Don't Shoot the Messenger

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Don't Shoot the Messenger

by [TheRiverScribe](http://archiveofourown.org/users/TheRiverScribe)

Summary

In which each person in the bunker is a messenger. Some did not volunteer. Also, they can't even make it to breakfast without a big dramatic to-do.

Notes

ENOCHIAN is in *BOLD*

Angel radio & thoughts are in /italics/

See the end of the work for more [notes](http://archiveofourown.org/works/8448730/notes)
When Gabriel opened his eyes to find himself standing in Chuck’s pocket-universe bar, his first thought was *Lucifer totally failed at fratricide*. Maybe his Father had *finally* decided to reinvolved Himself with their deteriorating family, and save Gabriel from his fate at the last second. Then he saw Amara, and he realized that couldn't be true—there were too many fail-safes in place keeping her locked away and he would have felt the Mark's destruction immediately. Which meant he'd been dead, and probably for a great deal of time.

Gabriel hadn't seen his Father in thousands of years. They talked for an age about their many unresolved issues, the archangel's life as a pagan god, and his love of humanity. By the end of it, most of Gabriel's anger was purged and his resentment cleansed. Basking in his Father's love reminded him of his purpose, and renewed his longing to be connected to his family. Naturally, that was when Chuck decided Gabriel was ready to return—not to Heaven, but to Earth. Specifically, to the Winchesters.

“*The Winchesters? Why in the nine-levels of Hell are you sending me to them?*” Gabriel's dramatic outrage only made Chuck smile affectionately.

“*Because you are my messenger. And they need you,*” His eyes twinkled.

“*Okaaay,*” Gabriel pushed on with the most patience he could muster, “*Can you elaborate? Do you have a specific message for them?*”

Chuck just looked at him, “*It is my only message. You will see what is needed when you get there.*”

“*But...*” Despair crept in at the thought of not returning home to Heaven.

“I *know*, son. You must trust me. *Heaven will welcome you when it is time for you to return.* Until then, *know that I love you and I am very proud of you.*” Chuck embraced His son one more time, then pulled away, “*Go to the Winchesters. They need you.*”

Before he'd had the chance to respond, Gabriel found himself standing outside an empty rundown building in the middle of nowhere-Kansas. The place was heavily warded, although it was instantly apparent that many wards had recently been destroyed. He spent the next hour snooping through the elaborate, nicer-on-the-inside bunker. It was clearly lived in, and judging by the personal items he found it seemed to be home to his Dad's favorite humans.

As he reached the garage, Gabriel sensed Castiel growing closer. Stretching out his grace, he could identify two humans. There was also another person was with them. A person exceedingly powerful who carried grace. A person with grace who Gabriel could not identify.

It was enough to make him pause. Even though centuries had passed since Gabriel left Heaven, he knew every angel in existence. He was present for the creation of all his younger siblings and could instantly name each one based on their grace alone. Yet he didn't recognize the grace-filled being traveling with his brother and the humans.
When he heard the infamous sound of the Impala screech to a halt on the other side of the door, he tried to assess the situation. He silently sent a curse to his Father for not giving him more information. Listening for a minute, Gabriel could clearly identify Dean and Castiel's voices. He chuckled when he realized they knew he was there and were trying to prepare for a possible fight.

Putting on his best sassy expression, Gabriel made his grand entrance. The monologue he'd prepared went swimmingly until he set eyes on the child clinging to Dean Winchester. All he saw at first was the familiar grace of his Father emanating from within the tiny body. But then he looked into those enormous hazel eyes and he knew. The terror pouring off Sam was a shock to his system and almost physically painful. It kept him frozen in place when everyone else gave chase to the suddenly escaping kid. Dean's shout of “don't fucking move” didn't even register for several minutes.

_Damn it, Dad! You couldn't have given me just a little heads-up here?!_ Gabriel's mind reeled with the possible reasons for Sam's change. He wasn't a Nephilim—the boy would have been born that way. A witch could have de-aged the younger Winchester, but wouldn't have the ability to impart grace on a human. Especially not his Father's grace. The only explanation was that his Father had done this Himself.

The reason why his Dad would intervene in such an extreme way quickly became clear as the night wore on and he heard a small part of the events surrounding the failed apocalypse. Horror still made his vessel feel shaky and his grace unsettled. Now that the others were asleep it was easier to drop his mask of confidence and really focus on the child in question.

Gabriel stared at the bundle of blankets and curly hair in his arms. The sleeping boy was a miracle—to survive inside Lucifer's cage at the mercy of two furious archangels was unthinkable. His Father's grace shone brightly among the fragments of Sam's soul and it called to his own grace in a way he hadn't experienced since before the creation of humanity. The fledgling was something the archangel had long given up ever seeing, let alone holding in his arms, ever again.

_Brother, are you alright?_ Castiel's true-voice broke through Gabriel's thoughts and resonated within his mind. He tore his gaze from the slumbering child to meet his brother's worried eyes.

Shaking his head, Gabriel struggled to sort the conflict of emotions churning within. _I don't really know, Cassie._

_What is troubling you?_

Gabriel looked back down at Sam and pulled the blanket back just enough to see the boy's face. Draining his grace had kept him deep in sleep so far, but it was not guaranteed to last through the entire night. And it would not ward off dreams. _What isn't troubling me right now?_ Gabriel huffed a hollow laugh out loud. His fingers traced the smooth brow. _How did this happen?_

Castiel frowned, _God healed Sam by merging His grace with the damaged soul._

_Not what I meant._

_What did you mean?_ the younger angel asked when Gabriel didn't continue.

_I mean...I mean how could our brothers fall so far that they shred a soul. Sure, Michael can be a dick...and Lucifer was a whole bag of dicks. But to do this?_ he found he was still slowly shaking his head, like the more he did it the more he could deny the past actions of his family. _I ran away because I couldn't take the fighting or how empty Heaven felt when Lucifer and the others fell. I buried 'Gabriel' so far below 'Loki' he was essentially dead. I did things I'm not proud of—especially now that I've talked them over with our Father. I taught lessons, and when a lesson couldn't be
learned I killed. But I never tortured for torture's sake.

You may have buried 'Gabriel' under the guise of 'Loki' but you never rid yourself of the need for righteous justice. You continued to protect innocents from the evil doers. Castiel put a hesitant hand on his brother's shoulder, wary of overstepping boundaries. Michael changed in our Father's absence. He ruled Heaven like a cold tyrant more concerned with obedience than justice or mercy. Raphael was even worse—he abandoned his role as a hero to become Michael's enforcer.

Sadness grew in Gabriel at hearing how Heaven had changed, as did his feelings of guilt at not being there to try and prevent it. How did Raphael die?

Castiel's hand jerked back, startling Gabriel with the violence of his movement. But there was no anger in those blue eyes—only a storm of despair and remorse. Father didn't tell you?

Dad didn't tell me shit before sending me here, Gabriel told him wryly.

Castiel looked away from him, jaw clenched and hands fisted tightly atop his thighs. I killed him.

Gabriel blinked, Come again?

I killed him. He was attempting to restart the apocalypse. Factions formed, sides were taken, and Heaven was on the verge of civil war. I... he broke off, face flushed with shame, I was so stupid and naive. I decided to empty purgatory of its souls for their power. When I succeeded, I killed Raphael and unleashed the Leviathans upon the earth.

A soft whistle made Castiel turn back toward an awed Gabriel. Damn, little bro, you sure don't do things halfway.

Castiel nodded solemnly, I went very 'dark side' for a time. Proclaimed myself the new god and killed anyone who stood against me.

