

“Ringa, Vanya, you’re with me. Dean, can you carry the chains? That’ll be a lot easier.”

Dean nodded.

“Oh, everybody…this is their home, treat it that way. We clean up after ourselves and take care of ourselves. We speak English at all times, unless there is a very specific reason not to.” He threw a look at Roz and Erethe who both grinned shyly. “Everybody here understands English, so nobody gets nervous. Also, don’t do anything angel-freaky. Human norms, please.” He cast a dramatic and meaningful look at Usha and Faral, who both grinned and nodded.

“I’ll be staying with Castiel for the next hour. Limit communication by prayer. We want to stay below the radar, for as long as possible. If you need me, text me. Anybody have any questions?”

The room was silent. Aneran nodded and looked to Castiel.

“Sir?”

Cas nodded and moved toward the foil covered plates. The other angels immediately went about their assignments.

Mary watched this with a growing sense of relief. They clearly knew how to work together. And they appeared to have worked very closely with humans, as well. She knew she could just as easily read this the other way. The suspicious way. But they seemed uninterested in anything but helping Cas. There was absolutely nothing stopping them right now from laying waste to the inside of the bunker. Cas might be able to fight them, but it was eight against one. Those weren’t good odds, but, they all acted like they thought he was great, so…

She decided to focus on the fact that Aneran’s assignments meant that she was definitely going to have a chance to ask Erethe about this ‘sleeping and eating’ thing, now.

Cas handed the plates to Aneran, after he’d thoroughly checked that they were together and tightly wrapped. Dean picked up the chains.

Nodding once to the three angels, Cas placed a hand on Dean’s shoulder and all five of them disappeared.
Chapter End Notes

The title of this chapter, as well as Mary's reference to Gandalf carving a rune on the front door, are direct references to Chapter 1 of 'The Hobbit', by J. R. R. Tolkien. (HazelDomain, author and beta-extraordinaire, pegged where I was going with this long before she saw the title or Mary's reference, so I'm assuming the explicit citation is actually overkill.)

Also, in case any of you are interested, these are the full names of the angels:

‘Aneran’ - Aneran
‘Erethe’ - Erethe
‘Roz’ - Rasanstiah/Rasanstat
‘Tazar’ - Mahtazar
‘Ringa’ - Haptoiringa
‘Faral’ - Faraluel
‘Vanya’ - Paurwanya
‘Usha’ - Ushahin
Communication Breakdown

Chapter Summary

The first 'pull' in the dungeon - someone should have maybe slipped a note under Sam's door? I'm just sayin'...

Chapter Notes

Many thanks, once again, to my friend HazelDomain! She gave me the idea to interweave the two scenes to build tension. And it was a brilliant idea, the way she suggested it. And then I took that idea and went a little crazy with it. So, if all the chopping doesn't work, it isn't her fault. I should have done what she said.

If it does work, then...ya know...yay! :-)

Title reference:

Once again, I chose it for the title, not necessarily for the lyrics.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

June 9, 2016

1:18 PM CDT

He knew he wasn’t entirely awake. Thoughts and ideas were only partially forming in his mind and it would be so easy to slip right back under. All he’d have to do is ignore that... sound.

He was sure it was just Dean laughing or being overly dramatic… Banging on something he was trying to fix… Cooking… Belching... His brother was loud. It was just a fact. No reason to be alarmed, most of the time.

Sam had developed a decent filter over the years so he could survive sharing motel rooms with the guy. It was a kind of automatic pre-sort that would take an incoming sound and either prioritize it or throw it out, before it ever reached the response systems in his brain.

Wooden chair legs loudly scraping across cheap linoleum? Benign sound. Totally normal. Stay asleep. Wooden chair legs loudly scraping across cheap linoleum, followed by the sound of fumbling and cursing? Again, totally normal. Dean was drunk and had probably stubbed his toe on the chair. Stay asleep.

The only sounds his brother made that Sam could never sleep through were the ones Dean made during nightmares. They were awful. Miserable and angry, pleading...desperate… Sam always tried
to wake him. Talk to him. See if he could get his brother’s mind to stop tormenting him so he could rest. Sometimes it worked. Most of the time, though, the moment he fell back asleep, the nightmare returned with a vengeance. Sam realized years ago that it was often best, in those cases, to simply let it run its course. Once it had played out, Dean could sleep. Maybe.

Some dreams, though, Sam wouldn’t let continue, no matter what. The ones that would cause Dean to not only groan or cry out, but had his entire body jerking and thrashing. The ones that made him…

‘Scream!’ Sam thought and sat bolt upright, totally awake and listening to the horrifying sound.

He was on his feet in an instant, gun in hand, angel blade tucked into the back of his belt, and very grateful to have fallen asleep in his clothes. Though, he had taken off his shoes and was now facing the prospect of running down the bunker halls in his socks. That never worked out well. Socks made those smooth, polished floors slick as ice and over these few years he’d taken more than one nasty spill trying to rush somewhere.

He reached down and pulled his socks off, standing by his door, listening closely to see if he could determine where the sounds were coming from.

Not Dean’s room. Or his mom’s. Or Cas’s. He mentally ticked off each possibility, continuing to narrow the options as quickly as possible. Kitchen. War Room/Library. Arsenal.

The scream died off for a few seconds, and he realized he could hear voices, too. Several of them, maybe coming from the same general area as the screaming, but he couldn’t tell.

He focused on the screams, trying to identify the voice. It wasn’t Dean. Unfortunately, he knew exactly how his brother sounded when he was in severe pain. But it seemed wrong for Cas, too. It was high pitched. Not a woman’s voice, but the upper registers of a male’s range. Tight. Desperate. Completely panicked. Whatever was happening, it was…bad.

Just then, the voice dipped back down into its normal range, finishing the final one or two seconds of misery without the panic pitch.

Sam felt his stomach knot. There was no mistaking the owner of that voice, now. It was definitely Cas.

He pulled open his door, gun raised and ready, and began quickly making his way down the corridor.

“It’s almost over. Just a couple more, buddy. Hang on.”

Dean stood in front of Cas, arms wrapped around his torso, trying very hard to support his friend’s weight to lessen the pressure on his wrists. But it wasn’t helping much. Cas had been pulling against the restraints with all of his strength, badly damaging his skin and joints. Dean didn’t bother trying to convince him to stop. It was reflex. Reason didn’t play a part.

The next wave hit and Cas let out another ear-splitting scream, arching his spine and pulling desperately against the shackles.
“Eleven seconds,” Dean mumbled. He wasn’t sure who he was reminding...maybe just himself. But he now knew that’s how long each wave would last. Aneran had been able to determine the length of the wave very quickly, since Cas had asked him to record the start time and the exact duration of each part of the event.

“We need the data,” Cas had tried to explain, when Dean chafed at his relentless stoicism. It wasn’t that Dean didn’t understand the need to gather as much information as possible. Of course he did. But Cas still seemed to be approaching all of this like he was the least important factor in a big experiment...and it was slowly driving Dean insane.

The duration of each reprieve had taken a bit longer to determine, but Aneran was able to narrow it down to just over five seconds.

He and Dean had mourned that discovery together. Five seconds of relief was...almost nothing. It certainly wouldn’t let their friend recover, before the next round of pain hit.

With the fifth wave, Dean had begun mentally willing time to move faster. Literally. He was using a methodical, trance-like ritual he’d created during his time in Hell. Twice, he’d convinced himself that it had worked. A little. Maybe. He was almost positive that, at least once, he’d managed to cut down his torment by one half of a second. He’d been so elated, he’d immediately begun scrambling to remember how he’d done it. He’d then spent months or possibly years trying over and over, certain that he had just forgotten a step and if he kept tweaking the ritual, he’d get it right again.

Logically, he’d known he hadn’t altered time. He wasn’t that stupid. But with all hope of escape or mercy ripped away from him, he’d clung to anything that might help. Anything. Even an obvious lie.

And right now, that lie was the only thing he had to give. So, why not? He didn’t berate himself for being an irrational fool. There’d be plenty of time for that later.

He focused on cutting those eleven seconds down to nine. If he’d gotten a half a second in Hell, he might get more on Earth. Aim high, right? And maybe Cas could have his five seconds of relief just a little earlier.

Of course, it was a pathetic goal, even if it had the slightest chance of working (which it didn’t.) But at this level of pain, any relief would be welcomed wholeheartedly. By both of them.

Attempting to alter the passage of time with his mind was also allowing Dean to ignore his own creeping panic. He didn’t understand what was happening. Cas had predicted there would be a steady increase in the strength of each pull, but this was far worse than the episode in his room six and a half hours ago. What would cause such an extreme escalation? Had the angels changed tactics? Were they now trying to kill Cas outright? Could they do it with this spell? Cas wasn’t sure how they’d been doing any of this, so would he even know if they were about to finish him off right here and now?

Dean managed to take one slow, deep breath, then fist his hands into Cas’s shirt and hugged him just a little tighter.

From the way the sounds echoed, Sam determined that the screams and the voices were coming from two separate sections of the bunker: The war room/library, and, most likely, the sub-level.
He made a quick decision. The voices would have to wait. Cas was suffering and from the way he sounded, Sam was worried he might not last much longer. He needed to get to him. Now.

A direct route to the closest stairwell would take him through the war room. Instead, he turned down the adjoining hallway, circling the central rooms, through the back corridors. It would take longer to reach the other stairwell, but at least he might avoid detection.

He moved silently through each empty hallway, cautious around every turn, until finally reaching the stairwell. The screams were definitely coming from below. He descended quickly, stopping just inside the doorway at the bottom.

Beyond the opening was the corridor containing the dungeon. It was a fair bet they’d taken Cas there. Little else was on this level, besides utilities and additional store rooms.

Another scream filled the corridor and stairwell. It was deafening as it bounced around the tiled walls and Sam’s ears were still ringing, after it faded.

Dean watched Aneran pace the area outside the warding. The angel was staring at the timer on his phone like a true obsessive, and looking like that task might be the only thing keeping him from falling apart.

He raised a closed fist toward Dean, and waited. Then he opened all five fingers, four, three, two, one… Dean watched him and called out each number into Cas’s chest. They didn’t know if Cas could hear or even pay attention to the countdown, but it was something they could do for him.

Cas let his head drop back. He didn’t want Dean to see his face and had been making obvious attempts to hide from him throughout.

It had taken Dean nearly a full minute to realize what Cas was doing, and he’d mentally kicked himself for being so blind. Bending his knees a bit deeper, he’d pressed the side of his face against his friend’s chest. That way, Cas could know he wasn’t looking. One less thing he’d have to worry about.

Cas struggled to catch his breath during those five second intervals, and by the time the ninth one rolled around, he sounded as though he could barely breathe at all. The gasps were being interrupted by choked sobs.

Dean closed his eyes and prepared for the next wave to hit. He’d need to focus if he was going to keep his hold.

Cas’s jerked and, once again, that small movement was almost enough to throw Dean to the floor.

They’d argued, when installing the restraints. Cas had insisted that he should be stretched tightly between the floor and the ceiling, allowing for only his toes to reach the ground. It would give him almost no flexibility. Dean had been adamant that doing so would make the injuries to his wrists and ankles much worse, but Cas wouldn’t back down.

Dean now understood his reasoning. He hated it, but he understood. Any more flexibility, and he wouldn’t have been able to hang on to him. Even with all of the warding reducing it, the physical
strength the angel could draw upon was truly astonishing.

“Five, four, three, two, one…” Dean called out each number loudly into his friend’s chest.

He felt Cas slump. And he tried not to listen to him cry.

The anguish and desperation in Cas’s voice was heart-breaking and Sam had to force himself to let it roll off of him. He needed to focus.

There were too many questions. The most important being who was inside the bunker? Who was doing this? Was it an angel? He hated to think it might be Aneran. Cas had believed him to be an ally, and the angel had seemed very sincere in his desire to help. Though, Sam had cringed when he’d realized he’d be forced to rely entirely on Cas’s judgement in the matter. He completely trusted his friend to always do his best to keep them safe, but when it came to detecting treachery, Cas had a terrible track record. Was Aneran just another result of that naivete? Sam really hoped not. For far more than just the obvious reason.

It could be one of those five who’d tortured him in heaven...back to continue the punishment. Or maybe one of them showed up to ensure that Cas would be too weak to resist the next pull? If that was the case then...who let them inside? And why would they have brought Cas all the way down to the dungeon to hurt him? Couldn’t they have done that anywhere?

And if they had Cas...where was Dean?

Sam swallowed and tried not to think the worst.

Focus.

“One more, Cas. Just one more…” Dean chanted, taking three of those precious five seconds to gently pat his friend’s back, before locking his arms tightly around him again.

The last wave hit. Cas shrieked and jerked, and a deep thud travelled through his vessel. Dean briefly closed his eyes. He was very familiar with that sound. Somewhere, probably in Cas’s arms, something had broken or dislocated. He was honestly surprised it had taken this long for it to happened, but it would now be even more important to keep Cas’s weight supported.

Again, as the wave progressed, Dean counted down the seconds, trying very hard to keep his voice from cracking.

He kept watching Aneran, as the angel got to zero and then began counting back upward through each second of the reprieve.

They both hoped Cas’s estimates were correct. That it really was over, now. At four seconds into the
reprieve, Dean felt his stomach lurch. If another wave hit...after he’d just assured Cas that it was over...


“It’s over, Cas,” Dean soothed. “It’s over. I’m gonna get you down, ok? But… Uh...” he stopped, trying to think up a way to get Cas down without having to let go of him. But he knew there wasn’t one.

“I gotta let go, Cas,” he said, trying to be reassuring and hating himself for it. “It’ll be quick, though. I promise. Just breathe.”

He began to release his hold, transferring Cas’s full weight to the shackles. But when he looked up at his friend’s shredded, bleeding wrists and discolored hands, he lost his nerve and went back to supporting him.

‘No plan for getting him down?!’ he kicked himself, as he tried to lift Cas just a little more. ‘Great, Dean! Fucking stupid!’

“Get my mom or brother! Now!” he shouted at Aneran.

The angel disappeared immediately and within two seconds, reappeared with a startled and disoriented Mary. She looked around wild-eyed, until she saw Cas...and her son’s distraught face as he clung to him.

“Oh, God,” she whispered.

“I gotta keep the weight off his wrists.” Dean explained quickly, as he dug the keys for the leg irons and the shackles out of his pocket with one hand and gave them to her.

Mary quickly released Cas’s ankles and dragged over the step stool. She released one wrist and waited for Dean to let her know he had him, before releasing the second one.

Cas legs were providing almost no support, so when the final wrist was freed, he collapsed onto his friend and they tumbled backward. Dean adjusted, mid-fall, keeping his own body between Cas and the floor.

Once they were down, Mary helped Dean drag him to a spot outside of the warding. Aneran was at their side the moment they cleared it.

“Hey! HEY! CAS!” Dean prodded, as he watched the angel’s eyes roll back and close. “Stay with me!” He had his hand under Cas’s neck, cradling his head and giving it a very light shake. With his other hand, he landed a couple of sharp smacks to Cas’s upper abdomen, causing the muscles to reflexively tighten.

There were voices down here, too. Sam cringed. How many of them were there? Where was Dean? Where was Mom?
He strained to hear any distinctive words or cadences. It might help him to determine how many voices he was hearing. Two? Three? He quickly realized it would be too hard to tell the voices apart. The echoing in the stairwell was intense, making any speech sound hollow and distorted. He had no chance of deciphering any of it.

He quickly peeked around the corner at the bottom of the stairs, and saw a white-haired woman standing in the center of the corridor, several feet back from the door to the false storeroom. She was motionless. Tense. Her back was to Sam and apparently she hadn’t heard him arrive. It wasn’t too surprising. The sound of his friend’s screams would have blocked out nearly everything else.

Sam held his breath and looked again... slowly this time... focusing on his target, taking in every detail... like a lion watching from the tall grass.

Cas’s eyes fluttered back open and he watched Dean, who was prompting him, over and over, to look at him and to breathe.

‘**Why does he want me to breathe?**’ Cas thought as he gazed at the familiar face. **‘I don’t require air. Has he...forgotten? No. Dean doesn’t forget things. He has a very sharp mind. He thinks he doesn’t, but he...he does...has many gifts...have them...does have. Had. Has. Have...to have...I have, you have, he has, she has, they have...had...did have...’**

He felt Dean’s hand supporting his neck. It was warm and holding him at such a comfortable angle. It felt really nice and he was very tempted to ignore his friend’s demands and let himself drift off. It would be so easy. He could just close his eyes, and...

Dean shook him again. That didn’t feel nice. Neither did more smacks on his abdomen.

‘**He’s hitting me. Why is he hitting me? Did I do someth...wait... He seems very concerned...about...something? Me? He’s always so concerned. About everyone. Such a good man. He tries so hard. Perhaps I should do what he asks. That might...be...I want him to feel...more...good...er. Happy. He deserves happy. Good shit. The sprinklers. No...that’s not...sprinkles! Sprinkles. He likes sprinkles of...things...he wants those...to...barbeque. For...the cooler...’**

Cas mumbled something and then began to moan.

Aneran’s eyes went very wide and he nearly knocked Mary over, as he dove toward Cas’s head.

“Cover your ears!” he demanded, then let his jaw drop open.

From what he could glean from the woman’s appearance and the information he had, Sam’s mind sorted through the most likely bad-guy scenarios and landed on ‘angel’ or ‘witch.’
If she was a witch, he could kill her, as long as she didn’t notice him first. If she was an
girl...well...even with the blade, he had little chance of surviving the encounter. So in this case,
hunter wisdom applied: Shoot first - Ask questions later. He’d have at least a fifty percent chance of
living to save his family.

He was absolutely silent as he moved his body around the corner. Raising his pistol, he carefully
aimed for the small spot between the woman’s spine and left shoulder blade.

He breathed out slowly... and slid his finger from the guard onto the trigger...

Aneran’s true voice punched through the room like a blast wave. There was no slow increase. He
spoke with full volume immediately...as though he were yelling.

It was a short burst...just a little under 5 seconds, but it was enough to make Mary scream and one of
Dean’s ears bleed. By the end, both humans were crouched and panting.

Dean had taken his hand off of Cas so he could cover his ear, but Aneran had grabbed his wrist and
forced his hand back onto Cas’s neck. He used his own hand to cover Dean’s exposed ear...it helped
a little, but clearly not enough.

“Castiel!” Aneran yelled, using his vessel’s voice. “CASTIEL!” he repeated. He sounded panicked.

Cas looked up at him and blinked a few times, as the angel continued to shout his name.

“CAS!” Dean yelled, also trying to get through to him. He realized Aneran was right to be panicked.
Cas wasn’t just dazed, he was fading. And he wasn’t healing himself.

“Hey!” Mary said, very brightly, trying to keep herself from wincing from the pain in her head.
She’d managed to get back into the huddle and right up in Cas’s face, so he could look at her.

“Hey, Cas!” She said very loudly, giving him her biggest smile. “Hey! Look at me!” Cas’s gaze
wandered a bit, but eventually settled on Mary...especially since she grabbed his face and forced
herself into his direct line of sight.

“Hey! Who am I, huh? Betcha can’t guess my name!”

Cas was vaguely looking at her, but then his eyes locked onto hers, as he registered the question.

“That’s it, Sweetie!” she encouraged. “Look at me! Who am I? Am I Mary? Hmmm? Is that my
name? Mary?”

There was a short pause, while Cas squinted at her. Then he nodded his head.

“Yeah! That’s right! And who’s this guy, huh?” She roughly grabbed Dean’s face and pulled him
closer, squishing his cheeks together and making his lips poke out.

“Uh...mom...”

“Is this Dean?” she asked, ignoring her son’s protest and leaning aside so Cas’s full focus could be
on him.
Cas let his eyes drift over the distorted face of his friend. After a brief squint and a tiny head tilt, his eyes focused a bit more, and one corner of his mouth tugged up in a grin.

“Wrasse,” he croaked. His voice was ruined.

“What?” Mary asked, cupping his face with her free hand and letting her thumb brush over his cheek.

“Giant...Wrasse,” Cas said, a bit more forcefully.

“Did he just call me a giant ass?” Dean asked, before extricating himself from his mother’s vice-like pincer and rubbing his jaw.

“Giant Wrasse,” Aneran said, with a very small grin. He sighed and sat back on his haunches. “It’s a fish. With big lips.”

Cas’s grace began to wash slowly over his vessel, and moments later he was fully alert. The wounds and blood disappeared and his feet were again covered in socks and boots.

Dean’s hand was still pressed to Cas’s neck, where Aneran had placed it. He felt a surge of grace shoot up his arm to repair his ear. Then Cas reached up to Mary’s face and healed her headache and the tinnitus.

He sat up and looked meaningfully at Aneran.

“Thank you,” he said quietly.

Aneran stared back at him for a long moment. It was intense. A range of emotions flickered across his face, before he nodded, sighed heavily and dropped his gaze. Putting a hand on Cas’s shoulder, he gave it a squeeze, and then stood and walked a short distance away.

Dean watched this with no small amount of dread. He recognized Aneran’s reaction. It was the same one Cas had elicited from him several times recently. A combination of relieved, sad, and pissed. He wasn’t sure what was up, but...it didn’t indicate anything good.

“Sir,” Ringa called out from the doorway.

All of them turned to look at the angel. She was clutching a barely conscious Sam to her side, his arm draped around her shoulder and his legs mostly useless. Both his ears were bleeding and his head lolled pathetically.

Cas was on his feet immediately, rushing to Sam’s side and healing him.

Awake and alert once again, Sam took in the scene in half a second:

His mom - totally fine.
Aneran - also fine.
New shackles hanging from the ceiling...what the hell?
His brother and Cas - both perfectly ok.

Then he noticed his left arm was draped over someone, so he turned to look.

“She’s...” Sam began, immediately trying to get away from Ringa, but smacking into the door frame only inches behind him.

“A friend,” Cas assured him. “An angel. She’s here with Aneran. There are several more upstairs.”
“You dropped your gun, Sam,” Ringa said gently, offering him the handle. “The safety is back on.”

Sam’s eyes darted from her to Cas and back, before he took the gun.

“I’d guessed witch,” Sam said, clearly unnerved and not at all happy about it. He threw a very disapproving look at his brother.

“’Coulda warned me,” he said, not breaking eye contact. “I almost shot her.”

Ringa swallowed and glanced over at Castiel.

“Yeah, well...shit’s happening fast,” Dean sighed. “You’re right, though, Sam. I’m sorry. But, if it makes you feel any better, I ain’t exactly gettin’ all the info I need these days, either.”

“Nor am I,” Aneran said sharply from several feet away.

All of them turned to look at him. He was standing with his arms crossed, staring at Cas.

Dean turned back to his friend, and when he saw his face, he groaned inwardly. Cas looked guilty.

‘Dammit!’ he thought. It was only then that he realized Cas was holding the back of his sleeve, because he felt fingers tighten in the fabric, pulling it taut across his upper arm.

Cas saw that he’d noticed, and leaned a little closer to him.

“We have to stay much closer, now,” he said in little more than a whisper. “I’ll...explain in a moment.” His eyes flicked to Aneran and back again.

“Yes...Cas...you will,” Dean said loudly, giving him a look that left absolutely no room for argument. “Right after I catch mom and Sam up, you are gonna tell us everything!”

Dean motioned for Aneran to come closer and began moving everyone out of the dungeon.

“And we’re not waiting ‘til we’re cozy! We’re taking care of this as we walk! ‘Cause the way things have been goin’, we won’t make it to the end of the god damned hallway without somethin’ ELSE blowin’ up in our faces!”

When they turned the first corner, Cas momentarily lost his hold on Dean’s shirt...and the frantic, half-second scramble to regain contact halted Dean in his tracks. He turned just in time to catch a glimpse of a wild-eyed look on Cas’s face, before the angel had a chance to wipe it away. Something was definitely...not right.

Dean slowly crossed his arms and stared at Cas, waiting for the angel to join him in another of their little contests. He knew his friend’s blank stare was not really the expressionless mask he’d once thought it to be. It had taken a very long time, and it was still really tough to decipher exactly what Cas was thinking...or hiding...but those staring contests had bought Dean a much more finely tuned ability to see behind the facade.

If there was something Cas wasn’t telling him, he’d see it in his eyes. So he’d wait...all damned day, if necessary...for Cas to look at him.

In response, Cas was trying to make his very obvious avoidance of Dean’s gaze seem casual. And failing spectacularly. Instead of calm innocence, his entire being screamed with guilt and discomfort, like a young kid who’d just been caught shoplifting.
Dean continued to watch him and shook his head slowly, amazed at how bad the guy was at this. Cas had learned so much in his time on Earth, but when it came to outright deception, he still had almost zero game.

Fingers twitched and tightened on the fabric of Dean’s shirt, again, and a thought occurred to him. A very alarming thought.

“Cas…” Dean asked slowly. “This isn’t close enough, is it?” He thought he might already know the answer, but he wanted it confirmed.

When Cas finally looked back at him, Dean knew he was right. Unsurprisingly, Cas tried to cover anyway.

“The outside of your clothing is close enou…”

“Skin contact,” Aneran said loudly, cutting him off. Dean looked over at the angel.

Cas closed his eyes.

“Necessary or just better?” Dean asked.

“Only way to be safe, at this point,” Aneran assured him. “Anything less is riding a very thin line.”

“So… necessary!” Dean barked, immediately furious.

Aneran nodded, still staring at Castiel.

“Unbelievable,” Dean mumbled. The wave of frustration and hurt ripping its way through him was so intense, it almost made him laugh. Because this was, after all, totally predictable.

Silence hung heavy over all of them for several long moments, as Dean tried to collect himself. He figured if he could make it through the next five minutes without killing his best friend, he might have a shot at making it through the next five hours, too. And the next 5 days. Maybe.

“Gimme your hand, Cas,” Dean said quietly. He held out his left hand, palm up, and waited. He didn’t look at him.

Cas hesitated. He eyed the offered hand like it would bite him, but after a quick mental battle, he conceded, letting his hand slide down his friend’s arm. The instant his fingers made contact with Dean’s wrist, Cas flinched as though he’d been struck.

Dean considered asking him about it immediately, but he wasn’t sure he had the patience to listen to Cas’s answer. Any hint that he was leaving something out would likely end in a fist fight, at this point. Plus, Cas was keeping his eyes down. And there were other things to talk about, first.

He closed his hand around Cas’s and kept a firm grip, as they made their way back toward the war room.

Chapter End Notes
Cas said Dean looked like a big-lipped fish called a Giant (or Napoleonic) Wrasse.
Want a pic? Here ya go:
The journey back from the dungeon is enlightening.
Sam is compulsively paranoid.
Someone is finally laughing at Dean's jokes.
And Cas...isn’t ok.

Also: Rebellious Angels 101.

The final version of this is not yet beta’d. I'm gonna fix mistakes in post. If I don’t publish it now, I’m gonna lose my nerve, so… Forgive me anything really awful.

UPDATE: Re-reading this in the light of day, I'm seeing fairly major issues with flow in several places. It's embarrassing, and the perfectionist in me is screaming to fix it right away. I want to keep the story moving, though, so I'm gonna leave it, for now.

*cringes*

They retraced Sam’s route, taking the long way back toward the gathering of angels in the war room. Sam took the opportunity to point out places he’d noticed the sound from the sub-level had been clearer...where there’d been less distortion or where he’d been able to get a better idea of direction. The small nook, about twenty feet away from the entrance to the stairwell was a better place to listen to what was happening downstairs than inside the stairwell, etc.

Dean quietly absorbed every detail, giving his brother a quick nod, when he’d finished.

Mary paid close attention, as well, and as Sam finished, she realized she was grinning.

Tactics. Preparation. Observation. He was a hunter. And he was good at it. Both her boys were. Even without knowing their whole history, she could see it in almost everything they did. Little glimpses like these spoke volumes. She still hated that they’d had to learn any of it, but...she was proud of them.

It was now her turn, so Mary shared her impressions of several of the new angels, having had the last hour to observe and interact with them. She listed the skills or personality traits she’d noticed, as well as a few potential issues.
As she finished, she threw a quick glance back at Aneran, hoping she hadn’t just pissed off their leader with her blunt assessments.

She hadn’t. He was smiling and with a single appreciative nod, he confirmed that her descriptions were pretty close to spot on.

Sam had been relieved to find Aneran still in the ‘good guy’ category. It meant his family was not going to be alone in this fight, and that was a very welcome change of pace.

When he heard that they now had an entire crew ready and willing to help, though, Sam’s relief nearly vanished. It was too good. His family didn’t have that kind of luck. There had to be a catch and Sam’s paranoid mind immediately began collecting evidence against the angels.

Since they needed all the help they could get, though, he decided he’d accept this new group, while quietly devising a plan for how best to round them up and gank them, when the inevitable betrayal came.

Sam sighed heavily. He dreamed of a day he could just accept a good thing, without the certainty it would eventually go bad or try to kill him.

It was Dean’s turn to share. He started by explaining that the horror show Cas had just endured in the dungeon was going to recur roughly four times a day.

Sam nodded. In a way, it was comforting to know things were just as horrible as usual.

Next, Dean informed his brother that he and Cas had snuck into his room, while he slept.

Sam considered freaking out...but decided, instead, to wait for the rest of the story to unfold. If it had been Dean by himself, Sam would have assumed nefarious intentions and immediately thrown away his toothbrush, toothpaste, hairbrush, all shower products and probably his underwear, too. Cas had been with him, though, and Sam trusted his friend to not be horrible to him while he was vulnerable.

It was an ironic placement of trust. He knew that. But Sam also knew that when Cas wasn’t trying to single-handedly keep the universe from exploding, the guy was completely trustworthy. Dean, on the other hand, would scratch his ass with Sam’s toothbrush while the universe was exploding, so Sam was grateful the angel had been there to keep him in check.

“Cas said he’d heard something ‘off’ in your voice, earlier,” Dean explained. “You know... just before you tapped out for your little nap-time.” He gave Sam a moment to be thoroughly annoyed, and then he continued.

“So we checked on ya before we went downstairs. And that was a good call, ’cause apparently, you’d brought home the Herp. Or the flu or somethin’. I dunno. You had a pretty high fever. What was it?” he asked over his shoulder.

“Respiratory virus,” Cas answered quietly.

“Yes. So...he healed ya. And me and mom. Thanks for that, by the way, Sam. Maybe don’t lick everybody you meet. Be a little more selective.”

Dean heard a soft chuckle somewhere behind him and grinned a little. He didn’t need to turn around to know it was coming from Aneran. He could already recognize his laugh. The guy was turning out to be a very receptive audience. Dean refused to be ashamed of how much he was enjoying that.

When Sam had finished giving his brother the least-impressed look he could muster, he looked back
“Thanks, Cas,” he said quietly.

Cas didn’t respond at all.

Sam continued to watch him for several more seconds. He didn’t think Cas was intentionally ignoring him. It was more like he hadn’t heard him. Sam knew that was incredibly unlikely, though. Cas could hear a whisper on the other side of the bunker.

He was starting to really worry about his friend. From the moment Cas had taken Dean’s hand, Sam had noticed a dramatic change in the angel’s demeanor. His jaw was clenched. His head was slightly bowed. He was even keeping his eyes down. Something was clearly wrong.

Cas had never been a model of ease and relaxation, but this was a level of stressed out Sam had rarely seen in his friend. The guy looked as though he were trying to hold the universe together with his mind...like the tiniest slip-up would trigger something catastrophic.

Sam hadn’t been really concerned, though, until Cas started moving in a kind of freakishly silent stealth mode. An extreme hyper-focus was allowing him to match Dean’s walking rhythm and the swing of his arm exactly, leaving his brother’s gait almost entirely unimpeded. Cas walked beside him when he could, and behind him in the narrower passages, like he was trying to hide in plain sight.

It wasn’t working, of course, but Sam realized if he kept it up, it wouldn’t take long for all of them to forget he was there.

And that, he realized, was the point.

Initially, he’d wondered if it was the hand-holding that was making Cas so tense, but he’d quickly dismissed that idea. Sure, the guy was uncomfortable with physical contact, but not to the point that his whole deportment would change.

Then it hit him. Skin contact. Cas could now hear all of Dean’s thoughts.

Sam considered that for a moment. He knew it had to be tough for Cas. Dean’s brain was almost certainly coming up with lots of creative new ways to call him a dick, right now, but Sam couldn’t imagine Cas buckling under the onslaught. He and Dean had never held back much when they’d argued, so mind-reading seemed an unlikely cause, as well.

Dean, it seemed, was doing his best to ignore Cas. Sam was pretty sure it was the only way his brother would be able to set aside what had happened downstairs so he could give his full attention to the current conversation. If Dean were allowing himself to fume about Cas’s seemingly compulsive need to downplay everything to the point of real danger, he wouldn’t be able to focus on anything else right now. So, again, that probably wasn’t the issue.

With nothing else to go on, Sam had to give up. He couldn’t afford to miss any of the current conversation, either. He’d have to talk to Cas about it later.

When they got close to the entrance to the war room, Dean diverted into the kitchen, so they could continue their conversation a bit longer, before joining the others. They still needed to get a few things straight.

While still in the hallway, Aneran pulled Ringa aside.
“We can talk later, if you need to,” he said quietly, leaning in. He placed a hand on her arm and gave it a reassuring squeeze.

She took a deep breath and reached up to put her hand over his. With a small smile, she nodded.

"Go tell everyone he’s ok,” Aneran said a little less quietly, tilting his head toward the war room. “And ask them to give us a few more minutes. If Vanya get’s back, send him straight to me. And let me know when Roz arrives."

Ringa nodded again and then turned to walk the short distance to the war room. He watched her go, then turned and entered the kitchen.

“One more thing,” Aneran said to Mary and Sam. “I asked Vanya to go to the spot where they’ve sent Castiel, during the previous pulls. I wanted him to monitor it, while this pull was happening. I’ll have one of the others visit the location in New Mexico during the next pull, but I’m hoping we’ll be lucky and Vanya will have found the source of the spellwork...if that is indeed what we’re dealing with.”

“That’s still in question?” Mary asked as she sat down on the concrete stoop just inside the main door. Sam slowly lowered himself down beside her and began putting on the socks and boots he’d grabbed out of his room.

“Castiel doesn’t think we should rule anything out, and I agree,” he answered. “I mean...you’re right...it almost has to be a spell of some sort. Everything we know so far points to that, but we don’t have much. We still need a lot more information. So, hopefully, Vanya’ll find something we can use.”

“Ok,” Dean nodded, when Aneran had finished. He leaned back slowly and rested against the island countertop. Cas copied him.

“Now…” Dean continued, keeping his focus on Aneran. “You made it pretty clear downstairs you’ve got somethin’ else on your mind, so… Let’s hear it.”

Aneran had made his way over to the table and was sitting on the edge. He put his feet up on the closest chair seat and leaned his elbows on his knees. Letting out a big breath, he met Dean’s eyes and the two exchanged a long, mutually exhausted look.

After another deep breath, Aneran cleared his throat and turned his attention to Cas.

“You told me you were experiencing 'discomfort' and that your vessel was 'having spasms.' So...when you asked me to find those particular plates and restraints, I was a little surprised. It seemed like overkill. But, I figured maybe you were trying to be super cautious, because...it’s not just any human you’re trying to protect. It’s Dean. And...I get that.”

He was keeping his voice fairly even, but as he continued to speak, the frustration was bleeding through and his voice quickly developed an edge.

“But, that...” he insisted, pointing vaguely downward, "was not discomfort, Castiel. Discomfort doesn’t even come close to describing what we just saw. They’re torturing you. Trying to wear you down. They want you too weak to fight them.”

“That is...one possibility, yes,” Cas answered quietly. “It’s also possible what I’m experiencing is simply a result of my attempts to counter the pull. It may be an unintended phenomenon.”

Aneran’s mouth fell open just slightly.
“Please tell me you’re not defending them!” he nearly yelled.

“I’m saying that we have no way of knowing their intent.”

“Their intent,” Aneran repeated, nodding and letting his eyes close briefly. With a heavy sigh, he wove the fingers of his hands together. His knuckles immediately turned white.

“Let’s just...forget their ultimate goal for a minute and focus on what happened downstairs,” he continued.

Cas shifted uncomfortably.

