Strange New Worlds

by Leletha

Summary

AU…THE FUTURE: Humanity survives everything, spreads to the stars, and finds it needs to know where it can land. Enter interplanetary explorers Sam and Dean Winchester…and sentient starships Gabriel and Castiel. Then ships and crews start disappearing out in the black and, as usual, all goes straight to hell. [Destiel, ever so slightly Sabriel only if you’re looking for it.] Slightly earlier version originally posted on fanfiction (dot) net.
Chapter One: Pilot

THE FUTURE:

It was because of people, of course. People and their insatiable tendency to make more people, to make people better, to do newer and crazier and more incredible things, to goddamn boldly go. And that big little problem of too many people and not enough nearby space would have been a big enormous problem...if it hadn’t been for the starships.

A few hundred years ago, someone tackling the old chestnut of AI had defied all conventional knowledge and decided to just keep piling processors and information and memory on top of each other and discovered that while you couldn’t build a mind from scratch, you could damn well grow one from slush. Give a fledgling artificial intelligence enough information, enough space, the ability to make choices, and a goal, and what eventually emerged was a mind. There had been screaming about the rise of the machines, and that there were enough people making more little copies of themselves that they didn’t need computers doing it too, but then two things had happened.

Firstly, at the time the work had been done in orbit, so it was only a very short step to setting those minds to piloting small ships. When it comes to making choices and having a goal to meet, nothing presents a challenge like orbital mechanics in a space practically filled with satellites and space junk. They bypassed the ‘killer robot’ stage so beloved of largely crap science fiction and were ships practically from the word go.

Secondly, the computer minds had gotten together with some innovative humans and invented not a doomsday device to wipe out the humans or turn them into batteries, but the flightdrive, as it rapidly came to be called as everyone tried to talk about the ‘faster-than-light-drive’ as quickly as possible. The technology that crossed light-years almost as quickly as crossing the ocean. Not as easily, though. It still needed a hell of a lot of processing power...

Which was basically how the colonization of the universe by humans was made possible by a fleet of ships with essentially human minds. And definitely human personalities. The starships were legally people, and anyone who spent any time with them knew it. They spanned the range of human personality and behavior; they just happened to have the bodies of ships the size of your average office block. And it hadn’t been long before VR goggles became standard issue for anyone who worked with a starship, so that you could at least talk to a face. It turned out that voices from the walls of the ship on which your life depended freaked people out. It was probably a deep-seated prejudice from the early days of mass media, or something.

Solid holograms hadn’t been far behind, making it fairly impossible to know whether the person you were talking to had his brain in his body or in orbit a few miles above his head. Almost everyone had shut up about the starships then, although there were always people who screamed just for the sake of screaming.

And then there were the avatars, artificially grown human bodies with processor/interface brains. If the holograms could pass for human...the avatars were indistinguishable.

They could have easily left humans behind, but when you came right down to it they really were people, and they considered humans their own kind, especially once the holograms and the avatars became available.
It had become fairly standard to send out a mixed team of humans and ships to scout for potentially habitable planets. Starships ran themselves, mostly, but like a human trying to do surgery in his own chest cavity, it wasn’t a good idea to go completely solo. A basic survey team, therefore, was generally composed of two human-ship pairs. They’d jump to a new system, scan the planet from orbit (if it was even there—sometimes it wasn’t), and if the place looked habitable, transport down the human crew for a closer look.

Rather than just hanging around in orbit, especially after an incident with a new colony’s very near miss by an errant asteroid, the ships would then explore the star system for potential hazards or interesting phenomena, return to retrieve their respective humans, and then take off for the next target.

They had a lot of ground to cover.

This planet, at least, was hot and sticky and full, mainly, of trees. Personally, Dean wouldn’t want to live here, but it had air and water, currently incarnated in ‘about-to-rain’. If the powers that be decided to send people here, they could clear some space, wear shorts, and carry umbrellas. Then again, maybe he’d just gotten used to a ship that didn’t mind tailoring the temperature to his whims and didn’t like mud. Tough luck, Cas, Dean thought, remembering at the last second that the commlink was open and Sam was listening in. Otherwise he might have said it aloud just out of habit. If you don’t get back soon, I’m gonna be tracking whole new kinds of alien dirt all over you.

“We should call this one Mudball,” Dean grumbled, mostly to himself but at least indirectly at his brother. They were about fifty miles apart at the time, but Sam did have to listen. As the people who could actually operate the transporter were unknown distances away, it was a safety thing. There wasn’t much they could do to help at that distance, but at least they’d know that help was needed. Besides, they both carried long-range emergency beacons that, if pressed, would summon two very clever ships very quickly. On a previous mission, the boys had been transported down without a problem, but a day later they’d been attacked and chased into a really small and damp cave by some seriously unfriendly reptiles. Make that a lot of seriously unfriendly reptiles.

The cavalry had come tearing back in a hurry, and it was lucky for the velociraptoids that the two scout ships weren’t armed, although the rescued but rattled boys had lobbied for beaming down armed explosives.

“We called that other one Mudball,” retorted Sam patiently. “Three weeks ago? You fell in that river.”

Dean had not needed reminding of that. It had been a long fall and a sticky, smelly landing cushioned only by his adaptive smartsuit. To make matters worse, he’d had to call Sam to come and get him, and he hated to let anyone else fly his pet project of a shuttle anywhere, much less to rescue him from a ravine. He’d gotten mud all over the interior of Baby, which he’d spent weeks of this mission repairing and detailing. And until he smelled a lot better, all he’d seen or heard of Cas was his voice through the walls. Dean had gotten used to having him physically present when the human was aboard and they were in flight, and had missed his a-little-bit-well-okay-a-lot-more-than-a-friend.