Did you just quote 'Star Wars,' Cassie? A small smile lifted the corners of Gabriel's mouth—both in amusement and to show the angel that he wasn't judging his mistakes.

Castiel shifted in his seat and some of the tension eased from his body. Yes. A couple years ago, Metatron took over Heaven using the Angel Tablet.

The Scribe? Gabriel interrupted, looking incredulously at his brother. Wimpy little guy? Dad's glorified secretary?

Castiel narrowed his eyes at the description. It was accurate but it downplayed the level of destruction Metatron had wrought on Heaven and Earth. And it illustrated how easily the 'expendable' angels could be overlooked or dismissed. Yes. He wanted to rewrite reality to make himself the new god and tried pushing me to play the role of his villain in his 'grand story.' He actually used you—well, a construct of you—to trick me into leading the rebellion. However, when I realized what was happening, Metatron became very upset because I didn't understand his references to popular human cultural icons and stories. So he 'downloaded' all of them into my memory. It has made communicating much easier, even if I still do not understand everything humans say.

When the younger angel used air-quotes in all seriousness, Gabriel had to hold in the laugh bubbling up through his system. The second time, it escaped in a snort. The noise made Dean shift on his bed and Castiel extended his grace to soothe the man back into a deeper sleep. Then he turned to scowl at his older brother.
I fail to see the humor of my story. Metatron caused death among the angels at a rate far greater than Raphael's civil war or even my own horrendous slaughter against those who opposed my reign.

You are right. There is nothing funny about any of that. Gabriel waved it off, But what IS hilarious is you using 'finger quotes!' He mocked him by repeating the gesture with his free hand.

Castiel's scowl morphed into contemplation. Oh. I wondered why people laughed when I use them. I always assumed I was incorrect in my references.

Man, I've missed you Cassie. Gabriel said affectionately. His grin faded when he felt Castiel slump in the seat next to him, and a slight tremble work its way through the angel's body. Castiel? Gabriel worried he'd said the wrong thing.

I...I missed you as well, Gabriel. More than I can ever express. Blue eyes met earthy-gold and Gabriel was floored to see tears there. I know we were not very close before you left Heaven, but I do remember you from when I was younger than Samuel. I always appreciated how kind you were to us younger, lesser angels. So much kinder than the other archangels—even Raphael. Your absence was felt throughout the flock, especially as Michael and Raphael grew cold and more distant.

I am so sorry, Castiel. Gabriel wanted nothing more than to gather up all his remaining siblings and hold them as close as he was holding Sam right now. Slowly, he wrapped his right arm around Castiel's shoulders and drew him into his side. As the trench coat clad body relaxed into the embrace, Gabriel unfurled one primary wing to add another layer of warmth and protection. Golden feathers covered the inky black ones and their graces intertwined like cat tails. They sat there, not moving, for over an hour. Simply basking in the renewed connection unique to angels. It had been far too long since either of them had felt the security of home.

In the early morning hours, Gabriel felt Sam begin to stir. After reassuring himself that it wasn't a nightmare, Gabriel gently shifted the blanket so it wasn't confining the boy's movements. The last thing he wanted was for Sam to wake up feeling restrained.

Should he be waking already? Castiel asked in a worried tone.

Gabriel shrugged, unsure himself. I know what is normal for seraphs, but I was the youngest archangel. It's kinda been going on several million years since I was this age. Possibly even billions of years. I don't really remember naps and how long they lasted. Actually, I don't remember sleeping at all. But Samuel is different, so I don't think there is a 'normal' here.

They tried not to hover (and failed miserably) as they watched Sam go from sleep to consciousness like most hunters—almost instantly. Years of being trained by John Winchester and living in a constant state of vigilance meant that the boy was aware of his surroundings before his eyes opened. Gabriel felt the tiny body tense and wide hazel eyes lock onto his face. There was only a second for Gabriel to realize that seeing the Trickster first thing was probably a bad idea. Especially when a small fist shot toward his mouth.

Gabriel's reflexes kicked in and he grabbed the fist before it made contact. “Whoa there, Sambino! Should have known you were the 'wake up swinging' kinda guy.”

Sam stared, breaths coming in shallow gasps.

“Samuel,” Castiel voice was low, just above a whisper. Sam jumped and looked past Gabriel to see the familiar face of his friend. “Are you awake?” The boy nodded. Castiel slowly reached to take his fist from Gabriel's grasp and continued talking. “Do you remember where you are?”
Sam's eyes darted back up to Gabriel for a moment before he turned to look around the room. They heard his breath hitch when he saw his mother and brother. When he turned back, his cheeks were flushed and he refused to look at them.

*I think someone is remembering his meltdown last night.* Gabriel's voice spoke in Castiel's mind.

*He has struggled with controlling his emotions a great deal since our Father changed him.*

*That's to be expected. You crazy kids were always having outbursts at this age—and that was without the emotional baggage this little guy carries.* Gabriel rubbed the boy's back and spoke in a whisper, "What do you say we go make some breakfast? Hmm?"

Sam nodded again and shuffled onto the floor. Gabriel stood and as they made their way into the hallway he used his grace to check the humans. Both were in a deep sleep, and should stay there for a while longer. He wanted to ensure they gave the angels some time to talk with Sam before they awoke. Castiel nodded his approval and followed.

In the hallway, Gabriel went to pick up Sam only to have Castiel grab his arm. Arching an eyebrow in question, the younger angel just shook his head.

He does not like to be carried unless there is no other option.

Gabriel pouted but continued to walk alongside the boy, keeping his hands to himself. They moved at a sedate pace and Gabriel had to bite his tongue to keep himself from making comments about their new height-reversal. He knew Sam wasn't ready to be teased, but the prankster in him was longing to crack jokes—if for no other reason than to break the tension.

“I know you guys think it's cool to live in some kind of underground bat cave, but seriously, it's dark. We should hang some party lights or something in the halls so it's less like some military compound and more like a superhero headquarters. Or even better—floating candles like at Hogwarts,” When they reached the kitchen, Gabriel snapped on the lights. “Now, lets see what you kids have by way of real food. I snooped yesterday before you all got here, and I gotta say—I was not impressed. No ice cream. No chocolate. No candy at all! Just coffee, hamburger meat, and weird green stuff. How in Dad's name did you manage to live off that?” He rambled as he busied himself with going through all the cabinets. A glance over his shoulder showed Sam sitting down on a stool with his arms wrapped around his middle.

With a sigh, Gabriel set down a skillet and walked over to the pitiful figure. “Hey, you. With the sad face. You want to give me a hand?”

Sam shrugged, then shook his head without looking up.

Gabriel crouched down so they were eye level and nudged the boy's chin up with a gentle touch until he met his gaze. “How about this—you help me with breakfast and I'll see to it you get a full sized coffee.” Sam glanced over to Castiel who nodded his agreement to the terms.

“Hey!” Gabriel said in mock outrage, bringing the boy's attention back to him. “What are you looking at him for? He's not part of this deal.” With a wink, he held his hand out and waited for Sam to shake it. When he did, Gabriel gave a broad smile. “Good choice. Alright, up you go.” Without pause, Gabriel scooped Sam up and brought him over to the island.

Immediately, Sam began fighting his hold. “Put me down!”

“Oh, he can talk.” Gabriel laughed as he sat the boy on the counter, “Did you know he can talk, Cassie?”
“Of course I know he can talk,” the angel answered, clearly confused, “You have heard Sam talk on multiple occasions, including yesterday. Was there a reason you were concerned he had lost the ability?” Castiel walked swiftly over to them at the island and stood in front of Sam. After studying him intensely for a second, he raised two fingers to the boy's forehead.