“You stayed at full power because you’re tethered to Dean. That allowed you to fight to keep yourself from being pulled away. But what they’re doing…” Aneran sighed. “Castiel, being at full power won’t matter if they’re making it impossible for you to think. They’re attacking you, not just your feathers or your vessel!”

“Hold on...what exactly does that mean,” Sam interrupted. “Cas said he’s feeling this pull on his feathers. And it’s painful for both his true form and his vessel. Or, at least...physically painful for his vessel and ‘destructive interference’ for his true form. Both are happening at the same time...like getting cut with an angel blade.”

Aneran gave a small shrug and nodded.

“So are you saying the pull on his feathers...isn’t the actual attack? The real attack is happening to his true form and just being felt...in his...feathers?” Sam winced as he stumbled through the end of the question. He realized as he was saying it that it didn’t make much sense.

“I’m saying that whatever they’re doing, this time it came very close to…” Aneran thought for a moment. “To disassembling part of his true-form.”

“Disassembling,” Dean repeated, sounding more than a little alarmed.

“They’re ripping him apart!!” Mary asked, wide-eyed.

“It’s not the same as with a physical body,” Cas quickly interjected, trying to reassure them. He shot an extremely annoyed look at Aneran as he struggled to come up with a better explanation.

Seeing his hesitation, and completely ignoring the disapproval, Aneran continued.

“Angels are energy. Spirits. We don’t have a soul and we don’t have a physical form...”

“Aside from a distinct, apportioned grace,” Cas cut back in, “an individual angel is a singular, unified bevy of multi-dimensional wavelengths, each unique to the angel, by its connate signature of intent, but discrete within the aggregate.”

In the brief pause between the end of that sentence and the beginning of his next, he noticed an abrupt change in mood, among his companions, and he halted.

All four of them were staring at him with varying levels of shock and confusion. In Aneran’s case, it was outright amazement. The angel’s mouth was slightly ajar, again, and he was slowly shaking his head.

Cas returned each dumbfounded expression with one of his own. He’d intended to continue, of course, adding a quick synopsis of the non-linear dimensional nature of an angel’s form...the parts
outside the realm of human experience. He wanted to reassure his friends...help them to understand
that he was not, in fact, being torn to pieces, as Aneran’s alarming word choices seemed to indicate.

But he didn’t continue. It wasn’t hard for him to figure out what the stunned facial expressions
meant. He’d been silently stared at by Winchesters enough times in recent years to no longer need a
direct explanation. Whatever he’d just said, they didn’t get it. Which, in this case, seemed impossible
to him. It was such a concise and straightforward explanation. The best he’d ever come up with,
using human language.

With one last burst of hope, he looked to Sam, searching for even a tiny glimmer of understanding.

Sam’s face was rapidly contorting as his mind scrambled to re-assemble any of what Cas had just
said into some form of practical English. It came as a mild shock to him when he realized there were
two words (TWO!) mixed in there that he’d never once heard another human being utter. Ever. He’d
maybe read them a couple of times, but…

Cas watched him, still hopeful, until Sam finally gave up and sighed.

“Yeah...Cas...that’s um...really not...I didn’t get that,” he said, still squinting a bit.

Cas slumped, still looking between Sam and Mary...willing them to understand.

Then Cas stiffened and his head turned sharply to look at Dean. His eyes were wide, as though his
friend had just shouted some horrible blasphemy directly into his ear.

It was an intense, abrupt movement, seemingly out of nowhere, and Dean flinched.

Cas seemed to be searching his friend’s eyes for...something. But the initial shock in his expression
quickly fell away. He now looked deeply hurt.

Dean opened his mouth to say something, but Cas didn’t give him the chance. His face snapped back
to it’s standard blankness and he turned away, looking back at Aneran.

Dean blinked and spent the next several seconds staring at the back of Cas’s head, wondering what
the hell just happened.

Aneran cleared his throat.

“So...there’s, um...that version...” he said, trying to not sound sarcastic. It was the least disrespectful
response to Cas’s verbal faceplant he could come up with, on short notice. Turning his attention back
to the humans, he continued.

“But, a more practical way to look at it is to imagine you have a bunch of strands of wool yarn.
They’re different colors and thicknesses, but they’re all made from the wool of the same sheep. If
you straighten them and lay them out next to each other, you’ll just have a bunch of individual
strands that would be easily scattered by a strong wind. But if you twist all of the strands together,
and then tie off the ends, you’ll have one very thick strand that won’t be blown apart. In fact, it’ll be
extremely strong.”

“So, they’re untwisting the strands?” Sam asked.

“In essence, yes. But they’re doing it in a very precise way. They’re unraveling the section that holds
his ability to process information. Memories, imperatives, cognitive ability in general.”

“They’re making it impossible for him to think,” Mary restated.
“They’re taking away not only his ability to fight them, but his motivation to do so, as well. I have to assume they’re trying to confuse him enough to make him wonder why he’s fighting them at all, so he’ll stop and let go.”

“But he’s back to normal, now.” Dean said. He turned to Cas. “You are, right? Everything’s workin’?”

Cas’s eyes were closed. He remained silent.

“Cas!” Dean demanded.

“Yes, I’m... There are no lasting effects.”

“Yet,” Aneran added.

Dean looked at the angel, then back at Cas.

“Yet? What the hell does that mean?”

Cas opened his eyes, but didn’t look at him.

“We have no way of knowing if the spell or mechanism they’re using will permanently damage my true-form,” Cas insisted.

“There is absolutely no reason to think that it won’t, sir!” Aneran demanded. His voice was getting increasingly louder with each of Cas’s attempts to deflect. “Do you even know how far they went? How close they came to disassociating your cognitive centers?”

Cas opened his mouth to speak, but furrowed his brow and squinted instead. He thought for a moment and looked over at Aneran.

“That’s why you jumped in,” Dean said, putting the pieces together. “You saw it happening.”

“I heard it,” Aneran corrected. “The moaning...it was a physical representation. He’d started singing.”

“That was him singing?” Mary asked, squinting at the angel.

“No, I meant… Angels sing. We all do. Almost constantly, really. It’s how we communicate our presence to others. Sort of a...um...” Aneran sighed and paused, looking for a good analogy.

“We use what you’ve been referring to as ‘Angel Radio’ to communicate thoughts, ideas, information,” Cas cut in. “Singing is more like a constant beacon to the Heavenly Host: ‘I am Castiel.’ ‘I exist.’ ‘I am with you.’ We then receive confirmation from all other angels that they also exist and are with us.”

“All of them?” Dean asked, surprised.

“All who are part of the Host.” Cas nodded.”We hear those with whom we are most closely associated the loudest and most frequently.”

“Part of the Host, meaning…” Sam prompted.

“Accepted in Heaven,” Aneran answered. “Member of the Host. ‘Angel in good standing.’” His voice held a tinge of derision.
“I take it you’re behind on your membership dues?” Dean asked with a small grin.

“Just a few thousand years worth,” Aneran quipped and returned the grin.

Dean snorted. He liked this guy.

“And the, uh...Magnificent Seven out there? They behind, too?”

“Yes. And there are two more who weren’t able to join us. They’re attempting to handle the things we were doing when I heard Sam’s prayer. Filling in for us, while we’re here. There are ten of us, in all.”

“So...not to be rude, but...does that mean you’re...’fallen?’” Sam asked, as gently as he could, while getting straight to the point.

Aneran grinned.

“Don’t worry, Sam. That particular word doesn’t send a shiver through me anymore. I’ve existed without much communion with Heaven for a long time. It’s no longer a big loss for me. Besides, there’ve been plenty of angels who’ve ‘fallen’ who have no business being in the same category with the Grigori or Lucifer. At this point, it’s a catch-all designation and punishment for the disobedient, given by...whoever happens to be in power when the angel decides enough is enough.”

“But...you’re not technically ‘fallen?’” Sam pressed.

“No. I almost certainly will be, at some point, but... Right now, I’m just not on many angels’ Christmas card list. And neither are my friends out there.”

“You feel like tellin’ us the reason for that?” Dean asked. He hoped Aneran had enough sense to give a quick overview instead of his whole life story. He was sure all of this talk about ‘fallen’ angels wasn’t doing Cas any good.

“How ‘bout I give you the CliffsNotes?” Aneran asked.

“Perfect,” Dean nodded. He definitely liked this guy.

“We were given a group of people to watch over. Long term gig. Vessels, interaction, on site living...the whole bit. A couple of us had experience with that sorta thing. Most of us were pretty green, but we figured it out. We kept their enemies at bay, and they thrived.”

“With that much contact, though, we quickly developed emotional attachments to them, which is... ‘frowned upon.’”

“Then, without any lead time, and for no apparent reason, we were recalled. The order came down to abandon them entirely. We knew if we did, they’d be killed by the neighboring tribe. Our superiors knew that, too, but they didn’t seem to care.”

“There’d been a few other things that’d happened that made me wonder where the orders were coming from. I started to suspect something was wrong...that maybe our Father wasn’t around anymore.”

“With no direct proof, though, telling your fellow angels you suspect God is absent and someone else is now pulling the strings... that was pretty much the equivalent of wearing a tinfoil hat and insisting you saw Bigfoot. So...not the best idea.”
Aneran sighed and rubbed his eyes.

“Ok...I said I was gonna keep this short. Um...basically, we rebelled. We refused to abandon them and eventually we were caught, hauled back to Heaven and...uh...‘re-educated.’”

Dean felt a hard, reflexive squeeze on his hand. It was just a quick pulse, so he wasn’t entirely sure what to do in response. Squeezing back would acknowledge that he’d felt it. It seemed kind of obvious Cas hadn’t intended to do it and he didn’t want to embarrass him. Especially not right now. But he also didn’t want to just leave him hanging if he needed a little reassurance, so he thought maybe he should…

Cas squeezed again. This time it was definitely intentional. And it lasted. Dean squeezed back.

“Except some of us remembered, afterward. The ten of us. Well...twelve of us.” Aneran’s voice softened. “We’ve lost two, in the last few years.”

“Sorry,” Sam offered quietly. Aneran nodded his thanks.

“So...yeah. After that...we were done. Sorta didn’t matter who was calling the shots, if that was the kind of order that’d be coming down the pipe from now on. If doing what was morally right was gonna get us ripped apart by the powers that be, then it just seemed like we’d be better off on Earth. So, we...figured it out. Made a way for ourselves.”

“And Heaven doesn’t have anyone after you? Trying to get you back?” Sam asked.

“Well...that’s a much longer story. But the short answer is ‘no, not at the moment.’”

“So...the singing…” Mary asked, pulling them back to the main issue. “Was he not supposed to be doing that?”

“I trained myself to stop singing after the angels were cast out of Heaven,” Cas answered. “I realized it was dangerous to keep announcing myself and my location. Also...it became clear to me that few of my brothers and sisters wanted to hear me anymore.”

Mary nodded. She didn’t understand the reference to angels being ‘cast out’, so she assumed it must be another part of his story she hadn’t heard yet. She understood that yelling your location to a bunch of people who were really pissed at you was a bad idea, though.

“The problem wasn’t that he was singing,” Aneran tried to clarify. “Though, right now it isn’t wise. The problem was that it was garbled. It translated into this dimension as his vessel moaning, but I could also hear his real voice.”

“Singing is automatic for us...kinda like breathing is, for humans...we don’t have to think about it. It just happens. And it always works. So when he started singing and it was all jumbled up, I knew something was seriously wrong. Exactly the way you’d know something was wrong if you saw that a human had stopped breathing or was breathing way too fast.”

“Was there any discernable pattern to the slurring?” Cas asked. “Anything we might be able to use to try to identify a…”

“It wasn’t slurred, Castiel. It was unintelligible.”

Cas stared at him for a long moment, completely stunned by that information. His mind searched for anything that could possibly do that to him without physical contact.
“Sir,” Aneran continued quietly. “They almost had you. And honestly, I’m not sure what their plan is, but if they’d continued much longer…” The angel sighed and dropped his gaze. He took a deep breath before he continued.

“Look, this is all conjecture, right now, and we’ll know more soon, I’m sure. But Dean, you asked what was on my mind and this part is just…” Aneran stopped and fidgeted for a few moments. He seemed to be losing steam with each passing second.

“I didn’t expect what happened down there,” he said. He was looking down at the chair his feet were resting on. “I thought ‘discomfort’ meant…” He stopped and took another deep breath.

“I didn’t expect that,” he repeated. After a moment, he looked up. “You should have told me, Castiel.”

Aneran looked close to breaking down and Cas let go of any remaining defensiveness. He wasn’t sure what was happening. Or what he should do. This level of emotional distress in Aneran was completely unexpected. They didn’t know each other that well, after all.

“I’m not certain I know what you…” Cas began.

“You don’t have to explain or argue or anything. I understand you didn’t want them to worry. You just…” Aneran swallowed hard and looked up at him. “You should have told me.”

“Excuse me,” Vanya interrupted from the doorway closest to the war room.

Aneran stood and motioned for him to enter.

“What did you find?”

“It would be a lot easier if I just showed you,” Vanya said quietly. He cast a quick glance toward Castiel and did his best to add a smile, though there was little happiness in it.

Reaching up, Aneran placed two fingers on the angel’s forehead and closed his eyes. When he opened them, his face visibly paled and he stared wide-eyed at his friend.

“What?” Dean asked, not liking the looks of this at all.

“One second,” Aneran said, raising his hand slightly to quiet the man. He kept his gaze on Vanya. “Show him.”

Vanya nodded and walked the couple of paces to Castiel. After a silent exchange, Cas raised his hand to touch the angel’s forehead. He then dropped his arm and nodded his acknowledgement of the vision…but said nothing.

“At least now we know why they took your feathers,” Aneran said sorrowfully, as he leaned back against the table.

Chapter End Notes
HazelDomain is responsible for this chapter being posted at all.
Left on my own much longer, I’m quite certain I would have permanently rage-quit/shame-quit and started a new career path involving staring absent-mindedly out of windows and drinking heavily.
Seriously, you guys. You should have seen the document I sent her to beta. It was so bad. I mean...SOOOO BAD. I started to wonder if I’d had some sort of head injury and didn’t remember it happening. It was like I hadn’t written anything in my life. Or somehow I was no longer a native English speaker.
Once again, she saved my ass. Those of you who were waiting for an update, please tell HD how much you love her, because she’s the only reason it happened this time. Oh...and she hasn’t had a chance to beta this version. And trust me...this version is WAAAAAY different than the one I sent her. Omg…
As I mentioned in the note at the top, I needed to post or I’d lose my nerve. I’ll fix mistakes as I (or you all) find them.
The description and implications of what Vanya saw.
The kernel of a very heated future smack-down. Possibly two.
BAMF! Cas shows up for like ten seconds and then retreats. Poor thing. He's still in there, under all the layers of damage.

And a couple of embarrassing, unintentional, uncontrollable reactions take place.

I may as well have named this chapter 'Exposition.'
Lot's of head canon. Brace yourself. I'm sorry.

Btw, this whole Tether thing sounded cute at first, didn't it?
Yeah...it's kinda not.

June 9, 2016
2:03 PM CDT

“One of you wanna fill us in?” Dean demanded.

“Maybe skip the cryptic statements?” Sam quickly followed up.

Aneran was still leaning against the table. His arms were lightly crossed and he was staring at the floor. Cas was also looking down, indicating that he wouldn’t be talking anytime soon.

It was Vanya who caught Dean’s gaze as the man looked rapidly between all three angels.

“Question’s open to the whole room,” Dean coaxed with only about half the snark he’d normally use.

Vanya seemed unsure what to say or even if he should. He hesitated, glancing back at Aneran for direction, but his leader was still staring at the floor. He sighed and looked back at Dean.

“We know it’s a wormhole. And, it’s definitely the source of pull. The strong one that happens every six n’ a half hours, I mean. It’s moving toward the location they’ve been drawing Castiel to.” He paused to consider how he could explain the rest. Dean’s demeanor hurried that thought process along.

“I was able to confirm that the location itself is the point of origin for the weaker, constant pull. We still don’t know how they’re doing that. There’s nothing there. It’s essentially empty space. I checked
the surrounding area as well.”

“If there’s nothing there...then, how do you know that’s the source of the pull?” Sam interjected.

Castiel made a barely audible grunting sound, just as Vanya started to answer. The angel paused briefly to look at him. He noticed a tiny smile on the seraph’s down-turned face, but his eyes were still closed. When it was clear Cas didn’t have something he wanted to say, Vanya continued.

"There are certain types of...‘radiation’...that come along with spellwork. And I’m only saying ‘radiation’ because that’s the best way to explain how it functions. It’s not the same as radiation in the physical dimensions. Anyway...summoning and catchment spells have ‘radiation’ signatures that are kinda unique, so we usually can tell that’s what we’re detecting. What’s coming from the center of that location, though, is not like anything I’ve ever seen. But it’s strong, it’s steady, and it’s tracking the Earth as the planet’s position changes relative to that location. There’s no way that’s a coincidence.”

Sam nodded. Vanya continued.

“Now... The wormhole is a lot more complex. There are several rings around the opening. They look solid, so I have to assume they’re physical objects, but it’s hard to tell for sure without actually going through the wormhole. Which I...um...didn’t do.” Vanya grinned slightly and made an emphatic motion with his hands. “Each of the rings is covered in sigils. They’re different kinds of warding...but more than half of it is unlike anything I’ve ever seen. I have no idea what it means.” With this, he looked again to Aneran for some kind of direction.

Aneran was looking up, now. He gestured toward the war room and started slowly walking in that direction.

“The chalkboards’ll make this a lot easier. I can draw it out for you,” Vanya finished, motioning for Dean and the others to follow.

“You can’t just put the image in our heads too?” Dean asked. “Cas has done that for me before.”

“That was your own memory,” Cas interrupted. He still had his eyes closed and head down, so it was just a little louder than a mumble. “I was helping you to recall it accurately. Your mind had altered the memory of the event, based on your assumption that you had somehow abandoned me. You were…” Cas flinched slightly and fell silent.

“Cas?” Dean asked.

“You ok, sir?” Vanya stepped closer and leaned down a bit to try to see his face.

Aneran had been coaxing Sam and Mary toward the door, but they stopped and looked back.

“I...I’m…” Cas stuttered. “I’m fine.”

Dean sighed heavily.

“Yeah…” Vanya groaned in sympathy. He reached up instinctively to put a hand on Cas’s shoulder, but thought better of it and let his arm drop back down. He looked up at Dean. “I’m gonna guess he was talking about a memory that’s kinda difficult for you?” he asked. “Something that brings up a lot of emotion?”

Dean stared at him. It took him a moment to piece it together, but he then he got what the angel was implying.
“Yeah...it, uh...” Dean began, wondering if he’d ever be able to explain what he’d felt when he lost hold of Cas’s hand, inches away from escaping Purgatory. The depth of his grief when he saw the portal close and believed his friend might be lost there forever. He shook his head. “Not a great memory, no.”

“He’s ok, then,” Vanya assured Dean. “He just hasn’t adjusted to the strongest inputs from you, yet. Give him a little while. He’ll figure it out.”

Vanya leaned a little closer to Cas and spoke. “It gets easier, sir. I can give you some tips, later, if you want. Ways to practice filtering some of it out.”

Cas didn’t answer for a long moment, but finally nodded.

Vanya motioned for them to move toward the war room.

“I think what Castiel was trying to say was... Yes, I could show you directly, but because of the nature of this particular memory, it would be totally unhelpful for you. Angels are able to parse sensory input in ways the human brain can’t. And we are able to perceive a much greater range of information from a whole lot more dimensions. So in this case, at the very best I’d just be showing you a fuzzy image of something way off in the distance. It wouldn’t be helpful at all. I’ll just draw it for you. I promise, it’ll work a lot better. I need to draw it up for all of us to use as reference, anyway.”

As they entered the war room, the rest of the team stood and quietly moved closer, anticipating the greeting they’d expected upon their former commander’s return. When they noticed Castiel’s demeanor and the Winchesters’ somber looks, though, they halted.

Aneran quickly transferred the visual of what Vanya had seen to two of his team. They in turn passed it along to the others.

Dean was still unnerved by that ‘now we know why they took your feathers’ comment, so as he watched the reactions the other angels were having to the memory transfer, his level of worry skyrocketed. They all looked just as shocked and saddened as Aneran had.

When they’d finished relaying the visual information, there was a brief pause. The angels stood silently, looking at one another. All of the joy and comfort they’d shared during their reunion was gone.

Then, as if a silent alarm had sounded, each angel moved quickly to a previously established position in either the library or the war room. There was a flurry of paper and chalk and the level of conversation went into high gear.

The bunker suddenly felt awake and alive in a way Sam and Dean had never experienced it. They both reacted, turning to each other with mild surprise.

“Wow,” Dean mumbled, absorbing the change in the atmosphere of the room.

“Yeah...” Sam agreed. “The place kinda makes more sense, this way.” They looked around for a moment longer, before turning their full attention to what Vanya had begun to draw on the chalkboard.

Erethe moved to Vanya’s side and marked off a small workspace on the board. She started scribbling quickly.

“Current distance?” she called out to Vanya. He answered with a number that she quickly scribbled
down, before asking the next question.

“Relative velocity?”

“Angle of approach relative to ecliptic?”

“Facing angle of opening?”

Erethe was writing at high speed, filling in the values for a roughly made list of variables. She was working in the lower right corner, where she could best reach. Her small frame fit neatly under Vanya’s arm as he leaned over her for a moment to extend his diagram.

Sam grinned with an unexpected memory: He and Jess were at a whiteboard, in front of a small room full of their fellow students, feverishly creating a series of badly drawn cartoons representing philosophical concepts. They were both grinning from ear to ear and giggling when the cartoons started getting laughs from the other students. Sam drew all of his cartoons at the top of the board, while Jess drew hers on the bottom. And Sam’s long arms allowed him to step back, so the two of them could move from side to side without ever having to dodge each other.

‘We were a great team,’ he thought. His grin grew into a soft smile.

“Oh!” Erethe chirped and pulled her hand away from the board. She paused for half a beat, then turned to Vanya. “Inez wants to know if you were able to detect gravity waves?”

Vanya looked over at her and grinned. She grinned back.

“Yes, Inez.” He turned back to his drawing. He was still grinning from ear to ear. “That’s how I found the object.”

“And she wants to know if you were able to get a delta on the pulses,” Erethe followed up. She lowered her eyes for a moment. “Yes, I’m gonna cover that too,” she said, slightly under her breath.

“Who’s Inez?” Dean asked Aneran.

“Her vessel,” Mary answered instead, sounding awed and a little creeped out. She took a half step toward Erethe.

“Is she...awake...in there?”

Erethe only shot a quick look back at Mary, but she was smiling at her new friend.

“She is! When I asked her if she’d be willing to help out with this project, I told her we’d be investigating something involving near-Earth orbit and she got pretty excited,” Erethe explained, while still scratching away on the board. “I promised I’d let her in on the action.”

“I’m sure a few of our vessels are awake, at the moment,” Aneran added. “This particular group has quite a bit of technical skill. We were very lucky to have had so many available with such a small amount of lead time.” He shook his head and grinned, gazing at each of them. “We really owe these people a lot,” he said, looking a little misty eyed.

“Aneran...I thought you understood,” Sam said, lowering his voice and moving a bit closer to Aneran, so he wouldn’t be overheard. He caught himself, as he did it, and rolled his eyes. It was so difficult to remember the worthlessness of that precaution when there were angels around. They’d hear him, no matter how quiet or tactful he tried to be. He sighed and continued at a normal volume.
“This bunker… The folks who built this place kept its existence entirely off the radar. It was the only way to keep it safe from...everything that would love to get its hands on this stuff. And that’s still true. We don’t tell anyone that we don’t absolutely trust to keep it secret.”

Aneran nodded, knowingly.

“Now we’ve got a whole room full of people who know exactly where this place is!” Dean barked, not really trying to conceal his immediate frustration. “And WHAT it is!”

“Not where,” Aneran answered, reassuringly. “None of them knows where they are right now. The transition from where they were to their arrival here was instantaneous, from their perspective. Just as it is for you when Castiel transports you somewhere. Also, I made it clear to my team that the location was to be closely guarded.”

“But not WHAT this place is,” Dean repeated. Aneran’s reassurances were nice, but if the vessels were awake...taking in everything they saw and heard here...

“Commander Inez Gutierrez, U.S. Navy, Nuclear Engineer. Top Secret security clearance,” Aneran said, gesturing toward the tiny officer with his open hand. Erethe shot a dazzling smile and a quick wave at Dean.

“Phillip Stevenson,” Aneran continued, now gesturing toward the library. Tazar glanced up and waved dismissively before going back to his work. “Former Army Ranger. Also held Top Secret security clearance.”

“Dr. Malik Washington, professor of cultural anthropology and sociolinguistics. Contract translator for the FBI.” Vanya took a second to stop drawing and waved his arm over his head, without turning around. “Secret security clearance.” Aneran began motioning to the next of his team, but Dean cut him off.

“Alright...I get it. You screen your vessels,” Dean huffed. But then his expression changed and he looked around the room. “Huh…” he concluded, having let that information sink in. The possibility that the vessels might play an active role had never occurred to him. It was still unsettling, and he didn't particularly like it, but at least these weren’t random folks who’d been plucked out of their lives and left wide awake as Aneran and team dropped them into the Winchesters’ fun house version of the world.

“For something like this, we would only respond if we could secure trusted partners. These people may not have seen much of what we know is out there, but I can promise you they understand what they’ve gotten themselves into. We won’t take a vessel into a potentially dangerous situation, without telling them the possible risks.”

Dean felt another quick squeeze of his hand. He didn’t wonder this time. He just squeezed back.

“We also do our best to allow them the choice to either sleep through it all or to remain awake...though that’s not always a possibility, and we do make that clear to them. Building trust with our vessels is given top priority, right up front, for exactly this reason. Each one of these people has a long standing relationship with the angel he or she is currently hosting. We wouldn’t bring a newbie on a mission like this.”

“Hang on…” Sam interrupted. His face was contorting as he realized the implications of what Aneran was saying. “You have a choice of which vessels to bring? Meaning you have more than one vessel to choose from?” His pitch was rising throughout the question.
“Yeah, of course,” Aneran answered. “It’s the only way we’re able to do somethin’ like this. And if I only had one available vessel, that poor man or woman would get sick of me really quick! People have lives, ya know? Jobs. Families.”

“Let’s get back to what he saw,” Dean interjected, motioning toward Vanya and the drawing he was finishing. Cas’s grip had continued to tighten throughout Aneran’s speech. Dean no longer had enough feeling in his fingers to squeeze, so he resorted to running his thumb along the back of his friend’s hand.

“Right,” Aneran said and turned toward the chalkboard. “So, the rings and their sigils... basically, we’re looking at a security mechanism. The rings appear to be interconnected, but it looks very much like each one can be rotated independently, like the tumblers on one of those cylinder-shaped combination locks. The ones with the individual wheels, ya know? It’s just a guess at this point, but I’m pretty confident we’re right. We’ve seen this type of mechanism before, mainly on highly secured objects constructed in Heaven’s dimensional plane. Stuff like...sacred archives. Stores of uniquely powerful weaponry. The Archangels’ communion chambers. Anything that needs to stay secured against all forms of intrusion.”

He was distracted by Erethe when she took a step away from the chalkboard and shook her head. Her eyes were darting from Vanya’s drawing back to the equations she’d been solving.

“What is it,” Aneran asked, breaking away from his explanation to move closer to her side of the board.

“This can’t be right,” Erethe said. Again, she shook her head, and she sighed heavily.

“How certain are you about all of these,” she asked Vanya as she gestured to the list of values he’d supplied. Vanya shrugged and nodded.

“Pretty solid. We could do with another round to verify, but...it’s close enough. Why?” he asked, stepping back so he could see what she’d written.

“This object…” she started, but she cut herself off and grabbed the eraser. She quickly removed the work she’d done, below the values. “I’m gonna do it again. That can’t be right. Gimme a minute.”

Aneran turned back to the humans.

“Sorry…um… So we can assume that what’s on the other side of that wormhole needs to be secured from...pretty much everything. Some of that warding will definitely keep angels out. Even a small amount of it would easily keep demons out. But the rest of it...we’re gonna have to investigate. I don’t think any of us has seen anything like that before.”

For a moment, they were all quiet, as they watched Vanya and Erethe work. Eventually, Sam realized they hadn’t addressed the most important question, so he spoke up.

“So...why did all of you look so upset when you saw this?”

Vanya and Erethe both hesitated in their work for just a split second, before continuing. They didn’t acknowledge Sam’s question in any other way.

Aneran met Sam’s gaze. He’d lost a lot of the pep he’d had during his explanations and was now wearing the same mournful expression so often seen on Cas’s face.

Sam groaned inwardly. He found the ease with which angels could suck all sense of hope out of a situation to be depressingly ironic.
“It’s...what’s on the other side. What we can see there,” Aneran explained mournfully. He swallowed and shook himself out of it.

“There’s a long, straight corridor with an open hatch at the end,” he continued, forcing himself to lose the dejected tone. “The corridor looks very much like the ones that make up the areas in Heaven where human souls are sequestered. Couple that with the security mechanism and I think we can safely assume angelic construction.” He sighed and set his jaw. The woeful expression vanished. Now he just looked pissed.

“The hatch is a large, narrow oval. Similar in shape to the edge-on view of a spiral galaxy,” Aneran said, as he pointed to a shape at the center of Vanya’s drawing. “It’s big enough to accommodate a seraph in full flight.”

Erethe stepped back from the board once again and slowly shook her head.

“Same thing?” Aneran asked, glancing over her work.

Erethe nodded, still staring at the board.

“Even with a large margin of error on the inputs, it’s still a very exotic object,” she said. “We’ve gotta verify this data on the next pass. Sorry, sweetie,” she said, reaching up and patting Vanya’s arm. “Just gotta be sure.” He smiled back at her and nodded.

“Exotic?” Sam asked quietly. He was still dealing with the idea of a hatch designed to perfectly fit Cas through it. That didn’t sound good.

“These numbers are indicating something like...a massive black hole orbiting a super -massive black hole orbiting a hyper -massive black hole. Or something...crazy like that...” she sighed and shook her head. “It shouldn’t exist. And even if something like this does exist, it’s definitely nowhere near Earth.”

“Objects of that kind are expected to exist much further into the lifespan of the universe,” Cas added. He still had his eyes closed and he looked as though just standing there was taking all of his concentration.

“How much further,” Mary asked. She was starting to look just as disheartened as Sam.

“Between eight and twelve billion years,” Cas stated blandly. “Earth years,” he corrected, then mumbled, “give or take one or two billion.”

“Oh, just one or two billion. Awesome. Narrows it down, Cas. Thanks,” Dean snarked. This entire conversation was slowly sending his blood pressure through the roof and so far, he hadn’t heard a single piece of actionable information. Just more ‘data gathering’ plans. It was irritatingly familiar.

“Wait...I see the mistake,” Aneran announced, as he stared at the data. “Current distance. It says a little over three light days.” He looked toward Vanya.

Vanya stiffened a bit, but turned to look at Aneran and nodded once to confirm.

“That’s not right,” Aneran protested.

Vanya said nothing. He just held his friend’s gaze.

“Vanya!” Aneran said with a half smile. He seemed poised to hear a punchline...like maybe his friend was pulling his leg. “That’s not...It’s way too far!” He continued to stare at the angel and
eventually threw his hands up dramatically and chuckled. “Come on! You couldn’t have gotten close enough to see it, then! You wouldn’t have had time!”

Right as he said the last word, Aneran’s face fell. His body tightened and his expression grew very dark as he stared at Vanya.

All three humans suddenly felt an instinctive need to back up. Sam moved to close the distance between himself and his mother. Dean reached out and took hold of Mary’s forearm, urging her to move behind him as he stepped slightly in front of her.

Cas’s eyes flew open and he took one step toward the angels. He now stood directly in front of Dean.

“I thought I’d made it clear...” Cas began. He sounded very unhappy.

“Yes, sir, I’ll handle it,” Aneran said sharply. He never took his eyes off of Vanya.

“I don’t want any of you to...”

“I’ll handle it!” Aneran shouted and turned his furious glare on Cas. Immediately, he squeezed his eyes shut and winced, raising his hands in contrition. Which was good, because Cas had already begun to advance.

“Sir, I apologize,” Aneran said, looking back up at Castiel’s eyes and showing him all possible deference. “That was entirely out of line. Please forgive me.”

Cas continued to glare at them both for a few moments. Vanya kept his head slightly bowed and his eyes lowered. Aneran held Cas’s gaze solemnly.

“You’ll handle it,” Cas repeated back to Aneran. It was less a question than an order.

“I will, sir. Immediately,” Aneran assured him.

Cas nodded once. “Finish what we’re doing here first,” he directed. He seemed to suddenly realize he was no longer at Dean’s side and turned slightly.

“Yes, sir,” Aneran capitulated and turned back to the board.

The Winchesters openly stared at Cas. All three heads moved in unison to track the seraph as he positioned himself back beside Dean. Cas noticed and stared back at them, his face growing more confused. He almost spoke, but instead turned his attention to Dean. He winced a bit and his eyes fluttered closed.

“Later,” Cas managed to groan out in answer to some unspoken question, before he fell silent again. His face went back to the same look of desperate concentration.

Dean blinked at him. A moment later, it occurred to him that nearly a dozen half-formed questions had gone through his mind while he’d stared at his friend, one or more of which must have gone out over the tether. Maybe all of them had.

He cringed. When Cas had said he’d be able to hear his thoughts, Dean thought he’d meant the fully formed thoughts. Similar to prayers. But now he wondered if Cas meant he’d hear everything. EVERYthing. Just the idea made Dean shudder. He was well aware of the avalanche of disjointed shit that flew threw his mind almost constantly. He knew how to filter it, though. He’d lived in there his whole life. But, if Cas was hearing all of that...
“No...Cas?” Dean whispered. “Are you hear...” he didn’t have a chance to finish. Cas was already nodding. “Ahh...man,” Dean groaned and closed his eyes.

“What?” Mary asked in little more than a whisper. She squeezed Dean’s arm to get his attention. He looked at her despairingly, but just shook his head. He reached back and put his arm around her.

“You still haven’t told us about the feathers,” Sam prodded. He’d gone back to looking at the board and missed the quick exchanges between his family. “You said you knew why they took them? I thought it was just...punishment?”

“We thought that, too,” Aneran said, having regained his composure. “But at the end of the corridor...surrounding the hatch…” Aneran quickly found a yellow piece of chalk and began scratching out lots of small lines around the outside of the drawing of the hatch at the end of the corridor. “They have his feathers lined up around the entire thing. Laid out in a very close approximation to the positions each feather would be on his actual wings. So, the feathers from the very tips of his wings are positioned at the outer edges of the hatch, the ones that would be closest to his spine are above and below the center of the hatch... Inner wing feathers on the bottom, outer feathers along the top, etc,” he finished, dropping the chalk back into the tray with disgust.

“So...like a mirror image of his wings?” Sam asked, staring at the drawing with growing revulsion. Just the thought of Cas’s bloodied, cruelly removed feathers lined up on a wall like some mounted hunting trophy made his stomach turn.

“Yeah, it looks like it,” Aneran agreed. “And that’s what they’re using to pull him. Almost without a doubt.” He stopped for a moment to gaze mournfully at Castiel. His former commander didn’t see him, of course. Cas had his eyes screwed tightly shut again. Aneran lowered his gaze and cleared his throat. “Do you agree with that assessment, sir?”

Cas didn’t respond for a long moment, but eventually he nodded.

“So, those feathers around the hatch...his old feathers...they’re like magnets for his new feathers?” Mary asked. “How does that work?”

“We don’t know,” Aneran said flatly. “There’s a lot about all of this that’s...very different from anything we’ve seen before. The spellwork they’re using is... “ He sighed heavily and rubbed his eyes. Then he nodded and gave Mary a sad but determined grin. “We’ve got our work cut out for us.” His grin got a little bigger, when Mary grinned knowingly back at him.

“We got any idea what this place is?” Dean asked pointedly. Aneran seemed like maybe he was finished and that was nowhere near enough information. “Or why they’re drawing him to it? I mean, there’s gotta be a good reason. This is a lot of effort to have gone through. And a hell of a lot of planning, if they went after Cas’s feathers, like, five or six months ago.”