“I’m forgetting about that,” he announced. “It didn’t happen, okay?”

Sam’s laugh was not reassuring. There were probably pictures. Damn. “You know they’re just going to rename it anyway, right? Doesn’t matter what we write on the maps. Even if it’s ‘Dean Falls In’ River.”

He decided to ignore that. “Yeah, yeah. Almost done up there? They’ll be back any minute. I hope.”
Unconsciously, Dean reached up to resettle the modified VR goggles that he and Sam both wore, or at least carried, any time they left their ships. When the two starships were actually in range, they would be able to project information, scans, and images onto the surface of the goggles, providing a convenient overlay or allowing them to insert avatars into the images their human partners saw. It took getting used to, especially when the person you were talking to vanished when you took off the goggles to wipe sweat out of your eyes. To name just one example.

At the moment, Dean wasn’t wearing them because, without his ship’s input, they’d just be average goggles. And it was too hot for goggles, and although they were waterproof they wouldn’t help much in the impending rain.

“Give me five more minutes, okay? I can see a rock face that’s an unusual color and I want to take a few more samples, just to be sure. It’s not really threatening to rain here yet."

Really, they weren’t in a rush—couldn’t go anywhere until the ships decided they’d checked the hell out of the local environment, as long as you took ‘local’ to mean ‘anywhere in this star system’. “You have fun with that, Sammy,” Dean said dismissively, and turned the volume on the interface way down, enough that he’d hear a scream but not a casual remark, not bothered by the fact that the only other person on the planet was fifty miles away and halfway up a mountainside.

Slinging his battered sample bags over his shoulder, and remembering just in time that one of the cases inside shouldn’t be shaken too sharply, Dean started hiking back towards the campsite where they’d variously landed the shuttle or beamed down, five days ago. Sure, he didn’t have to go back—it wasn’t as if Cas wouldn’t be able to find him anywhere on the planet—but there was a vague chance he’d be able to get back to Baby before the rain started, and anyway Dean was sick of portable camping rations. Unless there were some enormous predators on this planet that five days’ worth of surface scans and two days of orbital scans before that hadn’t turned up, their coolers would still be there, stowed safely aboard Dean’s refurbished shuttlecraft, which the brothers tended to use instead of a more conventional tent whenever they landed on an unexplored world.

Granted, if there were some meat-eaters that size, he probably should be heading in the other direction. Then again, if some big galoot had savaged Dean’s pet shuttle, it was probably the predator that should head for the hills. Whatever. He was walking this way and that was that.

Sam had said five minutes, he rationalized as he negotiated his way around the latest batch of the bajillion trees on this world, but Dean knew that tone in his brother’s voice, and it would probably be anywhere from fifteen minutes to half an hour before Sam remembered to check in. And given the choice between sitting and waiting, or covering some ground, Dean would take the active option any day.

Did mean struggling through ten miles of forest and undergrowth, though. Without the smartsuit, which he’d programmed to act like body armor as protection from the environment, Dean would have been a torn and bloody mess hours ago. As it was, his planetside clothes were a shining (or shredded) example of what the thing was saving his skin from. Every single branch within a hundred yards seemed determined to catch on his shoulders or snarl itself against his ankles, and they all had thorns. Any settlers who moved here had better bring some bloody chainsaws.

But then again, most people couldn’t afford to be picky. Not with there being so many of them, and not enough worlds. This not-Mudball had air a man could breathe without wearing a filter mask, and the biggest four-legged hunter the team had managed to find wasn’t mean enough to scare your average horse. There might still prove to be something nasty in the dirt and the water, but so far, so good, he guessed.

He hadn’t expected to be here, or anywhere off Earth at all. Except that their father’s death had
thrown both brothers into disarray, and the Fleet groups that trained offworld survey teams were looking in particular for pairs that could work well together in relative isolation and unpredictable situations…and Sam and Dean had been inseparable growing up, as much as they grated on each other sometimes…okay, often. Sam more than qualified—Sam was, his older brother had to admit whenever Sam wasn’t listening, quite brilliant, and Dean? Well, Dean could fix anything and survive anywhere.

This worked, for all of them. The brothers would spend a fair amount of time working together on whatever new rock was on the agenda today, and by the time the survey was over they’d be ready to go back to video calls only for a week or so. Until Castiel and Gabriel found them a new rock to explore. Rinse. Repeat.

But really—they did a good job and no one on their team had been killed and all in all it was damn good work. Despite the heat. And the stickiness in the air that told him that in about five minutes it was going to positively piss down. And that he’d spent almost a week of messy, sweaty days wearing the same smartsuit and with only Sam’s voice on the other end of the commlink for company. Collecting dirt. By now, Dean was really looking forward to a shower, once Cas turned up…

That train of thought went off downhill, and didn’t come back for a few minutes, until Dean’s comm unit went ping in his ear, stopping him quite literally short.

“About time,” he said to it, and slipped the VR goggles over his eyes, tapping the touchpad on the side to reactivate them.

The goggles sparked to life, and for a moment, nothing changed. And then a familiar figure appeared to materialize out of nowhere.

“Hello, Dean,” said Castiel. The human knew the sound was being transmitted from orbit, but his eyes and ears told him it was coming from the man who wasn’t really in the clearing. “Anything to report?”

“I’m not dead. Good enough for me.”

Dean had thought of Castiel as a ship only for about a week and a half, because unlike some starships (not to name any names, especially as none of those named names were Gabriel) Castiel was distinctly standoffish with people he didn’t know. Then Dean had actually started talking to Castiel’s favorite VR image, and that perception had gone out the airlock never to return. After three weeks working together he was far more likely to think of Cas-the-human than Castiel-the-ship. Some ships, he knew, preferred the distance of VR only when interacting with their human counterparts.