Sam rolled his eyes and pushed the hand away before it made contact while Gabriel burst out laughing. “Ignore him, Cas,” Sam said with a scowl at the archangel, “He thinks he's being cute.”

“I think I'm being cute?” Gabriel said through his laughter, “That's rich coming from the chickadee in footie pajamas!”

Sam's scowl morphed into a full-blown bitch-face that only made Gabriel laugh harder. Giving up on making the archangel take him seriously, Sam looked down at his clothes. Mary had picked this sleep set out, insisting they would keep his feet warm in the chilly bunker. Dean had laughed at him until their mother sent him across the store for some vague item to give them all a break. “Who dressed me?” he asked Castiel.

“Your mother.” the angel answered.

A blush covered Sam's cheeks, “Why not Dean?”

"He wanted to, but Mary insisted. She was very concerned about you after...” Castiel trailed off when he saw Sam flinch at the reminder.

“After I screamed at you and almost hurt my family?” Sam mumbled, looking down at his knees to avoid eye contact, “Why would she even want to touch me after how I acted?”

Okay, none of that. Move bro,” Gabriel hip-checked Castiel out of the way and took is place directly in front of Sam. Placing a hand on either side of the boy he leaned into his space. The laughter was gone, but his smile remained. He waited a moment, allowing Sam to adjust to his sudden closeness. The boy pulled back but didn't try climbing over the counter top, and he stayed still when he realized Gabriel wasn't going to grab him. “Alright, Sammy, let's break this down a bit, okay? You have grace. I'm guessing that it reformed your body to fit the angel-age of your soul which makes you feel vulnerable and a bit defenseless. It also means your mind is now able to process the centuries of torture you survived in the cage. It is normal to feel unbalanced and out of control. Because you are, and it takes time to learn how to properly control grace abilities—even for the angels who have never known life without grace, it takes centuries to become stable. And they were never exposed to anything approaching human-level emotion. Look at Cassie, here. He's been around humans now for years, and he's still practically a Vulcan!”

Sam glanced at Castiel who was nodding. “That is an adequate comparison.”

Gabriel chuckled, but kept his attention on Sam, “I'm never going to get used to him understanding pop culture references. Anyway, what I'm trying to say is that what you are experiencing is normal. You are normal.”

Yeah, normal,” Sam muttered in disbelief and tried to look away.

“Look at me, Sam,” Gabriel waited until the boy obeyed, then continued, “I know this was never exactly on your list of life goals. And for most humans living in the mundane world this would seem like something straight out of a fantasy movie. But you grew up immersed in the supernatural world. You've known angels and demons and vampires and werewolves and a hundred other creatures who share this planet. You've traveled through time, been to Heaven and Hell, and Dad knows where else. People in your family have died and been resurrected on an almost yearly basis. And you had
the big-man Himself as a house-guest for a time. So yeah, normal is relative.”

He paused while Sam processed what he'd said. The boy sat there, picking at his pajamas with those tiny fingers. Finally, he looked back up into Gabriel's face. “But what if it's too much?”

“Too much what, kiddo?” he prodded gently.

“Too much for them?” Sam whispered as though worried speaking any louder might summon the sleeping humans.

“You mean your mother and Dean?”

Sam nodded, biting his lower lip.

“Well, I can't promise there won't be an adjustment period. But I don't think you'll have to worry about it being 'too much' for them. Especially for Dean. You two have gone through everything together—even before the apocalypse you'd already experienced more than most hunters would in a lifetime. And I don't even know everything that's happened in the more recent years, but I'm sure it all got even bigger, darker, and more dramatic knowing you guys. Like the Leviathans? Cassie told me a bit about that fiasco. I remember them, and they were a formidable enemy for the archangels and the host. I can't imagine a bunch of raggedy humans fighting and winning against them, but you did!”

“Not without consequences.” Sam said in a shaky voice, “Dean and Cas got stuck in Purgatory. And I did nothing to get them back!” He looked at Castiel with watery eyes, begging for forgiveness without words.

“Samuel,” Castiel moved closer to them, “you had no way of knowing what had happened to us or where we were. It is not your fault.”

Benny has been more of a brother to me this past year than you've ever been! You let me down. Mistakes? Let's go through some of Sammy's greatest hits. Drinking demon blood, check. Being in cahoots with Ruby. Not telling me that you lost your soul. Those aren't mistakes, Sam. Those are choices! Always blamed me for pulling you back into it...this life. Everything you've ever done since you climbed into my ride has been to deceive me.

Sam's gut clenched as his brother's voice rang clear in his head. He quickly wrapped his arms around his stomach and clenched his eyes shut against the onslaught of memories tied to that time. The anger and pain and guilt that constantly fed back into each other like a vicious looping cycle. Sure, he had apologized for not looking for Dean just a few months ago. Right after Lucifer had also done a “Sammy's greatest hits” slideshow of his life. And maybe the wound was now a scar, but it wasn't gone. It could never be erased.

A cool hand pressed to the forehead and he felt Castiel's grace soothe the headache he hadn't realized was pounding. “Sam, those are things Dean said in the past, under the influence of a cursed object. They do not reflect how he currently feels about you or your relationship.”

“But how is this any different? Chuck offered, and I said 'yes' and now I'm not human. I'm not human Cas! Right now, Dean's in shock because he didn't die from the soul bomb, and mom's back, and I'm different. Give him enough time for it all to sink in and settle, and he's going to realize that I'm not human. It's been, like, our biggest fear since dad's last words to Dean was he'd either have to save me or kill me.”
A gasp sounded from behind Sam, at the entrance to the kitchen. Castiel instantly straightened up and started to step around the island. Gabriel stayed where he was, still leaning against the counter with his hands on either side of Sam. He saw Mary hold up a hand and Castiel stopped. She looked furious.

“John said what ?!”

Chapter End Notes

The original opening line to this chapter was this: "A new fledgling, unique in his creation, and it was Samuel-fucking-Winchester."
It was my starting point for writing Gabriel's inner monologue, but it never fit on it's own. I held on to it and kept pushing it to the bottom of the word document...until I was done, and there wasn't any place for it anymore. So, I give it to you here. :)
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

I lied. There's going to be three chapters to this story.
Sorry, not sorry. I just write the words the story makes me!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The moment Sam heard Mary gasp, his hands shot up to cover his mouth as though he could physically force the words back in. He stared wide-eyed into Gabriel's face, unable to turn around and look at his mother. Her anger filled the room with ice-cold fury. Sam felt it press against him and he shivered as goosebumps rose unpleasantly along his skin. He bit into his palm when nausea forced bile up into his throat.

*Come on, kiddo, she isn't mad at you.* Gabriel's voice boomed in Sam's mind, a deafening explosion of thunder in the immediate vicinity of a lightning strike. He slapped the hand not shoved in his mouth over one ear and curled over, missing Gabriel's wince.

“Sorry, buddy, guess you're not quite ready for angel-radio yet, huh? Shh, it's okay, let me fix that...” The archangel whispered, brushing fingers through the messy curls and easing the sharp stabbing inside his skull. Sam also felt the mental barriers return, buffering Mary's anger. “That's better, yeah?”

Sam nodded but stayed hunched over, torn between exhaustion and mounting frustration. Everything from the last few days made him want to curl into a ball and hide and sleep for a few weeks. Why expose himself to this constant barrage of humiliation and anxiety when he was powerless against it all? He heard the voices of Mary and Castiel fade into the hall leaving nothing but the sound of his own breathing.