“There's...at least one clue to what it actually is, but...” Aneran fidgeted uncomfortably. “It’s really just guessing right now...”

“Just say it,” Dean grumbled. He was really getting tired of people trying to buffer the information. Aneran looked away, suddenly unable to meet the man’s eyes.

“There’s a plaque on the wall...above the hatch. The inscription is in the most formal version of High Enochian. That type of script is usually reserved for objects or ideas that are meant to endure for all eternity.” Aneran stopped at this point. He looked like he might not be able to continue.

Dean gave him a moment. The guy was clearly hurting and needed to pull it together, but that was
only making Dean’s mind swim in dire possibilities and he couldn’t take it for long. Eventually, he prodded.

“What’s it say?” Dean asked quietly. He hadn’t realized he’d been squeezing Cas’s hand, instead of the other way around. His friend returned the reassurance, then used his free hand to cover the back of Dean’s hand as well.

“It’s my name,” Cas answered. His voice was just as quiet as Dean’s. “My formal name, written in ceremonial script.” Cas paused briefly. “This particular script can be used for anything that’s meant to be eternal, but most often it’s used to signify a memorial. Or a tomb,” he said, even more softly, “though...not exactly the same thing as you have for humans. Angels don’t have mortal remains, but...we sometimes leave a cache of representative objects that are then used as...a type of ‘remains.’ It’s difficult to explain, but the sentiment is the same.” He pressed the back of Dean’s hand more firmly. “In this case, I don’t believe it is intended as a tomb,” he added. His voice sounded more intense and the pace increased. Like he was rushing to avoid confusion. “From the high security placed at the wormhole and the sigils carved around the hatch, which Aneran hasn’t mentioned yet...I’m fairly certain it’s a prison. Not a tomb.”

Dean was starting to feel sick and the level of emotion was about to send Cas reeling. He blurted out the last of his thoughts, before Dean’s mind shut him down completely.

“Though...this design could effectively serve as both.” He swallowed hard and squeezed his friend’s hand very tightly. “Once the hatch is closed...it seems like a logical...progression...” he drifted off. A moment later, he shoved his free hand roughly into his own hair, just above his left ear. He curled the fingers and pulled hard.

“Dean, please...” he begged. “Please... I can’t think.” He took his hand from his hair and planted it against Dean’s chest, twisting his fingers into his friend’s shirt. “Please,” he whispered. “Please, stop!” He began breathing, but it was barely more than a miserable pant. “It hurts, Dean! Please, stop!”

“Cas?!” Dean called to him, but Cas didn’t seem to be able to hear him at all. “Cas!” he yelled again and put his free hand around the back of his friend’s neck. Cas continued to plead with him.

“Sam!” Dean yelled over his shoulder, but his brother was already at his side, trying to figure out what was happening. Both men tried to get through to Cas but it seemed to only make his pleas louder and more panicked.

Cas’s knees gave out. Dean caught him and held him up.

“Cas?! What the hell?!” Dean said into his friend’s ear. He turned to Aneran who’d made his way over to them and was trying to help them hold onto Cas.

“Oh, shit!” Dean gasped and began a desperate scramble for continued skin contact with his friend. Cas had tugged his right hand out of Dean’s grip and was fighting to get away from him. Aneran grabbed both of Cas’s arms and held him fast, so Dean could keep his hold on Cas’s neck.

“You’ve gotta calm down!” Aneran yelled at Dean from behind a squirming Castiel.

Vanya jumped into the fray as well, trying to keep Cas from kicking Dean away from him. Even with two angels and Sam on him, Cas was slowly winning the battle.

“DEAN!” Aneran yelled. When Dean looked over at him, and the angel saw the raw panic in the man’s eyes, he shifted tactics.
“TAKE HIM DOWN!” he ordered Ringa, who was now by Dean’s side. “DON’T LET HIM BREAK CONTACT!”

Without missing a beat, Ringa grabbed Dean’s arm, holding it in place, and put two fingers on his forehead. Sam and all three angels carefully lowered the tethered pair to the floor, letting Dean’s unconscious body drape loosely over Cas. Ringa kept Dean’s hand on his friend’s neck.

Still in mild shock, Sam looked over at Aneran.

"What the hell was that?!”

"Their connection is way too strong. Your brother's mind...his emotions...it's completely overwhelming Castiel. He doesn't know how to filter it, yet."

“And that’s the best we’ve got?” Sam demanded. "Knocking Dean out? What the hell are we supposed to do when he wakes up?"

Aneran collapsed back on his haunches and ran his fingers through his hair.

“Well,” he said and blew out a lungful of air, “we could try teaching Dean mindfulness and meditation?” He sounded both hopeful and sarcastic, and gave Sam a half-hearted grin.

Sam pursed his lips. He considered Aneran, then his unconscious brother, and finally settled his gaze on a mentally exhausted, embarrassed, and slowly recovering Castiel. Those sad blue eyes were staring back at him with a level of misery that broke Sam’s heart.

Dean stirred, grunting softly and reaching with his free hand to grasp at Cas’s sleeve. Aneran touched his forehead and put him further under. Dean’s body relaxed fully. He seemed to melt over Cas, pinning the angel to the floor. He sighed contentedly. And when his body relaxed further, he loudly farted.

There were various reactions...though, surprisingly, no one laughed. Cas rolled his head to the side to try to look at his friend’s face but he couldn’t get the right angle. Instead he rested his cheek against the side of his friend’s head. Reaching up with his one free arm, he very gently pat Dean’s back.

“Mindfulness and meditation,” Sam repeated as he wiped one hand down his face and looked over at Aneran. “Yeah...they're both screwed.”

Chapter End Notes

Ok...many of you will find Cas's adrenaline-fueled, fully-human/animalistic panic reaction to be OOC. Normally, I would too. However, as you'll find out soon, that reaction was due to him finally being pushed past his ability to control his emotional centers.
(I warned you about head-canon, my cherished reader. Please still love me after all of this! I truly cannot help myself.)
(Oh...and some meta, too, because...ya know...I can’t shut up.)
Cas’s true form can feel human emotions, but he has little to no experience with them, except for what he’s gained in the last eight years. Much of what he learned before that has been wiped from his memory. Heaven has emotionally hamstrung him, leaving him a brilliant, ancient, highly sophisticated, bad-ass grown-up angel, with the emotional
coping skills of a very young human child. But he’s NOT a child, so he’s very aware that he can’t let his emotions run the show. He still has to be a grown-up, bad-ass angel. Unfortunately, at the moment, the only thing he knows to do with his strong negative emotions is push them down or shut them off. If/when he can’t do that, he struggles. We all saw Cas come damn close to a full emotional shutdown after Rowena’s attack dog spell was removed. He saw no purpose for himself, other than to throw himself into the path of evil and either commit or receive violence. It was freakin’ awful seeing him like that. I put it on an even keel with hopeless future!Cas. *shudders in horror* And it’s no wonder - he’s been getting the shit kicked out of him emotionally for years, with pretty much zero support to help him learn how to handle it.

So, with him already at the bleeding edge of his ability to cope, I decided to tether Cas to Dean. Dean Winchester. Yeah...THAT Dean Winchester. Because I’m a horrible, horrible person.

In addition to his own barely manageable feelings, Cas is now experiencing everything Dean feels and thinks, too. (Which, btw, he didn't expect. He thought it would only involve Dean’s thoughts, and even then, only the most emotionally charged thoughts would force their way through. He thought he’d be able to ignore most of it. Oops.) And let’s face it...Dean’s seen some shit. And he’s a hard-ass, but he isn't exactly Mr. Stoic. I love him dearly, but I would NOT wanna live in that guy's head. Omg...I mean...OMG!

So...yeah...Cas cracked. That was a crack. Cracked seraph. It was never gonna be pretty. He recovered enough to stop freaking out, by the end, but...Oh...and the breathing thing...from what I've gathered from canon (correct me if you have evidence otherwise! I'd be very glad to hear it!), angels intentionally control all aspects of their vessels using their power/grace. At full power, it's easier for them to just take care of all vessel needs directly. When their power wanes, though, they either choose to or are forced to allow their vessel to function normally to conserve power (i.e. sleeping, eating, breathing, etc.) In this scene, when Cas was no longer able to think and was completely overtaken by the emotional deluge, he stopped focusing on supporting his vessel, which meant his vessel began to breath, to dump adrenaline, to weaken, to panic, etc.

So...yeah...that...

And I promise I am not making fun of Dean! Most people will fart if they have a little gas and they completely relax. Like under anesthetic. It happens. At the end of this scene, though, it served as a horrible underlining of the fact that Dean is gonna take to the whole mindfulness and meditation philosophy about as well as he’d take to going with a healthier, less noxious gas producing diet.
In the wake of Cas's tether-meltdown, Ringa has been tasked with helping him to cope. Dean is sleeping it off. Aneran and Vanya are having a 'conversation'.

Good times had by all.

Movie referenced:

The Sandlot. David Mickey Evans. 20th Century Fox. 1993

June 9, 2016
2:27 PM CDT

The door to Dean’s bedroom was halfway open, and Cas’s voice briefly rumbled out into the quiet corridor. Sam and Mary approached and peeked around the doorframe before entering the dimly lit room.

The atmosphere was very subdued - quiet, calm, peaceful. Sam had always been surprised by just how different any room could feel when the angel was the one controlling the ambience. It reminded him how lucky they were that Cas was...Cas. Even with all his quirks, he was so much better than the other angels they’d met. Sam shuddered to think what life in the bunker would be like right now, if Cas’s personality were more like Balthazar’s. Or Gabriel’s!

Cas was sitting in the desk chair he’d pulled up next to the bed, and finishing tucking a blanket around Dean’s left shoulder.

Ringa appeared beside him, holding three of the kitchen chairs. The little charms on her clothing tinkled softly as she moved to place two of the chairs on the opposite side of the bed and gestured invitingly to the humans. Then she made her way back to Castiel’s side.

“How long will he be out?” Sam asked. “He’s not gonna be happy about sleeping through anything else.”

“I’ll try to be as quick as I can.” Ringa gave Sam a reassuring nod as she placed a chair next to Cas and sat. “But, it may take a bit more time than we’d like. I want to make sure Castiel has the tools he needs. To avoid...something like this happening again,” she said, turning her attention back to Cas.
Sam sighed. That wasn't the answer he was hoping for, but he couldn't argue with the logic. He knew his brother would agree. That didn't mean Dean would like it.

“Yeah, ok.” He said it more for himself than for anyone else, and followed his mom to the chairs. He took another deep breath and let it out, as he sat. “Ok,” he repeated. This time, it was entirely for himself. He was finding it difficult to shake off what had happened in the war room. Something about this whole situation was affecting him much more deeply than he would normally expect, and he hadn't yet been able to pinpoint why. He leaned back and tried to relax, letting his long legs find a comfortable position.

Cas hadn’t responded to his friends’ arrival at all. Instead, he was giving his full attention to his own hand. His fingers were interlaced with Dean’s to provide a more secure grip as he’d moved his sleeping friend and gotten him settled. He’d seen no reason to change the grip afterward.

He flexed his fingers slightly, studying this new configuration, noting the various sensations.

“Ww’ll start with some simple exercises, sir, while his mind is mostly still,” Ringa began. “Then we’ll focus on separating the basic sensory inputs coming from him and from your own vessel. If he goes into a dream state, we can try some additional techniques, as well.” She noticed Cas’s demeanor and his lack of reaction to her statement and gently placed her hand on his arm.

“There’s no need to be embarrassed, sir. Really. Each one of us has had an intense experience during a tether. We know how overwhelming it can be.” Her fingers lightly squeezed and he looked up at her. His eyes darted over to Sam, before he lowered them again. He didn’t seem very comforted by her words or her touch, so she gave him a pat and brought her hand back to her lap.

“Even under ideal conditions, tethering can be extremely difficult to navigate. And you’ve tethered yourself to Dean,” she winced. The thought sent a shudder through her. “I can’t imagine what it must be like for you right now.”

“Hey,” Mary demanded, while still keeping her voice very quiet. “What do you mean, ‘it’s Dean. I can’t imagine?’ What’s wrong with Dean?!” By the end, she was glaring at Ringa.

“Oh, no! No, no! That’s not what I meant!” Ringa quickly assured her. “Nothing’s wrong with Dean! I mean, it would be fine if anyone else were to be tethered to him,” she paused for just a second, thinking, then shook her head and continued. “But for Castiel...Dean really was the worst possible choice.”

Cas stared at Ringa. He looked horrified.

“Hey,” Mary said, letting the flash anger she’d felt drain away. Then she squinted. “Wait...why?”

“Because of their bond.” Ringa looked between the two humans and then at Cas. “It would have a tremendous influence in this situation.”

“So, it’s worse...the closer the angel is with the human?” Sam asked, leaning forward and putting his elbows on his knees. “Harder to filter out the thoughts, I mean?”

“Oh, yes. The level of emotional attachment definitely affects the intensity.”

“There’s nothing in the archives about this.” Cas sounded skeptical. He squinted at her. “And an angel’s emotional centers are far smaller and less developed than a human’s. It seems a dubious assumption that even a strong attachment on the angel’s part would have much of an impact.”

“Actually,” Ringa began. She swallowed and shifted uncomfortably. “Our emotional centers aren’t
smaller or less developed. That’s something...they’ve...um...” she shook her head. “That’s a different issue. I can share with you what we’ve learned later.” She fidgeted and her face paled. She clearly didn’t enjoy having to correct him. Shaking it off, she straightened and forced herself to meet his gaze.

“You’re right, though. The transfer of information is one-way...from him to you. So, your level of attachment to him would have little impact, if any.” She opened her mouth to continue, but hesitated and started fidgeting again.

Cas’s face briefly tightened in frustration.

“Please...speak plainly, Ringa,” he said. He kept his voice gentle. “You don’t need… I recognize my relative ignorance in this matter. I’m willing to defer to your counsel.” He nodded once. “And I’m grateful for it.”

“Yes, sir,” Ringa whispered, and blushed. She took a moment to think, and then continued.

“Your own response, your...emotional...response to the information coming from him will be much stronger due to your bond and the depth of your feelings for him.” Her discomfort increased, but she kept going, as instructed. “It will be especially difficult when you receive anything negative or painful. Or...anything you might see as him being angry or critical...of you. Things that might...trigger...um...insecurities or...your own fears or...might...um...” She looked increasingly like she’d pay any price for someone else to take over this conversation.

Of course, she wasn’t alone, now. Cas was starting to look just as uncomfortable. Almost as if he were anticipating something horrible but had no idea how or even if he should stop it from happening.

“Might...be, um...uncomfortable...for both of you. Might...” She trailed off. Whatever she was about to say, she decided against it and went instead with a summary.

“Just know that it will be much more difficult for you, since you care so deeply for him. And that it’s perfectly normal.”

Cas dropped his gaze back down to his hand. He also began to fidget, using his free hand to very slightly adjust his coat.

“But, when I said the level of attachment affects the intensity... I meant Dean’s emotional attachment to you. That’s what’s making the input so much more powerful.”

Cas looked back up at her and stared for a long moment. His mouth fell slightly open and he appeared to be having difficulty absorbing what she was saying. A few seconds passed and his eyes went wide. He made a deliberate attempt to not look over at his sleeping friend, but failed almost immediately.

“With this depth of attachment, you’re most likely receiving everything from him - thoughts, feelings and sensory inputs. You’re essentially experiencing two minds at once. The techniques I’ll show you will help you to learn to separate your own vessel’s senses and your own thoughts from his. Unfortunately, there’s little that can be done about the emotional input. We’ve had limited success keeping a human’s emotional state from affecting us during a tether. But these techniques will allow you to keep at least some control.” She took a moment to let him try to come to terms with that information. The fear and despair she saw on his face let her know he understood the implications. She gave him a very sympathetic smile and leaned in closer to him.
“It won’t be easy, but it’ll get much better very quickly. I promise. And, sir, I know you feel embarrassed about what happened out there. I understand. I do. But, honestly, we’ve all been very impressed by what you’ve managed so far. And I’m not just saying that to try to make you feel better. It really is true. Even before you were in direct contact with him, it must have been extremely difficult for you. We’re all aware of that.” She shook her head and let out a quick huff. “I really can’t… With your bond and the way he feels about you...I’m surprised you’ve been able to function at all while he’s awake.”

“So...wait a minute…” Sam said. He shifted in his chair again. “Cas you said it would be Dean’s thoughts. That once you had direct contact you’d be able to hear his thoughts...and that you might not be able to filter some of them out. Is she saying...you can’t filter any of them out?”

Cas nodded.

“And it’s not just his thoughts? You’re actually feeling everything he’s feeling, too?”

Cas swallowed hard, staring at Sam with a hint of desperation.

“So, you’re basically living, full-time, inside Dean’s head? Like...completely?! You're getting everything?!”

Again, Cas nodded.

Sam looked between the two angels with a mix of disbelief and outright horror. He honestly could not imagine what that must be like for Cas. He knew his brother. He knew what floated around in that head from moment to moment. The thought of Cas trying to navigate that...

“Jesus, Cas! That’s…” He stammered, searching for the right word. “Horrible! What the hell, man! Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I didn’t…” His eyes darted from Sam to Mary. She was giving him a knowing and very disapproving look. “I knew right away it would be stronger than I’d originally anticipated, but I had no idea it would…” He swallowed again, looking at Dean and then back at Mary. “That it would be like this.”

“When did you first suspect it might be this bad?” Mary asked.

Cas hesitated for a long moment.

Mary’s gaze never wavered. She just took a deep breath and sighed. Her expression was making it very clear that lying to her right now would not go well for him.

“This morning,” Cas answered. It was barely above a whisper. “When he touched my leg...during the pull.”

“You knew or you just suspected?”

“I knew.”

Mary continued to stare at him. It was considerably more intense, now.

“There was nothing that could be done at that point.” His gaze was going back and forth between both humans again. “I didn’t see any reason to…um…” He stopped himself and exchanged another long look with Mary. He closed his eyes and slumped.
“I should’ve told my team.”

“There ya go,” Mary said. Her tone was encouraging but her face did not match. It had barely softened at all.

“We should get started,” Ringa said. She’d been watching this interaction nervously.

Cas looked back at the angel and nodded, grateful for the interruption.

“I’m a bit concerned about...keeping contact. While we do this.” He gestured toward his hand in Dean’s. “We left the cuffs downstairs, but even they won’t ensure contact...”

“I’ll get ‘em.” Sam rose to leave. He was still reeling from the information and glad to have something to distract him. “I’ll grab some other stuff, too. See if we can come up with somethin’ better. Don’t wait for me, though. You two should get goin’ on this.”

Ringa nodded at him, then turned back to Cas.

“Alright. We’ll start slow.” She scooted to the edge of her seat to better reach him and placed her palm on his forehead. “Just close your eyes and try to relax. If your vessel begins to breathe on it’s own, don’t be alarmed. Just let it breathe deeply... and try to stay focused on me.”

Aneran’s voice echoed down the corridor. His ‘conversation’ with Vanya was becoming less and less private.

“**Heaven?! You went to Heaven!**”

Ringa clicked her tongue and grimaced.

“Nice,” she grumbled, still keeping her voice very low and calm. “And I ran with scissors. Played with matches. Stuck my finger in a light socket.” She slowly shook her head.

It took Mary a second to register what the angel had said, but when she did, she grinned in spite of herself. Nothing about this situation was funny, but the dry wit was charming.

Ringa glanced over at her and rolled her eyes. “I love them. Truly. But I swear, sometimes it’s like herding cats. I don’t envy Aneran.”

Mary snorted softly at that.

“The fact that Vanya even considered what he did to be an option is disconcerting.” Cas took another slow, deep breath. He seemed to have found a comfortable rhythm and no longer needed to be reminded. “It was a tremendous risk. I thought I’d made it clear to Aneran...I don’t want that. From any of you.”

“Shhh...sir...you have to stay focused.”

“I’m capable of doing two things at once, Ringa.”

“Cas...” Mary grunted. She didn’t have to say anything else. Her meaning was clear.
They were silent again for a few seconds. Then Cas snorted softly and grinned.

Ringa grinned back and glanced over at Dean. Then at Mary. She smiled.

“What?” Mary asked, totally lost, but grinning again.

“You sounded exactly like Dean,” he said. “In a higher vocal register.” Once again, Ringa shushed him. He didn’t argue this time.

"Because it’s basic safety, Vanya! This is remedial crap! You’re seriously asking me that?!”

Sam returned just as Aneran’s voice escalated once again. He stared down the corridor, listening to the periodic outbursts.

“Yeah, except that’s NOT what you did!”

Sam shook his head and entered the bedroom. He held up the large first aid kit and the pair of wrist cuffs to show to Ringa, when she looked up at him questioningly. She nodded her understanding and went back to her task.

Sam placed the kit gently on the desk and retrieved some gauze, a roll of athletic tape and the scissors. He gathered them all and moved toward Cas.

“Don’t stop. You guys keep doing your thing,” Sam said, carefully sitting on the edge of the bed. “I’m gonna get you and Dean a little better secured, Cas. Wrap your hands together, for now. It won’t keep you from pulling away if you really want to, but...at least it won’t be as easy to separate by accident.” He very carefully placed one cuff around his brother’s wrist and buckled it in place. Dean didn’t stir.

“Get a comfortable grip on his hand and I’ll wrap them that way.” Sam waited for Cas to reposition, then he quickly buckled the other cuff around Cas’s wrist and joined the two cuffs together with the carabiner clip. He grabbed the gauze and began to wrap.

“Use the sensations this is causing in your hand and Dean’s hand to your advantage, sir,” Ringa said. “Focus on separating the two inputs.”

Sam was paying close attention to this ‘mind-meld’ procedure as he worked. It looked a lot like simple meditation, except that Ringa was keeping her hand in contact with Cas’s forehead. And though Cas looked calm, there was a slight tremor in his hand.

“Ok...THINK about what you just said! You didn’t come back here and tell any of us that you were gonna TIME TRAVEL...because you felt like you didn’t have TIME! Please tell me you see the irony!”

There was a short pause before muted laughter echoed down the corridor.

“You’re killin’ me, Smalls!”
Sam and Ringa both snorted.

“It’s...from a movie,” Sam said, when he looked at his mom’s questioning eyes. She nodded.

“He’s dreaming.” Ringa grinned. “Is that all him? You’re not adding to it?”

“No, that’s...just him.” Cas said. “Amazing isn’t it?”

“I’ll say!” Ringa sounded shocked.

“Great…” Sam shook his head and pulled out the first strip of tape. “Something totally inappropriate?”

Ringa smiled.

“No, no...nothing like that.” She took a deep breath and sighed. “Something quite beautiful, actually. His visual memory is exceptionally well developed. This is extremely vivid imagery.”

Sam grinned at that.

“Wow!” Ringa blurted a bit louder than she’d meant to. She winced and lowered her voice again. “All the senses, actually. This is like…” Ringa paused for a moment, and then smiled again. “This is like being ensconced in a vessel! His entire sensory experience is coming through in this dream.”

“What is it? What’s he seeing,” Mary asked. She leaned forward and rested her forearms on the edge of the bed, watching her son’s face for any sign of what he might be thinking.

“Oh...uh...” Ringa looked sheepishly at Mary. “I’m sorry, we don’t normally...um… We try to respect the human’s privacy whenever…”

Cas interrupted her. “He won’t mind if you tell her. Nothing here would embarrass him.”

“Yes, sir,” she said and glanced back at Mary, before closing her eyes. “He’s driving. The windows are down and he’s letting his hand dip and scoop in the air stream. It’s a two lane highway...a beautiful day...looks like the Rocky Mountains in the distance. And the road is flanked by fields full of wildflowers.” She giggled. “And I can smell them! This is amazing! That’s the right word, sir, I agree.”

“I take it not everyone dreams that way?” Mary asked. She was smiling brightly...pleased for him. It sounded like a very nice dream.

“They don’t.” Ringa said and let out another sigh. “Most people have vivid dreams from time to time, but...few produce this level of intensity.”

“Ya know...” Sam snorted and grinned. “I’m pretty sure I know exactly what he’s remembering. That stretch of road.” He snipped the end of the first strip of tape to go over the gauze. “This case we were workin’ had us backtracking at least twice. Revisiting some of the towns. We wound up driving that same stretch of highway, like four or five times in just a few days. It seemed like there were more flowers every time. Maybe more were blooming each day...I dunno.” He smiled and shook his head. “And yeah, they did smell amazing. Jeez...it’s been years, though. I can’t believe he still remembers it with all that detail.”

“Is he sending you any related emotional information?” Ringa asked Cas.

“Oh, yes.” he said. He managed to sound both pleased and apprehensive. “With equal intensity.”
Ringa sucked a quick breath through her teeth and winced in sympathy. “Ouch.”

Cas sighed. “At least it’s pleasant, at the moment. Ah...there you are, Sam. Sitting next to him. You look peaceful. Happy.” He grinned. “This is a very nice dream.”

“Mmm…” Ringa sighed. “I love this song.” She let her head tilt back slightly, listening.

“So...not Metallica, then.” Sam placed the last piece of tape and started smoothing the edges. “He’s not killing the moment, at least.”

“‘Going to California.’” Cas took another deep breath. Sam halted and looked at his friend.

“Ok, Foghat AND Zeppelin? I’m officially worried. I’m gonna pull you into the little music catch up sessions mom and I have been having.”

“Who’s that in the back s...oh!” Ringa sounded a bit surprised. “Is that you? That’s...I forget that humans can’t see us. Just our vessel.”

“Yes, that’s...me.”

“It’s strange. You look so different this way.” She grinned. And then she giggled. “You’re really cute, actually.”

Mary snorted.

“I’m developing a strong dislike for that word,” Cas grumbled.

“It’s not a bad word, Cas. It’s a good one. I promise. You shouldn’t hate it.” Mary grinned at him. Then she, too, started to giggle. “Especially since it’s one hundred percent accurate.” The giggles increased.

Cas cracked open one eye to give her a disapproving look. Mary raised a hand in apology.

“Sorry. Too tempting.” She continued to giggle and Ringa joined her.

“Yeah, this’ll totally help him relax, you guys.” Sam rose from his spot on the bed and put the last of the supplies back into the kit.

The giggles died down and everyone was quiet again.

Sam returned to his seat.

“Hmm,” Cas grunted. He was quiet for a moment, then shifted slightly, furrowing his brow.

“I appear to be...staring at him. Through the mirror.” He squinted his already closed eyes. Another quiet moment passed. “And not...moving. At all. That’s rather unnerving.” Cas took another deep breath and slowly let it out. “It’s interesting. The symbolism in human dreams. So difficult to decipher at times.”

Sam suppressed a grin and cleared his throat. “You think the staring is symbolism?”

“Well...I would think that in a dream this detailed and vivid, mannerisms would also be portrayed accurately. But...this can’t be correct. I look...bizarre.”

Sam and Mary exchanged glances. They both grinned, but neither of them had the heart to break it to him.
The humor was cut short when Cas sucked in a lungful of air and jerked.

“It’s ok. It’s alright. Stay focused on me.” Ringa reached forward with her free hand and placed it on his knee. She began firmly tapping with her fingers. “Try to pay attention to the sensations in your vessel. They way your grace responds to them.”

“It’s...I can’t...” His throat tightened. He sounded very near panic again.

“Focus on your vessel. What my hand is doing. The way it feels.” She continued tapping and squeezed the sides of his knee hard enough to cause some bruising. She then began moving his leg from side to side, increasing the sensations in his vessel.

“Ringa...” he whispered. “Please...”

“I know, Castiel. I know it hurts. Just a little longer. Keep trying.”

Sam watched his friend’s face contort. Watched tears form and begin to fall. Watched him fight. It looked awful and he wondered if he should step in.

Dean moaned and began a slow shifting of his limbs.

Ringa opened her eyes and looked over at the sleeping man.

“May I enter his dream?” she asked Sam. It was quick and urgent but she kept her voice even.

Sam hesitated. He hadn’t expected the question.

“You can say ‘no’ and I’ll put him under again,” she explained. “But this is an opportunity. I want to help them. Do I have your consent?!”

“Yeah. Yes! I mean, just the dream, though!” Sam stared at her, wide-eyed and desperately hoping that he hadn’t just somehow agreed to something awful.

Ringa nodded at him, then closed her eyes and lowered her head. She let her hands slowly fall away from Castiel.

“Nnn... ‘mara! ‘S not... jus... He’s in... th... CAS!” Dean’s restlessness was increasing and Sam watched nervously for any sign that Cas’s hand might slip out of the binding. Or that Ringa might be doing something...not good. He wasn’t even sure what she’d do, other than possession and he’d made it clear he wasn’t agreeing to that. He hoped.

“No.” Dean’s voice had dropped to a whisper and the thrashing had stopped for a moment. It looked as though the worst of the dream might be over. But then it began again. Dean’s voice was louder...more desperate and pained. His breathing increased, like he was running and sweat began to bead on his brow. “Don’ let it close! Sam! He’s in there!”

It had only been ten seconds or so when Ringa’s head jerked up. Her eyes were wide and she made a small choking noise, before lunging forward to place her fingers on Dean’s forehead. The thrashing and yelling stopped.

Ringa’s face had paled. She took a few moments to catch her breath before looking over at Sam and Mary.

“I’m sorry, Sam. I didn’t mean to put you on the spot like that. I should have... I should have asked you about that earlier. That was...stupid of me. I’m sorry.”
Seeing her awake and apparently no longer doing anything to his brother, Sam had a strong urge to lash out at her. Demand a full accounting of what she’d just done to Dean - what she was doing to Cas - and why the fuck she didn’t think this through? But her body language let him know that she didn’t really need any further correction from him. She was shaking...clearly trying to pull it together. Whatever had just happened...whatever she’d seen inside Dean’s dream...it had rattled her thoroughly.

She looked up and met his eyes. Sam sighed and stared back at her. And then he nodded.

“Cas,” Mary whispered. She leaned across the bed and put her hand over the gauze and tape. She couldn’t reach any further than that.

Cas turned his face away immediately, partly covering it with his free hand.

Ringa slowly sat. She was still struggling to shake off what she’d just seen, so it was taking her much longer than normal to react. She eventually reached toward Castiel, intending to comfort him, but Sam beat her to it. He’d already made his way over to his friend and was kneeling next to his chair, pulling him into a tight hug.

Mary watched the two of them, wondering how in the world whatever Ringa was doing was supposed to help if this was the outcome.

Ringa moved away from them, giving them a little bit of privacy and allowing herself a chance to quietly break down. She covered her face with her hands, facing away from all of them as she wept, barely making a sound.

At that moment, Aneran and Vanya strolled into the room. They froze, taking in the scene.

Aneran sighed heavily. “Great,” he mumbled, reaching for Ringa and putting his arms around her. He spoke quietly into her ear.

Vanya and Mary exchanged disappointed looks, before he moved to the chair next to her.

“Looks like this was fun,” he said as he sat. “Did they make any progress at all?”

“I dunno. But it sounds like Cas is gonna have a really hard time with this.”

Vanya sighed and leaned forward, running his hands over his face and letting his chin rest on his fingertips. “Yeah...we kinda guessed that.”

“Stop apologizing. Come on, man. Don’t.” Sam pulled back and took Cas by the shoulders lowering his head down to try to catch his friend’s eyes. “Do you need to take a break for a while? I mean, yeah, Dean wants to stay on top of stuff, but he’d understand, Cas.”

“We should keep going,” Cas whispered. “Whenever she’s ready.”

“Yeah, ok,” Sam said. “But, look...I know it wouldn’t be that fun inside my head either, but you’ve always said you and Dean have a stronger bond. I mean, if that’s the problem here...you can tether to me instead. If it’d help.”

Cas never looked up. He just reached out and pulled Sam into another very tight hug.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

“Sure, Cas. Of course. I just wish you’d said somethin’ earlier.”
“No...I...” Cas pulled back to look at his friend. “I can’t tether to you. I am very grateful for the offer, though, Sam.”

“Is it just me? I mean, is there anyone else you could...”

“No, it’s part of the process. Until this tether has dissipated, I can’t create another.” Cas looked over at Dean and sighed. “I’ll simply need to learn the techniques Ringa is offering to teach me. And hope they’re effective enough.”

“Vanya,” Aneran called to the angel. “You and Ringa give Roz a hand.” He gave Ringa one last peck on the side of her head and moved toward Castiel. Vanya and Ringa both vanished. “Mary, can I ask you to supervise this? Roz is back. They’re moving a lot of supplies in and I wanna make sure we don’t mess up any system you all have around here, especially in the kitchen. And Erethe could really use a hand.”

“Sure,” Mary said, rising from her seat. She looked over at Sam.

“We’ll be ok,” he said with a smile. Mary nodded back.

“Thank you.” Aneran nodded to her.

“Yeah,” she answered as she walked past.

Aneran walked over to Sam and Cas, as Sam slowly sat back on his haunches. He took the seat Ringa had vacated.

“She said the imagery is pretty rough.” Aneran directed the comment to both of them.

Sam gave Cas a second to respond before he answered. Cas didn’t look like he was up to it yet.

“The dream was really peaceful, but then it...um...I dunno...got ugly. I could tell from what Dean was saying it wasn’t a fun scene.”

“What was worse...the images or the emotion?” This time, he addressed only Cas.

“I’ve seen enough horror...enough death and pain...the images are not too difficult for me to confront.”

“So, it was the emotional component.” Aneran nodded. “Yours or his? Which was worse? Or was it both?”

Cas looked like he very much didn’t want to answer that. Aneran lowered his eyes and squirmed a bit in his chair.

Sam watched this with growing concern. Both angels now looked equally uncomfortable, as though some silent battle were being waged - an unwilling game of hide and seek they’d both be very happy to walk away from.

Cas cleared his throat. He kept his eyes lowered, not looking at either of them. “It was difficult...for...um...” He paused, and swallowed hard. “Dean’s emotions when it comes to losing people...losing friends...they’re quite poignant.”

Aneran nodded. He waited a moment to see if Cas would say anything else. But Cas was silent.

“I can imagine. He’s lost so many. The thought of losing you, too, must be awful for him.”
Sam looked at Aneran, silently acknowledging the truth in what he’d said. They were all quiet again for a long moment. Aneran sighed heavily and rubbed his eyes.

“Ok...I’m just gonna...sir, how strong was your emotional response? And please...don’t...I already know you feel far more than you’re ‘supposed’ to. And I’m asking...please just be honest. I know it’s hard, but just...I’m not gonna judge you for it. None of us will. But I need to know exactly what’s happening so I can help you.” Aneran seemed to have relaxed slightly, having gotten that out. Cas still appeared to be struggling to answer.

“Scale of one to ten. One being complete indifference and…”


Aneran gently sucked in his lower lip and chewed, silently assessing his friend.

“And...combined with Dean’s input…”

“Ten,” Cas interrupted again. His voice was tight, the word clipped and tense.

Aneran closed his eyes and leaned forward resting his forearms on his knees. “So...it completely takes you down? Same level we saw in the war room?”

Cas nodded. Aneran sighed and ran his hands over his face.

“Ok,” he said mostly to himself. He let his hands drop away and he straightened back up. “Ok,” he repeated. “So...let’s go straight to the hard part, ‘cause it sounds like goin’ slow is just gonna...be...useless.”

“The hard part? It gets worse than what we’ve seen already?” Sam asked.

“No, it’s just that...trying to slowly walk him through this is gonna prolong the agony. We need to just get to it.” He sighed again and turned his attention entirely to Sam. “We’ve got a couple ways we can do this. The easiest and quickest way would be for me to make Dean my vessel so I can control the inputs from his side…” he paused for half a beat and nodded, “aaand I can see from your face that’s not gonna happen. Ok. So, the next option is to wake him up and keep him happy and calm and somewhat distracted, while I work with Castiel.”

Sam sighed. “Cas...you know he’d want to help any way he could, but possession is - ”

“I know, Sam. You don’t have to explain.”

“Right...so...lemme just get a couple of things and we’ll get started.” Aneran rose and fumbled in his pocket for his phone, flipping through the apps, looking for something.

“You’ve got some ideas about how to keep him distracted? And happy? With all this goin’ on right next to him?” Sam looked incredulous. “Actually, I could get his laptop. Pull up Netflix preemptively. That should help.”