It was possible to be a really good team without getting any closer than that. No matter whether you were talking to a voice from the walls or a humanoid avatar, you were still talking to the same person.

Not Dean and Castiel. Despite Dean’s habit of trying to confuse Castiel whenever possible, they got on…well, more than well. It was generally accepted that if a starship bothered to project and maintain a solid hologram just to talk with you, you were liked. When Dean was aboard, Castiel put most of his attention on being the human avatar his partner insisted on referring to as ‘Cas’ and consciously trying to baffle. And teaching to do other things.

It hadn’t worked this time. For his pains, Dean got only the half-second’s pause that he always thought of as Cas rolling his eyes and a “I would have been most displeased if it were otherwise.”
Oh well, there would be other opportunities, and more of them once Dean got back aboard. Unfortunately, there was a limited distance over which the transporter could work. “You back in orbit yet or just calling ahead? ‘Cause it’s about to rain and I’d like to not get wet until I can do it with my clothes off.”

The problem with Cas’s VR image, Dean immediately decided, was that it didn’t have any reflexes or movements that Cas didn’t consciously put in there, and therefore didn’t blush. Apart from the problem with him not really being there, that is. Ah, for missed opportunities.

As it was, Castiel’s favorite projection gestured skyward. “Look up.”

Dean obediently turned to face in the indicated direction, angling the goggles towards the clouds. Thanks to the VR capabilities, the clouds appeared to scroll away, revealing the image of a clear but blue-greenish sky for his perusal.

The smartsuit Dean was wearing under his clothes was computer-controlled and programmable. A handheld interface could turn it selectively into armor, or change the color to camouflage its wearer, but there was a limit to how specifically it could be controlled…at least, for the hand unit.

Focused as he was on the image of the bright sky, Dean almost jumped as the smartsuit flexed and tightened so precisely he could feel Cas’s hand on his shoulder, as if the man waiting aboard the ship that was the man had transported down exclusively to lean his weight against his companion’s back and then wrap one arm around his waist. The only thing missing was breath against his skin—and the all-too-present illusion breaker of knowing that if he turned around, there would be no one there. Instead, he went with it, watching the VR of the sky and two silver sparks, one of which glowed softly as if to say here I am.

“So…I’m ready to come home,” Dean said after a moment, storing the memory away to be savored later.

“Beam me up, Cas.”

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**Introduction to Strange New Worlds:** Believe it or not, this was a throwaway oneshot. It started out largely stolen from a handful of my favorite science fiction series, and I typed it out in a couple of hours because dammit, I could not shake the idea of Cas as a self-aware starship. It’s probably the ‘I-am-Spock-and-you-are-crazy’ look he gets every so often and that the self-aware starship is hands-down my favorite sci-fi concept. I tossed what you’ve just read onto fanfiction (dot) net and got ready to forget about it. Well, a few people said they’d like to read more, and I woke up pretty much the next morning with a plot. That would not go away.

For the next three months, I wrote six days a week, three hours a day, to the accompaniment of a SPN-themed playlist. Somewhere along the line, I lost control of the story and they just started doing things as I typed frantically in the wake of a Team Free Will stampede. (For example, it started out ‘sorta vaguely Destiel flavored’.) I don’t remember writing a lot of it because of how hard I was working and how immersed in this story I became. I didn’t read things that would affect my writing style. I didn’t watch things that would make me think in other fandoms. I wrote this during my first semester in graduate school, as I started two new jobs and a new school, moved to a new apartment, and got my car wrecked (and so had to shop for a new one) the same day that the cat I’d had and loved and lived with for almost sixteen years died. I lived, thought, walked, drove, worked, ate, breathed, and occasionally slept Strange New Worlds—‘occasionally’ only because I didn’t get more than five hours of sleep a night for months.

It’s the longest, most complex, and at least in my opinion best thing I’ve ever written and I’m darn
proud of it. For ease of reading, I’m going to take out almost all my author’s notes and put the list of things that influenced this story at the very end. It’s quite a list. If you would like to read the original version (a few words may be different, but you’d have to know it as well as I do to spot them), it’s still on fanfiction (dot) net under my pen name there, Le’letha. It has all my original author’s notes that somewhat showcase my tortured writer’s process and a bit of behind-the-scenes.

Please do read on. And I hope you enjoy it as much as I enjoy reading it. Ultimately I just wanted to read this story. Writing it may not actually have been easier than sifting through the masses of SPN fic online for it—but I’m glad I did.
Of course, once he’d actually materialized and had adjusted to the abrupt change in location, Dean was none too pleased to find himself neither in his rooms or at least the transporter room that contained all the monitoring equipment and the transport interface, but the boxed-off, isolated decontamination chamber. The walls were glowing a shade of dark green that was probably supposed to be neutral but that Dean hated unconditionally. (Either they didn’t come with a shuffle feature or Cas was just ignoring his repeated complaints about the color. He wasn’t quite sure.)

“The hell?” he demanded of said walls, roughly removing his VR goggles and dropping them on the floor. A couple of seconds ago he’d been happy and as comfortable as possible considering the environment, and now he was in one of his least favorite places aboard the starship. “I’m clean, Cas! I mean, I’m not clean clean, but I’m not sick!”