“You okay, Sam?” Gabriel asked without a trace of teasing or use of a nickname. It was a relief—knowing how serious the archangel was treating this moment. Sam needed to be taken seriously, and not just be seen as some strange new child.

“How tell her? Demon blood, Azazel...No!” Sam grabbed Gabriel's jacket collar and pushed himself into the other's space for the first time. “No tell her.”

“Whoa there! Don't tell her what? About Azazel's plan? That's kinda the only part of the story she's directly involved in—it might be hard to leave that blank.” Gabriel said in English, looking confused.

Sam shook his head and pushed back against the rising tide of anxiety. If he could focus on the words and logic, then he could relearn how to disconnect his emotional response in some situations. Situations like this one. “No! If her know Azazel, next know...Lucifer. Too soon.”

Gabriel sighed sadly, “I'm sorry, Sam. But your mother already knows about Lucifer. She wanted to know why your soul needed to be healed—why and how it was broken in the first place.”

Sam froze at the words, his grasp on the cool, logical argument slipping away at the realization that the plan was useless. “She know?” he asked softly.
“Yeah, she knows—about vessels, and how Heaven and Hell tried manipulating you both into saying yes, and how you saved the world by tricking the devil. Oh, just for the record—you and I are definitely going to have a long talk about how it is you came to the conclusion that jumping was the best application of my porn-hidden plan. But not right now, and not today,” Gabriel said as he calmly eased Sam's fingers down from his jacket and held them loosely between them. “Now, she knows about Luci, but not Azazel. She needs to know what happened to you boys after she died. Needs to know why she died—why Azazel made these deals in the first place. Do you understand?”

Sam nodded, devastated at not preventing his mom from learning about the cage. “Okay, kiddo. Hold on a sec, Castiel's asking me something.”

Sam sat on the counter, staring at his smaller hands against Gabriel's larger palms. Part of him recognized what the archangel had said, and understood the truth of it. Considering she already knew the one thing he was hoping to keep from her, everything else in their history seemed to pale in comparison. What's the horror in her learning Azazel's part in their story when she knows the ending?

The sight of Gabriel's fingers curling to completely cover Sam's own hand made him jump. Looking up, he realized he'd missed hearing his name. “Sam? Saammmmy?” Gabriel's voice sang until he had his attention. “There you are,” he smiled and gently let go of Sam's hands so he could raise his own in invitation, “So, Castiel is going to fill your mom in on the basics. I think we need to go wake up your brother and catch him up on the morning. What do you say?”

“He mad I say bad things...” Sam ignored the offered arms.

“What? I don't...” he cut himself off as he remembered the statement that started this whole mess, “You mean the thing about John? You think Dean will be angry because you said something negative about your dad?”

Sam shook his head, knowing he could never explain how their father had turned into a mixed symbol in the decade since his death. The brothers had tried so hard to reconcile their conflicting feelings for the man who'd raised them in empty rooms with empty bellies. Their own monumental mistakes softened the boys' memories of John's actions. But for Sam to have said what he did in front of Mary would be unforgivable. “She hear bad things,” he clarified.

“Oh, Dean will be mad your mom heard what you said,” Gabriel pulled a face, understanding that their morning chat with the older Winchester brother could get rough. “Well, he may not like it, but he will move on. Believe me, the more I learn about you boys, the more I know not to underestimate either of you.”

Sam raised an eyebrow, silently asking for further explanation.

“I'll explain it later—it goes along with the talk about you jumping into the cage. Let's focus on one thing at a time, and right now...” Gabriel wiggled his fingers where they still hung, suspended between them, waiting for Sam to lean forward.

Sam knew he couldn't ignore Gabriel's requests to pick him up. He doubted the archangel would allow him to jump down, or try to climb off the counter. Besides, Sam didn't think he could make the long walk back to their new bedroom, and he appreciated the fact that Gabriel wasn't just grabbing him without permission. So he begrudgingly leaned into the offered arms.

Gabriel held him to his chest and Sam allowed himself to rest his chin on the broad shoulder. For a moment, they just stood there in the kitchen. “You are going to be just fine, Samuel. Your family loves you, and you have at least two angels who will do everything in their power to keep all of
you—all of us—safe. I promise."

Sam closed his eyes and pressed his forehead into the jacket material. He felt something shift in Gabriel and then something like the sun's rays in a gentle wind drifted across his arms and ruffled his hair. It was warm and playful and like nothing he remembered experiencing. Opening his eyes, he found his vision filled with golden light. It took several hard blinks to make out the shape of feathers and he felt an involuntary laugh rise through him in wonder.

Gabriel laughed with him, a sound both musical and magical when Sam could hear their graces respond in kind. “That's better,” the archangel said warmly, “now let's get Deano. Then, we can have a real breakfast.”

He gave himself the walk through the bunker to focus solely on the feeling of Sam being calm. Every once in a while, fingers would lazily run through his wings and it felt like electricity on wind. *My Dad, I've missed little siblings!* he thought to himself. The boy really deserved a break. Not just a grace-patch on his soul, but a chance to breathe without constant crisis. “After breakfast, we are going to focus on as much hardcore relaxing as is physically possible with an angel and archangel at your disposal,” he mumbled but Sam wasn't paying attention to anything outside the feathers draped over him like a blanket.

Outside the bedroom, Gabriel reluctantly pulled back his wing and returned Sam's over-stimulated mind to the present situation. “Alright, Sammy, you ready to wake this bear? We can ply him with extra food if he starts roaring and eating people's faces.”

“See, it's people like you who get their face eaten when they wake others up with rude name calling,” a sleep-graveled voice interrupted the pep talk.

Mary was frantic. Why would her husband—a man who adored and doted on his children—ever say that? “Please tell me that I misunderstood what I heard?” Her voice rose above the sound of Gabriel and Sam whispering to each other.

“Mary,” Castiel's voice was low but full of command that made her instantly focus on him, “Let's sit down and give them a minute. Then we'll answer your questions. Would you like some coffee?” He ushered her out of the kitchen toward the couches from the night before.

“Do I want coffee? No—I need someone to explain why John would ever say those words to Dean!” she tried to push past the angel, but Castiel was like stone.

“Please,” he insisted, “I will explain, but you must calm down if you wish to speak with Sam about this issue. You have the right to be angry—but not at your sons.”

Mary searched his face for any hint of deceit. When she found only honesty and compassion, she nodded and allowed him to lead her away from Sam.

*Gabriel, will you be able to join us?* Castiel mentally inquired.

Not any time soon. *This may take a little while. Sammy really didn't want to tell his mom the story of being fed demon blood because he didn't want her to learn about Lucifer and the cage. I've explained that she already knows. He's not happy, but he understands why she needs to be told...Go ahead and explain it to her for now and we can have the boys answer questions later. There was a*
pause and Castiel could almost feel his brother sighing. Well, she can ask them anyway. There's no guarantee that Sam will switch back to English.

*He speaks Enochian when he is upset. And...Lucifer was not a kind teacher.* Castiel stumbled as he tried to subtly explain Sam's broken speech, then winced when he felt the boy's growing inner turmoil from the other room.

*That...that actually explains a lot.* Gabriel answered.

*Gabriel, I do not want to tell her things without Dean's knowledge. He will feel...betrayed. Perhaps you and Sam should go talk to him. It may help Samuel as well—he seems upset.*

*Yeeaaahhh, gotta go.*

*He likes our wings,* Castiel offered up as his brother went silent. He focused back on Mary as they sat down. “Gabriel says he needs some time to calm Sam and that I should go ahead and explain what I can now.”

“Is Sammy alright?” she asked, worry clear on her face.