“Yeah, that’s probably a good idea. But, I was already worried we might have to make our tethered soul happy at times, so I made arrangements.” Aneran was still flipping through something on his phone. Then he smiled. “Excellent! Eight kinds, four each. This is why Roz and her vessel are the best combo ever. Gimme a minute. I’ll put together an eye-popping spread for him to wake up to. Should give us ten minutes of distraction, easy.”

“Do I wanna know what you’re talking about?” Sam asked. He didn’t know Aneran well enough
yet to not be worried, and given Dean’s tastes, the list of possible effective distractions was truly disturbing. Aneran saw the worry in the man’s face and had mercy on him.

“Pies, Sam!” Aneran’s eyes twinkled. He looked very pleased with himself. “Roz brought pies!”
Nothin' but a Good Time

Chapter Summary

Dangerously good pie, kick-ass photography, and Zeppelin.
What could possibly go wrong?

Chapter Notes

Title Reference:

National Geographic Magazine - STILL rockin’ some of the best photography
anywhere, after all these decades)

June 9, 2016
3:45 PM, CDT

“Ok, Sam...this is officially how I wanna wake up from any take down. Ever. From now on,” Dean said through a mouthful of warm apple pie. He nipped a small amount of the unmelted vanilla ice cream onto his fork and added it to his mouthful, moaning as the flavors and textures mixed. “I don’t care...if I’m freakin’ bleedin’ out. My eyes pop open, this is what I wanna see. I’ll die happy.”

“You got it,” Sam said. His boots dented the side of his brother’s bed as he rested them there, bending his knees and balancing easily on the back two legs of his chair. He flipped through one of the magazines Roz had procured to entertain their ‘tethered soul.’

“Don’t blow me off, smart ass. I’m serious.”

“Absolutely.” Sam sounded even less invested in this conversation than he had been five seconds ago.

“Mmm...oh my god...this is...crazy good. Where’d she get these?”

“They’re tryin’ to concentrate. Leave ‘em alone.”

“Jesus…” Dean finished a bite and swallowed as he chose his next slice. Blueberry this time. It, too, was wonderfully warm. “This is just...wrong. Did you get any’a this?”

“Not yet,” Sam said, closing the magazine and tipping his chair back onto all four legs. He reached
for one of the small plates spread out on the enormous platter at the end of Dean’s bed. Dean lurched forward, almost flipping his own plate off the TV tray across his lap in order to slap Sam’s hand away.

“I wasn’t offerin’, bitch! Get your own.”

“There’re like...a dozen slices of pie down here. I’m eatin’ one.” Sam reached back down to the platter and removed a plateful of pie before his brother could line up another slap. He then very quickly swiped a fork off Dean’s TV tray. “You’re slow,” he teased, moving back to his former tipped-back position.

“You’re exactly the same. I still gotta share all my shit. ‘Dean, I want pie, too! Dean, I wanna go to the store with you! Dean, I wanna drive the car!’” He shook his head, but then took another bite of warm wonderfulness and momentarily lost his resentment. It came back quickly, though. “You were like...four foot tall. There was no way you were drivin’ the damned car.”

“Oh my god…” Sam mumbled through a mouthful.

“Right?” Dean said. He took a quick swig of milk.

“Ok...this is like...I’m actually kinda suspicious of this.”

Dean snorted. His mouth was too full of pie to reply. They both continued to demolish the treat, groaning and mumbling.

“I’d say I’m gonna analyze this for that Leviathan additive, but I’m not. ‘Cause this is good enough that I don’t care.” Sam took a bite from a second slice and groaned again. “Which totally makes me think it has Leviathan additive.”

“Well, if we both wake up stupid tomorrow, we’ll have our answer.”

“I dunno. I mean...our baseline’s pretty low, man. How could we tell?” Sam snorted. Dean laughed outright.

“Guess those concussions finally caught up with us.” Dean continued to chortle.

“Naw...I think our angel already saved our asses on that one.”

“You figure Cas’s been runnin’ some kinda daily special? A free brain-damage-removal-sweep with every heal-up?”

“I’m pretty sure. Otherwise, we’d both be droppin’ IQ points on a weekly basis.” Sam grabbed the magazine he’d been reading and laid it open on his lap. “Thanks for keepin’ us from being even bigger idiots, Cas.”

There was no reply for a few moments. Then Aneran pulled in a deep breath and turned his head just slightly toward the men. His eyes stayed closed.

“He says ‘you’re welcome’. Now, stop distracting him.”

Dean pulled a face. “Jeez! Touchy!” He took a long drag off his glass of milk. “We’ll try to keep it down, Dad.”

Another short silence ended with both angels quietly laughing. Aneran mumbled something in Enochian. Cas replied the same way and they returned to their laughter.
“Hey!” Dean grunted. “You were gonna stick to English!”

“I lied. Eat your pie.”

Sam snorted. “He does sound like Dad.”

There was a quiet knock at the open door and Vanya peeked his head in. Dean looked up and motioned for him to enter. Vanya strolled in slowly, hands in his pockets, and watched Aneran for a long moment before he very gently cleared his throat and spoke.

“Aneran?” He waited for a reply, but none came. “You wanted an updated schedule?” It took a few seconds, but Aneran raised one hand, gesturing for him to wait.

There was a long pause and they all stayed quiet. Sam glanced at them every few seconds over the top of his magazine. Dean also watched them as he ate, making an effort to be less distracting with the sounds of his fork against the plate.

Aneran and Cas simultaneously took a slow, deep breath and broke their connection. They opened their eyes but remained focused on one another.

“Ok.” Aneran spoke very softly, in keeping with the atmosphere in the room. “He’s going to give me a string of information. It’s something you and Dean will both be interested in hearing, but it’s just gonna be general organizing/housekeeping stuff. But you and Dean will both be hearing it at the same time and thinking about it at the same time.” He watched Cas’s face, making sure he was following his train of thought. There was some hesitation and Cas appeared to be trying to concentrate.

“It’s...already...um…” Cas swallowed and lightly shook his head. “It’s already difficult…” He closed his eyes again.

“Dean.” Aneran looked over at him and motioned toward the stack of magazines lying on the bed near Sam. “Could you find one that’ll…” He changed his mind. “Grab the National Geographic.”

It was just barely out of reach, so Sam got it and passed it to his brother. Dean noticed some of the other magazines and nodded appreciatively.

“Ok...if you would...just browse the pictures for a minute or two. Don’t read the articles. The captions on the photographs are fine to read, but try not to concentrate on anything in particular. Just...enjoy the imagery.”

Dean pursed his lips and nodded. Sounded simple enough.

“Oh, and...if you should happen to come across any picture that disturbs you in any way, please flip past it immediately and try not to let your thoughts linger on it at all.”

Dean nodded again. He looked briefly at Cas and then cracked open the magazine. Within just a few seconds, he’d found a photograph that captured his attention - a sweeping panorama of a bustling city in Asia with more visual interest and appeal than any single photograph should be allowed to have.

Aneran smiled to see Castiel’s face relax quite a bit. “Better?” he whispered.

Cas nodded. “Easier with a single image.”

“Yeah. It usually helps. Now...Vanya is going to speak. You and Dean will both hear the
information. And you’ll both process the information in your own way.” He stopped when Castiel’s face once again began to look slightly pained. “Dean, don’t listen to me right now. Focus on the pictures.”

Dean looked up from the magazine and stared at Aneran. He frowned. “Uh, yeah...ok...I guess...man, you’re sittin’ right there! And there’s like...no other noise. At all.”

“I never said this would be easy.”

Dean sighed, annoyed. “Well...just...don’t say my name then.”

“What?”

“When you’re talkin’, don’t say my name. You said my name and I couldn’t tune you out, anymore.”

“Yeah! Yeah, sorry…” Aneran said. “Ok...just...back to the pictures. You can listen when Vanya starts talkin’.”

Dean nodded once and looked over at Vanya. “You say my name.” He looked back at his photograph and sighed, trying to relax.

Vanya had looked a little lost in thought, but snapped back to the moment as soon as the man had begun speaking to him. He considered the request for just a moment, wrinkling his brow and squinting. “Um...Dean.”

Dean looked up. “What?”

Sam shook his head and chuckled ironically. “Wow,” he said under his breath.

“Oh for the love of...You wanna pay attention? Maybe? Lose the Abbott and Costello routine?”

Aneran barked over his shoulder.

Vanya looked down and rocked back on his heels. “Sorry.”

“When you start talking…” Aneran repeated the instruction for him - nice and patronizing. “Say Dean’s name first, so he’ll know to start listening.” He sighed and waited for a beat. “Everybody know what they’re doing now?”

The angel and the human both mumbled an affirmative, and Aneran turned his attention back to Castiel. He waited for about 15 seconds, letting Dean get his focus back on the magazine and continuing when the seraphs face indicated that he could once again concentrate.

“Ok,” Aneran began. His voice was little more than a murmur. “I want you to concentrate only on what you are hearing. Just you... from your true self and from your vessel. You’ll still hear what Dean’s hearing, too, like a very loud echo, but I want you to focus on turning up the volume on your own thoughts and inputs. If you can do that easily, then you can start trying to turn down the volume on his. But don’t rush. And don’t expect to filter him out entirely. That won’t happen. You’re aiming for ‘able-to-function’ right now. Not full control.”

Cas nodded again. Aneran placed his hand back on Cas’s forehead and they both closed their eyes. A moment later, he motioned for Vanya to begin speaking.

“Ok. Dean...we’ve got the kitchen stocked. And a small amount of extra laundry supplies, just in case we need it. There are two spare bedrooms made up. They’ll hold two to four of us at a time.
Erethe is cooking up a storm. She’ll be ready for us to eat not long after we come back from...um...after the next time we go downstairs.” He shifted uncomfortably and cleared his throat again. “We found the extra leaves, so the kitchen table will be big enough for us to all sit and eat like civilized folk. No perching on countertops with our plates in our laps...or fights over elbow room.”

Aneran gave him a thumbs-up.

“Also, I, uh… I found a spare mattress we might be able to use downstairs...and some additional chain that will hold up to… Um… I’ve put it all in that, uh...that room...down there, so if we wanna start changing the configu…”

“Dean,” Aneran interrupted. “Don’t think about that. Focus on the pictures.”

Dean looked at Aneran, trying to switch mental tracks. It took less than two seconds for him to understand what the angel was asking him to do and why. Cas’s face had contorted and he’d begun breathing much harder. He felt his friend’s hand clamp down on his own and he winced, trying to match the grip enough to keep Cas from squeezing the bones together. Dean scrambled to get his mind clear. He flipped through several more pages very quickly until he found a particularly eye catching photograph. He did his best to focus on the details and the colors...and not on finding a better way to chain up Cas so he’s less likely to break his arm the next time he’s in the dungeon, panicked and screaming.

Aneran made a rolling gesture with his hand, asking Vanya to keep it moving along.

“Wrennie pulled some strings and got us time on CalTech’s older super-computer. That’s still way more power than we’ll need. Should make all the predictive modelling fast and accurate. She says it won’t take her long to write the code. And...that’s about it. We’re stocked with plenty of food, Erethe’s already runnin’ the kitchen like she owns the place. Mary’s keepin’ the rest of us in line and making sure we know where stuff is...even if she has to figure out where it is, first...and we now have enough beer and pie for a small army.”

Dean looked up at Vanya, pursing his lips and nodding. He ended by giving the angel a quick thumbs-up.

“Thank you, Vanya.” Aneran didn’t turn. He kept his focus on his connection to Castiel. Vanya took the hint and turned to leave.

“Hey.” Sam tipped his chair back down and rose, tossing his magazine back on the stack on Dean’s bed. “Can I talk to you for a sec?”

Vanya nodded and smiled, a little surprised but happy to accommodate. Sam followed him into the corridor.

“Aneran.” Cas spoke with some urgency. Even mild alarm. “What are you doing?”

“I’m trying to help you encapsulate…”

“I won’t have access to it, then!” Cas definitely sounded alarmed, now.

“You will. I…”

“What’s goin’ on?” Dean lost interest in the magazine entirely.

“Stop!” Cas said and began to gasp. “Dean!”
“You’ll be able…” Aneran never finished the thought. His eyes snapped open when he heard the TV tray and its contents crash to the floor, but not in time to avoid being pulled up by the front of his shirt and slammed bodily into the wall next to Dean’s dresser. The old phone’s bells rang out as it crashed to the floor. The hand holding Aneran in place released and he stumbled trying to regain his footing. Half a second later, the point of an angel blade was pressing lightly against the hollow of his throat.

“Dean!” Sam shouted as he ran back into the room. Then he froze, slowly raising his hands in subtle surrender. Vanya stepped slightly to the side behind Sam and stared at Dean.

“Lemme guess!” Dean snapped. “You got one’a these against my brother’s back right now.”

“Let him go.” Vanya’s tone indicated there would be no further negotiation.

“Vanya, stand down!” Aneran ordered. The angel didn’t move. “STAND DOWN, DAMMIT!”

Vanya slowly obeyed, stepping fully away from Sam and positioning himself to watch both men from a distance. Sam also moved away, while retrieving his own blade from the holster at the back of his waist and holding it ready. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched the corridor just outside the doorway as it quickly filled with equally armed angels.

“EVERYBODY...STOP!” Aneran was shouting and looking out into the corridor, as well. “This is a misunderstanding! All of you STAND DOWN!”

There was a long moment of hesitation from the angels. Aneran ground his teeth and rolled his head in frustration.

“STAND...DOWN! PUT YOUR BLADE AWAY AND BACK...OFF!”

The angels reluctantly obeyed, sheathing their weapons and moving to the far wall of the corridor. They stood in a loose but attentive formation. Aneran briefly closed his eyes and swallowed. When he opened them, he looked directly at Dean, holding the man’s gaze and no longer blinking.

The sound of very fast footfalls echoed down the corridor.

“Let her in!” Aneran shouted out to them. A moment later, a wide-eyed Mary walked through the doorway. She was still looking at the angels flanking the corridor, very confused, but when she saw Sam in a fight stance and armed, she moved immediately to his side and drew her own angel blade.

Sam turned his attention entirely to the two angels in the room. Mary focused on the doorway.

“What do you need from me,” Aneran asked Dean. His voice was now almost completely calm.

“I need...to know what the fuck you just did to Cas!” Dean let the menace in his voice and glare come across unchecked. “And I need to keep your ass at the end of this pig sticker until I know you can’t do it again! But first... I need your attack dog to drop his blade and get the fuck out in the hallway with the rest of your little Band of Dicks!”

“Do it, Vanya.” Aneran ordered. He never looked away from Dean. Vanya obeyed but he did not look at all happy. When he hesitated, Aneran spoke again, still completely calm. “Go. I’ll be alright.”

Dean waited until Vanya had left the room. “You sure about that?” he asked the angel.

“Yes,” Aneran answered. He continued to stare into the man’s eyes, but said nothing more. Dean considered him for a long moment. He knew the angel could probably get out of this. The proximity of the blade to a kill zone on his vessel, plus Dean’s fast reaction time, would stop him from simply...
smiting all three humans, but he’d only need to gain the upper hand for a single second. Aneran, though, was making absolutely no effort to defend himself.

Dean’s mind raced through all possible nefarious reasons for the angel’s total surrender and came up with only the possibility of long-game subterfuge. While less likely, it was absolutely a possibility, so...he stayed right where he was.

“What’d you do to him?”

“I frightened him,” Aneran said. “I didn’t mean to. I thought he had a better understanding of the way it works. He doesn’t. That was my mistake.” He swallowed by reflex, unintentionally letting Dean know he was still extremely nervous. Dean lifted the blade higher, to a spot just below the angel’s jaw, ratcheting up the threat.

“Cas doesn’t scare easy,” Dean said. His voice was smooth. Controlled. Deadly. “So I’ll ask again. What did you do to him?”

“I tried to help him sequester his grace. Build a container for it, so he can stop it from overriding everything. He thought it would keep him from accessing his power.”

“Sounds like it might. And maybe you know that. Maybe that’s been your plan all along, huh? Shut down Cas’s grace so your five buddies can nab him again?

“His emotions are raw. He panicked. That’s all.” Aneran set his jaw defiantly. “And they’re not my ‘buddies.’” He continued to stare directly into Dean’s eyes.

Dean allowed himself a deep breath and a moment to think. No good options for ending this were coming to mind. Every scenario would result in someone dying. Possibly a lot of someone’s. And vessels, too. Another deep breath and he sighed heavily.

“Cas,” he said, never taking his eyes off of Aneran. “You gotta help me out here.”

Sam was suddenly at his side, pressing his own angel blade to Aneran’s throat. “I got him.” Dean hesitated for only a split second, before squatting down next to Cas, to get a view of his friend’s face.

“Cas,” Dean pleaded. “You gotta tell me what happened. Or just tell me you’re ok. Somethin’!”

“Sam.” Aneran was staring at the younger Winchester with the same intensity. “Please. I’m begging you both...this situation needs to de-escalate right now.” Sam snorted humorlessly. “We have about twenty seconds before one of my team loses it and makes a move.”

“They do that and you’re dead. Are they really that stupid.”

“No. But they are that loyal. And we aren’t a military unit anymore. We haven’t been for a very long time. They listen to me by choice. Not out of obedience. Sam, please...no one has been hurt. I know what happened. I get it. And I’m not pissed. Please. I won’t move. I’ll stay right here.”

“Yeah,” Sam snarked.

Aneran squeezed his eyes shut and grimaced. “I have nothing else to give you!” He opened his eyes and stared at the young man. Flashes of panic were showing through and Sam watched him steadily, assessing their validity. “You have to trust me or something horrible is gonna happen for no reason! Please!”

A sharp crack came from Sam’s left and the pained sound Cas made at the same time took Sam’s
attention for the tiniest sliver of a second.

The speed with which Aneran disarmed him and sent him flying across the bed would baffle Sam for years afterward. When asked, he’d swear Aneran had pulled some ‘Matrix-shit’, because there was no way the angel was capable of moving his vessel that fast. In less than a single second, Aneran had thrown Sam ten feet and disarmed all three humans. He hadn’t moved from his position next to the dresser, but was now holding all three of their angel blades, plus a fourth one that Dean had hidden in a makeshift ankle holster. Sure, he’d used his grace to bring the blades to himself, but...still… Damn, the guy was fast.

Making a very obvious show of it, Aneran retrieved his own blade, then tossed all five of the weapons into the gap between the wall and the back of the heavy wooden dresser. He put his hands up in a show of surrender.

“Everybody just cool it! Please! I didn’t hurt him! He panicked! He’s still panicking because you’re upset, Dean! Calm down and he’ll confirm that for you!”

There was a long moment when nobody moved. Or spoke. Or even breathed much. Aneran looked over at Sam, who was holding his arm awkwardly and wincing.

“You’re injured Sam. You should sit down.”

“I’m fine.”

Aneran sighed and looked over at Mary. “His wrist is injured and he likely has a concussion. Please, can you get him to sit down before he falls down and makes it worse? I’ll be happy to heal him the moment I know for sure that if I move this place isn’t gonna turn into a war zone.” He noticed Mary rubbing the area where her thumb joined her wrist. “I’ll fix your hand, too.” He sighed, lowering his eyes. “I’m sorry. Both of you. I didn’t mean…” He shook his head and switched tracks, focusing back on Dean.

“There’s still the constant pull trying to yank him to that spot in space. It’s taking everything he has right now just to focus enough to keep that from happening. He can’t speak to you or even separate what you’re saying from what you’re thinking or feeling.” Aneran looked down at Castiel’s hand, still tightly fisted around the large splinters of wood that used to be part of the chair seat. “He can’t heal himself, either.”

Dean very briefly followed the angel’s gaze. One of the largest splinters that was still attached to the seat had pushed through the palm of Cas’s hand and was tenting the skin from the inside, above the back of his wrist. His whole body was twitching uncontrollably, as though being electrocuted, and with each pulse, a large amount of blood exited the wound in his palm and was pooling on the floor.

Aneran slid tentatively to his knees, folding his legs completely, getting below Dean’s eye level and trying to appear as non-threatening as he possibly could. Dean watched him warily, looking for any weakness the angel might reveal, knowing that he and his family were now completely defenseless, and terrified that this was all about to go bad in the worst possible way.

“Please.” Aneran said. His voice was just barely starting to shake and Dean’s own fear receded a bit when he realized the angel was just as afraid as he was. “We could lose him at any moment. And I don’t know if we can get him back. We don’t understand what’s happening well enough yet.” When Dean still didn’t show any signs that he trusted him, Aneran put his hands together in front of him in a prayer pose, openly begging. All sense of pride fell away and the angel’s eyes began to fill with tears. “Please, Dean, let me help him.” He swallowed hard. “Don’t let them take him.”
It was unexpected enough to throw Dean off for a couple of seconds as he tried to process the shift in
the angel’s tone. Aneran was watching Castiel and seemed on the verge of panic.

“I’ll do anything you want. Please, just…” the angel began. Dean didn’t let him finish. He backed up
the few inches he could and motioned for Aneran to move toward Cas.

Aneran didn’t hesitate. He nearly leapt toward Castiel, pushing one hand onto the seraph’s forehead
and the other on the center of his chest. He began a very fast, whispered incantation that sounded like
a hybrid of Enochian and some other unknown ancient language.

Dean watched him very closely while also watching Cas for any hint of trouble. Not that he was in a
position to help him at this point, but he certainly wasn’t going to give up trying.

Cas’s face began to relax, as did the rest of his vessel. The splinter in his hand retreated of it’s own
accord and the flesh healed in a glow of blue light. A moment later, he took a very deep breath and
slowly exhaled. As he did, he called for Mary and Sam to both approach.

They looked at each other. Neither of them had any intention of going near Aneran…or taking their
eyes off of the doorway and the threat in the corridor. Cas waited, then called for them again. His
voice sounded a little weak, like he was in something of a dream state. He slowly raised the newly
healed hand and reached over Aneran’s back, summoning his friends.

Mary looked at Dean, but he had no answers to give.

“He wants to heal you,” Aneran said. It seemed to take a lot of effort for him to get the words out.

Cas called to them again. His voice was beginning to sound sad…almost pained. Sam sighed. Under
any other circumstance this seemed like a stupid move, but he didn’t want to add to Cas’s level
of…upset…or whatever anyone could call what was happening here. Mary was holding onto his arm,
keeping him steady as he listed slightly from the head injury. He motioned for her to stay behind him,
and he staggered around the bed to the other side. He reached over, hesitating for one last moment,
before taking hold of Cas’s outstretched hand.

Grace surged through Sam, healing all of his injuries. And then Sam felt a strange tingling sensation
where his mom’s hand was resting on his arm. Mary drew in a sharp breath and Sam looked from
her back to Cas.

“Did you just…heal her through me?” he asked. This was new.

Cas’s face broke into an easy smile, eyes still closed. “Full power, Sam,” he said. He sounded
significantly stoned. “Soooo much easier…at fuuuulllll power.” The smile got bigger. And goofier.

“What’s wrong with you,” Dean asked, squeezing Cas’s hand. He immediately began staring
daggers at Aneran again. “What’s wrong with him? What did you do to him?”

Aneran looked like he was still having a hard time speaking, but after a moment, he managed a
slurred response. “Short spell…f’r happy…r’lax. ‘Bout ten min’ts.”

“What’s wrong with you?” Dean asked the angel. This was looking scarier by the second.

“Weak,” Aneran whispered. He was still clinging to Castiel, but his vessel was slowly slumping. He
kept catching himself and forcing his posture straighter. He was less successful each time. Seeing
this, Sam decided he should take a chance. He knelt down behind the angel and put an arm around
the vessel’s chest, shoring him up and taking some of the pressure off of his legs and core muscles.
Aneran flinched at first, then sighed. “Thanks,” he mumbled. He was going down fast.

“Shhh, Dean,” Cas said. He let his head loll to the side, facing his friend, but keeping his eyes closed. Aneran almost lost his hold on the seraph’s forehead. Sam helped him keep his arm in place.

“Cas, hold still,” Sam called out to him.


“Yeah…Cas…I remember.” Dean sighed and glanced at Aneran. “Ten more minutes like this?”

“Mor’…Less,” Aneran mumbled. A moment later, he let his hands slide away from Castiel and he slumped, sinking back into Sam. “Sorry…I…um...need a sec.”

“Wait…doesn’t he need you to-”

“Stay calm,” Aneran whispered. Dean took a deep breath and tried very, very hard to not think about the horrible things going through his head. He was not successful.

“Calmmm…” Cas hummed the word like a tantric ‘OM’. “Calm, Dean.” He sighed. And smiled. “Dean.” He said the name like it tasted wonderful. “So much pain and fear. And love and loyalty and intelligence and humor. And creativity! Ah, Deeear! Sooo creative!” His smile grew as he drew in a deep breath and sighed again, letting out a soft hum of contentment and pleasure. “So beautiful. So beautiful, Dean. Always…”

“Yeah, this’s gotta stop.” Dean looked at Aneran with mild desperation.

“Always, always…so beautiful.” Cas let his head tilt back. All the way back. Dean began to worry his friend would snap his own neck, but then Cas tilted his head back up halfway and cleared his throat. “Beautiful dreamer, wake unto me…” The gargled sound of his singing was enough to make everyone’s eyes widen.

"Oh, God…” Aneran breathed. Sam eyes went wide and he stared down at the angel taking the Lord’s name in vain in his lap.

“…starlight and dewdrops are…” Mercifully, Cas began to cough as the intense tickle caused by singing with his neck bent that far overrode his desire to keep going.

“Hey, Cas…” Dean asked. “What’s ninety four times six thousand four hundred and twenty eight?”

“Way too easy…” Aneran barely began to say as Cas rattled out the answer.

“Define the concept...of Imaginary Time using only...English words containing...six letters or less...Go!” Aneran managed to gasp out as quickly and loudly as he could, then collapsed into Sam entirely.

Dean looked over at Cas and slowly grinned. Cas's face and jaw were both twitching and twisting in a delightfully silent manner.

“Why do you want me to…”

“It’s a game, Cas. See if you can do it.” Dean reached with his free hand and gave his friend’s leg an encouraging pat.
“Ah…” Cas smiled. “Yes, alright. I...I like games. This one’s...like...a puzzle!”

“There ya go,” Dean encouraged, renewing the pat.

“I built...a temp box for his grace...for him...to use... That plus th’spell...took everyth...thing I had.” Aneran was breathing harder as he continued to speak. “Need Vanya.”

“For what?” Dean barked.

“He’ll essplain.” Aneran choked and turned his head. A trickle of blood ran down his chin.

“Oh, man…” Sam groaned. “Vanya!”

“Sam!”

“Come on, Dean...even if he...I mean, we can’t just…” Sam sighed and held Dean’s eyes.

“You’re not gonna do anything stupid, right?” Mary asked Vanya as he quickly approached the huddle next to Castiel. He looked at her with only slightly less venom than he previously had and shook his head. Mary stepped aside.

Sam shifted when Vanya knelt down next to him and moved his friend gently out of the man’s arms. Vanya spoke to Aneran quietly, trying to assess his condition.

“You need t’ tell th’m.” Aneran mumbled and reached for Vanya’s hand to place it on his own forehead. A moment later, Vanya pulled Aneran partway onto his lap and let him rest against his chest, putting his arms around him. He looked at the humans and took a moment to calm himself before speaking.

“Castiel is acting strangely because Aneran cast a spell to put him totally at ease for a brief time. The spell also forces him to pay attention to fighting the constant pull, so he’s safe, at the moment. And before you ask, no we can’t keep doing that to him. It takes an enormous amount of power and like any strong intoxicant it isn’t exactly healthy for him to have it done over and over again. While he’s...i dunno...blissed, or whatever you wanna call this, Aneran was able to erect a wall around his grace. It’s temporary. None of us has anywhere close to enough power to build a wall strong enough to hold Castiel’s grace with any permanence.”

“He built the damned wall?!” Dean shouted. “That’s exactly what Cas told him NOT to do!”

“You got a better suggestion?!” Vanya yelled, his tenuous hold on his temper broken. “‘Cause now’s the time! We’ve got nothin’ else for this, ok?! It works for us and it’s the best we’ve got, but please...if you know a better way, I’m all ears!”

“Come on, guys! Don’t fight…” Cas implored them. “You both have great ideas. Wonderful ideas...you’re both wonderful…”

“Pretty soon, Mr. Sunshine is gonna snap out of it,” Vanya continued, still partially raging. “And when he does, it’s gonna go right back to being just as ugly and painful and scary for him as it has been.”

“So, what, I’m supposed to ignore him? When he’s yelling for me to help?”

“He wasn’t yelling for your help, he was asking you to stop! Stop freaking out! Stop sending him every horrific fear that flies into your head at full freakin’ volume. It hurts him!” Vanya huffed loudly and looked away for a moment. “We’ve got less than four hours, now, before we’ve gotta go back
down there and from what Aneran’s shared with me… Dean, if he goes through that again without some significant tools to fight this off…they’re gonna get him. There’s no way around it."

Dean groaned and ran his hand down his face - his mistake now very clear to him.

“Aneran feels that we’re beyond the point of continuing an external approach. He wants me to ask you about his first suggestion and he knows you aren’t gonna like it.” Vanya looked down at Aneran. “Thanks for that, by the way, boss.” His friend grinned weakly up at him.

“No way,” Sam said. “I already told you he’s not gonna do that.”

“What?” Mary asked.

“Aneran wants to control the inputs from your end, Dean. From inside your mind.” Vanya looked at the man, refusing to be shy about this any longer. “It’s the best way...it’s the fastest way...and at this point, I don’t see any other options either.”

“From inside my...you mean possess me?!” Dean looked from Vanya down to the drooping eyes of the angel laying against him. “You seriously think I’m stupid enough to agree to that?!”

“Do you want...to save him?” Aneran managed to speak through a few loud wheezes, before choking up a bit more blood.

“Oh, you sneaky son of a bitch!” Dean looked from Aneran to Vanya and back with open skepticism and rage. He couldn’t believe he’d bought into their jovial bullshit. They were just as manipulative as every other Heavenly dick they’d ever met and there was no way he was gonna let them do this to him.

“I think I got it,” Cas said, lifting his head and grinning. “Imaginary Time is a simple const...wait...Imaginary is longer than six...so...that’s...nevermind…” He sighed heavily. “This game smells.” He leaned all the way back again and began to languidly hum some unrecognizable set of what could loosely be called ‘notes’ of music.

“I think he’s probably regretting asking that as a question,” Vanya said. “We know you wanna save him.” A lot of his anger subsided with Dean’s accusation. He was reminded of how this must seem to these humans and it only served to make him feel tired. Anger was starting to seem ridiculous.

“Spent my days with a woman unkind... Smoked my stuff and drank...all my wine…” Cas’s voice was soft...nearly melodic, though still down in the very dregs of his vocal range. And he was smiling. Dean turned and looked at him...listening as his friend ‘sang’/recited the words of the beloved song.

“Made up my mind...to make a new start... Going to California with an aching...in my heart.”

There was a long moment when no one spoke. Or moved. Or made any sound at all. They just listened to Castiel sing the words of the song he’d heard so many times while in the company of his dear friends. He seemed pleased to be with them now, and also somehow unaware that they could hear him. Or maybe he didn’t care that they could. He was just...happy.

It took another minute or so for anyone to break the silence. Cas had long since finished the song and Dean was looking closely at their taped together hands - thinking.

“How long?” Dean asked.

“Bout an hour,” Aneran whispered.
“And I’ll be awake? The whole time?”

“Yes. Only works if y’r ‘wake.”

Dean looked over at his brother. And then his mom. Neither of them looked happy about any of this, but they also didn’t seem to be offering any good alternatives. He finished by looking back over at Cas. The angel had let his head roll to the side and Dean could see his face...happy and content. Not a care in the world. It was the way he should look a lot more often, Dean decided. He took a long, deep breath and let it out.

“Ok,” he said...and closed his eyes. “Yes.”

Chapter End Notes

I got a comment questioning Dean's overreaction to Cas calling out to him. Now that I've waited a while and gone back and read it again...she's totally right. There needs to be a stronger build up there, before he pops. This chapter will get some additional work before I put the final lid on this project. Apologies to those who've already read it. Thank you so much, Rizzio! I LOVE comments that make me think!
Peace of Mind - Part 1

Chapter Summary

‘Peace of Mind’
Summary for Part’s 1 and 2

Possession - sorta.
Learning to cope - kinda.
Trust issues get worked out - eh...for the most part.

Castiel can think, now, but his emotions no longer have an effective damper...or even a circuit breaker. And he’s about to vomit eight years worth of pain, guilt and crazy on anyone within earshot.
Dean will try to reassure him, of course. By yelling. ‘Cause that’s how Dean rolls.

Chapter Notes

UPDATE:
I've added a section to this chapter that was accidentally left out of the original posting.
My apologies to those who've already read this Chapter. I'll make note of the change when I post Chapter 26, as well, in case any of you want to go back.
The added section is between Aneran asking Dean to piss Cas off and Cas blowing up about the coat. The rest us essentially unchanged.

Title Reference:

Magazine referenced:
Hemmings Muscle Machines
(I didn't name the magazine, but that's where the article with the gold '74 Nova running an autocross came from, so I thought I should give them a proper shout-out.)

The Summary for this chapter will make more sense after Part 2 is also finished. Most of the real drama will happen there.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

June 9, 2016
4:55 PM, CDT
“Ok. We’re done with the main stuff. We just need to do a little practicing with handling emotions. Make sure Castiel can react quickly enough when it happens.”

Aneran waited for some kind of reply. Dean just continued to read his magazine.

“Dean,” he prodded. Still nothing.

Aneran had intentionally kept his voice smooth, low and even, throughout the previous hour, so he wouldn’t startle his temporary vessel. There’d been a couple of ‘moments’ at the beginning - Dean had made some rather undignified moves and sounds when the angel had spoken into his mind unexpectedly. Neither of them wanted a repeat, so keeping a calm, quiet voice when speaking to Dean seemed the best approach.

However, in the last twenty minutes or so, he’d spoken almost exclusively to Castiel and had insisted that Dean keep himself distracted with non-upsetting, pleasurable or neutral thoughts and activities. Dean had dutifully taken that to heart, trying his best to make this process run smoothly so it would be over as quickly as possible. He’d finally been able to tune the angel out. Entirely, it now seemed.

Dean took a slow, deep breath, still oblivious to Aneran’s comments, and thumbed to the next page of the magazine he was reading. He grinned. The layout was of a gold ‘74 Nova running autocross and the thought of taking his Baby through that obstacle course made his insides feel warm. He’d never had time to do much of anything fun with her. He knew she could win at something like autocross. She had it in her. And he knew it wouldn’t take him long to figure out any tricks or techniques he’d need to win. With all the quick escapes and insane chases he’d driven, he figured he might even win on his first go. He’d definitely take an amateur competition to the cleaners. He was sure of that. And he knew he could get his Baby to perform beautifully in almost any situation. All the upgrades he’d installed to get her faster, safer, more stable, better able to handle everything he asked of her... She was a masterpiece. It was a fact. It had nothing to do with him being partial. The only thing he knew might slow her down even a little is the extra weight from the reinforcements to the frame and passenger compartment, and the protective shields lining the more important components on her underbelly. And, of course, there was the two hundred plus pounds of gear and salt in the trunk. Which...on second thought, he decided he’d probably leave in place. Most of it anyway. Not the ammo. Or the Holy Oil. Or the blasting caps and the small pouch of C4 he was saving for a special occasion. The rest of it would stay. He knew how Baby handled with that weight. It was part of her.

Dean pursed his lips and nodded once, allowing himself a small smile. He’d definitely be a fabulous autocross competitor. And his Baby was perfection incarnate.

"Dee-ean," Aneran sang. He sounded like he was trying to wake a toddler. Dean rolled his eyes. “Do you need to spend a few minutes alone with your car? I could try to distract Castiel for a while, if you...um...”

“You done yet or what?!?” Dean grunted.

“Ah! You can hear me.” The angel let his voice lilt sarcastically.

“Course I can hear you. You’re in my head!”

"Huh..."
"Why? Were you talkin’ to me?"

"I was. But it was nothing important. Just that I’ve accidentally tripped my angelic self-destruct sequence and we now have less than a minute to live. But please, take your time. You should finish this article. And that little fantasy about you winning at something you’ve never done in your life. That was great.” Aneran giggled through the last sentence.

“Aneran,” Cas scolded.