Belatedly, he added, “I’d know.” Most of the alien germs—rarely a good phrase—the human brothers picked up during their explorations fell into one of two categories: so alien they were completely harmless, or so ill-adapted to surviving in a human system that they worked too well and threatened to kill their new host. The latter generally led to pushing of panic buttons and being confined to sickbay for a week and a half by someone who literally controlled all the exits with his mind. And then there had been the sick. And that Sam had worried himself quite literally sick and fallen prey to the same bug despite the fact that his immune system had resisted slightly better. Bad day.

“Gabriel is talking to Sam,” Cas reported through the ship’s internal intercom. “He says Sam’s breathing is too heavy and he is coughing. If there is a risk—”

“Sam’s halfway up a mountain,” interrupted Dean pointedly. “There’s less air up there and he’s been climbing around trying to get to funny rocks. And this is Gabriel we’re talking about here, right? The same Gabriel who talked the Admiral’s barge into screaming that its flightdrive was about to breach right in the middle of her big speech? The one that was being broadcast live to three or four billion people?”

The Admiral had not been happy, although almost everyone else had enjoyed the resulting chaos rather more than the speech, which had been heading into its thirtieth minute when the core breach alarm went off despite the efforts of the fifty engineers that it took to replace a starship’s mind on a dumb barge. “No one ever managed to prove that was him,” Castiel admitted, although it probably had been.

Despite his protests, Dean was going through the routine he’d gotten used to doing every time he got dumped into the damn Green Room, dumping his shredded outer clothes in one drawer to be recycled, folding the smartsuit more carefully and setting it aside to be cleaned, and reluctantly opening the tub of sticky blue goo he found in another drawer. It wasn’t as if he could get out, at least not without a laser cutter. And not only would he never do that, the cutter was in his bag. Which had been transported, he noticed as he put his hands into a wall alcove for the machine to take a blood sample, somewhere else. The sampler hurt slightly less than the thorns he’d been dodging down on the planet.

“He’s screwing with us, Cas. You get my sample bag?” he checked in order to stall for time while he
thought of a new vampire joke. He’d learned very quickly that Cas knew all the ones Dean had cribbed out of books and movies, because most of those books and movies had been downloaded into his memory. While that meant Dean had only to ask for a movie or a playlist, it also meant Cas could recognize anything he felt like quoting. Although, to be fair, he didn’t always understand them.

“It’s in the lab. And I’m transporting up the caches you left based on the data you have added to your map. Why is one of them a dead animal, Dean?”

Oh yeah. That. He didn’t bother to ask which lab Cas meant. To his knowledge, there were at least five. “Because a herd of them nearly ran me over when I decided to take a walk in one of the few fields I could find, and when I shot one the rest ran away in other directions than straight over me. Which was kind of the point.”

Silence.

“Except for the stampeding thing, it looks harmless. Flat teeth, no claws. Figured you might as well take a look at it, get something useful.”

More silence.

Okay, either Castiel really disapproved, or he’d stopped paying attention, which would be annoying either way, because he had just three other people to talk to on this outward bound mission and there was only so long he could watch old movies for the company. “Cas,” Dean continued, stifling the image of himself whining like a child for attention, “what the hell do you put in this stuff? It stinks. Are you listening to me?”

The intercom sparked back to life. Dean was getting tired of talking to the walls; he preferred a face to talk to even if it was just a holographic image. “I am listening to you, Dean. I am also beginning my analysis of the contents of your bag. I am calculating the chances of you letting me replace it, as it has gone beyond filthiness and become a sample in its own right. I am instructing your shuttlecraft to return from the surface; at its current velocity it will dock in approximately twenty-two minutes. I am preparing my report on the spatial environment of this star system and coordinating it with Gabriel’s observations and opinions. I am calculating our flight route to the next star system on our agenda. I am attempting to discover whether Sam is really ill or whether Gabriel is, as you suggest, making things up—”

“Okay, okay! I get it!” Holding his be-gooped hands in the air in surrender, Dean laughed. “You’re busy and I’m bugging you and I should shut up until I’m completely decontaminated and I can go wash off this stink in a proper shower.”

He mentally rewound a few seconds. “And don’t burn my bag.” Okay, so the dirt and the duct tape—an invention that had never been improved—were probably the only things holding it together. But until it fell apart of its own accord Dean was not going to consider anything else an argument for disposing of it. The ordinary clothes he’d been wearing planetside were one thing; they were made to be replaced. The bag he was currently using to carry little boxes of alien rocks and dirt and plant life around several solar systems had belonged to his dad and had a lot of memories—some good, some bad—associated with it.

“The probabilities were low,” Castiel admitted, keeping the grin on Dean’s face despite the blue decontamination goo, which still stank like hell and stuck to his hair despite being a brilliantly bioengineered contact antibiotic.

“Speaking of long odds, why don’t I just call Sam and ask him if he’s okay, and if he says Gabriel told him that you insisted on greenrooming us, then we know Gabriel’s just messing with us.”
Dean knew the starships talked to each other at a much faster rate than humans could, so the pause between suggestion and reply had to be something thrown in there to fit with what humans thought of as normal. “Gabriel appears to be keeping score, although of what I am not certain, and has awarded you an unspecified number of points.”

“You are so very much a younger brother, Cas. I understand that perfectly, and I bet I got some of those points taken off for actually getting covered in goo.” The starships affected certain aspects of humanity, and one of the things they consistently insisted on and managed to adopt pretty accurately was that all of them were metaphysically related, assigning age and standing by things like date of development, first launch, and ship model. Gabriel was older and of a different design than the slightly smaller Castiel, making him, in their terms, Cas’s elder brother.

“Perhaps you will explain it to me at some point. Although some of these readings suggest that the contact antibiotic may have been a necessary precaution.” To his delight, the previously sealed door clicked open.