“He is...” he thought of the right words to describe Sam's current condition, “sensitive to the emotions of others. The grace gives him an enormous empathic ability as well as heightening his own emotional state. Before you joined us, he was already struggling with own fear of being no longer accepted by his family due to the change he underwent. Especially after last night's episode.”

Mary frowned, “I figured he'd be embarrassed, but why would we not accept him?”

“As you know, John raised the boys to be hunters,” Castiel shifted uncomfortably, worried that Dean would be angry at him for revealing any amount of details. But it needed to be said, and he didn't trust the brothers to not skip out on important details that would cast John in a bad light. “He taught them that anything supernatural was to be killed, anything non-human destroyed on principle. After several years of tracking the yellow-eyed demon, he learned what it had done to Sam in the nursery the night of your death. Yellow-eyes, Azazel, fed him demon blood. Your sons later discovered that he had done this to many children around the same time—children he had access to thanks to demon deals with their mothers.”

“Oh God!” she gasped, covering her mouth, “He fed my baby demon blood? Why?”

“It activates latent abilities—telekinesis, pyrokinesis, mind-control, super strength, visions of the future. Sam had visions, and later could exorcise demons with his mind without harming the host.”

“But why?” she asked again.

“It was to prepare possible vessels for Lucifer.” Castiel sighed and turned to fully face her on the sofa, “Everything that every happened to your family was done as a prelude to the apocalypse. Azazel was tasked with finding dozens of potential vessels, but everyone knew it would come down to Sam. He and Dean were destined for their roles. Everyone else was really just a back up plan.”

“So, feeding them blood as babies...”

“Prepared their bodies and minds to house an archangel. Remember how angels are compatible with certain bloodlines? Well, all of the children Azazel fed were from the bloodline of Cain, which is tied to Lucifer. For most, the relation was very distant, and they probably would have never been able to contain the archangel. But Sam is a direct descendant through the Campbell line. Just as Dean is a direct descendant of Abel through the Winchester line—which houses Michael. So, it was always
meant to end with those two because Heaven ensured their creation and manipulated their lives’ events to push them into their roles.” Castiel gave her time to absorb everything he’d said.

“So why did John tell Dean that he would have to either save or kill Sammy?” she finally asked.

“Because he was told that the yellow-eyed demon was creating soldiers to lead a demon army. He knew nothing of angels, let alone the plans for the apocalypse. And Sam was meant to lead a demon army. Azazel forced all the ones who showed potential into a death match where the winner gets crowned leader. It would have given Hell time to mold Lucifer's vessel into a powerful, willing tool.”

Mary managed to look even more horrified. “What happened?”

Castiel looked away. It was not his place to tell about Sam's death, nor Dean's demon deal and his own trip to Hell. “I do not know all the specifics, and some is not my story to tell. I can say that it did not go to plan, and there was no demon army.

She nodded, accepting his incomplete answer. He had told her plenty for now, although she still had one more question. “Castiel?”

“Yes?” he replied, looking at her again.

“Earlier, you said I had the right to be angry, just not at my sons. Did you mean I should be angry with the demons and angels who were involved in all that? Or were you talking about John?” She held his gaze unblinking.

Castiel's eyes widened, unprepared for her insight. He wanted to look away, but knew Mary would interpret it as deceit rather than shame. “All of them deserve your anger, Mary Winchester.”

“But not equally,” she kept pushing.

“It is not my place to determine who is worthy to receive greater portions of your anger.” Castiel tried to avoid being straightforward.

“Castiel!” she said, exasperated.

“John was not the man you remember,” he sighed, “and, while telling Dean to either kill or save Sam was possibly the worst thing he said, it was not the only thing. However, that is also not for me to tell, and that conversation needs to wait until another day.” Mary opened her mouth to say something, but Castiel cut her off, “No, I have already said more than I wanted to without Dean present, and the boys need to learn how to trust you before answering questions about their father.”

Mary surprised Castiel when, instead of insisting on more answers, she reached up and wrapped the angel in a hug. “Thank you for telling me the truth,” she whispered, “and thank you for protecting them when you could.”

“You...you are welcome,” Castiel responded in a bewildered tone, then added, “They are my family.”

“I'm glad. It sounds like they needed one.”

The angel jerked back a little and she let him go. He had always seen the boys as a complete unit—two lives completely bound together by trauma and sacrifice and blood. They were The Brothers, a supernatural entity unto themselves, and they were already a family. He'd been adopted by the Winchesters, and while he'd wrestled with his place in their family Castiel had never questioned how they saw him. Never questioned if they needed more than each other.
“You don't think they need you?” she asked with a laugh, seeing his reaction, “I may be new around here, but I knew as soon as we met that he looked to you.”

“For what?” his voice was rougher than usual.

“Everything. Support, comfort, confirmation—things that I don't even know how to offer to him because I don't know him yet,” she smiled like she was in awe of Castiel, like she wasn't jealous or hurt that he had somehow replaced her, “When I first saw this Dean, he was terrifying. Tall and dangerous and he came storming out of a dark wooded area full of mist. I didn't know who he was, but I was really surprised how easy it was to take him to the ground.

“After we got past our introductions and we made our way to the bunker, I remember thinking how confident and unshakable he seemed. Just broad stunning smiles and witty optimism. I never realized he'd just come from saving the whole damn universe, or that he was worried because Sammy wasn't answering the phone. But when we pulled up and he saw you—I realized I'd only seen a mask because I watched it crumble and get replaced by such relief.”

Castiel tilted his head in confusion, “I do not understand.”

Mary smiled, “Dean had just spent three hours pretending like it was perfectly normal to drive around with his dead mom. It was cold and distant now that I've gotten to know him better. But when he saw you, and knew he could finally be himself, it was the first time I really saw Dean. My Dean. And he's looked to you ever since that moment. When we found the blood, and then Sam, he looked to you for guidance and support. He defers to your judgment, even when he fights about it first. He trusts you. They both do. Don't think I've missed how Sam soaks up your attention like summer sun.”

Castiel felt a smile settle on his face and rubbed the back of his neck, “I honestly never saw them as needing me. I've tried to remain useful to them, even when I was reduced to living as a human. But they've always been my family. I didn't think they saw me as their family.”

“Well, allow me to reassure you. They do. You're a very special person, Castiel, and I hope one day you and I can consider each other family too.”

Dean had been content drifting through the space between sleep and consciousness. It was a rare event for the hunter to wake relaxed instead of alert and tense. That bubble of contentment was burst when the echo of footsteps broke through his awareness and he recognized the snarky voice of the Trickster.

The silence that followed Dean's own sassy comeback was unsettling enough to make him sit up and try to get his eyes to focus past his mental fog. Checking his watch proved it was still early, but a glance around the empty room worked to clear the sleepiness faster than anything else. “Gabriel, where is everyone? Where's Sam? Where's my mom and Cas?” Dean ordered as he turned on a table lamp and stood up.

“Whoa there, cowboy! Do all humans wake up assuming the world is ending, or is that a Winchester special? Relax, man, I got Sam right here,” he turned as he walked into the light to show mini-Sam, in his footie pajamas, perched on the archangel's hip. It would have been cute if not for the fact that his brother was face-planting into Gabriel's jacket in obvious distress.
“Yeah? What's wrong with him? What did you do to upset him? I swear to God, if you've...” Dean's voice was calculating and calm as his eyes took in every detail of the two. The kid was letting their newest stray house-guest parade him through the house while clearly upset. Wait, not just upset—he was hiding from Dean. “Sammy?” the hunter's voice softened to a tone reserved just for assessing and reassuring his brother.