“You’ve got,” Dean looked over at his clock, “seven minutes, and then I’m puntin’ your ass, so... shut up and fix Cas.”

"Ok, ok, sorry. I was saying... We’re done with the main stuff. But we still need to let Castiel practice. I wanna make sure he can handle some things you might send him that’re kinda tough, emotionally. Make sure he knows how to keep them from overwhelming him, before he has the chance to use the techniques I just showed him.”

“Practice,” Dean repeated. He sighed and tossed the magazine aside, crossing his arms a bit defensively. He looked like he was preparing himself for something awful.

"Try to relax. It’s not gonna be super pleasant, but we can keep it quick."

“Yeah, it’s fine. Just...whatever we need to do.”

“Dean, if you’re uncomfortable with this part- ”

“I’m fine, Cas.”

“You ok?” Sam called to him from just outside the open bedroom door. He and Mary were in the corridor, leaning against the doorway, watching this procedure attentively. Vanya was leaning against the opposite corridor wall. He was watching everyone.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Everybody just...relax. Let’s get this over with.”

"Ok,” Aneran said. He’d returned to his low, soothing voice, trying to keep his vessel calm. "Dean, do you remember the dream you had earlier?"

“Uh...not...really. A little bit.”

"Ok...um... We’ll do that one later, then. Let’s start with anger. That way it’ll be the least fresh in both of your minds when we end this. Dean...see if you can think of something that will irritate Castiel.”

“ Irritate him,” Dean repeated. It was hard to believe someone was actually asking him to do that.

“Yeah. Piss him off.”

Dean tilted his head slightly and pursed his lips, fighting the urge to grin.

“You don’t get to be the injured party here, ya know,” Mary said without preamble. Her voice was calm and held no open hostility. She was leaning against one side of the outer door frame of Dean’s
room, while Sam leaned against the other side. They were both keeping an eye on their family while Aneran did his work. Vanya, the one angel Aneran hadn’t been able to persuade to go back to the war room after the altercation, kept his vigil leaning against the wall on the opposite side of the corridor.

The three of them had barely spoken at all for nearly an hour, somehow preferring to let the obvious discomfort linger. So when Mary addressed him, it instantly got his attention. His gaze moved from the two forms inside the bedroom to her.

Mary looked back at him and continued. “It’s not like any of this is Dean’s fault. Or ours.” She motioned to herself and Sam. “In fact, if any of you feel like being pissed at somebody, you should head back to Heaven and try to talk some sense into those assholes that’re doin’ this to Cas?”

Vanya gave no indication that he’d heard her, other than his gaze. He stood motionless, staring for several long seconds before letting his eyes drift back to the figures inside the room. He took a deep breath and let it out.

“No one’s at fault,” he said. He sounded tired. “And I’m not sulking. I’m just... watching.”

“Watching us?” Mary pressed.

He met her eyes again. “Wouldn’t you?”

“Look, I dunno what happened in there,” Sam said, turning to look back toward the angel, “but Aneran obviously did something that got Cas upset, and Dean thought he was in trouble. And yeah...Dean got it wrong. But...can you blame him? It’s not like we know any of you. What if that had been your guy callin’ out for your help and- “ Sam didn’t have a chance to finish.

“It was my guy,” Vanya said, fighting to keep the volume of his voice low. “They’re both my guys...Aneran and Castiel. Look, Sam...I get that your experiences with other angels have been pretty lousy. But...that doesn’t give you the right to treat us like... We haven’t done a single thing to warrant that level of hostility!”

“And we’re supposed to just trust you until you do do something to warrant it?” Mary asked.

Vanya snorted. “You think a comment like that will make me wanna let my guard down?” He shook his head and let it drop back to touch the wall he was leaning against, staring at the ceiling above Dean’s door. “Look...we’re here for Castiel. Period. None of us has a problem with any of you.” He looked back at the two of them again, letting his gaze settle on Sam. “And we were happy to meet you because we already know you and your brother. Castiel has spoken very highly of both of you, and with everything that’s happened in recent years, it’s not like we could avoid knowing the Winchester’s. You’re famous. You too, Mary, though I admit we didn’t expect to ever meet you. But all three of you need to understand, we’re not here for you. We’re here because our brother needs our help. That’s all. So...if you have a problem with not understanding everything that’s happening, well...join the club. We don’t have all the answers, either. We just happen to have some of the answers that you don’t.”

“So tell us,” Sam said. “Tell us what you’ve got so far. ‘Cause it seems like there’s a new piece popping up every ten minutes that completely changes the game and that’s really not easy for any of us to roll with.”

“We’ve been trying...” Vanya sighed. “It’s like you think we’re these...amazing answer machines that can just whip up an explanation for absolutely everything in a minute and a half! And in a way you’ll understand! Just from the questions you ask, we can tell how much we’re gonna have to
explain before we can start the real explanation. And if this kinda crap keeps happening…” he made a vague motion toward the room and their current location. “Sam, you pulled me aside earlier because you wanted to talk. Which was great. We need to. And right now we actually have a chance to do that, but instead we’re standing out here having a silent face-off over pointless trust issues because thirty seconds after leaving them alone your brother had my brother shoved into a wall with a damned angel blade to his throat! Does any of that really seem to you like a good use of our time?”

Sam sighed. He looked at the angel for a moment, considering his reply, but Cas’s voice pulled his attention away. All three of them looked back into the bedroom.

It was Cas’s tone, more than the volume, that shattered the calm.

“You saw the Leviathan completely overtake my consciousness…and then compel me to drown my own vessel, so they could disperse into that water. And instead of...ah... taking a step back from the bank or maybe running, you stuck your arm into that water...for a coat?!”

Dean fought hard to keep his face from showing signs of victory. He knew better. Cas was still well below his violence threshold, but Dean smiling right now could change that.

“How could you be that reckless?!” Cas demanded.

“Ok...guys, I was just looking for a little pissed off, not quite - ”

Cas ignored Aneran completely. “That coat was in no way a critical item, and yet you risked being contaminated? Or possessed?! What were you thinking?!”

“I was thinkin’ we’d just lost you, you dick! And that...stupid coat was...I dunno... I wasn’t gonna just leave it in some fucking pond! It was right there!”

“Dean?” Sam stepped into the room. “What’s - ”

“And YOU, Sam! You watched him do it, and said nothing!” Cas screwed his face up and closed his eyes, trying to calm down. “Do either of you understand how difficult you make it for me to help keep you alive?!”

Sam let his mouth fall open, but nothing came out. He stared at him. Then at Dean.

“We’re big boys, Cas. We can take care of ourselves.”

“Uh, Dean, you can stop, now. This is plenty pissed enough for - ”

“Yes! You can! But you don’t!”

“Sir...”

“Sam was right. I do fix the injuries to your central nervous system. Often! Because the two of you would most certainly be dead by now, if I didn’t!”

“Well, we appreciate that.” Dean’s instinctive condescension in response to being scolded made Cas’s lip curl into a snarl.
“I don’t want your gratitude! I want you to stop being incautious with your life! Both of you! Though Sam at least attempts to retain his vitality. You, Dean, seem relentlessly drawn toward anything that will destroy you. In addition to the endless stream of sexual encounters with complete strangers, and the inevitable viral load they impart -”

“Hey!”

“- your daily intake of food and drink is a scourge!”

“Ok, look... That’s not -”

“When I put you back together, I repaired everything. All the damage that had ever been done to your body. And in only two years, when I healed you again, your liver and kidneys and heart...it was as if you’d tried to replicate the damage! Those organs were in better condition when you were a corpse!”

“You haven’t lost your flair for the dramatic, Cas.” Dean smiled humorlessly and was about to continue, but Cas cut him off at a volume just shy of a scream.

“THIS IS NOT A JOKE! YOU NEED TO LIVE!” The angel’s face was almost purple with frustration and rage.

Dean’s face fell, losing all traces of argument or snark. He watched as Cas’s expression flashed from anger to outright terror and back again, before morphing into something far more complicated. Without breaking eye contact, Dean took in a long, slow breath and let it out, sobering his thoughts and bracing himself. They definitely weren’t arguing about a coat anymore.

Cas was silent, but his whole body was clenched and he looked like he wanted to scream or punch something or burst into tears...maybe all three...and it was taking everything he had to stop himself. Dean realized that if he wanted to give his friend any chance of making it out of this with even a shred of his dignity intact, he needed to get everybody out of the room. Immediately.

“Ok,” Dean said. His voice was very subdued, reflecting the seriousness of the situation. He looked over at Sam and then his mom. “You guys need to give us a few minutes.”

Sam sighed. He clearly understood why they were being asked to go, but it didn’t make it any easier to leave his brother’s side, while an angel was still possessing him. He hesitated. It was only for a second, but it was long enough.

“Now, Sam. Please. Mom...you, too.” Dean looked at both of them, knowing exactly what they were thinking. And feeling. He was asking a lot and he knew it. “We won’t be long. And this isn’t...Aneran. This is me asking. Ok? Please, just...go.”

Sam gave them both a very meaningful look, ending with a tiny, empathetic grin at Cas. The angel had no ability to return the gesture, but that was expected. Sam reluctantly turned and walked out of the room slowly pulling the door shut behind him. Mary watched her son and Cas from the corridor until the door impeded her view.

Sam made sure the latch on the door clicked, before looking up at his mom and then at Vanya.
“So...we should, um...give them some space,” Sam said and motioned for them to all start heading away from Dean’s room. He still looked incredibly uncomfortable with the thought of leaving half of his family in that room.

Vanya followed the two humans just as reluctantly, but without complaint. When they got to the first t-junction in the corridor, the angel finally spoke.

“Aneran wants me to wake up Mike. His vessel. Get him something to eat. Let him meet you two. Give him a chance to say, ‘Hi’ to the rest of us. Some of us haven’t seen him in a while.” He stopped, waiting for Sam and Mary to respond. He was clearly trying his best to be cordial, but he still looked extremely worried. And a little defensive. “Mike should be fully recovered by now, so...I guess Aneran figures if he’s still gonna be a little while...maybe this is a good time to let Mike...um...be Mike.”

Mary crossed her arms over her chest, looking back at the angel for only a moment before clearing her throat, rocking back on her heels and looking downward. Sam watched her, noticing for the first time what Cas had mentioned to him a week or so ago. His mom and his brother had eerily similar mannerisms. He’d have grinned under different circumstances.

Vanya only waited a short time for them to respond. When they didn’t, he turned his body halfway to indicate the direction he was headed. “He’s in one of the spare rooms down this way,” he said, pointing vaguely down the corridor. “I’m just gonna walk him back to the kitchen. If...you two would like to join me? Meet him?” Vanya still sounded very uncomfortable, but...he was trying. That wasn’t lost on Sam or Mary.

“Yeah,” Sam said with another heavy sigh. It sounded forced, but he did his best to return the gesture of goodwill. “Yeah, I’d like to meet him.” He looked down at his mom, as she uncrossed her arms and shoved her hands in her pockets.

“Yeah.” Mary gave the angel a very small forced grin. “Me, too.”

Vanya gave a stiff nod and sighed as he turned to head down the corridor. Sam and Mary followed, each turning to look one last time at Dean’s closed door, before continuing.

Chapter End Notes

Part 2 is taking a very long time to complete...likely another week, though I'm keeping my fingers crossed it won't be that long. Arguments...real arguments...ones that are meaningful and cathartic for the characters...those are really, really, REALLY freakin' hard to write! And also, I keep arguing back at the characters when they say stuff, trying to figure out if what they said is actually true or just...ya know...defensive bullshit. So...there's that. Did I mention my hair has a lot more white in it these days? Which, honestly...I kinda dig, but it's still a good indicator that these crazy bastards have gotten entirely too far under my skin.

(Note: this is why I should have listened to HazelDomain and begun writing gratuitous porn in short installments. But did I heed her sage advice? I did not. Instead I introduced about a hundred new characters and a whole lot of emotional and psychological shit that I'm nowhere near deep enough to easily write or resolve. Because I'm a masochist. Or I just has the dumb. It's not clear yet.)

The glorious and wonderful omgbubblesomg just sent me some corrections that I've half
fixed. Now I'm grilling her to help me learn the why's and how's of certain syntax rules, 
before I correct the rest. Because I'm a pain in the ass and must know WHY...always! 
And somehow, she keeps offering to help me.
I believe omgbubblesomg and HazelDomain may be the two most wonderful humans 
on the planet.
FYI
Peace of Mind - Part 2

Chapter Summary

Summary of ‘Peace of Mind’ Parts 1 and 2

Possession - sorta.
Learning to cope - kinda.
Trust issues get worked out - eh...for the most part.

Castiel can think, now, but his emotions no longer have an effective damper...or even a circuit breaker. And he’s about to vomit eight years worth of pain, guilt and crazy on anyone within earshot.
Dean will try to reassure him, of course. By yelling. ‘Cause that’s how Dean rolls.

Chapter Notes

You know what? I'm not even gonna say it. Just... Here. Love me. I need you.

Btw... I added a short scene segment to Chapter 25 in the interim. My apologies to those of you who've already read that chapter. It doesn't alter the plot at all, but I honestly forgot to include it when i posted that chapter and realized it weeks later. Yeah...I'm super organized like that. Impressive, right?

Title Reference:

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

June 9, 2016

5:10 PM, CDT

Dean waited a few moments, giving his mom and brother a chance to get out of earshot, before turning his full attention back to Cas.

“You wanna tell me what this is really about?” he asked. He kept his voice as calm as possible. Cas looked alarmingly fragile and the last thing Dean wanted was to cause some type of emotional explosion that would end in him shutting down too soon.

“Dean,” Aneran said, hesitantly. He, too, was keeping his voice calm. “I’ve asked Vanya to wake my vessel, so whenever you need- ”

“You wanted emotions, right? Practice?” Dean snapped at Aneran. “You’re about to get it. Pay
attention."

"I didn’t mean- "

“Cas, come on...talk to me.” Dean turned his entire body toward his friend. He sat on the edge of the bed, his knees almost against Cas’s outer thigh as the angel sat in the chair. He could feel him struggling to keep his hand loose.

“You and Sam and Mary need to live,” Cas said. He was leaning back in his chair, keeping his eyes focused straight ahead.

Dean nodded. “Yeah, I got that part. And I’m not against the idea of the three of us stickin’ around a while longer, but what does that have to do with any ‘a this?”

“The world - humanity - still exists because of you.”

“Because of us, Cas. All of us. It took everybody.”

“It took you!” Cas turned and stared straight at his friend. His expression was almost threatening in its intensity and Dean had to fight the urge to back away from him. “I saw what you were able to do - the two of you. I thought I could do the same. I thought if I tried hard enough…” Cas shook his head, and turned his gaze back to the wall. “I managed to stop him, but the cost was extreme.” His jaw clenched, and he growled out the next sentence. “My failures are extreme!”

“Your...wait… Stop who? You talkin’ about Lucifer? The apocalypse?” Dean asked, already confused.

“Raphael. But, Lucifer is yet another mistake - one I’m sure will cost lives, cost you and Sam dearly. And now Mary.”

“Cas…”

“My choices, Dean! My response! In every situation...that’s always been the problem.”

“That’s not - "

“It all could have been done so differently,” Cas said. “You’ve shown me that.”

“Will you shut up for a second and listen?”

“I have never known anyone who could do the things you’ve done.”

“So, you’re just gonna...act like you didn’t hear me,” Dean deadpanned.

Cas clenched his jaw and increased the volume of his voice. “And I will do anything... anything at all, to keep the three of you safe!”

“Including throwing yourself under the bus every chance you get?” Dean barked, raising his voice to match Cas’s. “What is it with you? It’s like that’s your go-to move!”

“If sacrificing myself will save you? Then yes!”

“Well, that’s great! And where’s that leave us, huh? We’re supposed to just be ok with it?” Dean’s gestures were getting more dramatic as the volume of his voice rose. “Since when have we ever been ok with family dying? We can’t leave it alone, Cas, you know that!”
Cas shook his head in frustration. “You have to stop seeing me as…” He paused and lowered his gaze.

“As what? Family?”

“I know what family means to you, and the fact that you would consider me worthy… I have no words to thank you enough.” Cas hesitated, looking back up at his friend. “It means everything to me, Dean.” He was clearly trying to keep himself from crying.

Dean’s eyes went wide and he blinked at him. It was surreal seeing Cas this way. Even at his lowest point, he’d never been this out of control and the rapid swinging between rage and tears was disorienting.

“But, you have to acknowledge that I am not like you,” Cas continued. He was grinding his teeth again and had to force himself to let his jaw relax so he could speak. It was making him sound exactly as volatile as he looked...and raising the hairs on the back of Dean’s neck. “I don’t have the abilities you have. I don’t have the instincts or the training or even the basic human social skills necessary to be effective at...almost anything here.”

“None of that is true!”

“It is true!” Cas yelled. “I couldn’t leave the bunker!”

Dean closed his eyes for a moment and furrowed his brow. “So...this is about Rowena’s spell now?” He looked at Cas for confirmation, but the angel just looked...wild. “Ok, just...stop for a second. You’re all over the place-”

Cas’s face and voice softened again. “You once said that without my powers...” he swallowed, “I’m just a baby in a trench coat.”

“Ah…” Dean grimaced and briefly closed his eyes. He sighed heavily, then reached up and rubbed at his eyes with his thumb and finger. “Shit,” he whispered to himself.

“Sam was right. It hurt my feelings.” Cas paused, then snorted derisively. “Not that I even understood what the phrase ‘hurt feelings’ meant at the time.”

“I was bein’ a dick, man! I was frustrated and just...swingin’ at anything that moved! I didn’t mean -”

“It hurt because it’s true.”

Dean mumbled something inaudible and dropped his head down, dragging his free hand over his mouth and jaw, before looking back up at his friend.

“You’ve already had to raise one child with no support for yourself,” Cas continued, lifting his gaze to meet Dean’s. “You shouldn’t have to raise another.”

Dean visibly tensed. He started to respond but cut himself off. He could feel the urge to scream at Cas getting too close to the surface, so he took one beat to pull it together. He cleared his throat and let his gaze slide to the side. “Aneran,” he said quietly, “this is me, right? He’s gettin’ some kinda...crazy feedback loop off of me? That’s what this is?”

Cas’s rage was back in an instant. He opened his mouth to defend himself, but Dean raised his hand up to stop him.
“Don’t get pissed. Ok? Just… hang on. I gotta know what’s goin’ on. You’re freakin’ me out, Cas.”

The muscle under Cas’s eye twitched several times as he forced himself to comply with his friend’s request. It was pretty clear to Dean he wouldn’t have much time to get the answers he needed. Cas’s self-restraint was almost nil.

“Aneran!” Dean demanded.

“It’s…um…he has you pretty well separated, right now. I mean, your…uh… your emotions are still coming through and he can still see and hear everything, but he’s…uh… He’s not being overrun by your stuff anymore. I mean…a little, and it could get worse if you let it. Like if you lose control yourself. But right now…this is…um…this is mostly him.”

“No…this is not him,” Dean corrected. “That’s the point.”

Dean caught his breath. Tilting his head slightly, he sucked in his lower lip and let out a very soft grunt.

“Cas.”

“What?!” Cas yelled.

“You’re gonna break my hand.” Dean watched a multitude of emotions roll across his friend’s face, as Cas forced himself to ease his grip. The pain from the release was almost as bad as the pressure, and Dean fought to keep his face from showing what he felt. He realized, as he was doing it, that Cas could hear his thoughts and feel what he was feeling anyway, so it wasn’t like he was actually hiding anything, but he didn’t want Cas to have to deal with the visual, too.

“The way he’s setting aside his power…” Aneran continued, “The, um…the method he’s using…it takes a lot of effort. That leaves him with very little ability to filter his own emotions. And because of the tether, he has almost no ability to filter yours.”

“Well that’s just freakin’ great!” Dean barked at the angel inside his head. “This is you helping?”

“This isn’t Aneran’s fault,” Cas interrupted. “It’s mine. All of it. Everything that’s happening right now.”

“No…Cas…” Dean corrected him through another frustrated sigh. “None of this is your fault.”

“You ARE defending them,” Aneran let out a humorless chuckle. “Unbelievable…”

“Dean, you have to accept that I am the least critical member of this team,” Cas insisted, ignoring Aneran and leaning further toward his friend to make sure he had his attention. “I’m entirely replaceable. As much as your own sentimentality would argue against it.”

Dean’s eyes went wide. “My own… It’s not sentimental. We need you!”

“How can you say that?!” Cas yelled.

“Easy,” Dean yelled back. “Cas, we need you. See?”

Cas snarled at him. “Of course...be flippant about it!”
“You think I’m gonna take any a’ this seriously?” Dean said, still yelling. “It’s all crap, Cas!”

“Look at what’s happening right now!” Cas stood abruptly, nearly knocking over his chair. He gestured wildly. “Look at it!” Dean slowly rose to meet him.

“Guys, please...don’t- ”

Cas ignored the angel and glared at Dean with all the intensity the hunter had come to associate with a rapidly approaching ass-beating. Dean swallowed and forced himself to stare back.

“You should be spending this time with Mary!” Cas yelled. “Instead, every ounce of our combined effort is being poured into trying to keep me from having to face the consequences of MY FAILURES! All three of you are suffering, no one is being saved from the monsters you hunt, and Lucifer is STILL WALKING FREE!”

Dean’s eyes slammed shut and he curled down just slightly, sucking in a breath. “Hand, hand, hand,” he gasped urgently. Cas lessened his grip. “Son of a- ” Dean lightly groaned and blinked the tears out of his eyes. “Man, we gotta rethink this hand-holdin' thing.”

Cas was still churning through a barrage of conflicting emotions. He clenched his jaw again and closed his eyes, pushing out welled up tears that coursed down cheeks flushed with rage. Dean was fairly sure those tears would be the first of many. Cas was shacking from the strain of trying to contain himself. He looked like he’d pop any second now.

A tiny flash of grace made its way through Dean’s hand, searching for injuries and calming irritated nerves. Cas’s eyes were still shut and he was breathing to try to calm his vessel. Dean waited.

“I’m sorry,” Cas growled through clenched teeth.

It was the angriest sincere apology Dean had ever heard in his life and even in this intense situation, he was suddenly finding it extremely difficult to not grin at his friend.

“’S’ok,” Dean mumbled. Again, he waited, giving Cas a chance to try to pull himself together a bit.

For about half a minute, they just stood there. No one spoke. No one made any move at all, except when Cas wiped his face with his free hand.

Dean shifted his weight from foot to foot a few times. He stared down at the floor for a moment and then very quietly cleared his throat. “I’m sorry about the ‘baby in a trench coat’ thing.”

Cas just sniffed and wiped at his cheek again. He didn’t look up.

“It was a shitty thing to say.” Dean swallowed and looked to the side, staring at nothing in particular. “I was just... pissed at the world. Seemed like everything was stacked against us. Again. And then you…” Dean sighed. “I dunno, man... You can’t listen to the shit I say.”

Cas wiped his face again and sniffed. A moment later he looked up. His brow was deeply furrowed. “I don’t understand- ”

“When I’m bein’ a dick...don’t listen to me. That’s what I meant. Listen to me other times.” Dean waved his free hand in a small circle, trying to emphasize or somehow clear up his meaning. It seemed to confuse Cas a bit more, so he stopped. “I say things when I’m pissed that I shouldn’t say, and they come out...wrong...sometimes…” He shook his head. “Come on Cas, you gotta know you’re more than that.”
Cas dropped his gaze. He sniffed again. “I believe I have a similar apology to make.”

“Somethin’ you said?”

“Yes, I...uh...made a rather rude comment when we were arguing recently. I said we could find you blocks to play with, implying that I consider you unintelligent. I regretted that afterward. I apologize, Dean.”

Dean sniffed and straightened his shoulders a bit. “Yeah...so...you get it then.” He reached up and scratched the back of his neck. “But, ya know...I don’t actually think you’re not useful without your powers. I didn’t mean it.”

“Exactly. I don’t think you unintelligent. Quite the opposite, in fact.”

Dean pursed his lips and looked down. “So...you just said it ‘cause you were pissed at me.”

“Yes.”

“And you were tryin’ to hurt my feelings.” Dean looked up at him...a knowing, slightly suspicious look creeping across his face.

“I…” Cas cut himself off. He let his eyes drift off to the side as the realization of the point Dean was about to make sank in. He nodded and gestured uncomfortably with his free arm. “Yes,” he admitted.

“Well, that’s just hateful.” Dean said. He shook his head, appalled.

Cas sighed, realizing he was now being teased. “And I’m sorry.”

“Man, yours was way worse than mine!” Dean complained, ramping up the drama in his voice and gestures. “I was just yellin’. I wasn’t tryin’ to be an asshole! You said that shit on purpose!”

Cas stared at him blankly. He could feel the lightheartedness and humor radiating out of his friend and within a couple of seconds, a small grin was lifting the corner of his mouth. Dean’s mask cracked as well.

“I dunno, man,” Dean said with a disgusted shake of his head. He sighed. “That’s pretty messed up. I don’t know if I can let that go.”

Cas nodded solemnly. “You’re right. It was...very selfish and cruel of me. I never should have said we’d find you blocks to play with.”

Dean grunted. “Yeah, well… I guess it’s ok.”

The corner of Cas’s mouth ticked up rhythmically. “I should have said crayons.” He was already giggling.

Dean barked out a laugh and then pulled it all the way back in, still feigning indignation. “Ok...fuck you. And fuck Metatron for teachin’ you all that.”

Cas laughed. He was looking at his friend with red-rimmed, swollen eyes but the rest of his face seemed delighted.

“I think I liked you better when you didn’t know anything,” Dean grumbled. He slowly let his face lose the charade and he grinned at his friend.
Cas just smiled at him for a long moment, until the sadness slowly began creeping back into his expression. Dean reached up and grabbed the back of Cas’s neck, pulling him into a hug.

“Come on, man,” Dean said, giving his friend a couple of solid thumps before pulling back to look at him. He rested his hand on top of Cas’s shoulder and gave it a very light shake and a squeeze. “We’re gonna figure it out.”

Cas glanced up at him for less than a second before dropping his head back down.

Dean sighed and gave his friend’s shoulder another affectionate squeeze. “Ya know...I don’t think there’s any punishment or penance that Heaven could come up with that would be any worse than the constant ass-kicking you give yourself inside your own head...or true-form or...wherever it is you...think. I don’t know how that works.” He furrowed his brow a bit and shrugged.

Cas wiped his face again and shook his head. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize.”

“You deserve better than this, Dean,” Cas said quietly. He moved just slightly, somehow managing to seem closer to his friend without decreasing the distance between them. “You shouldn’t have to deal with all of this.” His head was still down and the angle now caused him to speak directly into Dean’s shoulder and chest.

“Nah....come on, man,” Dean soothed. “It’s not a big deal.” He took a deep breath and let it out. It looked as though Cas had reached the end of the screaming segment of this little episode and Dean had begun to relax a bit.

“After the last pull, I began to consider...now that Aneran is here...if one of these angels would agree to assist you... it might be better if we parted ways.”

Dean lightly chuckled, thinking it was an absurd joke. “What?” he asked with a confused grin. He pushed the arm holding Cas’s shoulder a little straighter, backing up just an inch or two so he could better see his friend’s face. Cas avoided looking at him.

“It’s not that I want to leave,” Cas said, wiping his face again. “Far from it. But...I’m only increasing your difficulties. Perhaps that’s always been true. The amount I’ve managed to help you seems rather insignificant, compared to the damage I’ve caused. I began to wonder whether or not it might be best for everyone if I just...let them take me.”

It took a moment for Dean to realize Cas was serious, but when he did, the number of thoughts and feelings that flashed through his mind almost simultaneously was enough to briefly bring his mental processes to a screeching halt.

It had a much greater effect on Cas. The pulse of emotion hit him like a blast wave and the angel’s eyes flew open wide, before rolling back into his head and fluttering closed. He reached up with his free hand and clutched at the front of Dean’s shirt, trying to keep from falling.

“Dean!” Aneran yelled. There was no response from the man. “DEAN!”

Cas made a series of odd sounds, before all of the overhead lights began glowing.

Dean’s face darkened. All sense of calm and humor was gone. “You son of a bitch,” he growled, completely ignoring the surge of angelic power crackling through the air around him. His supportive grip on Cas’s shoulder had turned into a clenched fist full of jacket and trench coat. He jerked his friend a little closer and one of the overhead lights blew out.
“Shit!” Aneran cursed as he continued to scramble for control of Dean’s output.

Dean could hear the angel panicking inside him, but couldn’t bring himself to care. Two more lights blew out and a low hum began emanating from most of the rigid, metal objects in the room, before Dean realized he’d have to reign himself in a bit. He barely managed it.

Maintaining a death grip on the coat, he forcefully shook Cas and the angel’s knees gave just enough for him to fall forward. “Do you even listen when I tell you shit?!” Dean tugged him back upright, forcing Cas to tilt his head up and back. “What the fuck part of ‘please, don’t leave’ or ‘you’re important to me’ don’t you get?!” he yelled directly into Cas’s face.

Cas stammered incoherently. He was scrubbling for a hold on his friend, trying to keep from collapsing, but Dean was shaking him periodically for emphasis and Cas kept losing his grip.

“Are you still nuts? Is that what you’re tellin’ me? Purgatory didn’t fix you?”

Cas didn't answer. He just looked up at his friend through eyes that were barely open, before squeezing them shut.

Dean was now the one shaking. It had been a very long time since he’d wanted to take a swing at Cas this badly. Instead he ground his teeth and tightened his grip on his friend’s coat.

“How’s this, Aneran?!” Dean snarled, never shifting his glare off of Cas. “You gettin’ a good enough show?” He realized that he could actually feel the angel inside him cringing away from his consciousness. “You pay attention to this. It’s exactly why I had you stick around. I fuckin’ KNEW he was gonna… You need to know what he thinks of you comin’ to help him. Of me tryin’...and Sam and Mom. You need to know he's thinkin’ about bailin’ on ALL of us! AGAIN!”

He leaned even closer to Cas, no longer caring that his friend couldn’t respond. Cas could hear him. That’s all he cared about. He was done trying to reason with him.

“I am doin’ everything I can to help you... Busted my ass tryin’ to get to you when you fell out of the god damned sky! Read every boring book in that whole fuckin’ library... defended you - freakin’ SIDED with you - against my mom! MY MOM, YOU DICK! And I volunteered to be tethered to your ass for the duration. What the fuck do I have to do to convince you, you crazy son of a bitch!?”

Dean ended by shoving Cas roughly into the dresser behind him. He held the angel there, pushing back on his shoulder to force his back to arch, keeping him from hiding his face.

“I was gonna ask you ‘why,’” Dean growled, still leaning very close, “but ya know...I don’t care. You wanna leave, Cas? GO! DO IT! Nothin’s ever stopped ya before. But all that... ‘I’m poison - I’m the problem - You're all better off without me’... It's a cop out. It solves nothing!”

He shook Cas once more, causing the dresser to rock back slightly and collide with the wall behind it. The thud momentarily broke Dean’s focus and Aneran took advantage of the opening.

“Dean,” the angel said very quietly, trying to calm him. “Please.”

Dean huffed in disgust and closed his eyes, letting his head drop down. He let go of his grip on his friend’s shoulder and pressed his thumb and finger to his own eyes. He took another deep breath and let it out, allowing the rage to begin to dissipate.

Cas was still leaning heavily against the dresser and holding onto Dean’s shirt. His eyes slowly opened as Dean’s emotions began to quiet. He tried to speak, but only a small noise squeaked out, so he stopped.
Dean heard the sound and looked up at him. And immediately de-escalated much further. Cas looked terrible. Clearly, all the arguing and joking and screaming wasn’t improving this situation at all. It was just exhausting both of them. Dean shook his head in defeat.

“I am so damned tired of us doin’ stupid shit,” he said, much more quietly. “I’m serious. I’m done. We’ve managed to screw up every possible way we could, and we learned from those mistakes, but this one...this knee-jerk ‘everyone is better off without me’ crap… I dunno, maybe we’re just fuckin’ dull. All of us. We know exactly how it always plays out, but about once a year, like clockwork, one of us’ll dip into his little stash of crazy and do this shit again...and I just can’t take it anymore.”

Cas had managed to get his eyes open, now that the storm of thought and emotion had calmed enough. For a long moment, the two of them just stood there, looking to the side, looking down, looking at each other… Neither of them seemed to know where to go from here.

Cas realized he didn’t need to keep his hold on Dean’s shirt anymore. He looked down at the fingers curled into the soft fabric and a hint of confusion flashed across his face. He couldn’t let go.

Recognizing that they’d stalled out, Aneran spoke to them both.

“Guys, I know this isn’t…” He groaned. “I’m really sorry to have to do this…”

Dean slumped. “Ah, fuck, Aneran!” he barked. He took another deep breath and huffed it out. “What else?” he asked, only slightly less exasperated.

“Um... We, uh... We still need to do one more thing... And then we’ll be done.” Aneran paused for a long moment and then continued. “It’s not gonna be a whole lot of fun, either. Just to warn you.”

Cas closed his eyes and swallowed. “The imagery,” he said.

“Yeah,” Aneran answered.

Dean sighed. “I thought we’d... I thought we already covered that. With the magazines.”

“That was...um... That was different.” Aneran fumbled a bit. “You said you didn’t really remember your dream you had earlier. I, uh... I’ve found it in your memory. I’d like to retrieve it so we can recreate what happened before. Castiel will be a little more prepared this time, so it should be easier for him. I’m hoping.”

“I’d prefer not to make him remember that,” Cas said quietly. He looked back at his hand still gripping his friend’s shirt.

“I know. I don’t really want to either. But we need to. I’m sorry.” He waited while the two of them slowly accepted the idea and prepared themselves. “It’ll be short. About a minute.”

“Yeah, just...” Dean sighed again. “Let’s get it over with.”

“Dean, you just need to make sure you don’t lose contact. I’ll do my best to help keep him from being overwhelmed again, and he should be ok, this time, but we can’t afford an accidental separation.”

Dean let out another heavy sigh, then reached out and grabbed the back of Cas’s neck, pulling the angel into a tight hug, once again. He pushed Cas back, so he was wedged between Dean and the dresser. Cas let go of his grip on the shirt and put his arm around Dean. They both adjusted, getting as tight a hold as possible.
Aneran didn’t want either of them to grow more anxious, so as soon as he felt Dean’s grip on Castiel solidify, he began the playback of the dream. He started it at it’s most pleasant point - the view, the scent of the flowers, the music...Sam’s profile - a peaceful grin on his young face...Castiel in the rearview mirror. The dream lingered on that image for several long moments as Dean’s eyes flicked back to check the road periodically.

Dean took a deep breath and slowly let it out.

“I don’t look like that,” Cas announced into Dean’s shoulder.

“You look exactly like that,” Dean mumbled back. “Freak.”

“Why are you watching me so closely?”

“You’re the one who’s… Just… Shut up.”

The image of Cas morphed. His expression confused, exhausted...like he was waking from a very deep sleep. The background darkened around him. Then his expression changed again, to a bizarre blend of joviality and bitter sarcasm. The vision laughed.

Dean sent an involuntary wave of horror and revulsion across the tether and Cas clenched. He sucked in a breath and tightened his grip on his friend.

“Keep your grace behind the wall, Castiel. Don’t let it greet these emotions. Dean’s ok. You don’t need to comfort him right now.”

Cas let his grip relax just a bit, but then it tightened again. The vision was now of him at Amara’s side - her power keeping him immobilized. Dean felt himself starting to shout and flinched, pulling the impulse back.

“Dean,” Cas whispered.

“S’ok,” Dean said, giving Cas’s neck a light squeeze.

The entire scene shifted and they were now seeing an image of Cas lying on the floor of the dungeon...moaning and fading away. The image flickered, and he was on the floor of the library. Wreckage was all around him. His face was badly damaged and streaked with blood. He was clutching the arm that had him pinned down...not fighting, just...trying to connect. His eyes, an exaggerated blue, seemed to eclipse everything else.

Just as he had been earlier, Cas was shocked by the image. He hadn’t known his face could convey that much emotion. He’d always been teased for his lack of expression, but the look on his face in this memory… The look in his eyes...

Now the image of Cas was motionless, standing, surrounded by a ring of flames, and again...his eyes… The depth and intensity of emotion they were conveying easily matched the levels radiating out of Dean.