The human waved a hand dismissively. “Tell me about it later, Cas.” And, a second later: “But if it means Sam has to get covered in goo, tell Gabriel about it right now. And since we’re not going anywhere until Baby’s back on board, I’m gonna go take a shower.”

He stopped, supposedly to retrieve his smartsuit from its technically ‘folded’ state on the floor, before he made it to the door. Dean knew Cas could follow him through the intercom, but if talking to a wall was annoying, talking to a wall that was following you was worse. He also pulled open another drawer—the walls were covered with them—to grab a basic robe to wear on the walk to his rooms. “I’ll see you once we’re in flight, yeah?”

What he meant was you’re going to spend the trip as a human person with ME, right? The ways that ships could interact with humans had become more advanced over time, from the goggles and the holograms right up to creating and assuming human avatars, but the more complex interfaces took up more of the ship’s attention. Dean knew from experience that Castiel preferred to keep his full attention on the transition between cruising at slower than light speeds and the jump into flight, now generally used to mean faster-than-light travel.

Personally, he was okay with that. One of the hardest things for him to overcome to get this job was that if he was in a vehicle, he wanted to be in control of it—not even remotely possible when the pilot of the ship was the ship. That was one of the reasons why he’d rebuilt Baby so that the pilot, generally Dean, rather than Castiel, had primary control. True, if there wasn’t a pilot Castiel could still fly the shuttlecraft remotely, but it was Dean’s shuttlecraft now rather than just another avatar Castiel could work through.

He just liked to know that the person in charge of a dangerous transition, whether it was between orbit and landfall, or cruising at sublight to flying beyond the speed of light, was actually focused on that task.

But once they were in flight, maintaining that flight was much less complicated, meaning that Dean usually spent the trip between planets with a physical companion.

“Yes, I’ll see you quite soon,” Castiel responded in kind.

Dean really should have remembered by now that Cas could be incredibly literal at times. But in this specific instance, he didn’t. So when he walked out the door of the Green Room, he turned to head down the corridor to his rooms and unexpectedly saw something in the corner of his eye.

This time he did jump, twisting around in surprise and almost dropping the pile of smart fabric that
had abandoned all pretense of being folded in an orderly fashion.

Sure, Castiel was always ‘present’, but Dean had expected to be alone in the corridor, practically speaking.

What he hadn’t expected was for the holographic incarnation of his starship partner to be essentially waiting behind the door to ambush him. Effectively.

It was becoming a thing between the two of them. Dean did his absolute best to confuse Cas, and Castiel retaliated by finding new and inventive ways to keep him on his toes, falling back on an unpredictable basis on the old standby of just appearing out of thin air without fanfare. It was…fun.

Having gotten the reaction he’d wanted, Cas stayed for only a moment, memorizing the look on Dean’s face to save in an increasingly eclectic private file, before disappearing. They’d talk later, and they both had work to do.

Dean went off to his rooms laughing. Given the choice between Gabriel’s over-the-top pranks and Castiel’s much more subtle sense of humor, he’d stay right where he was any day. Stinky blue goop or not, it was good to be home.

The blue goop washed off easily enough, at least, and a few minutes later, dried and dressed, Dean was paging through various messages and bits of news that had turned up in his desk while he’d been down on that planet. Obviously the ships had gotten this system’s relay beacon set up and working, hopefully somewhere where it wouldn’t get sideswiped by a chunk of interplanetary ice and taken completely out of commission so that they’d have to run back and repair it. Again.

Most of it was unimportant, some of it was interesting. There were some messages from people he didn’t really want to hear from. Those got sent to the metaphorical round file. Some news from Earth that Dean scanned over looking for amusing things that caught his interest rather than actual news. At the moment he didn’t really care what politician had done what or which sports figure had been caught doing something amazingly stupid. As far as he was concerned a lot of so-called ‘news’ should have “Does anybody care?” added to the end of their headlines, although apparently people did.

He set aside a request for more information about a planet they’d been unsure about from an admiral less inclined to trying to make hour-long speeches. Dean definitely had more to say about that one, but he’d refrained from ranting about “there was definitely something out there trying to kill us!” in a formal report, at least in those exact words. But something had been trying to kill them and even though it had evaded him, Sam, and any and all scanners brought to bear, he’d still recommended sending another, more heavily armed, team if they had to go back at all. Probably someone thought he was overreacting.

There was a large new file that Castiel had tagged ‘data on other missing ships, read this Dean’ which Dean should probably have read, and he would have if Sam hadn’t chosen that moment to call.

“You got me gooped,” complained Sam right off the bat. He had probably called right after getting out of the shower, because his too-long hair was still dripping. He’d been evading haircuts for years and Dean was keeping a mental list of ways it was obviously inconvenient, just in case the opportunity arose next time they were around more people. But it would probably take a planet full of monkeys pulling on it to get Sam to consent to a haircut.

“I get gooped,” his brother declared at the moment, “you get gooped. Blame Gabriel.”
“That won’t get me very far,” Sam had to admit. “He’s kind of hard to goop in return.” Gabriel favored appearing as a hologram that went from solid to incorporeal at unpredictable moments, which he claimed was because people kept trying to stab him. Either Sam or Dean usually tried to point out that it had only happened once, and Gabriel had been completely egging the poor stupid guy on, and anyway he’d deserved it at that point. Dean had once asked if that meant they were allowed to stab him whenever he got annoying, which was often, since it wouldn’t actually hurt him. Unfortunately that had only served to reinforce Gabriel’s point.