Sam shook his head without lifting it, rubbing his face against the fabric. “S'r'y,” came the mumbled reply.

“About...last night? Dude, I promise, you did not need to make a special apology at six in the morning,” Dean reassured, and a little confused how this constituted a crisis before sunrise.

“Not just that,” Sam said as he pulled back from Gabriel's shoulder enough to be clearly heard, but still wouldn't look at Dean.

“What else are you sorry about?” he asked, bewildered.

“I promise, I didn't mean to say it! I didn't know...didn't know she was there. I never...” the kid was hyperventilating as he tried to start the story half a dozen times.

Dean's eyes moved from his brother to Gabriel, eyebrows raised to demand explanation.

The archangel sighed, “Cassie and I took Sam to the kitchen when he woke up so we could discuss stuff without waking you and your mom. We got to talking about his concern over not being human anymore,” Gabriel's eyes stayed locked on Dean, encouraging him silently to listen between the lines. The hunter knew 'concern' was Sam's default mode, and on a topic like that 'concern' probably more closely resembled 'tripping into terror.’ He nodded to Gabriel that he understood what he was really saying and he was surprised to see relief on the shorter man's face before he kept speaking, “Sam mentioned something John said before he died. And...your mom heard.”

It took a second for Dean to figure out what Sam had said. His eyes widened and his hand flew up to his hair, “Oh shit, you said...you said that Dad told me I'd have to...and Mom heard you? What did she do?” Morbid curiosity mixed with his need to assess the situation with their mother.

“She demanded answers. I had Castiel explain the basics of Azazel's part in your lives. If I heard correctly, he told your mother how John only knew about the plans for Sam to lead the demon army and that the demon's plan failed. Cas didn't go into Sam's death or your deal. He wouldn't betray your confidence.” Gabriel's eyes shone with a seriousness and understanding that was starting to unnerve Dean.

“Did she say anything stupid?”

That question wiped all the understanding from Gabriel as he laughed, his face scrunched up in bewilderment, “Like what? Ask for Azazel's blood type?”

“No,” Dean's aggressive protectiveness wasn't distracted by the sass, “I mean did she upset Sam? Did she try to defend our dad.”

“Oh,” Gabriel looked down at the kid who was staring holes into the archangel's shirt. He used his free hand to rub Sam's back in what appeared to be an unconscious gesture, “No, I'm pretty sure there is no defense for your dad. And last I saw Mary, she was more likely to resurrect John and kill him again than she was to defend him.”

“Good,” the hunter said gruffly, then softened as he turned all his focus to his brother, “So what's got you upset, Sammy? Did you think I'd freak out? Or is this about last night?”
At first, it wasn't clear if Sam was going to answer, but then they heard a small voice whisper, “Both.”

“Hey Gabe, you mind sitting him on the bed for me?” Dean sat on the edge of his mattress and patted the space beside him. Gabriel raised an eyebrow at the nickname, but lowered the kid to the requested spot. Without the archangel distracting him, Sam quickly seemed to realize there was no escaping a talk with his brother. The problem for Dean was that Sam was too short for this conversation to happen side-by-side.

With a sigh, Dean eased himself off the bed, joints popping, and knelt facing Sam. “Alright, dude, talk to me.”

Sam shrugged, but his brother waited him out, knowing the kid could never pass up the chance to talk. His patience was rewarded when Sam squirmed after only thirty seconds and caved in, “I just worry...that it's a lot. A lot to accept at once.”

“Is it a lot for you to accept?” Dean asked.

“What? That's not...” Sam huffed, knowing his brother had deliberately turned his words against him, “I mean, yes, it's been hard. Less than a week ago, I was prepared to take the Mark, God almost died, then you almost died and I was shot and now mom's back and Gabriel's back. It hasn't all sunk in yet.”

Dean nodded, “I agree, those are all big things that will take time to process. But you didn't wake up at the ass-crack of dawn and have an existential crisis over any of them.”

"I...I guess that the thing from last night was still fresh in my mind when I first woke up. The angel-squad was worried I'd still be upset and wanted to talk. That's all.”

“That's all, huh? You just talked about Michael and Raphael returning?” the hunter's voice was quiet and intense.

Sam flinched and his breath caught at the resurgence of fear caused by that thought, “N-no.”

“Then what did you talk about?”

“I told you! That all of this would be too much accept.” Sam gestured vaguely around them.

Dean's eyes lit up in understanding, “You think we won't accept you now that you're different?”

“What?! No, that's not what...” Sam rushed to deny his brother's words.

“Really Sam?” he used his 'how dumb do you think I am' voice, “So what, you were just casually discussing your 'concerns' about being turned into some kind of baby angel, and happened to mention John's dying words?”

“No...no...” the kid kept shaking his head.

“Who else in this universe knows the hell those words put us through besides me and you? No one! You can lie to everyone else and gloss over what you 'really meant,' but not me. I know, and I'm tired of those words haunting us.” Dean framed his little brother's face with his hands, forcing the kid to look at him and quit shaking his head. “Dad. Was. Wrong. I don't give a shit how scared he was, or how hard he tried, because he was wrong for even thinking it. Saving you will always be my priority. You will always be my priority, understand?”
Tears fell over the baby-round cheeks and Dean promptly wiped them with his thumbs. Sam stared at him in confusion, “But I'm not human, Dean!”

Rolling his eyes, “So? What, I should be mad because Chuck saved your life? I mean, if my options are a tiny angel brother or a dead human brother, I'll take my chances and try not to trip over you.”

“That's...you're not...” Sam tripped over his words, “You're not taking this seriously!”

“I couldn't be more serious, kiddo. How many times have we been changed by the supernatural? We've been infected, bitten, healed, put under spells, swapped bodies, possessed, killed, and resurrected. I've lost count it happens so often! And we've always rolled with it. I was a demon—a full knight of hell—and you stayed by my side. Now you've got some angel-grace and I should get out the holy oil? Fuck that, dude.”

“You really think that?” Sam asked, breathless with the possibility.

“Yeah, Sammy, I really think that,” Dean smoothed down the boy's curls and pulled him into a hug, “And I think mom is a little relieved that one of us is kid-sized.”

Sam gave a laugh through his tears and gently smacked the back of his brother's head, “I can't believe you let her dress me.”

“Ha! You try stopping her. She even had Cas and Gabe jumping to do her bidding,” he smirked over to the archangel who was leaning against the wall watching them.

Gabriel took the invitation to rejoin the conversation, “Hey, no fair. She was in total mom-mode! Angels don't even have moms...we had no defense against her.”

“Whatever, mamma's boy. Let's get out there before she has Cas spilling inappropriate insights about pizza men or bees,” he pulled back from Sam to look him over. His brother was still shaken and emotionally unsteady, but he was smiling and making eye contact. “You ready?”

Sam chewed on his bottom lip and nodded. “I guess. It's not like we can hide in here forever, right?”

“I love you, but I'm not spending eternity in this room. Come on,” he helped Sam off the bed and didn't let go until the boy had his balance, “Are your feet warm enough, or should we get some slippers you can fit your footsies into?” Dean laughed when the only response he was given was a tiny middle finger.

Chapter End Notes

Feed the author's soul with your fantastic comments! Seriously, y'all are amazing :)

Feed the author's soul with your fantastic comments! Seriously, y'all are amazing :)
Mary prepared coffee while she and Castiel waited in the kitchen for the others. Nerves ate away at her stomach as she kept picturing Sammy's face in his crib moments before her death. Before a demon had bled into his mouth to prepare him for Lucifer. For the destruction of the world.