Cas, sitting in the passenger seat of the Impala. Then gone.

Sitting on the edge of a bed. Then gone.

In Lucifer’s crypt...the angel tablet in his hand...staring back with the same heart-broken expression.

Gone.

On a park bench. Gone.

At the library table, his face twisted in pain. Gone.

A little stack of notebooks.
The spare bedroom in the bunker.
The nest in the boiler room.
The old trench coat, balled up in the trunk of the Impala...

Cas could feel Dean’s grip on his hand tightening...his other hand pulling Cas closer to him, as if that were possible. He tightened his own grip, instinctively trying to comfort him in whatever way he could.

“Castiel,” Aneran cautioned. Cas grimaced and forced the small tendril of grace that had seeped out, back behind the wall he’d constructed in his mind.

… running rapidly through a field and coming to the edge of a creek, scanning everywhere, searching… The field went almost pitch black. Still running. The vague image of Sam ahead, also running…

... a long, dark corridor. The floor - a two lane blacktop road. Up ahead, a brightly lit, oval-shaped opening surrounded by beautiful brown, gold and cream colored feathers. A strong burst of air behind and overhead and the instinctive need to duck...

Cas and Dean both flinched at the same time, their knees simultaneously bending slightly to avoid whatever had just flown over their heads in the dream.

A blur in flight zipped through the bright opening and disappeared from view. Sam - once again in the lead, running ahead toward the opening.

Dean made a small, terrible sound, before he caught himself. He knew it was a dream, but the urge to call out to Sam was incredibly strong. He was desperate to tell him that Cas was in there...in the prison cell. Sam would reach the door first...he had to keep it from closing.

“It’s not real,” Cas whispered, then caught his breath when the image changed.

The door began to slowly close and the prison cell lit up, revealing its contents. A bleeding, broken Castiel was desperately trying to drag himself across a smooth prison floor to get to the door before it closed. His beautiful wings were mangled and hanging at strange angles. Broken feathers lay all around him. The feathers around the outside of the door were beginning to fall a few at a time, like leaves in autumn, as the opening to the cell narrowed.

Anxiety spiked in Dean when the pace of the running in the dream slowed to a crawl and the length of the corridor seemed to expand dramatically. The cell door was now much further away...the broken Castiel a distant image. Sam would certainly not make it to the door in time to stop it from closing.

Dean shuddered. His grip on Cas increasing dramatically.

With his grace almost fully sequestered behind the mental wall, the force of Dean’s grip made Cas wince. He let out an involuntary grunt.

The door was now almost closed. The image of Castiel reached out with what looked like his one working arm. His mouth formed into a scream - ‘DEAN!’ The door closed. The rest of the feathers fell in an absurd avalanche...a mountain of them completely covering the cell door. The feathers turned black. Then smoothed out. A yellow line extended straight up the center - the road now covering the door entirely in a thick, impenetrable hill of asphalt, crowding out the light, until everything went black.

No one moved. No one spoke. Dean was shaking and Cas was barely keeping his legs under
himself. He was extremely grateful for Aneran’s initial warning and Dean’s decision to hold him against the dresser. He was certain they’d have ended up on the floor otherwise...and possibly broken their connection. Cas shuddered at that thought, realizing, for the first time, just how blind and foolish he’d been.

“I’m sorry, Dean,” Cas murmured into his friend’s shoulder.

“Shut up,” Dean said, barely above a whisper. He was also speaking into Cas’s shoulder, now.

“I didn’t realize,” Cas continued.

“Shut UP, Cas,” Dean demanded, though his voice carried little energy.

Cas curled his fingers deeper into the back of Dean’s shirt and he increased his grip on his friend’s hand.

“I won’t let them take me,” he said. “I’ll fight them. I won’t leave you again.”

Dean was holding his breath. After a long moment, he let it out, breathed deeply once and held it again. He fully flattened his right hand around the back of Cas’s neck and then turned his left wrist sharply, letting go of Cas’s hand and jerking free of the gauze and tape. Wads of the bindings stuck to both of their hands as they each wrapped their free arm around their friend and hung on. After another very long pause, Cas spoke again.

“I’m so sorry, Dean.”

“I said ‘shut up’,” Dean mumbled, no longer able to hide the break in his voice.

Chapter End Notes

There is no way for me to properly express my gratitude for the two betas whose lives I nearly destroyed trying to write this chapter (HazelDomain and omgbubblesomg.) They are both gods among humans.

Huge shout out to Rizzio for sending me enormously detailed comments and emails filled with fantastic information on the psychology of guilt and pain and recovery from trauma...most of which I am nowhere near deep enough to understand. But bless Rizzio's beautiful heart for trying so hard to get through to me. Some of it sank in. I swear it wasn't in vain. I sincerely hope I did the lovely Rizzio proud.

And thank you so, so much Eyes_of_a_Tragedy for freakin' fangirling at me enough to get me excited about my own fic again! You have no idea what you've done, dude. Seriously. Omg.

*throws gigantic smooch to each of you*
Fight The Good Fight

Chapter Summary

Angel stories - Not as heroic as you might think.
The next pull is just as awful as they feared. It's also a lot more interesting.

Chapter Notes

Once again, I’ve included dialog in another language that I know nothing about. At least it’s a real language this time. Which is nice.
If you have the itch and want to know exactly what Cas says, the translation is in the End Notes for this chapter. Don’t worry, though. You don’t need to know what this means, yet. The boys will figure it out in a little while.

Title Reference:

See the end of the chapter for more notes

June 9, 2016
07:04 PM, CDT

Sam slowly leaned back in his chair, keeping his phone below the table so he could shoot off one more text without drawing attention. All of the angels had gathered in the kitchen to spend some time with Mike, and Roz had begun a very lively, impromptu storytelling session. He didn’t want to interrupt her.

‘40 min mark. You wrapping it up?’

He sent the text to Dean and Cas, just in case Dean was still distracted by having Aneran floating around inside of him. In only a few more minutes, they’d be pushing into the half hour lead time Cas had established as a safety buffer. They needed to be in the dungeon very soon.

Mary saw him out of the corner of her eye. “Almost time again?” she asked quietly.

Sam nodded. “Forty minutes.”
Mary reached into her pocket and pulled out her phone. She looked up when she realized Roz had stopped talking.

“I’m sorry. We just need to... They have forty minutes left.” She grinned apologetically as she opened her ‘clock’ app and quickly set a new alarm.

Roz nodded and waited patiently. The story she’d been telling was for them, after all. Everyone else in the room had heard it. Probably many times.

Sam’s phone vibrated.

‘Yep ’

He sighed, then looked at his mom and nodded. Mary let out a breath and put her phone away. They both settled back in and looked at Roz.

“They’re on their way?” Vanya asked.

“Yeah,” Sam answered. He looked back at Roz. “Sorry.”

The angel grinned at him. “It’s cool,” she said, wriggling a bit to get herself resituated in her chair.

The angels were grouped around the table, listening and grinning. Mike was sitting next to the other two humans, quietly looking from angel to angel, still trying to memorize who was in which vessel. He looked happy, but fairly disoriented. He occasionally caught Mary’s eye and immediately blushed and looked away each time.

Mary did her best to act like she didn’t notice. She switched to lifting her coffee mug with her left hand, ensuring he’d get a good view of her wedding ring. He took the hint, but his blush reflex was not cooperating.

“Ok…” Roz continued. “So, I’m cleanin’ our gear manually, ‘cause we’re both drained at this point. It’s night, and I figure nobody’s gonna see me, so I’m out on the back patio with a garden hose. And I look up... and through the kitchen window I see Mike’s sister, Lydia. She’s standing in front of Aneran, who looks like he’s been dragged behind a truck for a few miles. He’s got cuts and blood everywhere... his clothes are all ripped. Now...that woulda been bad enough, but then... right there in front of the kitchen window where the whole neighborhood could potentially see… he pops his wings!” Roz made a ‘fwap’ sound and gestured with her arms for dramatic effect.

Mary and Roz both went wide eyed. Mary reached up to put her hand over her slightly open mouth. Roz saw this reaction in both of them and threw up her hands.

“Right?! ” she said, emphatically. “So, I dive into the house and try to get the blinds closed... and I realize Aneran is about to go down, ‘cause he’s actually way more injured than we thought and that’s why he’s not thinkin’ straight… Right as i walk in the kitchen, Lydia’s little girl, Maddie, who was, like, five at the time?” she gestured to Mike for confirmation. He nodded with a huge grin. “She walks in and sees her Uncle Mike, who’s, ya know... not her uncle Mike right then, and he’s standing there looking like a zombie film extra, holding a twelve inch blade covered in blood and he’s got big wings sproutin’ out of his back. And of course, she screams and startles him so his wings flap a couple times and he knocks half the dinner dishes off the table and completely clears the countertop behind him. Huge crash. Scrap paper flies everywhere... Scares the crap outta this poor
“At which point Aneran finally passes out and he busts up his face even more on the tile floor. So now you’ve got a gigantic, grey bird that looks like Uncle Mike, with blood gushing out of his face, and a terrorized child doing that little kid anxiety dance, where they just kinda jog in place and scream ‘cause they have no idea what to do with any ‘a this…”

“Tell ‘em about the picture, Roz,” Vanya demanded. “Jeez...you take forever to tell a story.”

“Fine!” Roz barked at him. “So, Maddie’s in kindergarten and their teacher asked them to draw their favorite animal.”

Sam started laughing. “Oh, man…”

“She comes home with her picture, as well as a note from her teacher for mom and dad.”

Mary groaned.

“Exactly,” Roz nodded. “Turns out, Maddie is quite the little artist. She actually did a pretty solid drawing of that scenario. ‘Course it looked like her favorite animal was actually her Uncle Mike with giant, scary wings, holding a huge knife, with blood dripping from his mouth and eyes. So, yeah...I think we all know what that note said. I spent at least a year trying to figure out where we were gonna come up with the money for the therapy this kid was gonna need.”

Mike chuckled. “She’s fine,” he said quietly.

“Yeah, thankfully. You and your sister and brother-in-law are amazingly good with kids.”

Mary looked over at Mike and grinned. “Life with angels, huh?” She took a sip from her coffee, still watching him.

Mike blushed furiously at the attention, and then just nodded. “Always a good time,” he agreed. Mary laughed around her drink.

“Yeah, we’ve got a few good ‘angel stories’, too,” Sam assured Mike.

Erethe sucked in a breath and quietly squealed, while the rest of the angels looked at Sam with a twinkle in their eyes.

Roz deadpanned and let her arm thump loudly down onto the table.

“Please understand,” she said imploringly. “You have to tell us those. All of them. We need this in our lives.”

The angels nodded like a sea of bobble-heads.

“Hey,” Dean said from the doorway. Everyone turned.

“Hey,” Sam answered, rising. “You guys done?”

“Yeah, we’re good.” Dean scanned the room, nodding to everyone. He looked over at the guy he knew for a fact was no longer Aneran, and walked over to him, extending his hand to introduce himself.
“Mike, right?” he asked.

Mike quickly rose and shook his hand.

“Dean Winchester. Good to meet ya.” Dean hung onto the man’s hand for just a little longer than he normally would. Mike appeared to have completely locked up, an expression of awe on his face. Dean gave his hand another hard shake, in an attempt to snap the poor guy out of it. It didn’t fully work, but at least Mike now appeared to be breathing again.

“You ok, man?” Dean asked, still gripping his hand.

“I...uh...Hi.” Mike was doing his best to be polite, but his gaze barely strayed from the spot over Dean’s left shoulder.

“And this is Castiel,” Dean said, stepping aside so Cas had a clear path to him. When neither the man nor the angel moved, Dean’s grin got a little tighter. He squeezed Cas’s hand and tugged him forward.

Cas squinted at him, then turned back to Mike, giving the man his most benevolent, unintentionally-intimidating angel-gaze.

“Michael Smith,” Cas said, pronouncing the name slowly, with depth and reverence - as though he were standing before the Host, reading from The Book of Life. All the blood drained from Mike’s face. Dean rolled his eyes. “Your willingness to sacrifice your time...your very self to assist me - a stranger. It’s humbling. You have my sincere gratitude.”

“Yessir,” Mike whispered. His deathly pallor was starting to worry everyone, so Dean took over again.

“Ok...let’s just...get Aneran back where he belongs. We need to get movin’.” Dean reached out and gave Mike a friendly pat on the arm to help shake him out of it a bit more as he guided them out of the kitchen, toward the bedroom. The humans and all of the angels called out their goodbyes to Mike and he turned and bashfully waved back at everyone.

“Ya know, I gotta hand it to ya, Mike,” Dean said as soon as they stepped into the corridor. He tried to keep his tone lighthearted and easy for the man’s sake. “I don’t know how you stand it. The guy never shuts up.” They kept moving, but there was a pause while Dean dropped his gaze...listening. “You’ve been talkin’ the entire time!” he snapped. Another pause. “You don’t need to be lookin’ at that stuff anyway. And don’t judge me.”

They’d managed to get to the dungeon with plenty of time, but Cas still seemed anxious to hurry things along. Dean realized it was probably just the stress of what was about to happen so he did his best to stay as calm and relaxed as possible.

Sam set the step stool down beneath the hanging shackles, halting his conversation with Aneran to throw a silent ‘What next?’ look to his brother. Dean waved him off. The next step required Cas and he wasn’t ready yet.
Cas laid his coat, tie and jacket on the table that had been pushed to the side. He toed his boots off, then pulled off his socks and began rolling up his pant legs a few inches.

“Ok, I’ve been thinkin’ about how we’re gonna keep contact,” Dean said with less confidence in his tone than usual. The words sounded forced, like he was trying to keep everything cool, but he knew what he was about to suggest was the exact opposite. Cas understood why, when a vivid image of them shirtless and hugging flashed across the tether, followed by a burst of broiling emotion. Apparently, Dean was extremely uncomfortable with the idea, but he was willing to do it anyway. It was one more reason for Cas to hate everything about what he was asking his friend to do.

Cas finished with his pant legs and stood to face him.

“So…” Dean continued, “I figure, best way is...no shirts. Sam’ll cuff my wrists together behind your back. We’ll use his belt and mine....hook ‘em end to end. That’ll reach all the way around us both. He’ll cinch it tight, so when you start tryin’ to throw me, I’ll have a better shot at hangin’ on. It’ll...keep more than just a wrist or two in contact.” He stopped and looked at his friend, waiting for an agreement or counter.

Cas’s previous hurry vanished and he stood very still. He had been looking at Dean’s face and listening, but now he seemed to be looking through him, instead. His eyes glazed.

Dean’s brow furrowed. He gave him a couple of seconds, and then prodded. “That sound ok to you?”

“Yes,” Cas barely said. There was a tiny pause, then he blinked and nodded. “Yes.”

Dean could clearly see it wasn’t ok, but he knew they didn’t have time to work through a better arrangement. He kept a close eye on Cas, while wriggling out of one arm of his flannel shirt. He then reached over his head to grab the back of his t-shirt, pulling at it awkwardly. Realizing he was making this too complicated, he stopped, and pulled Cas’s hand into contact with his bare side.

Cas obliged, flattening his hand against his friend’s skin, while Dean finished removing his shirts.

When he was done, Dean reached up and put one hand on the back of Cas’s neck.

Cas had both hands free, now. He unbuttoned his cuffs and pulled at the oversized white shirt, getting all of it untucked, and then reached up to the top button of the shirt front. He hesitated. It wasn’t a long pause, but Dean’s concern was growing. Cas switched directions and began unbuttoning from the bottom of the shirt, instead.

Dean had felt his friend’s hand begin to weaken and shake the moment they’d stepped through the door of the dungeon. It had been mild, so he’d done his best to ignore it. Now, though, it was bad enough that Cas kept losing his grip on the buttons.

Cas quietly grunted as another button refused to stay in his grip. He tried again. Same result. He sighed in frustration.

Without a word, Dean reached out and took Cas’s hand. He pulled it back to his own side and pressed it there until his friend relented. Dean finished the rest of the buttons for him, then put his hand back on Cas’s neck.

When Cas made no move to slip out of the shirt, Dean leaned a little closer so he could speak quietly.

“What’s up?”
Cas took a deep breath and let it out. He looked at Dean briefly and then shook his head, dropping his focus back down and slipping out of the shirt.

“Cas?”

“Nothing. It’s...nothing.” He took Dean’s hand again. “An...illogical association.” He tossed the shirt onto the pile of his other clothing.

Dean was still looking at him. Cas could hear his growing concern and he knew his friend could feel him shaking. He was trying his best to make it stop. Nothing was working, though. Controlling his vessel’s physical responses was proving to be much more difficult, with his grace sequestered behind the mental wall. He tried schooling his features into a more stoic expression, but that backfired. Dean’s worry escalated.

Cas gave up. He looked over his shoulder to make sure Sam and Aneran were occupied and not listening, then he leaned closer to Dean.

“While I’ve occupied this vessel...on more than one occasion, my shirt was opened while I wasn’t alone and…um...” He hesitated, fidgeting uncomfortably. “Bad things...happened. Now, my consciousness and my vessel are both responding as though unbuttoning the shirt is the ‘bad thing.’ As I said, it’s...illogical.” He kept his gaze directed anywhere but his friend’s face and sighed, frustrated with himself. He was shaking just a little harder than before.

Dean swallowed and dropped his gaze as well. His mind raced - memories and questions and old suspicions of what may have happened to the angel when Dean hadn’t been around...or when he’d openly thrown Cas out, forcing him to fend for himself in a world he didn’t really understand. Every terrible thought competed for his attention as he tried to come up with a response that would be even remotely helpful. It was all quickly overshadowed by crushing guilt. He closed his eyes, as the full weight of it washed over him.

“Dean, stop,” Cas demanded. He squeezed his friend’s hand and reached to do the same to the man’s shoulder.

Dean looked up at him and saw the wince in his expression. He scrambled to stop the mental beating he was giving himself, if only because it was the one thing he could actually do for his friend right now that wouldn't just make everything worse.

Cas sighed heavily, looking even more embarrassed and frustrated than he had before.

“This is in no way your fault. It has...nothing to do with you,” Cas admonished him. His voice held an edge of anger. “Please, just...stop.”

Dean pulled himself the rest of the way out of his spiral. He stared at the ceiling where the chains were mounted, mentally re-running the calculations for weight and tensile strength and jerk force...checking and rechecking the figures of his earlier guesstimate over and over, like a mantra. After three or four passes through the calculations, he was calm again.

Cas turned and looked up at the ceiling and then looked back at his friend. He slowly smiled and let out a breath. He pat Dean’s shoulder, before releasing it and dropping his arm back down.

“Thank you,” he murmured.

Dean nodded silently. He didn’t meet Cas’s eyes.

“Cas... It’s almost time. You ready?” Sam asked from behind him.
Cas turned toward him and nodded, giving Dean’s hand a small tug as he moved into the circle.

He climbed the step ladder without hesitation, determined to not lose his nerve or continue to show his fear to his friends. He realized that decision wasn’t very wise, when his shaking caused him to teeter on the top step and Sam had to catch him to keep him from falling off.

“Whoa...ok...maybe, uh...I’ll just hang onto your waist for a sec, huh?” Sam asked, looking up at Cas worriedly. Cas nodded his agreement and his thanks. He reached up and quickly locked the shackles around his own wrists, then looked back at Sam.

Both men kept their hold on Cas’s waist as he climbed down. The final step was difficult for him. He had to allow his vessel to hang and stretch for a moment, before he could even touch the floor with his toes. Once he could, Sam pulled the stool away and bent down. He secured Cas’s ankles in the leg irons and then stood again, facing Cas.

“You wanna test ‘em? Make sure they’re good?” he asked.

Cas paused for a moment. A flicker of terror passed over his face, which he immediately hid.

He began pulling against the shackles and the leg irons, feeling for slack or weaknesses and testing their fit. But his movements escalated into the jerking, thrashing movements of panic. It continued for a few seconds before Dean caught on and moved quickly to Cas’s front.

“Easy! Easy!” he called out to him. He wrapped his arms tightly around his friend’s torso and held him as still as he could, so he wouldn’t tear himself up before his ordeal had even begun.

“I gotcha. I gotcha, Cas. Take it easy,” Dean soothed. He continued murmuring to him, while Cas shook and attempted to breathe through the panic. “It’s ok. Nothin’s happening right now. We’re just hangin’ out. You and me and Sam and Aneran. It’s ok.”

Eventually, Cas managed to calm himself enough to stop struggling.

“I’m sorry,” Cas whispered.

“Nothin’ to be sorry for. Just, take it easy.”

“It’s difficult to control.”

“I know. Don’t worry about it. You’re good. You’re doin’ great. Just...keep breathin’ .”

“I don’t understand how you manage it,” Cas said, still breathing too quickly. “You...both of you...make it seem so easy.”

“Make what seem easy?” Dean asked.

“Being human.”

Dean pulled his head back to look at his friend. And then a small smile crept across his face. Eventually he snorted.

“WOW, do we have you fooled!” Dean said, only partially teasing.

Cas looked down into his friend’s face. He saw the kindness...the concern...the desperate need to comfort that was matching the waves of emotion he was receiving across the tether. A moment later, he registered the humor. He chuckled.
Dean laughed right along with him. They seemed to egg each other on for a few rounds, the nervousness and the fear both ebbing slightly.

Cas groaned and chuckled once more, allowing himself a big smile. He sighed and looked fondly down at Dean. After a moment, he called out to Aneran.

“How much longer?”

Aneran checked his phone for the thousandth time. The angel looked awful and it suddenly occurred to Cas that he might need some support during this, too.

“About two minutes,” Aneran answered. He’d been avoiding looking at his friend, but now he met his eyes. Cas smiled at him, and nodded appreciatively. Aneran nodded back.

Cas let his head fall back slightly, so he could turn his face and speak to Sam, who was finishing getting the belts tightened around them.

“Look after him.” He let his eyes dart toward the angel pacing outside the warding.

“I’m fine,” Aneran grunted, clearly eavesdropping.

Cas sighed, but kept looking at Sam. The young man looked back at him and grinned. He nodded.

Cas pulled in a sharp breath and shuddered, closing his eyes.

“It’s starting?” Dean asked, squeezing him a bit tighter.

Cas nodded. “It’s building, yes,” he mumbled. Dean made a few more adjustments, remembering to lay his face on Cas’s chest this time and bend his knees to support him.

“Dean,” Cas whispered into the top of his friend’s head.

“Yeah?”

“Tell me a story.”

Dean froze for a moment. He had no idea where that request was coming from.

“Uh...yeah, ok...uh...what kind of...” Dean didn’t have a chance to finish. He looked up right as Cas slammed his eyes shut and tensed every muscle in his vessel.

“Dean…” Cas grunted.

“I gotcha. Hang on.”

The wave hit. Aneran started the timer the instant his friend began to scream. He made sure he was in Dean’s line of sight and held up his hand, just like last time. At the five second mark, he pushed his hand further forward, then began lowering fingers one at a time.

Dean had forgotten to keep track of the seconds for the first half of this wave, but when Aneran got to ‘four’ he remembered and yelled each remaining second into Cas’s chest. He could barely hang onto him, just like last time. He knew this setup would make it impossible for Cas to shake him loose, but he still clung to him like a drowning man.

The wave ended. Cas was shaking violently and he squirmed against his restraints.
“Hang on, Cas,” Dean whispered. He heard the quiet sobs and knew he’d have little chance of keeping his own emotions in check through this, no matter how much he wanted to help him. He closed his eyes and tried to think of a story. ANY story.

The next wave hit. Immediately, all of them knew something was very, very wrong.

They’d known the second wave would be worse than the first. It was the pattern. Cas had confirmed that. A more dramatic response was expected and they’d braced themselves for it. They also knew Cas might respond a little differently from the way he had during the previous pull, since Aneran had given him some better tools for managing the tether. They’d hoped that might make it a little easier for him. But Cas’s reaction to the second wave destroyed everyone’s composure. For several long seconds, they watched in stunned silence, each of them rapidly concluding that they were likely witnessing the end of this fight, right here and now.

Cas jerked sharply and pulled. His entire vessel seemed to freeze in place...every muscle locked into a full contraction without a single twitch or tremor to indicate that he hadn’t simply turned to stone. The overhead lights dimmed and a low rumble shook the room.

Dean pulled his head back an inch or two so he could look at him. He heard and felt the dull cracks of several bones snapping, but the pulling didn’t stop. It actually increased.

One of the bolts anchoring the upper plate into the ceiling made two very loud popping noises, and the center of the plate bulged downward slightly. A trickle of powdered cement fell onto Dean’s shoulder. Then, one of the bolts on the floor plate did the same.

Dean barely had time to react, before the sound that came out of Cas grabbed his full attention. He was certain he was listening to his best friend die.

When the air in Cas’s lungs had been expelled, he began to convulse. The muscles in his chest and torso had also locked up. He couldn’t breathe at all, now.

Dean looked over at Aneran. That was a mistake. The angel had dutifully raised his hand to resume the countdown, but his face looked exactly the way Dean suspected his own face looked right then - completely confused and terrified.

Aneran’s fingers began to fold in, one by one. Five, Four, Three-

Before he could count out the last seconds, Cas collapsed, sagging fully in the restraints. His head fell back and he choked once... and then lost consciousness.

“CAS!” Dean screamed. He shook him. And shook him again. Violently. Broken bones or not, he had to wake him up. “CAS!”

Sam was at his side in seconds, lifting his friend’s head up and holding it straight. He was checking his pulse, looking for any major bleeding or signs of serious injuries that might be keeping him unconscious.

Dean continued to scream his name and shake him. When Cas still hadn’t responded after almost half a minute, both brothers began looking to Aneran for an explanation.

The angel just stared back at them, completely at a loss. His eyes darted back to his phone and he ran a hand very anxiously through his hair, before grabbing a fistful of it and pulling.

Dean turned back to Sam and the two of them just stared at each other. None of this fit. Cas needed to stay conscious to fight against the pull. Two more waves had already come and gone, and Cas
was still hanging there, alive but entirely checked out. So...were they wrong? Had they been approaching this incorrectly from the beginning? Or was there some other danger that had been lying in wait until now?

Dean again looked at Aneran. He was very tempted to scream at him. He knew the angel didn’t deserve that, but he wanted answers. He needed them. Right now. If he weren’t currently strapped to Cas, Dean knew he’d most likely be holding Aneran by the shirtfront, threatening to kick his ass. It would be extremely unfair, and, in light of their very recent altercation, it would also be massively unhelpful. But Cas was in danger of being yanked away at any moment - he might even be dying - and the only person in the room who might have even a little more information about any of this, was currently standing there staring at him with the same useless expression on his face that Dean knew he and Sam both had on theirs. It was unacceptable.

Cas moaned and coughed weakly. “Don’t…” he mumbled.

“Cas?” Dean nearly yelled. All thoughts of Aneran vanished.

“Please stop…” Cas whispered. He didn’t sound fully awake.

Dean blew out a huge breath and began searching for something...anything...he could focus on to get himself calm. He wasn’t coming up with much, but then he thought of a story. Finally! It was one he used to tell Sam when he was little. He made himself focus on the first image...a huge, beautiful, old tree in the center of a meadow.

“Help me...”

“Can you see what i’m seein’, Cas? The big tree in the field?” Dean continued to shake him, rubbing and slapping at his back.

“Please... help me...”

Sam let go of Cas’s head to get the belts back into position. They’d slipped down several inches and were now too loose.

Cas’s head lolled forward and Dean barely avoided taking a hard hit to the face.

As soon as he’d finished with the belts, Sam reached to lift Cas’s head again.

Dean stopped him and silently indicated for him to wait. He took a deep breath, calming himself, so he could switch tactics. Softening his voice, he moved his mouth very close to Cas’s ear.

“Can you hear me? Cas? You gotta wake up.”

“Please...Minael…” Cas whispered. “Please, stop.”

“Who’s Minael?” Sam called to Aneran.

The angel blinked at him in surprise. And then his eyes went huge.

“Is he calling him?!” Aneran asked, just barely below a scream.

“Who is he?!” Sam yelled.

“He’s the...the one doing this! Those angels...he’s their leader,” Aneran stammered. “Castiel!”

Dean’s focus broke instantly. The urge to go back to shaking Cas as hard as he could was almost too
strong. He wanted to scream in his friend’s ear...to slap him...pinch him... He wasn’t above cutting Cas’s arm with an angel blade or tossing a bucketful of freezing water on him. He *had* to make him wake up. But, he knew talking to Cas would work better. It had last time. He had to believe it would this time, too.

Dean closed his eyes, forcing himself to breath deeply. It was incredibly difficult, but after a few moments, he was able to fill his mind with the image of the tree, again.

“It’s a big tree, Cas. *Real* big... and old... and it’s got these giant branches that’ll hold your weight real easy. You can climb and climb all day, and never reach the top.”

“Please…”

“And there was this legend…” Dean continued, “…it said...if you could climb all the way up to the very top, you’d find a treasure.”

“You’ll fall,” Cas whispered. He sounded just slightly more awake.

“Nah, ya won’t fall. It’s easy to climb this tree. You just gotta keep goin’-”

“I fell…”

Dean swallowed and closed his eyes. He let his forehead drop an inch forward to rest against Cas’s temple.

“I know…,” he whispered. He took a deep breath and let it out. “And I know it hurt like hell when you hit the ground. But, Cas... you got back up. You patched yourself together with spit and duct tape like the rest of us, and you started walkin’.” He breathed deeply again and pat his friend’s back. “You did good, Cas. Real good. And it’s over, now. No more fallin’. It’s over.”

Cas continued to hang limply, occasionally mumbling another disjointed word or phrase, while his three friends waited out the remainder of the pull. His jaw stayed slack and drool dripped slowly from his bottom lip, forming a small puddle on Dean’s shoulder before rolling down the man’s back.

“This is the last one,” Aneran called out to them.

Dean closed his eyes and held on.

Aneran was staring at his phone, holding out his hand as before. The countdown began.

When he reached zero, he started counting back up through the expected five second reprieve. When that also had ended, he sighed very heavily and nodded at Dean, then sprinted for the other side of the warded circle. He grabbed the mattress that had been brought down earlier and tossed it onto the floor, near the table. He vanished for a split second and reappeared holding a pillow and a blanket that had been sitting near the door.

Dean and Sam released Cas as quickly as they could, doing their best to protect his three very obviously broken limbs. Cas barely registered any of it.

They carried him out of the circle and very carefully laid him on the mattress, while Aneran tucked the pillow under his head.

Dean unfurled the blanket and covered Cas’s bare chest and shoulders, leaving only his arms uncovered. He hadn’t stopped talking to him, continuing the story of the little boy who’d searched for the treasure in the big tree.
“...but...turned out, *that* wasn’t the treasure, *either*. It was just a squirrel’s nest. Little Sammy, though...he didn’t know that, so he crawled along the branch, real careful, and he reached out and stuck his hand into the big wad of leaves. And...Cas, I dunno how much you know about squirrels, but...they don’t exactly dig you shovin’ your hand into their nest. So, a couple of seriously pissed off squirrels shot out of there, makin’ that weird buzz-growl noise… Probably cussin’ him. That’s always what it sounds like to me… But they jumped right at Sammy’s head, and Sammy...screamed like a girl.”

“Except...at *that* age, Cas,” Sam cut in with the same light-hearted, story-time tone in his voice that Dean was using. “Little boys and little girls sound exactly the same.” He pulled Cas’s one unbroken arm up, so he could tuck the blanket around his friend’s torso. He laid his arm back down at his side, but kept patting and squeezing it periodically to try to rouse him. “So, what he just said makes zero sense.”

“See, Cas? *This* is why Sam doesn’t get storytime anymore.” Dean reached up and lifted each of Cas’s eyelids, checking for level of focus, but also looking for burst capillaries, blown pupils, eyes no longer tracking in unison... “‘Cause, he’s no fun.” When he saw no obvious signs of major injury, he went back to trying to rouse him. He gave the seraph’s face a couple of solid pats.

Cas had begun blinking rhythmically in a very odd way and after a moment or two, Sam remembered where he’d seen that before. A few years back, a woodpecker had slammed into the window of their motel room. It had hit very hard, startling both men and making them wonder how that big window pane hadn’t shattered into a million pieces. Shockingly, just by keeping it warm and safe for ten or fifteen minutes, the bird had made a full recovery and flown away like a shot. But as it recovered, it blinked. Over and over, in an almost perfect rhythm. Exactly like Cas was doing right then.

Sam allowed himself a small burst of hope. He relaxed just a little, no longer certain that he and Dean were about to lose their friend. Again. Maybe for good, this time.

Between blinks, Cas had been looking at nothing - just staring directly through Aneran, who was leaning over his head, rubbing circles into his friend’s temples. But as time went on, a furrow began to slowly form on Cas's brow.

Dean took that as a sign to continue telling him the story, while he and Sam both kept up a constant series of pats and shakes on the parts of him that weren’t broken.

“So, *that* wasn’t the treasure. Sammy knew he was gonna have to keep climbing. So, he scooted back to the big branch, where he could stand up again, and he reached for-”

“He’ll fall,” Cas whispered. He let his head roll slightly to the side so he could look at Dean. He was staring at him now, not through him. His face showed deepening concern.

“He’s not gonna fall, Cas. Nobody’s gonna fall.”

“I can’t catch him,” Cas whispered. His eyes glistened and his expression became very sad. “My wings…”

“Your wings are all healed up, remember? You got ‘em back. You showed ‘em to us. They’re awesome!”

“They took them...all of them…”

Dean paused and sighed.
“Your feathers grew back, Cas. They all did. Your wings are great, now.”

“Castiel,” Aneran said, leaning closer to his face. “Who, um...who am I?” he asked.

Both men looked at him. He returned their gazes and shrugged awkwardly.

“It worked last time,” Aneran explained. He turned back to Cas. “Am I Aneran? Is that my name?”

“Aneran,” Cas breathed. He let his head roll back to look up at the angel.

“Yes, sir. Do you know where you are?”

“Aneran,” Cas repeated. He reached up toward him with his good arm and grabbed the angel’s shirt sleeve, twisting his fingers into the fabric and pulling. “Catch Sam,” he pleaded.

Aneran put a hand around Cas’s wrist and squeezed. “I’ll catch him, sir. I won’t let him get hurt.”

“You have t’ hide them,” Cas insisted, still sounding just as desperate, though now he was slurring. “’S many ‘s you can.”

Aneran’s face fell and he went very pale.

“Hide what?” Dean asked, getting close so Cas could see him. When he didn’t get an answer, he slapped his friend’s shoulder a couple of times. “Cas!” he shouted.

Cas kept his focus on the angel. “I’ll hold th’m off...’s long ‘s I...”

“It’s ok, sir,” Aneran said, loudly. He nodded and grinned at him as best he could. “Everything’s fine. We’re all safe. You need to wake up, now. Right now. Ok? Do you know where you-”


Cas’s eyes quickly filled to overflowing and the blinking pushed out tears. “Libbuna kabitu...”

Letting go of the sleeve, he placed his hand on the side of Aneran’s neck and jaw. “Abatu, Harrani...” He smiled sadly. “Harranina...”

Aneran hesitated, stifling his own reaction. He could feel both men watching him very closely, now. He swallowed and reached up to grab Castiel’s hand, placing it in his own and pulling it away from his face.

“What’s he saying?” Sam asked.

Aneran glanced over at Sam and shook his head.

“Nothing. Just... It’s nothing,” he said and then immediately returned his full focus to his friend. “Castiel? Do you know where you are?”

Cas stopped talking. A shudder went through him and his eyes closed. A few seconds passed, then his face pulled into a hard grimace. He slightly arched his back and grunted.

“Cas,” Dean called to him. “Hey! Cas?” he reached up to try to check his eyes again, but Cas had them pinched too tightly closed.

“Dean...” Cas managed to pant through a tightly clenched jaw.

“Yeah, I’m here,” Dean answered.
“Pain…”

“You broke some stuff. You gotta heal yourself, buddy.”

Cas moved his good arm, trying to reach over his shoulder, toward his back. He got halfway and suddenly jerked and cried out. His arm snapped back down to his side and his entire body arched, lifting him an inch or two off of the floor.

“Hold still!” Dean barked as he and Sam tried to push him back down. “You’re gonna hurt yourself worse.”