The brothers trailed off into silence for a minute or so, neither feeling compelled to fill the space. It was one of the things that made them such a good team, out here in the middle of nowhere. Most people back on Earth and the earlier colonies (most of which were also full to bursting) lived their lives completely surrounded by other people, and being alone or with only two or three other people, far away from everyone else, was deeply terrifying to them. The rooms Dean considered ‘his’ and Sam’s corresponding rooms aboard his ship, if they were on Earth, would each hold at least two families sharing the space between them. As children, Dean and Sam had practically lived their entire lives within a hundred meters of each other. Despite that, the Winchesters were uniquely qualified to go out and deal with things no other humans ever had before because they didn’t mind the isolation, having only each other and Castiel and Gabriel to depend on and talk with, although the transmissions from Earth were good to get so often. That was a rare trait among humanity these days.

“Did you get that thing from Harvelle?” asked Sam eventually.

“About Shadow?” It was what they’d called the planet where Dean had been sure there had been something stalking them. “Yeah, I saw it. Hope she really does want an unedited version, because that’s what she’s gonna get.”

“Okay, your call,” Sam chuckled. “I still didn’t see anything, and I’m going to tell her that—but I’ll also say I trust your judgment. And if they send people there and they get eaten by some monster, we get to say I told you so.”

Dean had to admit that “That would suck. Them not listening and getting people killed, not the saying I told you so.”

“Also, you’re still freaked about it, so you probably did see something and I just blinked at the wrong moment.”

“I am not still freaked! I was never freaked! I was just…wishing I’d had a bigger gun, that’s all.”

“Right…” The skepticism in his voice was designed to rile, and it was working. “Because you didn’t sit up all night worried that something was going to eat us, and then insist we stayed together so that it took us twice as long to finish—all right, all right!” Sam grinned at the look on his brother’s face. “One warning sign on Shadow, coming right up.”

In the background of Sam’s call, Dean heard Gabriel’s voice say “Hey, Sam, hold on tight!” half a second before Castiel cut into his side of the conversation with, “Your shuttle is back aboard and we’re ready for flight, Dean.”

Both brothers had, independently, asked for the warning almost as soon as they’d set out on their first mission as a team. The jump from normal cruising speed to faster-than-light travel was disorienting and stomach-twisting, and while the ships were designed to travel at those speeds, humans were not. As insulated from a totally alien environment as they were aboard those ships, it was a rare passenger who couldn’t feel the transition at all. They were the lucky ones. It hit some people so hard they couldn’t even stand.
Dean and Sam fell somewhere in the middle. They felt the jump, but only for a moment, and while it didn’t feel great it generally didn’t knock them over, either.

“In three, two, one,” the ships counted down together for the benefit of their respective passengers, and for a dizzying moment they accelerated from a region of space where the rules of physics worked one way into an adjacent layer where they worked in another, leaving Dean as always with the unshakable feeling that someone had just blown up a balloon inside his rib cage and then popped it.

“Ow,” Sam commented from the other side of the video link, pressing two fingers to the middle of his forehead in a useless gesture against a sudden violent headache. “Need painkillers. See you later, Dean.”

Dean switched off the screen with a “Later, Sammy,” grimacing in his turn as the effects of the transit ebbed away without chemical intervention. What he needed was a distraction. Forgetting all about the files still waiting unread in his desk’s memory, Dean tilted his chair back and said, “Cas, you there?”

A pause, and the ship replied, “No. Come find me,” which was all the invitation Dean needed to shuffle on the soft shoes he generally wore while on board and moving around outside his rooms, and head out the door to another section of the ship.

One of the first things that most people commented on when brought aboard a starship for the first time was how blank the corridors were. Personal rooms were customized, but no one ever took the time to paint all the corridors. The only intrusion upon white or plain-colored walls was generally the black bar of display panel that ran along eye level, purely for the benefit of any humans that happened to be walking by. Sooner or later someone usually told them that the ships didn’t care what color the walls were, and as a human did you really care what color your internal organs were, as long as they were healthy? And really that was one of the few reasons the ships needed standard-model humans around, to do maintenance and repairs that they couldn’t easily do. And the company. The company was absolutely essential.

By now Dean had all the routes to the places within the ship he usually went memorized. A certain number of right turns this way, a certain time walking that…as long as he knew where he was going his feet did most of the navigating for him. At the moment he was headed towards what he always thought of as the Control Room, because he persisted in thinking about some things completely backwards.

The door opened in front of him without Dean having to do anything at all, because Castiel was paying attention and knew where he was going. He stepped into a room almost covered in display panels, and with a structure somewhat resembling a chair occupying the one section of wall space that was not.

The chair was a life-support system, designed to maintain the health of a reconstructed, biomechanical clone. Although the man in the chair was almost completely human in appearance and origin, it was actually only a vessel for the ship’s mind when he chose to be as human as possible.

It was almost impossible to tell a clone from an ordinary human, at least without extensive observation. Sooner or later certain tells emerged, like that although they enjoyed the new input of tastes, they didn’t need to eat or drink. Upon even closer inspection, a particularly intrusive observer might notice the marks cutting just around and below the vessel’s shoulder blades, which looked like broad scars but were in fact ports that connected the body to the life-support system that maintained the body while the mind was elsewhere.
If you didn’t know all that, it would be easy to think the man in the chair was simply asleep, breathing softly but otherwise remaining absolutely still, due partly to the restraints that anchored his wrists and ankles to the arms and base of the support unit and wrapped across his chest. While most ships were very good at maintaining the stability of their internal environment, moderating the gravitational acceleration of sudden movements for whatever humans were on board, it wasn’t a perfect system. Despite predictions, hopes, and improved technology, there was still a place for the basic five-point seat belt aboard a ship that could maneuver through space with incredible agility and speed.