No matter how many times the angels argued with her that it wasn't her fault, Mary knew she would always carry that weight on her shoulders. It was her choice to accept the demon's deal that sealed her youngest son's fate. *My whole family's fate, really,* she thought to herself. Sam lost any chance at a normal life as he was placed on a path filled with manipulation. Dean lost his innocence and childhood. And John lost himself.

Her hands clenched as she thought of what her husband had done to their children. She wasn't naive—being raised in a stable family of hunters didn't mean she hadn't met other hunter families in less stable situations. The Campbells had a reputation for being a powerhouse of information and contacts. It was normal for her family to house hunters passing through. Some needed help with a hunt or lore. Some came to pass on a message or lead from mutual friends. Most were solitary wanderers, but occasionally they got a small family—refugees of the supernatural war.

The parents were always angry and terrified, eyes bloodshot from not sleeping, usually heavy drinkers, and single. But the impressions that stuck with Mary were of the kids. Unnaturally silent and suspicious of strange adults, siblings clinging to each other, skinny bodies in over-sized dirty clothes.

She knew there was a chance her boys hadn't been exactly like those other children she'd met. But she remembered Sam and Dean at the store, both completely unsure of themselves and emotionally conflicted over such a mundane task as basic clothes shopping. She saw how Dean was used to making Sam his number one priority, whether it was in a crisis or simply getting the boy fed and dressed. It was clearly a deeply ingrained part of the brothers' relationship—even the angels deferred to Dean's judgment.

Every time Mary pictured the boys as children, she saw John and her fury would make her shake again. No matter how many excuses could be given to him for circumstances being beyond his control, there was no excuse for considering the murder of their baby. And for him to tell Dean that it was their son's responsibility to carry out? Completely unforgivable.

"Mary," Castiel's rumbling voice startled Mary out of her dark thoughts and back to the present.

"I wanted to make sure you were alright...and let you know the others will be joining us in a few minutes," he looked worried.

"Right. I should probably calm down so I don't overwhelm Sammy," she said, trying to smile and control her anger, "I was thinking of John," she offered in explanation.

The angel nodded, though still concerned. "I understand. Is there anything I can do?"

Mary gave a laugh, "Thanks, but I got this. Sometimes, parents just have to stow their crap and focus on their kids." She poured herself a cup of coffee for something to do. "Would you like some coffee,
“Castiel?”

“No, thank you. Angels do not need to eat or drink or sleep.”

“We may not need it, but that doesn't mean some of us haven't learned to appreciate the finer things on Earth.” Gabriel's cheerful voice rang through the kitchen as he entered.

Dean was right on his heels looking awkward but determined. Mary watched him glance her way before he sought out Castiel for some sign of reassurance. He must have received it because she saw some of the tension drain away. She worried Sam might have stayed behind when she didn't see the boy, but then she finally spied him standing behind his brother's legs. He hesitantly returned her smile when he caught her looking at him and she had to shove down the images of similar children.

“Good morning boys,” Mary said nervously, “we would have made breakfast, but I didn't want to be responsible for destroying the kitchen.”

“Well, it's a good thing I'm here then! I've been a master chef in no fewer than 57 countries, during at least seven separate centuries. Cassie, you want to learn the art of making the perfect omelet?” Gabriel didn't wait for an answer—just hooked an arm through his brother's elbow and led him away from the entrance.

“Mom,” Dean started, but Mary shushed him and wrapped her arms around him. She felt Dean's shoulders tighten at her touch, but his muscles melted as she spoke.

“You don't have to explain anything. We can talk about later if you want to, but for right now let me just say this,” she took a steadying breath, “I am so sorry. John should never have even thought those words, let alone said them to you. I can't imagine...”

“Hey, it’s okay, Mom,” Dean whispered as he clutched at the back of her robe, “We know. Sam and I've talked about it a few times over the years and we know what he said was wrong. We've had time to work through most of it, although I'm sure we'll find something to rehash down the road. So try not to worry about it too much, okay? It wasn't your fault.”

“Don't you dare try to comfort me, Dean Winchester. I'm the parent here,” she said with a half-laugh and a playful slap to the back of his head, “Besides, I haven't even reached the 'worry about it' stage. I can't get past 'angry enough to punch walls.'”

“Well, our family's known for our tempers.”

“Are we now?” Mary asked as she felt Dean's feet shift, and his left arm drop. Thinking he wanted to end their hug, she started to relax her hold but he just held tighter with his right arm.

“Oh, yeah, we're legendary from Heaven to Earth to Hell and all the places in between. You'll fit right in.”

“Good to know,” was all she say through the happiness from his words. Her son just patted her back, then straightened up with a little smirk. When she raised an eyebrow at his expression, he nodded his head to a space below on his left.

She looked down to find wide hazel eyes shifting between her and Dean. Mary noted that Dean's left hand was gently working the tangles from Sam's hair, and further down her eldest son's barefoot was carefully pinning one footie of his brother's pajamas to the ground. The sight left her a little giddy when she recognized the action as one she'd used regularly on Dean as a toddler. The stretched-out-of-place fabric proved he'd stopped the boy mid-escape, but the stunning uncertainty on her youngest son's face told her that something more than Dean's foot was keeping Sam in place.
A glance back up to her eldest got her the nod she needed to know it was okay to approach Sam. It made her chest ache to know she would be a stranger to her youngest for a while yet. The conversation last night provided her with a lot more context for her boys' lives but it had been hard to reconcile the others' descriptions of Sam with the little boy she'd bathed and dressed. In his sleep, he'd nestled into her like he recognized her—either as his mother or a source of safety. But the child she'd held in her arms was different from the one standing before her now. In the light of morning, she could see the weight of age in his eyes.

Kneeling down, Mary rested her hands on her thighs to keep from reaching out to him. She saw Dean start to step away when he made a grunt noise and shifted back into place. He had the barest hint of a smile on his face, like he was purposefully trying to keep a neutral expression. Looking back down, Mary realized that Sam had his fingers unconsciously curled on the side hem of Dean's sweatpants. It was a testament to the brothers' level of non-verbal communication that the barest pressure was enough to keep Dean in place. Thinking about it, she realized they had probably been having a silent conversation throughout her entire spoken one.

“Sam, I'm sorry if my reaction this morning upset you. I was not mad at you and I will never agree with John's words,” her palms began to sweat and she wiped them against the robe's fabric in a nervous habit. How could she not know how to speak to her own child? Dean was easier because he knew her, remembered her enough that it showed when he looked at her, and Mary recognized her little boy in that look. But Sam and her didn't have that shared memory.

“I do that,” Sam said, looking down.

“You... get angry?” she asked.

“Well, I do that too,” he glanced up through his messy curls then gestured toward her lap, “but I meant that. My hands sweat when I get nervous and I'm always wiping them on my pant legs.” He said it with in a tone crossed between matter-of-fact seriousness and the awe of someone who'd just received a revelation.

“Oh, really?” she said, surprised by the sudden change in topic.

“Kid's not joking. Never seen anyone who sweats like he does. I would threaten to cover him in deodorant every night so I wouldn't wake up drenched because someone couldn't sleep unless he plastered himself to me.” Dean grinned at the memory.

Sam glared up at him and his brother's cheeky smile faded, “You did do that, Dean! You took one of Dad's new sticks and used almost the whole thing on me. Including my hair!”

“Oh yeah!” Dean's smile beamed back in place, “I forgot about that. That was awesome.”

“How old were you?” Mary asked, trying to picture them.

“It was not awesome. I smelled like Old Spice for weeks,” Sam insisted to his brother, then turned to Mary. His voice was quieter, a little shy like he'd forgotten for a second that she was there, “I think I was about five or six, so Dean must have been at least nine. Old enough to know better.” The last bit was said with the now-familiar dramatic scowl.