“Too late,” Sam grunted as he very quickly reached behind him and pulled Cas’s tie off of the end of the table. He whipped the blanket off of Cas’s legs and looped the tie around the angel’s upper calf, being very careful to avoid the sharp bone sticking through the skin.

Dean looked at the blanket, now bunched up next to him. A large amount of blood had already stained it so he wasn’t surprised when he looked down to see what his brother was doing and saw a pool forming on the floor beneath Cas’s right leg.

“YOU fix him!” Dean yelled at Aneran.

“I can’t,” the angel snapped, then shut his eyes.

“WHY NOT-”

Erethe materialized almost on top of Sam.

“I got it,” she said, pushing the man aside and laying her hands on Cas’s legs. Her grace flooded over him, slowly stitching the bones and the flesh back together.

Ringa and Mary arrived at the door to the dungeon just seconds later. They stopped at the edge of the storage shelves, staying well out of the way, and stood side by side, peering in.

Erethe took a deep breath and let it out, closing her eyes. She slowly pulled her hands away. Dean looked at her, then looked back down at Cas’s still clearly broken arm.

“His arm, too,” he said, glancing back at her.

Erethe reached toward the arm.

“No,” Aneran commanded. “Ringa!”

Erethe pulled away and Ringa took her place. The charms on the angel’s wrist tinkled lightly as she slowly smoothed her hand down Cas’s arm, pulling it back into the correct form and healing the bone.

“Save what’s left, Erethe,” Aneran ordered. “I don’t want both of us down at the same time. You’re first up for sleeping, too. No arguments.”

Erethe sighed in mild annoyance, and then nodded.

“Whoa,” Sam blurted. He quickly caught Ringa with an arm around her chest, as she began to collapse forward on top of Cas. He guided her back upright and held both of her arms. She looked up at him and smiled weakly.

“Thank you.”
“Yeah,” Sam answered. He kept staring at her.

Cas was still squirming and panting through the pain. Without Sam’s help holding him down, Dean wasn’t able to keep him from arching again.

“Why is he still in pain?” Dean demanded.

Aneran didn’t answer. Instead he stared down at a spot just above Cas’s head. He opened his own vessel’s knees wider and backed up a bit, seemingly looking at something on the floor.

“Oh!” Aneran gasped. His eyes went wide. “Oh, shit!” He immediately rose to his feet. “Help me get him up,” he ordered and began lifting Cas by the shoulders. Dean grabbed the sides of Cas’s chest and lifted, trying to get room to put his arm underneath.

Aneran had only lifted his friend a few inches when Cas let out a horrible scream and arched away from some unseen pain. He twisted frantically and Aneran nearly dropped him.

Erethe appeared on Cas’s left, next to Dean. She pushed the man aside, and then the tiny angel slid an arm under Cas’s waist and another under his knees and lifted him entirely off the ground as she stood. Cas was still twisting and writhing, so it took a lot for her to keep her hold on him, but Aneran was holding his shoulders and the two of them managed to get him high enough that they could simply rotate him ninety degrees onto his feet.

“Dean,” Erethe said. She indicated toward Cas’s feet with her head. “When we set him down, you’ll need to catch him and hold him up.”

Dean moved around her, keeping a hand in contact with Cas’s skin. As they tipped him down onto his feet, Dean tucked his arms under Cas’s and wrapped them around his back. Erethe helped support him.

Cas began simultaneously clinging to Dean and also trying to position his arms to lessen the pain. The result was a constant twitching and clawing that was rapidly tearing up the skin on Dean’s back.

Aneran reached forward and grabbed one of Dean’s forearms. He repositioned it so that Dean’s hand was on the back of Cas’s upper shoulder. He reached to do the same with the other one, but Dean beat him to it. The angel nodded at him.

“Castiel,” Aneran called out. “You need to manifest your wings.” He took a couple of steps back and motioned for Sam to back up toward Erethe. Sam did, keeping a hand on Ringa’s arm.

There was a short pause as Cas tried to get himself under control enough to concentrate. Then an odd sensation shot through all three humans in the room. The air rippled slightly and Cas’s wings were there.

The left wing immediately sagged several inches and Cas threw his head back and screamed. His legs collapsed, and his right wing thrashed wildly, fully extended.

Mary never saw the hit coming. Cas’s wing was a blur and the stiff feathers at the tip slapped her hard, knocking her backward toward the door. She lay there, stunned, but then curled up tightly, throwing her arms over her head to protect herself as repeated wingbeats knocked boxes and assorted supplies off of the shelves and sent them tumbling down on her.

Sam narrowly avoided the same fate. Ringa shoved him back away from the melee as she leapt toward Dean. She threw her arms around him, helping to hold him up. Erethe joined her.
Aneran was doing his best to get a firm hold on Cas’s left wing. When he finally did, he lifted it and bent it back at a very odd angle.

Cas stopped screaming and sagged into the arms supporting him. His left arm had dropped away from Dean as soon as Aneran had started pulling the wing into position. He now held it at an odd approximation of the angle of the wing.

Sam glanced over and saw Mary moving very slowly and awkwardly to extricate herself from the jumble on the floor. He darted toward her, skidding to his knees by her side. She pulled a large folder away from her head and Sam got a look at her. He winced.

She was still wriggling out from under the mess, so Sam helped her, knocking a couple of boxes off of her legs and pushing some of it away to give her some room. He very gently cupped one side of her face with his hand and lifted her chin so he could better see.

She looked like she’d had a fight with a combine. Multiple deep cuts on her face, neck, arm and torso were rapidly coating her with blood. The flesh looked flayed, in places, especially across her upper ribs. There was too much blood for her to open her eyes. Sam’s gut twisted when he realized one of the cuts actually extended across her eye. He was glad she was keeping them closed.

Mary felt him there and reached up blindly to clutch at his forearm.

Aneran noticed his quick departure and realized where he was going.

“She ok?”

“No,” Sam answered flatly.

Erethe looked over at Mary and sucked in a breath. She started to let go of Dean and Cas, so she could go to her.

“No!” Aneran barked. “Erethe, dammit! Bring her here, Sam.” He stared at her over the top of Cas’s wing and gave her a sharp, scolding look. “What did I just say!?”

Erethe looked back at him and sighed in frustration. She re-tightened her hold.

Sam scooped Mary up off of the floor and carried her to the rest of the group. She was clutching at his shirt, but her hand weakened and dropped away. Her arm now swung loosely as they moved. Sam looked down at her pale face and lolling head and he swallowed hard. She was going into shock.

“Castiel,” Aneran called out. “Mary needs you.”

Cas’s eyes popped open and he immediately began scanning the room. Sam moved right up against Dean’s back, so that his friend could easily reach them. Cas extended a very shaky hand, wincing with the movement, and healed her. His arm shot back to it’s previous position around Dean and locked on.

Sam set his mom down onto her feet, keeping an arm around her. He watched her very closely, once again cupping her face to check her.

Mary took a second to assess herself, then nodded at him and reached up to pat his hand. Her clothes were still covered in blood, but she was fine.

Sam closed his eyes and hugged her.
Everyone’s phone buzzed. Text msg.

Sam got to his phone first. “Usha and Faral,” he announced.

Ringa looked over Dean’s shoulder at Aneran. He nodded at her.

“Yep. And get the vessels ready at the door. Blindfolds on. No exceptions. Make sure they stay inside until the others arrive.”

Ringa nodded and vanished. Erethe moved in to cover her spot, tightening her arms around Dean’s waist and gripping Cas’s belt and waistband.

Dean instantly felt the increased support. The tiny angel definitely had more mojo than the other one. She was like a stone pillar. He couldn’t have shaken her loose if he’d tried.

Suddenly...it was quiet. Everyone was holding still. Nothing was happening.

Aneran closed his eyes and took a long deep breath, forcing himself to relax a bit. He let it out slowly.

“Sir,” Aneran said. His voice was much softer, now. “I think it’s best if we wait for more help. I’m very sorry. I know this hurts.”

All of them could hear the small grunts and heavy breaths coming from Cas. They’d been able to avoid listening to it, with all of the uproar, but in the sudden quiet it was very clear. And it was slowly breaking everyone’s heart. He sounded like he was barely able to keep from screaming again.

Dean tilted his face toward him. “Can you hold on another minute or two?” He darted his eyes toward Aneran for confirmation of that time estimate. Aneran nodded.

“Yes,” Cas whispered. He gasped out a breath he’d been holding and sucked in another lungful. He held that one, too. Dean shifted his weight just slightly from one foot to the other and he felt Cas flinch and stiffen.

“Sorry.” Dean locked himself in place. Almost immediately, he felt the creeping tightness in his legs and lower back returning. He cursed inwardly and ignored it. If Cas could hold out with his wing damned near twisted off, then Dean could handle a little back pain...

...until it got really, really tight. Dean ground his teeth and started holding his breath, too.

A flush of grace passed along Dean’s back and legs.

“I’m not dyin’, Cas. Save your strength.”

“It’s your strength,” Cas gasped. He took another few quick breaths. “From your soul.”

Dean thought about that for a moment. His brow furrowed. “So if you can heal me, then why can’t you h-”

The room was abruptly filled with people and Dean’s mouth snapped shut. All the angels were back. They appeared as a group in the dungeon, some of them already in mid-sentence, turning the quiet stillness into a rush of activity and voices in the blink of an eye. Cas grunted and hissed when Dean startled.

Mary visibly jumped and was actually relieved to see that Sam did, too. She was getting tired of being the only one to look twitchy around these guys.
“How bad?” Tazar asked as he moved to Aneran’s side. He looked closely at the angle of Cas’s wing and winced.

“He’ll have to stay braced,” Aneran mumbled to him.

“Yep,” Tazar nodded. He began directing the other angels into positions around Cas and Dean. Every possible point of movement eventually had an angel’s arms locked tightly around it, ensuring that Cas would stay as immobilized as possible.

Dean breathed deeply, ignoring his instinctual urge to fight. He wasn’t nearly as worried about these angels and their intentions anymore. Letting Aneran hang out inside his head for a while had given him a glimpse of the angel’s character. Cas was right to trust him. Aneran would do anything to help his friend. Of that much, Dean was certain.

Still, though, the sensation of being entirely bound by their arms was unnerving. It was a bit too reminiscent of being bound by creatures that definitely were a threat. He could feel the strength each one of them had. Every limb was like a vice, being consciously held at just the right pressure to provide support and not injury. He knew they wouldn’t hurt him. Not right in front of Cas, at least. But he also knew that if any of them wanted to, they could snap him like a twig.

‘An exercise in faith, huh, Cas?’ Dean thought. He felt Cas’s very light reassuring pat on his back and he smiled.

Tazar nodded to Aneran again and spoke quietly. “This is the best we’re gonna get, but it won’t hold, if he starts fightin’. And I guarantee, if you start movin’ it around to get the angle lined up, he’s definitely gonna fight, so… What do you wanna do?”

Aneran assessed the wing carefully, holding it as steadily as possible, while gently feeling along the joint for additional clues. His face held tremendous concern.

“And you’re certain it can just be forced back over the top?” Aneran asked.

“Yeah, it pops back in. But, you gotta do it at just the right angle or it doesn’t work. Thing is…” Tazar’s voice lowered further and he leaned closer to Aneran. “…with Qaphsiel, he was unconscious when they did it. He wasn’t fightin’. It was all loose. And it still took them a few tries, even then.”

Dean watched them and listened. He could tell Aneran was second guessing himself, wondering if they really did know how to do this or if he was about to cause his friend incredible pain and possibly further injury. And probably get half of his crew beat to hell in the process.

Aneran demanded another quick run through of different approaches. Tazar was taking more time, now, looking at the wing from all sides, even getting on the floor below it to check the angle from the underside.

The entire time, Dean could feel Cas shaking. Sweating. Jerking and clenching with even the slightest movement. A thought occurred to him and he very carefully lifted his head up enough to speak to Aneran.

“How close is it to a human shoulder?” Sam called out to the angels.

Dean nodded and closed his mouth. Apparently, he and Sam really did share a brain.

“Uh…” Aneran answered, thinking to himself.

“It’s different,” Tazar snapped. He began his conversation with Aneran again, but the angel cut him
“It’s not THAT different. It’s pretty close. I mean, if you take into account the duplicate muscles and that it’s two of the same joint, but they aren’t designed to work together…”

“Ok, look…” Sam said with a huff. “If it’s like a human shoulder…if it pops in and out pretty much the same way, then…”

“You have to pull the wing at the same time you push on the bone.” Tazar waved him off dismissively. “Don’t interrupt. We’ll handle it.”

Sam raised his eyebrows. Mary crossed her arms.

Dean smirked.

“At some point, you and I are gonna have a little talk. I can tell already.” He glared at Tazar, while wearing a pleasant smile.

Tazar rolled his eyes and looked back at Aneran…and realized the angel was glaring at him even more menacingly than Dean.

Tazar looked surprised. Then defensive. And when Aneran continued to stare him down, he actually looked a little hurt.

“I just meant that he can’t do that! He doesn’t have the strength-”

“Stop talking,” Aneran snapped.

Tazar huffed in disgust. And closed his mouth.

Aneran closed his eyes and took another deep breath. “Sam,” he called out to the man. He opened his eyes again and looked over at him. “Are you saying you know how to do this? You’ve done it?”

Sam made a point of ignoring Tazar’s irritated stare, and shrugged.

“I definitely can on a human. Dean and I do this for each other about once or twice a year. Have done for, probably fifteen years, off and on. So, I mean…if it’s close to the same…”

Aneran nodded and gestured with his head for Sam to come around behind Castiel.

Sam started to move and happened to catch Cas looking at him. His friend’s eyes were bleary, and red, and squinted in pain.

Sam gave him a very small smile and winked. “We’ll figure it out, Cas. Hang in there.”

Cas closed his eyes and very, very slowly lowered his face back down onto Dean’s shoulder.

Sam spent a moment carefully watching, as Aneran used one hand to demonstrate the angle of the joint collar. The angel then separated the feathers so Sam could see the head of the bone in its current position.

Sam relaxed as soon as he saw it. He knew exactly what to do. The skin on Cas’s wing was eerily thin and colorless, at least in that spot. Sam could clearly see the bone, the arteries and most of the shape of the joint.

“Oh, yeah,” Sam said, nodding as he continued to look at the anatomy, pushing back a few more
feathers here and there to get a better view. “I got this.”

Aneran’s eyebrows shot up. “You’re sure?”

“Yeah, absolutely.”

“How certain are you that you’ll be able to get it in one go?” Aneran asked. He was watching the young man very closely, likely assessing whether or not he was just being overconfident.

Sam picked up on it and nodded. “As long as everybody works together, one hard shove and it’s done.”

Aneran kept looking at him, then he glanced back at the wing.

“I mean...I’m not gonna lie...this is more serious than we usually have. Normally, it pops out forward. There’s only been one time it’s been yanked out and rolled over the back of the cuff.”

Dean stifled an involuntary gag. “I remember that,” he barely said.

“I put that one back in. It worked exactly the same way,” Sam assured him. “Just needed to be pulled harder as the shove happened.”

Aneran sighed and nodded. “Ok, what do you need us to do?”

“Ok, so you guys both get ready to pull... in…” he dragged the last word out and turned his back to Cas, holding out his arm to show the exact angle they’d need to stretch the wing. “... that direction.”

Aneran looked carefully at the wing, then nodded at Sam. Tazar did the same. Very slowly and carefully, they pulled outward on the wing and changed the angle to match Sam’s instruction. They both visibly tensed when Cas cried out.

“We’re almost done, sir,” Aneran soothed.

Sam had pulled out his phone, while they were getting the wing into position. He was finishing typing something, and when he saw that Aneran was about to ask him what he was doing, he looked pointedly at the angel and put his finger to his lips. Aneran and Tazar both kept quiet.

Sam finished and turned his phone so both angels could read what he’d written. They looked back at him and nodded. He shoved the phone back in his pocket and gave a quick look to Dean. His brother winked an acknowledgement.

“Ok, Cas, it’s gonna hurt like hell, but it’ll be over really quick, ok? They’re gonna pull and I’m gonna push. On the count of three. You ready?”

Cas whispered ‘yes’ into Dean’s shoulder, but Sam didn’t hear. Dean nodded, giving Sam the go ahead.

“Ok, here we go. One…” Both angels pulled and Sam shoved the bone back into place with a loud thump.

Cas screamed, writhing for several seconds as the pain swelled and reverberated. He nearly climbed Dean in an instinctive need to escape the sensation.

Dean barely kept his grip on his friend’s shoulders. He was very grateful that the angels hanging onto their combined legs hadn’t let go yet.
Cas shuddered. Then he slumped. His vessel continued to shake and his wings trembled pathetically, but he no longer tried to flap them. He just held them about a quarter of the way open, out to the sides and slightly forward. Dean held him up. Cas legs weren’t working very well.

Aneran stepped forward and rubbed a soothing hand along either side of Cas’s spine, massaging the muscles where his wings met his vessel.

“Ok, everybody,” he said quietly. All of the angels began slowly extricating themselves from the huddle and moving toward the far side of the room.

Aneran continued the massage. At the same time, he began investigating the patches of blood he could see in multiple areas on both wings.

“Take a look,” he said quietly to Tazar, motioning to Cas’s left wing. Aneran then began sifting through the feathers on the right wing.

Cas twitched his wings away from the intrusion.

“Sir, we need to see where the blood is coming from. There’s quite a bit in some places.”

Cas said nothing. He kept his face buried in Dean’s shoulder, but very hesitantly positioned his wings back where they were so the angels could continue.

Sam ducked under Cas’s wing and began looking along the underside. He saw a spot where blood had pooled and reached toward it.

“No, don’t!” Aneran demanded. Sam stopped and looked up at him. “I’m sorry, Sam...I...um… Let us do this part. Ok?”

Sam looked at him, a little taken aback. He let his gaze flicker over at Tazar and then back to Aneran. The angel sighed.

“This is something...um...I can explain later. It’s just...we need to be the ones to do this part.” He looked at the young man, almost hopefully.

Sam pursed his lips and gave a single nod, then backed off. When he got back to his spot next to his mom, he looked to see if he could catch his friend’s eye again, but Cas hadn’t moved. His face was still buried and he looked like he was clinging to Dean for dear life. Sam suddenly realized how torn up Dean’s back was and he winced. He knew Cas would fix it as soon as he noticed, but...damn. It looked pretty painful.

“So, it looks like several dozen. Not as bad as I was thinking, but…” Aneran went back to massaging along the sides of Cas’s spine. “There are several that look like they snapped off, but most of them were pulled out.” He sighed and slumped a bit. “It looks like whatever happened, it stopped in the nick of time, though. There’s a ton of bruising. I’m thinking a lot more feathers were about to come out. Some of the primaries look a little loose. Do they hurt?”

Cas nodded silently.

“Ok...so, we’ll see if we can get you cleaned up in a bit and maybe wrap some of this. Give it some support, while it heals.” Aneran finished massaging and gently pat his friend’s back. “I’m gonna go talk to the scouts. Find out what they saw. Are you gonna be ok for a minute?”

Cas nodded silently again and Aneran looked at Dean. The man nodded reassuringly at him and Aneran walked toward the other angels.
“You got a plan back there or you just like snugglin’ me?” Dean called back over his shoulder. Erethe was still clamped around his waist. She was the only one remaining, still helping to support them both.

Erethe giggled. “Mmm…” she hummed. “Well, you’re warm and pretty and you smell nice, so…snuggling is good.” She only paused for a moment, still giggling, but then she let go of Cas’s waistband and started pulling away. That’s when she noticed Dean’s back. “Oh!” she cried.

“What?” Dean asked, trying to see her face. Erethe was in the process of reaching up toward his shoulders when she stopped herself and shook her hands in frustration.

“Castiel,” she said, then gently tugged at the seraph’s arm. Cas raised his head enough to look over Dean’s shoulder. “Sir, he’s injured.”

Cas immediately let his grace flow through Dean, finding and healing all injuries and cleaning the man’s skin. He even healed a few older scars. And cleaned Dean’s liver. Again.

Erethe gave Dean one more gentle pat, this time on his arm. She smiled very sincerely at him and then walked to join everyone else on the other side of the warded circle.

Cas leaned back, slowly letting go of his friend. Dean wasn’t so quick. He kept a hand on each of Cas’s arms, leaning down to look at his face, so he could get a better idea of his overall state.

Cas closed his eyes, letting his grace wash over his vessel, cleaning it and healing the rest of the minor scrapes and abrasions. He looked up at Dean and nodded. And then lowered his head.

Dean sighed and pat Cas’s arm. Then he reached across to the far end of the table and grabbed the white shirt. He handed it to him and placed his palm on the back of Cas’s neck.

“Maybe just…put it on backwards,” Dean suggested awkwardly. He gestured toward the gigantic wings. “Ya know…since… I mean, if you want to. You don’t have to, Cas.”

Cas took it without a word. He held it in front of himself, considering, for a long moment. Then he slipped his arms in and pulled it up until it was on his shoulders. It felt wrong. It would easily fall off. And Cas knew he looked ridiculous. He huffed in frustration and roughly pulled it off. He was about to chuck it hard back toward the stack on the table, but Dean stopped him.

“Hang on. Got ‘n idea,” he said. He reached down and pulled the small knife out of it’s ankle holster. “Here,” he grunted and pulled Cas’s hand up to the back of his own neck.

Dean found the center of the back of the shirt and sliced through the bottom seam. Then he pulled, ripping the fabric in a straight line up to the seam of the back yoke. Cas stared at him.

“I’ll give you another one,” Dean promised and then handed the shirt to Cas.

Dean slipped the knife back in it’s sheathe and put his hand back on Cas’s neck. He watched his friend determine the best way to put the shirt on and then slip into it. It certainly didn’t fit very well, the yoke was too deep to lay flat above his wings, but it did the job. Cas began to button the front. His hands weren’t shaking anymore so it went quickly. He looked up when he was done and Dean was very relieved to see a small smile on his face.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Now, tuck it in, I guess...so it doesn’t flap around. Otherwise it’ll just be kind of a…long sleeved apron. On an angel. In dress slacks. That’d look really weird.”
Cas’s mumblings to Aneran were in ancient Sumerian.
(NOTE: I know nothing about Sumerian. Nothing. I attempted this armed with only my limited knowledge of how language works, a site with a Sumerian dictionary page, and the Wikipedia entry for Akkadian. So...yeah...there’s, like, zero chance this is correct. Imma pretend it is. Just roll with it.)

“Harrani... Libbuna kabitu... Abatu, Harrani... Harranina…”

Literal translation (hahaha! Yeah...sorta):
“Road... Heart-my heavy... Flee, Road... Road-my…”
*‘Road’ is being used as a nickname or term of endearment. It does not refer to a physical road.

The other type of translation (where, ‘Culturally and in context, this is what these words actually MEAN.’ I don’t know what this type of translation is called, but...here it is):
“Road... My heart is breaking... Flee, Road... My Road…”
*Also, here, ‘Road’ is being used as a nickname or term of endearment.

‘Road’ will be explained later
B'Boom

Chapter Summary

A lot happened during that last pull. Aneran’s scouts report back.

(It's a lot to absorb. Don't panic if it makes no sense. The plot does not hinge on understanding all of this. There's enough here for a good description/visual of the layout of the wormhole and the spot in space they've been trying to pull Cas to. But it's only if you feel the need. This is entirely for nerds like me. I live for this kind of detail. Most people don't. I've learned to accept that.)

Chapter Notes

I legit have no sense of appropriate or consistent chapter length.

Title Reference:

'BFG' - 'Big Fucking Gun.' First Person Shooter gaming lingo.
(Ex. in Unreal Tournament (an embarrassingly long time ago), the Plasma Rifle was the BFG - 'mmm...I'll take those bots extra crispy, please!')

June 9, 2016
8:00 PM, CDT

Aneran quickly skirted the outer edge of the warding circle and approached his team.

“Please, tell me you saw something,” he said, looking more than a little desperate.

“Oh, yeah,” Vanya replied, nodding emphatically.

Roz gestured toward Castiel. “Is he ok?”

“He is, now.” Aneran briefly glanced back over his shoulder. “He almost wasn’t. The second wave was really bad, but it stopped a couple of seconds early, and never started back up again.”

Roz looked over at Vanya with a grin and nodded. “You were right.”
“The wormhole - the rings around the entrance,” Vanya said, digging into his pocket for his phone. Aneran stepped closer. “There was some kind of explosion.”

“When?”

“About half a minute after the face of the wormhole aligned with the stationary summoning spot,” Roz answered.

“We’re pretty sure that alignment is what causes these pulls. These are all the measurements we took.” Vanya angled the phone for Aneran to see.

“We might know why each wave is eleven seconds long, too,” Roz added.

Vanya nodded, then pointed to the phone. “These are the baseline measurements. Now...I thought I’d only seen three rings, when I was there the first time, but this time we got closer. There’s actually a very thin fourth ring that turns at a constant rate. The little shining dot I’d seen circling the inside of the innermost ring, was actually just a tiny section of that fourth ring. It looks like maybe it’s some kind of power distribution system...like it might be keeping the rings charged up with each revolution? But, whatever it’s doing...that little dot is definitely the source of the pull. It’s putting out radiation across the entire physical spectrum and it’s emitting keys and deltas from what’s gotta be at least fourth-level spellwork...very high end. Plus, there’s another layer of emissions that we just didn’t recognize at all. The spellwork, though...is crazy strong. Archangel power levels, at the very least.”

“What the hell?” Aneran shook his head.

Vanya nodded. “I know.”

Sam leaned a bit further into the circle of angels. “So, Cas is getting hit with radiation, plus spellwork, plus something else you can’t identify?”

“The summoning spot is getting hit with all of that, yeah,” Vanya answered him. “But Castiel is connected to that spot, so for the moment, we have to assume that he’s getting it, too.”

“Ok, so, get this,” Roz jumped in. “The wormhole and the summoning spot are about the same diameter. It looks like the intention was for the face of the wormhole to line up with that spot with every orbit the wormhole makes around its system’s center of mass...which, for all practical purposes, is moving directly toward that stationary spot. But...the alignment isn’t perfect. It’s a little too high, and from what Tazar could see...” Roz gestured toward Tazar. He nodded and took over.

“The wormhole only aligns with that spot for about two thirds of the time it takes for that inner ring to make one full revolution. And one revolution takes sixteen point three seconds. So...there’s your pattern: eleven seconds on, five seconds off.”

“Oh, and...the wormhole’s orbital period is six hours, twenty seven minutes, three seconds.” Roz added.

Aneran sighed. “Ok...this is good stuff, you guys.”

“Wait! That’s not the big news,” Roz said with a twinkle in her eye. She nodded to Vanya.

“The three outer rings - the ones with the visible warding - those reset to different positions between the first and second waves of each pull event. That’s something I noticed before, but I wasn’t sure what it was about. This time, those rings moved a whole lot... Not just one or two notches like last time, but full turns. And that little bright spot on the inner ring? It had a massive increase in output.
And then...several seconds later, it exploded!” Vanya’s eyes had the same twinkle as Roz’s. He smiled and waited for his friend to catch on.

It didn’t take Aneran long.

“How bad?”

“Bad!” Vanya happily assured him. He gestured for his friend to touch his forehead and Aneran obliged. One second later, Aneran dropped his hand and a burst of hope lit his face.

“And that happened when?” Aneran asked. He was trying not to smile too broadly yet. It was almost too good to be true.

“Between twenty-five and thirty seconds into the alignment, so right about the time you said it stopped here.” Vanya’s smile was huge. Roz and Tazar’s too.

Aneran closed his eyes. Letting his head drop back, he bent his knees slightly and raised both fists in a victory clench.

“Yes!” he exclaimed in a very muted squeak. His entire face lit up. “That is… Oh, man, that is…exactly what I needed to hear!” He took a big breath and huffed it out, still smiling, and rested his hands on his hips.

“I had another thought,” Vanya said a little more hesitantly. “I mean, I can’t prove it, but I think it might be right.”

“I totally think it’s right,” Roz assured him. “It makes sense. Fits everything.”

“What,” Aneran asked.

“Ok...so...” Vanya began. His grin became very conspiratorial and he leaned toward him just a little. The others leaned in as well. They were all smiling at this point. “I’m thinkin’ the mechanism is sending out the first wave of a pull to test how much resistance it’s gonna get. And then it’s re-calibrating accordingly. So...the first few times this happened, Castiel was fighting it with just his own power. Which was substantial, but if they’d kept ramping up and pulling harder each time, eventually they’d get him, right?”

“Ooookaaaay,” Aneran drawled.

“Ok, so...Castiel tethered himself. And that let him fight back a lot harder. But he still wasn’t touching Dean, so it was only a small amount of extra power.” Everyone was watching Vanya and his grin grew much wider. “I think this time, with him in direct contact with Dean... when it sent out that first test wave, it got a whole mouthful of soul juice and cranked itself up to eleven.”

“Somethin’ tells me they didn’t test for that,” Roz smirked.

“You think they figured Castiel wouldn’t use a tether?” Aneran asked as he finished scrolling through the readings on the phone.

“No, I think they had no idea what they’d get if he tethered to Dean.” Vanya said, taking the phone back.

“Poor Minael,” Roz said, shaking her head. “All that moustache-twirling and his target found the BFG. That’s gotta sting.”
Aneran giggled. “Alright… Don’t get cocky, yet.” He turned his attention to the two scouts he’d sent to New Mexico. “Anything?”

“We got nothin’,” Usha said with shrug. Aneran grinned at him.

“Totally clean,” Faral cut in. “No keys, no deltas, no signatures. Not even residual. So, whatever they did, all trace has dissipated and they haven’t done anything else there since.”

“Ok...so, I’m gonna go with, ‘New Mexico was a test run.’ We drop that data out. Everyone agree?” Aneran looked around the group. No one objected. He nodded and continued. “Somebody get that stuff off the board upstairs. I’m gonna help Castiel. We’ll meet in the kitchen in twenty minutes. GREAT job, you guys.”

The angels began disappearing and Sam spoke up.

“I’ve still got some questions-”

“Yes! Sorry...Roz,” Aneran caught her just before she was about to leave. “Take Sam and Mary...make sure they know everything we do, now. And Sam...before you go, I need some things...a, uh...squirt bottle, rubbing alcohol, and if we’ve got any kind of wrap that won’t stick to his feathers-”

Roz cut in. “I picked up a ton of that stuff on my supply run,” She looked over at Mary. “Erethe noticed you guys were running a little low when you showed her around. She sent me a list. I hope you don’t mind.”

“No complaints,” Mary answered. “I’m sure we’ll use it.”

Roz nodded to both humans. “Meet me upstairs?” They nodded back and she disappeared.

“I’m happy to help, you know,” Sam said, with a small gesture toward Dean and Cas. Aneran smiled and nodded. “I mean, I already touched his wing, and he’s not flapping anymore, so I’m assuming it’s not dangerous for me to help...”

“No, no...his wings aren’t a danger to you,” he said, then tilted his head and winced at Mary. “At least not when he’s in control of them. I am truly sorry, Mary. I should have anticipated something like that and had everyone back up further beforehand.”

“Yeah, that was...a hell of a hit. Did not see that one comin’,” she said. Aneran’s wince deepened and he looked enormously guilty. She snorted and waved it off. “It’s ok. I can take a beating. And honestly, it was over so fast, I didn’t really have time to feel it. Just...maybe a heads up next time?”

“Of course. I swear I’m not normally this incompetent,” he said with a sigh.

She snorted.

Roz appeared with an armload of supplies and set them on the table next to Castiel. She caught Dean’s attention and handed him a bottle of water. He looked surprised and then gratefully took it. She smiled at him, nodded at Aneran, and vanished again.

“She’ll meet you upstairs. We won’t be long.” Aneran smiled at the two humans and turned to make his way back around the circle to Dean and Cas.

Sam let out a disgruntled sigh as he watched the angel walk away. Mary pat his arm.
“We’re supposed to get filled in on everything. Make this the first question.”

Sam looked at her for a moment, considering just how badly he wanted this piece of information right now. Did it warrant overstepping some sort of angelic protocol? Aneran was almost certainly going to continue to dodge. He pursed his lips and nodded. They needed info. All of it.

“And if Roz won’t tell us, I’ll ask Erethe. She’ll spill.” Mary looked up at him with a big grin as they exited the dungeon. “I like her.”
Cas was too quiet. It certainly wasn’t unusual for him to act as a silent observer, but in a situation where he was getting this much help and focused attention, there should have been a few snippy outbursts. One ‘I’m fine’ and a couple of variations of ‘this is unnecessary’ really was the bare minimum for him.

Aneran had moved their first-aid efforts into the long corridor outside the dungeon, where he’d have enough light and room to tend to the seraph’s injured wings with minimal fuss.

Cas stood quietly, allowing his friend to take care of him without a single protest.

It was weird.

Dean tried not to make it too obvious he was watching him. He knew Cas could still hear most of his thoughts, but the lack of skin contact would give him at least a little privacy. Still, he did his best to not focus on him too much. The poor guy needed a break.

He’d tried to lighten the mood earlier, with a wisecrack about finding a good local vet, now that Cas was officially in his ‘forever home.’ The response he’d gotten from both angels had been enough for him to hang his head in shame and stop talking entirely for several minutes.

The bunker’s air handlers were in a large utility room no more than thirty feet away and with the constant sound, Dean almost missed the fact that Aneran had started singing to himself as he worked. Just humming absently. Occasionally, he’d throw in some lyrics, barely above a whisper.

Dean split his focus between keeping an eye on Cas and trying to figure out what the angel was singing. He couldn’t make it out. It sounded a little familiar, though - kinda old and sappy.

Cas looked up and made a tiny motion for Dean to move closer.

“It’s from ‘Tourandot’,” Cas quietly explained into his friend’s ear. “‘Nessun dorma.’”

Dean pulled away enough to look at him. Cas stared back. Dean gestured like he’d need a bit more information than that. Cas squinted and tilted his head. Dean rolled his eyes.
Aneran finished washing away the blood and began focusing his efforts on the largest flight feathers. He worked his fingers down to the skin at the wing’s tip and then began gently testing each of the surrounding feathers, determining which ones were loose enough to need splinting.

It was obvious, from Cas’s reactions, these feathers were painful when touched, but with a few of them, Aneran’s tiny testing movements caused Cas to involuntarily flinch and jerk his wing away. That, of course, caused the feather the angel was holding to bend, twist or pull much more sharply. It also tweaked his very sore ‘shoulder’ joint.

Cas sucked in a sharp breath through his teeth and reached for Dean to brace himself. Dean caught his arms, careful to avoid skin contact.

“Easy,” Dean soothed while Cas breathed through it and got himself solid again.

Aneran murmured ‘Sorry’ and winced sympathetically. Once he’d gotten each of the feathers properly positioned into a large bundle, he began carefully wrapping the whole thing in self-adhering tape. He started singing again. This time in English.

“... standin’ on a corner in Winslow, Arizona. Such a fine site to see. It’s a girl, my lord, in a flat-bed Ford, slowin’ down to take a look at me. Come on, bayyyy-bay-”

“A little heavy-handed, ain’t it,” Dean quipped. Aneran looked at him quizzically. “An Eagles’ tune?” Dean gestured at the giant wing stretching halfway down the hall.

Aneran cracked a smile and snorted.

“I thought feathers were like hair,” Dean said, watching the angel work. “I didn’t think there was feeling in them.”

Aneran finished off a roll and started unwrapping another. This one was hot-pink. The previous rolls had been screaming-green and hazard-yellow and Dean winced at the new insult. It felt fundamentally wrong to cover part of that amazing wing in lurid neon - like spray painting a tri-colored popsicle over the Mona Lisa.

“That’s sorta true,” Aneran answered as he continued to wrap. “But you have to remember that you actually can feel your hair. If your hair moves, you feel it in the skin. And if you try to pull your hair out, it hurts. The shaft of a feather is a lot thicker than a strand of hair and more deeply rooted, so there’s a whole lot more sensation that gets translated into the flesh when it’s touched. And in angels, these larger ones have roots that extend through muscles and bond to the edge of the bone, so...they’re super sensitive.”

Dean pursed his lips and nodded. “So...you’re splintin’ just the ones that go to the bone?”