Even if you did know all that, it was also very easy to mentally reverse the true state of affairs, and come to believe that the man in the chair was controlling the ship, rather than the ship controlling the man.

Dean would freely admit that he had fallen into this trap a long time ago. He knew the truth of things, but some part of him would always consider this man—the one he could touch and see and drink obscenely over-sugared coffee with—the real Castiel. Despite everything. At least he knew he was doing it.

As he entered the room, the restraints clicked loose apparently on their own, a soft hiss just above the threshold of human hearing indicated that the links beneath his shoulder blades had disconnected, and Cas opened his eyes. “We’re in flight,” he reported. Reacting to Dean’s gesture, he reached out and allowed the taller man to pull him to his feet.

“Yes, I noticed,” Dean answered, not letting go of his hands. “Morning, Cas.”

After being alternatively ignored and told that the accuracy wasn’t the point, Cas had given up correcting this greeting, offered regardless of the relative time of day.

“I think Sam went to bed with a headache,” he continued.

Cas managed to get one hand free to place it on Dean’s chest interrogatively. “But you are—”

He got his answer, in a way, because Dean wrapped his free hand across the base of Cas’s neck and kissed him hard until they both needed to breathe again and Cas’s blue eyes had gone hazy and unfocused.

“Perhaps I should not finish that sentence,” he suggested finally.

Dean took it as a personal triumph that it had taken Cas that long to put that sentence together. “Mmm,” he agreed, and dipped into another kiss, tasting him slowly. “You taste different when you first wake up.”

Blue eyes blinked at him from a very short distance away, visibly confused. “According to my research, I did not believe that was meant to be a good thing.”

“But bad,” Dean corrected himself hurriedly. “Just different. Like…I don’t know. Sparks. When I figure it out, I’ll tell you.”

Cas thought about it for a moment, visibly dismissed it as something he just didn’t understand yet, closed the hand still on his partner’s chest into a fist to drag the fabric away from his throat and shoulder, and suggested, “Research?”

Cas was warm and content and comfortable and he had often wondered if it was nice to be completely human and have the ability to be in just one place at a time. Because no matter how much
of his attention was here, sprawled out and relaxed in Dean’s bed, in the dark, with him, there was always part of him that was Castiel and never stopped. That was enjoying the sensation of flying faster than light and keeping to the course he and Gabriel worked out earlier, and analyzing the results of the tests he was running earlier on the samples he’d transported aboard and the pathogens that had been in the blood sample he’d taken from Dean in the decontamination chamber that the Winchesters insisted on calling the Green Room, and checking through the files he’d downloaded from the working relay beacon they’d left behind in that system, and putting significant effort into ignoring Gabriel, who pretty much knew what was going on between his little brother and Dean and was trying out smart remarks and generally being smug, and…wait. Go back.

“Dean,” said Cas, not bothering to move because, well, he was comfortable.

“Mmph.”

“Wake up.”

There was a high probability that the sound Dean was making was intended to be “Why?”

“I tagged a file for your attention. You didn’t read it.”

There was a long, silent pause, and for a moment Cas entertained the idea that Dean had simply gone back to sleep. But eventually the human shifted into a position where he could look at Cas despite the darkness, which involved a bit of squirming around on both their parts, which was pleasant in itself.

“You’re going to tell me about this whether I like it or not, aren’t you?” Dean said, and Cas knew his voice and his nature well enough by now to accept the contradiction between the affection and irritation he could hear equally.

“In the past six months seven ships and their crews have gone missing, completely and without warning, too far apart for it to be of natural causes. Command does not know exactly what is causing these disappearances, but they currently have two working theories. Either the ships and crews have conspired to escape the Fleet’s control, or something or someone is hunting us down, Dean.”

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**Random Rules of This Universe:** Ship names are formal names and thus always italicized; personal nicknames are informal and therefore not. It’s not a tone-of-voice emphasis. (The names of ships are always italicized in the real world as far as I know.) “Cruising” always refers to sublight velocities, “flight” to faster-than-light.
Dean had been hunted before. He knew, all too well, the feeling of knowing that there was something out there, that it could see you but you couldn’t see it. That you didn’t even know what it was, or what it was going to do to you, or when. The dread of it, sitting low in your chest and the back of your throat. Knowing that life was not an old movie and there wasn’t going to be a convenient change in the music so you could turn around at just the right moment to see…

He’d felt it on the planet he and Sam had dubbed Shadow, only a few weeks ago, and they’d ultimately come to no harm. But it had lurked in him the entire time he’d been there, trying to watch everything and knowing that the one thing he didn’t would be the one that got him, or worse, Sammy. He’d felt it the time the two of them had been attacked by velociraptoids and chased into a cave until the ships could rescue them. A few times, back on Earth or the original colonies or one of the bigger space stations the Fleet maintained, he’d been chased after by people who objected to various things about him, mostly his attitude towards jerks, idiots, and people who weren’t on the short list of people Dean actually liked. (It was usually the jerks and idiots chasing him.)

As a child, he’d felt it in his father’s paranoia, moving them from place to place, moving through crowds one day and holing up the next in the most isolated place John Winchester could find. Ultimately, he’d been grateful that they hadn’t lived on Old Earth, where isolated places could have only one person in ten square miles rather than only three hundred. It hadn’t been about the number of people around, though, it was about who they’d been.

Who they were now. Because now he was unfathomable distances, light-years, away from those roaring crowds and he was happier than he’d ever been in his life. Until now, when that crushing fear of being the hunted descended on him again—all on the behalf of a creature much more powerful than Dean was himself, who had just told him that his brothers were disappearing and no one knew why.