“Yeah, but dad's reaction,” Dean's breath hitched as he tried not to laugh while talking, “He...I thought he would kill me, so I tried to stuff you under the blankets and hoped he wouldn't notice. But the second he walked in the room, oh god...” he trailed off as he couldn't fight the laughter anymore and sank to sit on the floor next to them.
“Hilarious, jerk,” Sam mumbled but resigned himself that his brother wouldn’t be deterred.

Dean scrunched his face up in a re-enactment of John’s reaction, “Did my cologne break? Oh god, how are you guys breathing?” Dad shoves up the window and starts tearing through his duffle, trying to find where the smell was coming from. He sees the deodorant stick sitting out on the sink and hears Sam giggling from under the blanket where I’m trying to smother him into silence. Then, he walks over to us and flings the blanket back,” tears pour down Dean's cheeks as he gets caught in another laughing fit, “And the smell, it's like a cloud rising and it’s so strong that Dad's eyes start to water and he just stares at Sam like he's an alien.”

"That's because there was chunks of waxy goop smeared all over me! And all the lint and dust stuck to it so I probably looked disgusting.” Sam's scowl grew and was joined by hands on his hips.

The description only made Dean laugh harder and the sight made Mary's heart flutter with joy, “What happened?” she asked, grinning.

“When Dad was done howling with laughter? Just scooped him up, and dumped him in the bath. Then he threw the deodorant away. Told me he didn't want know what happened and to never do it again. But I'll tell you what—he never did wear Old Spice again. Started using things with almost no scent to them.”

Mary could see it—her boys getting into their dad's bag and doing something so mischievous and normal for little kids. And she recognized some of her John in there. Maybe he wasn't a complete caricature of the other hunter parents she'd encountered. Maybe there were enough moments like this for them growing up to keep the horrors balanced.

“Why are you all on the floor?” a gravelly voice spoke from behind Mary. She jumped but the sudden intrusion didn't phase the boys even though it seemed like they hadn't noticed Castiel's approach either.

“I'm standing, Cas!” Sam protested, turning his scorn on the angel.

She tilted her head all the way back in time to see Castiel nod, “My apologies, Sam. You are all a lot lower to the ground from my perspective.”

“What the hell are you wearing?” Dean asked, on the verge of going into another laughing fit.

“Gabriel said it was necessary,” he answered, and Mary thought she could detect a trace of annoyance for the first time in the angel's voice.

She got back onto her feet and turned to look at what Dean was talking about. She laughed before she could stop herself. Castiel had lost the trench coat and suite jacket, and rolled up his sleeves. A black apron with the words “Kiss the Cook” in bright red letters was tied around his neck and waist. And it probably was necessary because it was covered in flour...and possibly a whole egg.

“Wow,” was all she managed to say. Hopefully, the kitchen was still standing.

Dean stood and looked Castiel in the eye and quoted John again, “I don't want to know what happened. Just don't do it again.”

“What happened? Don't do what? I was only assisting Gabriel in making breakfast. Is that not something I should do again?” Castiel's frown deepened when Dean just laughed harder and slapped the angel on the shoulder. A large plume of flour burst from the fabric.

“Ignore him, Cas,” Sam answered him when Dean walked away without another word.
“Does he think he's 'being cute?'” Castiel asked with exasperated seriousness and using his air-quote gesture.

The laughter bubbled out of Mary and this time she did nothing to stop it. In all her limited time spent imagining angels as a girl, none of her musings came close to the two she now knew. This awkward little warrior who protected and loved her boys from within a cloud of constant befuddlement, and the archangel with a foul mouth and sharp wit who was cooking them breakfast.

Sam's laugh joined her own and it was music to her ears, “He thinks he's adorable.”

“Y'all better get in here before Dean eats everything!” Gabriel's voice called through the kitchen.

Mary looked down to see Sam struggling to straighten his pajamas and nodded to Castiel, “We'll be right there.” For a second, he seemed torn about leaving them, but then gave her a smile and returned to Gabriel. Kneeling back down, she gently held Sam's arm to steady him as he pulled the twisted fabric back into place. “You're very good at that, you know,” she stated.

“At what? Failing to properly wear clothes?” Sam asked with a huff, but the little grin made the sarcasm warm instead of biting.

“No, you're good at derailing a conversation,” she whispered conspiratorially.

Sam's head shot up, grin fading to a firm line of worry. “I'm sorry, I didn't...I saw you doing that thing that I do, and I just wanted...to say something. I don't know. I'm sorry.”

“Hey now, I'm not scolding you, Sammy,” she reassured, leaving her hand on his arm to keep the connection, “I'm complimenting you.”

“You...what?” he asked, the worry now shifting to confusion.

“You didn't just get sweaty palms and a death scowl from me. And while your father may have changed after my death, I doubt he developed a talent for subtlety. I can see some of him in how Dean takes everything head on—whether it's a crisis or a conversation. But you and I? We come at things with much more nuance. We prefer to do all our research ahead of time instead of barging in and demanding answers. Am I right?”

Sam nodded and a smile slowly grew, lighting his eyes. “Yeah,” he whispered.

“Then as one master to another, I want to compliment you. And I also wanted to finish what I was saying,” she held his gaze until he nodded again, “I know that we are strangers—or maybe more estranged relatives who have only heard of each other. But I already love the person you've become, Sam. You are patient and kind and selfless.”

“Not always,” Sam blushed.

“Well, we're all human.” The words came out before she could stop them. Sam's blush drained away and his eyes dropped to the ground. Cursing herself, Mary brought both her hands up to rest on Sam's neck, her thumbs gently running along his jaw to nudge his face back up. “Sweetheart, I also know that in the black-and-white world of hunting, there is often little tolerance for shades of gray. I'm sorry that you were made to doubt yourself. That John made you doubt yourself,” she felt him give his head a little shake and she wasn't sure if he was trying to deny her words or John's actions, “I will be eternally grateful to a God I never believed in for saving you. If it means you aren't completely human because of His actions, then that is just fine. Anything that gives me more time with you, that lets you heal, is a blessing in my book.”
Sam hesitantly brought a hand up to wrap around her wrist, but he didn't draw her hands away from his face. Instead, she felt little fingers move along her skin, cataloging the bones and pulse point. “You really mean that?” he asked shyly.

“I really do.”

Footsteps behind her drew Sam's attention and she saw him nod at whoever had stopped a few paces away. “We're coming. And you better not have eaten everything!”

Mary smiled. Of course it was Dean, who was probably frantic when they hadn't joined him after a minute or two. Standing up, she turned to smile reassuringly at Dean. The minute amount of tension that eased from his eyes was a sudden unexpected victory for her in a morning full of floundering. She patted his shoulder as she walked past and heard him start talking quietly to Sam.

“You good, man?”

“Yeah, Dean, I'm good.” She heard a brief scuffle and a frustrated groan. “Quit stepping on these foot-things, you jerk, or I'm cutting the feet out! I'm not joking, Dean.”

“What would you tell mom, huh? That Cas chewed them off?”

There was a pause. “Do you think she'd buy it?”

“Maybe. I probably would.”

Laughing to herself, Mary thought maybe she hadn't completely missed the boys' childhoods after all.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to everyone for the lovely comments!!
I'm super blessed and humbled by all of you.

Comments are SOUL FOOD!!!
(and may we all live to survive this Tuesday--safety, patience, and understanding my friends)

End Notes

Come be my friend on Tumblr @theriverscribe
Comments feed my soul!! <3

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!