“Yeah. They feel like maybe the roots just got tugged a little loose, but didn’t break free.” Aneran finished the roll and opened another. More hot-pink. “There’s a lot of bruising, so I can’t be certain. Most of ‘em feel solid enough. Those should re-knit back into the surrounding tissue in a couple of days, but a few of them are iffy. You might lose one or two on this wing, sir. I’m sorry.”

Cas nodded solemnly and looked at Dean. “We should collect all shed feathers for future use, but if I do lose those flight feathers, we’ll need to find a way to keep them hidden. We can’t risk them ever falling into the wrong hands. It would be best if no one knows you’re in possession of them.”

Dean stared at him, a little taken aback, but he nodded anyway. What he was saying made sense, but the idea of putting any of Cas’s feathers in a jar in their ingredient room seemed a little...wrong. Also, where the hell were they supposed to securely hide feathers that were half the length of the Impala?
Aneran’s phone chimed in his pocket, just as he was finishing off the last roll of wrap. He grinned.

“Aaaannd there’s Ringa - politely informing me that they’re all hungry and I’m slow,” he said as he smoothed over the tape ends and dug out his phone.

“So this dinner thing...you’re not plannin’ an all-nighter, right?” Dean asked. “We caught a break. We can’t waste it.”

“I agree, so I’m limiting it to forty-five minutes.” Aneran shoved the phone back in his pocket and gently pat Cas’s wing. “Ok, sir.”

Cas briefly inspected his wing and then carefully drew it closed. He gestured at the floor with his hand and the small pools of blood, water and alcohol vanished. Another wave and the few small feathers that had been dislodged were gathered into his hand. He loosely arranged them and tucked them into his pant pocket.

“Normally, I wouldn’t waste one second of a break like this,” Aneran said, as he finished gathering the remaining supplies into bags. He grabbed Cas’s jacket, coat and tie, and headed for the stairs.

“We got extremely lucky. We need to take advantage of it.”

Aneran stopped at the entrance to the stairwell and stepped aside, gesturing for the two of them to go ahead of him. Cas almost walked straight through, but remembered, just in time, that he’d need to bend down. His wings made him taller than most of the door frames in the bunker, now.

“But the last few years have been tough on all of us,” Aneran continued, “We’ve had very few opportunities to be together like this. The next days or weeks are likely gonna be intense, too, so I wanna give us all a chance to relax for a minute and enjoy being together, before we dive in.”

They walked quietly through several passageways on the main floor, but when they reached the corridor leading to the kitchen, Aneran violently shivered.

“Ok, not to be critical, but your place is freezing,” he said when Dean looked back at him. His arms were crossed tightly over his chest and he was covetously eyeing the clothing he was carrying.

“You get used to it,” Dean said. They were just about to pass his bedroom so he made a quick detour and stepped inside. Cas followed dutifully behind, staying within arms reach, as they’d agreed.

“You gotta think of it like you’re campin’, though,” Dean called out as he dug through his dresser drawer. “You get sweaty, you gotta change.” He found what he wanted and walked back out.

Cas squinted, taking a good look at Aneran. He saw the dampness in several places on the angel’s thin summer clothing and, without asking, he touched his friend’s forehead, cleaning and drying his vessel. Aneran let out a relieved sigh and nodded his thanks.

“Chapstick and space heaters - archive living at it’s finest,” Dean announced as he handed Aneran a long-sleeved henley and a flannel overshirt. “Still beats the hell outta cheap motels, so I don’t bitch.”

The angel quickly pulled on both shirts over his short-sleeved oxford. They didn’t exactly match but he didn’t care. They were warm.

“Just...hang onto those until you get your mojo back. Lemme know if you need somethin’ else.”

“Thanks, man, this is great.”

“So...your people” Dean said, gesturing toward the kitchen. “They good? A couple of ‘em are low
power now, too, right? They gonna need stuff like this?”

Aneran stopped fussing with the shirts and looked at him. He seemed a little shocked. “I think we’re ok for now, but I’ll let them know to ask,” he said, and his face quickly lit up. “Thank you, Dean. That’s really thoughtful.”

“Eh, no big deal. I know it isn’t exactly easy for ya when you lose your mojo, so… if you need somethin’, ask.”

Dean turned and continued their journey toward the kitchen. He made a point of ignoring the smile Cas was aiming at him.

“It’s a social thing.” Roz continued her explanation, while dragging her hand along the underside of the kitchen table. She and Sam had been tasked with putting in the expansion leaves and the mechanism for opening the top was proving remarkably difficult to locate. They’d given up on trying to find any way to open it from above and they were both now crawling around under it.

“Basically, it’s considered taboo to let a corporeal creature get touchy-feely with our true form,” Roz continued. “Nice angels don’t let the dirty little Earth-creatures touch their special parts.”

Sam twisted at an awkward angle and frowned at the stodgy teak beast above him. He’d found the table in one of the many old lab rooms in the bunker and brought it up to the kitchen about a week ago, after Mary had casually mentioned the ‘prison-chow-hall’ feel of the prior table. He was beginning to regret that decision.

“So, there’s no real reason,” Sam summed up. “It’s just elitist bullshit.” His tone was completely neutral as he laid out the indictment and Roz couldn’t help but grin.

“Uh, yeah, pretty much.” She grabbed onto the flat tab of what looked like a fastener key of some sort and began turning it. It loosened but appeared to be unfastening nothing at all. “This is the shittiest design I’ve ever seen. Seriously. Who the hell makes a table with leaves and then hides the mechanism?” She began twisting the key back in a little, just in case it actually did do something that she just couldn’t see. “Maybe this was, like, some sort of hazing device. Get the new guy really drunk and see how long it takes him to open this piece of crap.”

“You’re changing the subject,” Sam said as he fiddled with a small, wooden peg-thing that was attached to the bottom of the table with a single screw. It appeared to have no purpose whatsoever.

“I’m not, actually. I’m just easily irritated by poor design. Oh, wait!” She reached for something and then slumped, sighing in disgust. “Dammit,” she grumbled and then continued. “But, yeah, you’re right. It’s bullshit. I mean, it might have had some practical purpose way back in the day? I dunno, you’d have to ask Castiel about that. Now, though, it really is just tradition. But, Castiel was too out of it to make that decision for himself. Aneran was protecting him. He would never have let you touch him at all, if it hadn’t been an emergency.”

“That really doesn’t sound like something Cas would care about.” Sam paused his search briefly to
throw her a very incredulous look. “I mean...he’s pretty practical. I can’t see him getting bent out of shape over some archaic social taboo.”

“Whether he agrees with it or not, he’s still part of the old guard. They’re held to a very strict standard of conduct.”

“So...Cas is older than you?”

“Oh, yeah. WAY older.” Roz had resumed her task of running a hand along the inner rails of the table, looking for any kind of latch.

“Guess that makes sense. Cas mentioned Neanderthals, once.” Sam shook his head and snorted. “So he’s gotta be, what...forty or fifty thousand years old, at least? It’s pretty crazy to think he’s been around that long.”

Roz again stopped what she was doing and looked at him. She had a lopsided smile on her face and she almost laughed, but then she realized he was serious.

“So, you don’t… Oh, wow, ok. I thought Castiel would have told you most of this by now.”

Sam looked at her and realized she was gearing up for a long explanation. She’d rolled onto her side, facing him and leaning on her elbow. He stopped his search entirely and turned his full attention to the angel. They were both too tall to sit up under the table so she stretched out and Sam mirrored her.

“Ok...here’s the quick and dirty breakdown. There are three main groups of angels. Three generations. The eight of us that are here - we’re third generation angels. We all have the same kind of grace and roughly the same capabilities. We’re also the biggest category of angels. A ton of us have been created over the last thirty million years or so.”

“Thir-” Sam cut himself off and his eyes went very wide. “Million?! How old are you?”

“Me?” Roz asked. Sam just barely nodded. “A little over fifteen million. Usha’s the youngest - he’s only about nine, and Aneran and Erethe are the eldest. They’re both around twenty.”

“Million,” Sam repeated. “We’re still talking in millions, here? Twenty million years old?”

Roz nodded and smiled at him, giving him a moment to absorb that.

“And Cas is a lot older?” Sam looked at her with a heavily wrinkled brow.

Again, Roz nodded. “Ok...so...the archangels are considered first generation. They were created right at the beginning, like...way, way back, probably before the Earth had been fully formed. It’s hard to say exactly. Their history has always been wrapped up in legend and myth, because no one could ever get a straight answer out of them.”

“The second generation of angels are the cherubs and the seraphs. Only around a thousand of each were ever created. They’re much older than us, they have a different kind of grace, and seraphs, in particular, are a lot more powerful than we are. The first seraphs showed up right about the time life on Earth started getting really complex, and more were created in batches over the next billion years or so. So...the oldest ones were somewhere around one and a half billion and the youngest was no more than about three hundred million. Castiel was one of the younger ones. I don’t know exactly when he was created, but I remember him mentioning once that he’d seen the first species of fish to leave the water and crawl on land. That puts him at about four hundred million. He implied he was still kinda young at that point, so...I figure he’s somewhere between four hundred million and half a billion.”
Sam’s mouth fell open.

There was a click above them and a thin metal rod that was tucked neatly against a wooden cross-member, turned and slid about an inch. The two halves of the table top slid smoothly apart, revealing Dean’s mildly amused face staring down at them.

Roz’s brow scrunched in confusion. She stared up at him for a second and then began visually tracing that metal rod back to it’s origin at the side of the table.

“This is your move?” Dean asked his still stunned little brother. “Really? Pretend you can’t figure out how to open the table, so she’ll crawl under there with ya?”

Sam’s mouth snapped shut and he frowned at him

“You’re hilarious,” Roz grumbled. She wriggled halfway out from under the table and looked at where Dean’s hand had just been. She squinted even harder for a moment and clicked her tongue. “I still can’t see it!”

“Right here,” Dean said, reaching down to grip a carved wood block that served as the handle for a spring-loaded mechanism. He pulled it outward and let it snap back, while Roz watched.

“Oh, you gotta be kiddin’ me,” she grumbled as she slid further out. Dean offered his hand and helped her up. Once she was standing, she looked back down at the table with open disgust, then huffed once more and looked over at Dean. “How did you know that’s where it was?”

Dean looked at her, a little confused, then gestured down at the side of the table. “Well…” he began, taking a half step back for a better view. “Look at it: It splits down the middle, so...you just slide your fingers along where the two sides meet. Feel for something that kinda stands out a little and just...fiddle around with it until somethin’ happens.”

Roz bit her bottom lip and nodded thoughtfully. She forced back a smile as she turned to look at him, but did nothing to hide the evil glint in her eye.

Dean saw it and his mind immediately played back what he’d just said. His face fell and he closed his eyes, bracing himself.

“Is that how it was explained to you?” she asked, keeping her voice low and conspiratorial.

Dean pulled in a deep breath and opened his eyes to stare back at her. She was losing her ability to hide her smile.

“I mean...I can see how that would work.” She cracked at the end and started giggling.

Dean sighed, still staring at the angel while formulating a come-back. He was distracted by his brother quietly chuckling on the other side of the table. He side-eyed him.

“Shut up.”

Sam chuckled a little louder and dropped in the leaves.

Roz patted Dean’s arm, still giggling and giving him a huge smile as she walked past him and headed toward Aneran.

Sam had barely gotten the table top fully secured before Vanya was gently nudging him to the side and setting a platter heaped with some delicious smelling food right in the center. The angel looked
delighted.

“No sampling, Vanya,” Erethe called out from her position by the stove.

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Vanya said around the morsel he’d already swiped off the platter and shoved in his mouth. He grinned and winked at Sam and headed back toward Erethe.

The rest of the angels had been hovering in the kitchen, lending a hand whenever needed, but generally just laughing, talking and catching up. The volume in the small-ish room was rising with each new conversation and the whole thing seemed incredibly normal, somehow.

Dean and Sam looked at each other, both having noticed the familial atmosphere at the same time.

“Comin’ through,” Erethe’s high voice distracted them both. Sam stepped quickly out of her way. She had another loaded platter and was setting it on the table next to the first.

“That smells incredible,” Sam said, letting his eyes linger over the food.

“It is. You’re gonna love it,” she said and grinned up at him. She finished adjusting the platter and turned back toward the stove. “Sam, can you get plates for everyone?”

“Yeah,” Sam said, heading toward the cabinets. He stopped midway and turned back. “Cas, I found you a barstool. So, you’ll be up high… Your wings won’t be on the floor.”

Dean spotted the stool before Cas did, so he grabbed it, surveyed the table and set it at the corner. His attention was diverted by an eruption of laughter over by the stove. Ringa, Erethe and Mary were standing in a loose cluster and all three were laughing hard enough to start turning red. Mary actually had a hand out, leaning on the sink to brace herself. Whatever had been said was continuing to hit her in waves, because her laughter actually got harder before it subsided. Roz ran over to them, throwing an arm around each of her sisters and saying something that had all four of them roaring again.

It was the first time Mary had laughed - really laughed - since she’d been back and Dean, Sam and Cas each happily took it in.

Dean was still smiling when he turned back to talk to Cas.

Sam continued to watch his mom. Staring. Unable to look away, even though he knew he was being intrusive. He couldn’t stop.

Mary glanced over at him. She didn’t know exactly what he was feeling, but what he was showing on his face made her walk away from the huddle of angels and spend a long moment hugging him. She pressed the side of her face to his chest and stared up at him, beaming, and the two of them spoke softly before giving each other another tight hug. Sam kissed her forehead as they parted and Mary went back to the sink. Sam took the stack of dishes to the table.
Social Graces

Chapter Summary

Angels are just as obnoxious at a family gathering as humans.
Also, to an angel with sequestered grace, food is awesome - Aneran wears his proudly.

Chapter Notes

This was going to be at least twice as long, but I realized this part was done enough and I would be a moron not to post this on Thanksgiving. I just realized that this morning. *sighs*

Happy Thanksgiving, my American amigos! And everyone not in America today, eat something yummy and join the fun. It's all good.

*Stargate.* Roland Emmerich. MGM. 1994

*M*A*S*H* - TV Series and Film - 1972


The late, great Billy Mays - TV product hawker-extraordinaire. (1958 -2009) R.I.P.
You were loud as hell, but somehow never truly annoying. We miss you, bud.

June 9, 2016

9:08 PM, CDT

It took a few more minutes for everything to be ready. Then, as if on cue, the entire group started lining up like second graders to wash their hands at the sink. The three humans simply followed suit. It seemed an odd ritual for everyone to be doing this in the kitchen, but they rolled with it.

One by one, they settled into their places at the table.

Aneran stood by his seat for a moment, taking in the scene while everyone else continued to chat. He lightly rested his hand on Ringa’s back and leaned slightly over her to address the humans sitting on her right. He got Mary’s attention with a small wave.

“Mary, if you don’t mind, I’d like to say something, before we begin?”
She stared at him for a moment, not quite registering what he was asking. Then she caught on and her brain scrambled for half a second, trying to think of an appropriate response.

“Sure,” she blurted.

He smiled and nodded, then turned his attention to Castiel, asking him the same thing.

Mary squinted, watching the angel. She was still trying to figure out why he’d aimed that question specifically at her, when there was a whole table filled with jabbering voices.

She was still squinting as her gaze drifted back to her own place setting...at the head of the table...where Erethe had effortlessly guided her to sit...with her two grown sons flanking her. She pursed her lips and cast a glance down to the other end of the table where the tiny, bubbly angel was happily chatting away.

Aneran reached out and grabbed his bottle of beer. He stood quietly for a moment, watching all of them - smiling. They quickly noticed and wrapped up their conversations to give him their attention.

He opened his mouth to speak, but found himself a little overcome by the sight of their smiling faces staring back at him. He blurted out a nervous chuckle instead, lowering his gaze for a moment before shaking himself out of it and looking back at them again. He cleared his throat.

“Things have been moving fast, so I want to say it while I have a chance.” He cleared his throat a second time. “Thank you. All of you - angel and vessel, alike - for everything you have done and will do. I’m speaking for Castiel as well as myself. For me, personally, though, I want you to know that I miss you. I miss us being together like this. It’s been far too long, and I wish all of us could have been here...under better circumstances, of course.”

He paused for a beat, looking down at his bottle. When he continued, his voice was softer.

“It’s been a rough few years...for everyone at this table. It’s good to be reminded that we’re not alone.”

Aneran let the silence linger for only a short time before he raised his bottle, straightening himself.

“To old friends and new.” He made a point of smiling at the Winchesters, then turned back to the whole group. “And to those we’ve lost along the way.”

As expected, the mood shifted, but Roz kept the somber silence from lasting too long. She nodded and partially stood, holding her bottle out toward him across the table. “Cheers, NeeNee,” she said quietly, as they clinked their bottles together. She winked at him and sat, taking a swig. More bottles clinked alongside quiet responses.

Erethe snapped them all out of it. “Ok, eat!” she demanded with a couple of light claps and her trademark bubbliness.

“You don’t have to tell me twice,” Vanya immediately blurted, already grabbing the first slice of flatbread off the nearest stack.

Aneran sat, gripping the seat of his chair as he scooted it toward the table. Ringa immediately handed him three napkins. He grinned at her and sighed, then took them with only the hint of an eye roll.

Dean leaned toward his mom as he set his beer on the table. “Looks like you’re head of the house.”

“Damn right,” Mary answered, without missing a beat. “Don’t you forget it.”
Dean snorted and grinned.

“We’re both technically older than you, ya know,” Sam cut in.

“Uh-huh,” she dismissed. “When we’re done with dinner you both need to clean your rooms.”

All three of them chuckled and smiled hugely. Dean heard Cas snort and turned to his left, craning his head to look up at the angel perched on the bar stool. He was grinning at the three of them.

The conversation went into high gear as all of the angels dug into the feast, passing plates and sharing bursts of laughter.

Vanya realized Erethe would not sit down and stay down unless forced, so he got up to help her retrieve whatever last minute bits she seemed to need. She gave him a tight, one-armed hug and he kissed the top of her head, before they both sat back down.

Dean was slightly startled when Ringa reached toward him and took his plate away, swapping it with one containing a mound of steaming rice.

“Dean, can you hand this one to Mary and give me her plate?” she asked. Her voice was just soft enough to require his full attention so he could hear.

He did as she asked and continued to follow her directions through a few more serving manoeuvres, while she quietly organized herself and the two humans. He was actually grateful for the help. The table setting was a little odd - a single dinner plate and a napkin, but no silverware at all. Each setting also had a small bowl of what looked like plain water. He had no idea how he was supposed to actually eat with this gear, so it was nice having her step in and take over, until he could figure it out.

Ringa glanced briefly at Castiel and cleared off a small area at the corner of the table that he could easily reach. She handed Dean another plate of rice and smiled at him before turning her attention to Aneran’s place setting.

Dean continued to watch her surreptitiously. He hadn’t yet had time to really meet any of these angels, but right now, Ringa was giving him far more information about herself and the dynamics of this team than he ever could have gotten from a brief conversation.

Aneran was turned away, chatting with the other angels, while Ringa quietly rearranged everything in front of him. Even the condiments and side dishes that had been placed nearby were quickly being swapped out with different ones. Dean knew that any second, now, the guy was going to look back at the table and wonder what the hell happened.

‘She’s Radar,’ he thought, and tried hard to not laugh, as images from M*A*S*H* flashed through his mind. They were aligning a little too perfectly with everything Ringa was currently doing to manage her team leader without him really noticing.

Cas snorted again, and when he saw Dean look up, he gave him a slightly guilty wince and leaned down to speak into his ear.

“Forgive me. I didn’t mean to intrude on your thoughts, but that’s a very apt analogy.”

Dean grinned. For once, the tether was actually helpful, instead of a nightmare.

Aneran gestured a little wildly with his arm during his conversation with the other end of the table. Ringa easily anticipated the motion and swiped his beer out of the strike zone just in time, relocating it to a safe spot several inches away.
Aneran absently reached for the beer that was no longer where it had been and looked back at the table. His face looked exactly as Dean had predicted.

Dean and Cas both chuckled. Ringa looked over at them with a bashful smile and then went back to her tasks.

Dean's attention was drawn to the little show happening two seats to his right. Roz was trying to teach Sam how to properly eat from one of the communal platters in the center of the table. Dean shook his head. His brother looked like one of those dorky guys on some low-budget travel show - overly excited for a new experience, but awkward and slightly terrified by the local cuisine.

Roz demonstrated how to take a portion of the plain, sticky rice heaped on her plate and form it into a small ball using her fingertips. Sam imitated her. It was clumsy, at first, but he slowly got a decent ball formed.

She then took the ball and dipped the side of it into the sauce at the edges of the communal entree in front of them. Letting it soak for only a second or two, she then popped the rice and sauce into her mouth. Her grin was a bit too wide as she watched Sam try to do the same. He managed it pretty well and Roz spent a few moments praising him, before excitedly moving on to the next lesson.

Dean rolled his eyes. Sam’s ability to attract every hot and/or nerdy female within visual range was legendary, but the fact that it now appeared to extend to angels as well… that was just getting a little ridiculous.

Roz moved on to showing Sam how to use chunks of the flat-bread to pick up pieces of meat, cheese and vegetables from the platter, as well as soak up some broth. This was a little harder, and quite a few of the chunks Sam had managed to pinch into the folded bread ended up in various places on the table, in a line from the dish to his mouth. Two more tries, though, and he was communal-eating like a pro.

Roz was praising him, again. She also seemed to be very adept at finding opportunities to touch him and this moment gave her a reason for a lingering pat of his arm.

“See, Sam?! You're a natural!” she said, while the arm touching was still in full swing.

“Come on, you guys,” Sam coaxed his mom and brother through a small mouthful. “Try it!” He was grinning as he glanced between them and then back at the delighted angel to his right.

“I'm good, Redford. Thanks,” Dean snarked. “You just...keep your grubby fingers away from my side of the platter.”

Dean and Mary were both eyeing the proceedings a bit anxiously. Neither was ready to begin eating with only fingers, though they were both watching Sam’s private tutorial for clues.

“Dean, Mary, would you like to try?” Ringa asked. “I’d be happy to show you, though, it’s no problem at all if you’d prefer to simply put portions on your plate and eat with utensils. We don’t want you to be uncomfortable.”

“Yeah...um,” Dean said. He looked over at his mom and she was staring back at him with the same level of ‘help me’ in her expression that Dean had been feeling. “Actually, I think we’re gonna do the silverware thing.” He started to scoot his chair back.

“Nope!” Erethe’s voice called out from the opposite end of the table. “I got it. You sit.” She bounced around the island and rummaged through the drawers, before appearing at Mary’s side to hand them what they’d need. She then put a couple of clumps of spoons on the table to be used for the smaller
side dishes.

Dean reached forward with the serving spoon Erethe had given him and scooped a decent serving of the nearest entree onto his mother's plate, then his own. The food smelled delicious but neither of them could identify most of it and they were a little intimidated. They were both going to at least be brave enough to try each of the main dishes, though.

Aneran was watching them and he turned and grunted something unintelligible toward the other end of the table while gesturing toward a stack of small plates. He swallowed his food and finally managed to speak clearly.

“Usha, start loading stuff up on those. Let's get a little of everything down here for them to try.”

“Oh, uh...,” Mary stammered, immediately overwhelmed. She'd only just tasted one bite of the first dish and wanted to at least let that experience settle for a few seconds. “I'm fine with just this for now.”

Aneran glanced over at her and shook his head, while waving a hand dismissively. The movement was the epitome of a French maitre d' insisting upon spoiling his guests with the very best of everything. Mary couldn’t help but smile.

Plates began working their way toward the ‘human’ end of the table, each one loaded with one or more kinds of savory goodness. Any available space in front of the Winchesters was rapidly filled with yet another beautifully colorful serving of...something.

All of it looked and smelled spectacular. Each angel was taking a turn grunting approval through a mouthful of yumminess and giving Erethe tons of praise. It took only a few more minutes, and a few more hesitant tastings, before all apprehension had been overridden and the three humans were digging into the meal with gusto, as well.

“Castiel,” Aneran said as he slightly stood and handed a small plate and fork over to him.

Cas shook his head and gestured with his beer. “Just this is fine.”

“Yessir, I just thought you might like to try these. They’re foods we’ve found we can still taste without sequestering our grace.”

Cas tilted his head and rather quickly set down his beer in favor of the small plate. He explored the items curiously with the fork before trying a small bite.

Dean watched. “Yeah?” he asked, when he saw his friend’s face light up.

Cas nodded at him with a small grin and swallowed. “Yeah,” he answered. His smile got a bit bigger and he turned back to Aneran. “What are all of these?”

“Various pickles. From a few different cultures. Old recipes.”

“Pickles?” Dean asked, craning his head to better see Cas’s plate. “There are no pickles on that plate.”

Aneran smiled around a mouthful. Ringa answered instead.

“Vegetables, mainly - that have been allowed to ferment.”

Dean instantly curled his lip and stared back up at Cas. “So, everything’s gross to you except for
spoiled milk and rotting vegetables. Awesome.”

Aneran chuckled. “Not rotten or spoiled. The process just gives stuff a tangy flavor that we seem to be able to sense with our true-form. I’m honestly not sure why. The acids, maybe? But it lets us taste some of the other flavors in the food, too.” Dean still didn’t look convinced. Neither did Mary. They were both looking at him with open disgust.

“Coffee, beer, wine, chocolate - the darker the better,” Aneran rattled off the items, counting them on his fingers. “They’re all fermented. Yogurt, sourdough bread… What I put on his plate is closer to kim chi or sauerkraut - the old way of making them.” Aneran popped a small rice ball into his mouth and a glob of sauce landed on his upper chest. He didn’t notice.

Dean almost said something, but Aneran reached for a piece of flatbread and inadvertently stuck his elbow into a small condiment bowl. He didn’t notice that, either. Dean pursed his lips and said nothing.

“Here,” the angel said, once again slightly rising to pass a small chunk of bread to Castiel. “You should be able to taste this, too. Just not as strong.”

Cas took it gratefully and went about his thorough inspection of the item before tasting it. He smiled again.

Aneran continued his conversation, expounding on different things angels can taste, how the sense of smell is impacted when their grace is sequestered, how they figured each of these things out, over the centuries, etc. As he spoke, he inadvertently added to the number of splatters and spills on his shirt, chin and sleeves.

He completely missed what was happening around the rest of the table. Each of his friends was quietly smearing sauce on the tip of his or her nose and desperately trying to keep from laughing. When every nose had been doused, they all stopped eating and looked expectantly at Aneran, waiting for him to notice.

All three humans caught on at the same time, and instinctively tried to hide their reactions so they wouldn’t spoil the joke.

Aneran continued to enjoy his meal, while he spoke, completely oblivious to the attack awaiting him. He dribbled yet another dollop of sauce on his chin, but this time he felt it and immediately grabbed his napkin. He wiped his face clean, and in the process, somehow managed to smear a little more sauce on his shirt.

It was when he reached for a clean napkin and accidentally dragged the cuff of his sleeve across the small bowl of ketchup, Ringa finally cracked. She let out one tiny, embarrassed snort of laughter and looked down, quickly covering her smile with her napkin.

Aneran looked at her, confused, and he grinned, wondering what the joke was. When he caught a glimpse of the humans also trying to cover up smiles, the grin disappeared and he quickly scanned the rest of the faces at the table.

“No!” he shouted and immediately looked down at himself. The entire table exploded with laughter. Cas was startled away from his focus on his food.

“Ah, dammit!” Aneran whined. He hastily searched his clothing, almost frantic, and found spot after spot. Unfortunately, these movements were causing the ketchup-saturated sleeve to place additional deep red smears on various parts of him.
The laughter increased as the destruction continued. Aneran’s shirt was totally unrecoverable, now, and every time he moved, it got worse.

“How are you still not be able to eat?” Roz demanded. Her face was bright red from laughing. “Just…how is that even possible?!”

“I can eat!” he objected, while desperately trying to wipe off the stains he could see.

“Aneran, you need to remember…Mike is a human vessel,” Faral said in her best kindergarten teacher voice. “He can’t absorb nutrients through his skin.”

Aneran sighed in disgust and turned his attention back to the Winchesters.

“I’m not nearly as bad as they’re making it sound.”

The three humans grinned at him. He clearly had no idea how many colorful spots were currently arguing against that statement.

Ringa had begun trying to help him wipe up the areas that were causing him to contaminate more and more of his clothing every time he moved. She chuckled at his ridiculous defense. He’d actually placed his forearm directly onto a large blob of sour cream as he’d said it.

“Good grief…” she huffed, with a huge grin. “Just…hold still. You’re getting it… Stop!” she ordered.

Aneran obeyed humbly and held up his forearms for her attention. She began wiping him down with a series of napkins, but Cas stopped her, motioning for Aneran to come close. He touched his friend’s forehead and cleaned his vessel and clothing. Red-faced, the angel nodded his thanks.

Ringa blocked him from sitting back down, while she moved his plate and began wiping away the mess around it.

“Dude…” Vanya shook his head, still chuckling. “You could be the spokes-angel for Wet Wipes.”

“Or for bleach,” Usha mumbled through a mouthful of food.

Aneran didn’t bother looking at them. “Yeah, thanks… You two should go play in the street.”

“HI! BILLY MAYS, HERE!” Roz shouted. “DOES YOUR ANGEL DESTROY HIS CLOTHING EVERY TIME YOU FEED HIM?!”


“Thank you, Tazar!” Aneran nodded to his sole defender. As he turned back to Ringa, he paused long enough to stick his tongue out at Roz. She returned the gesture and went back to giggling.

“Nice to know at least ONE of you can still show me a little respect,” Aneran said, with a barely perceptible whine.

“Whatever,” Roz mumbled and took a swig of her beer.

“Guys…check it out,” Tazar called out to the whole table. “Who am I?” He had very quickly coated his fingers with sour cream and dragged them over his forehead into his hair, spiking it up. An enormous hunk of flatbread was hanging out of his shirt collar. His expression was completely neutral.
The roar in the kitchen was deafening. Even Cas openly laughed.

Aneran finally cracked and laughed as well. He knew he had no chance of making it out of this alive, so he stopped fighting and gave Ringa a very loving smile as she wiped down the area of the table around his plate. When she’d finished, Aneran threw a glance back to the rest of his team.

“I only stick around, ‘cause there’s safety in numbers, ya know. I don’t actually like any of you.”

“Oh, NeeNee,” Roz mocked. “So crabby! Don’t worry...I’ll find you a bib for the next meal.”

Aneran gave her a sarcastic grin and went back to his food.

“Does it take a while to adjust?” Sam asked the whole group of angels in general. “When you first take a vessel? Like...to learn how to use the new hands and arms and…” He trailed off, suddenly a little embarrassed by how he was asking the question. “Sorry, I hope that’s not...insulting or anything.”

Aneran grinned at him and shook his head. “Not at all, Sam. And, I mean, yeah, it can take a little time to-”

“No,” Vanya cut him off. “It doesn’t take a while, Sam.”

“When it’s your first time in, like, that whole Family of species it takes a while.” Aneran complained, clearly annoyed.

“Yeah, like, a day,” Tazar said.

“It takes more than a day,” Aneran snapped.

“Two days,” Faral deadpanned. The laughter started up again.

Aneran slumped and loudly sighed in disgust.

“To be fair,” Cas began, levelling a friendly but slightly rebuking glance at the other angels. He turned his focus back to Sam, “some of the more complex movements associated with a new vessel can take several days to several weeks to master.”

“You took down a bookcase with your ass last week, Cas,” Dean announced.

Cas threw a disapproving squint at him, while the rest of the table laughed.

Dean stared up at him, smiling. “I’m just sayin’, you prob’ly don’t want a piece of this fight.”

“Oh, so, two days,” Roz chimed in, diverting attention back to the assault on Aneran. “And you’ve been inhabiting human vessels for...four thousand years?” she asked, while making a vague, confused gesture with her hands.

“Give it up, man. You suck at eating. Own it.” Vanya quipped.

“Fine. I can’t eat and talk at the same time. There. Happy?” Aneran turned his attention back to his meal.

“And we love you for it,” Erethe said with equal sarcasm and sincerity. She held up her beer in a toast and blew him a kiss.

Aneran smiled and rolled his eyes.
There was a lull of just a few seconds as everyone chuckled softly and turned back to their meal or took a drink.

“At least I can hold onto my blade during a fight,” Aneran sniped into the quiet, still staring at his plate.

“Oh, see...that’s low.” Vanya leaned back in his chair and gave his friend a disapproving look. “Why'd you have to get ugly?”

Mary groaned sympathetically. She glanced over at Vanya.

“Got it taken from ya? Or it slipped outta your hand?”

“It slipped,” Vanya answered, sounding embarrassed. “And it was one time, Aneran! One freakin’ time I couldn’t hold onto it, in how many fights?!”

“Happens to the best of us,” Sam chipped in.

“Thank you, Sam!” Vanya leaned forward to look past Roz and nodded gratefully at the young man.

“Oh, you meant an actual knife,” Dean blurted, looking back and forth between the two angels. He seemed to have only just figured it out.

Aneran and Vanya both looked at him.

“Yeah, sorry…” Dean said with a shrug. “I thought it was a euphemism.” He casually took a swig from his beer.

It took each human or angel a different amount of time to put that joke together, but once they did, the sound in the kitchen once again reached an almost painful volume.

Roz was red-faced and nearly breathless, smiling hugely at Dean, when her phone buzzed. She quickly rinsed her fingers in her little bowl of water and dried them so she could dig into her pocket. The conversation and laughter around her never slowed.

“Oh crap!” she exclaimed. Aneran watched her and his cheer quickly faded.

“What is it?”

“Beth, um...the woman who’s watching Wrennie’s dogs. She just broke her leg. I gotta go,” she said as she scooted her chair back and quickly rose. She looked over at Aneran and tucked her phone back in her pocket.

Aneran hesitated but then nodded. “Yeah, of course.” He looked around the table, assessing his team.

“I got it,” she assured him.

“You’re taking backup.” Aneran leaned forward and glanced at Tazar. The angel nodded to him and rose, cleaning his hands and face.

“It’s almost certainly legit,” Roz added. “Wrennie’s been bitching at her for a year to replace those porch steps. I guarantee that’s where she fell. It’s just bad timing.”

“Yeah, suspiciously bad,” Aneran responded, making it clear this wasn’t up for debate. “Stay sharp. Both of you. Follow protocols, and text me if you’re gonna be any longer than an hour. Try to come
back sooner, though. I mean, if you feel you can. If she’s ok.”

Both angels nodded at him.

“Save me some pie!” Roz said to the whole table. She gave a tiny mock-salute and disappeared. Tazar nodded to his friends and followed her. The sound of the bunker’s inner and outer doors being opened and then closed echoed into the kitchen.

Aneran fidgeted for a moment, while the rest of his team went back to chatting. The mood in the room had dipped dramatically and the angels were having to work to regain the former lightheartedness. Aneran reached for his beer and took a quick sip before glancing over at Castiel. Neither was able to hide his worry.

“I don’t imagine they thought their big... Stargate Super-Max was gonna blow up.” Dean leaned back in his chair so he could more easily include Cas in the conversation. “You think they’ve already come up with a plan-B? How good are they?”

“Minael? No. He wouldn’t be able to respond this fast,” Aneran answered right away.

“It’s Melcheziel,” Cas added. He looked down at Dean. “He’s the one we really need to worry about.”

“That’s another one of the five?” Mary asked. She and Sam were both looking at Cas, now, too - leaning in so they could better hear.

Aneran and Cas both nodded.

“Ok, so... what’s his deal? He the one really runnin’ the show?” Dean asked.

“No, Melcheziel is a henchman,” Aneran said.

“But,” Cas cut in, “he’s very good at his job. He can adapt quickly.”

“Minael tends to just throw a fit and start pointing fingers when things go wrong. Honestly, if it were just Minael, I wouldn’t be as worried.” Aneran took another swig of his beer and set his phone on the table where he could keep an eye on it.

“Ok!” Erethe’s voice chirped from the other side of the table. “We’ve got ten minutes left. Who wants pie?”

Every hand went up immediately - word had gotten around about the pie. Cas was the only one who didn’t respond, so Dean grabbed his hand and raised it up, too.

“I’m not going to eat it,” Cas protested.

“I know. That means I get an extra slice.”

“I’ll get their information up on the chalkboards for you,” Aneran said, scooping the last of his meal onto a piece of bread and popping it in his mouth. He dropped part of it on his shirt. No one mentioned it.

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