Lords of the storm, he had it bad.

Through a great effort of will, he managed to put together a question that wasn’t “What?” or “Are you sure?”, which were both questions Castiel didn’t understand very well, and also bypassed asking “What’s causing it?” or “How long has this been going on?”, both of which he’d already answered only a few seconds ago.

What he ultimately came up with, before Cas could pester him for a response or start wondering if he’d gone back to sleep—which he hadn’t—was “Does Fleet Command want us back?”

He could feel Cas relax slightly at his relatively calm answer, and was just congratulating himself on getting something right when he realized that no matter how reasoned his voice had been, his physical reflexes had betrayed him—he had Cas’s wrist in such a tight grip it might have bruised a human. The construct the ship’s mind inhabited (most convincingly) was built a lot tougher, but Dean still loosened his grip just a little bit. Okay, so he was protective of the people he cared about. So what?
“No,” Cas was saying, and it took a moment for Dean to jump back to the conversation they were having rather than his own possessive little panic attack. “Lacking any substantive data about the cause of these disappearances or any connection between them, the admirals wish only that we be aware of the incidents.”

Which was bloody useless. “So if we do get attacked by some monster giant space-going amoeba, what the hell are we supposed to do about it?” He reconsidered and corrected himself preemptively. “You supposed to do about it.”

The ships weren’t armed for the simple reason that they’d never had to be. As far as they knew, humanity and the ships that were their cousins were the only sentient, space-faring life out there, at least in this tiny timeframe of the universe. A couple of survey teams had reported finding animals with the potential, possibly, to develop into intelligent, tool-using species. Monkey-like animals had shown up on some worlds. One survey team had apparently encountered a planet inhabited by lupine variants that had been, according to the reports, far too clever for the human explorers’ liking.

There was simply no one for them to fight, and no other reason to arm them, even though the technology existed. Contrary to every science fiction movie ever, the average asteroid belt did not require shots from a laser to clear a path through. The visible part of the average asteroid belt, whenever they happened to pass through one while the ships cruised through the system, usually consisted of one rock, very far away.

No one to fight, and nothing that could harm a smart, fast, self-repairing, self-aware starship; until, apparently, now.

“Run,” Castiel replied dryly, undisturbed by the hand now closed tightly enough around his wrist that a human would be yelping about loss of circulation. “Run, and keep running, and report back. They believe that whatever the cause of these disappearances is will be incapable of successful pursuit—an assumption, but not an unwarranted one.” Even other starships could have trouble finding one of their brothers or sisters, if that sibling was in flight and keeping quiet. They could explain why to humans, but it involved maths. Basically, unless ships coordinated their flights or communicated with each other, each ship in flight was essentially in its own relatively safe little bubble of acceleration. “To that end, you’ve been ordered to install the emergency relay and overrides before we drop out of flight at our next destination.”

Dean forgot the exact serial number of that device, and Cas had seemed to realize that he’d probably actually misplaced its actual name, as well. He knew what they were suddenly talking about, though. It was one of the reasons the normally self-repairing ship actually needed him on board, although not one of the reasons he liked.

“I knew the techs back on Station should have done that before we took off,” he grumbled now. “That thing’s supposed to be wired right into your brain, Cas. Makes me nervous.” Humans didn’t do brain surgery on themselves, and neither did ships. The recursive nature of it bothered them almost as much as it would a human, and the effects of getting something wrong could only escalate.

There wasn’t really much light in the bedroom, as Dean had been nearly asleep and Castiel had been shifting his attention elsewhere and letting his avatar slip into a similar state, but Dean could still see those blue eyes blink at him. Mmm...Dean thought involuntarily, if that really counted as a thought. If that can wait until later...

“I trust you,” said Castiel.

…Well, now they definitely weren’t getting out of bed anytime soon.
For the sake of their human partners, the ships generally maintained a 24-hour day. As far as Sam was concerned, he was woken up far too early in that day for his liking.

"Sa-am," a familiar and, at the moment, annoying voice warbled at him. "Wake up."

"No," Sam muttered, just on principle, and tried to go back to sleep. Jumping from sublight cruising to full flight never failed to give him a splitting headache, and the painkillers that dealt with it the best always sent him straight to sleep anyway. He’d held off taking them in what counted as ‘yesterday’ just long enough to get the news from Gabriel about the missing ships and crews and realize there was nothing he could do about it, and the delay had only made it worse. Today he fully intended to sleep through as much of it as possible, and the rest of his team could just keep themselves entertained.

Theoretically. And apparently not.

“How can you not be bored?” Gabriel wanted to know, from the entirely-too-close distance of sitting on the end of Sam’s bed. “You’re not doing anything.”

Participating in this conversation, Sam knew, would not help. On the other hand, ignoring him wouldn’t do any good either. He briefly considered kicking the hologram as an option, as he was right there, but the satisfaction of it wouldn’t last very long and Gabriel would almost definitely retaliate.

“I’m sleeping,” the younger Winchester pointed out. “Go talk to Cas.”

“My brother is ignoring me,” declared Gabriel, “something your brother probably has a lot to do with. Care to guess why?”

No, he did not. Sam loved his brother and Castiel was a friend but some things, in his opinion, were better without visual aids beyond Dean’s increasingly contented demeanor. And now he was awake. Damn it.

He said as much and, as he’d half expected, Gabriel vanished as soon as the minor entertainment of bugging Sam was used up. Briefly, he considered trying to go back to sleep, but decided against it because of the possibility of blue goop in the shower, randomly strobing lights, and/or phantom music playing at odd hours. On one long flight, Gabriel had replaced all his coffee with a strongly over-caffeinated version that tasted exactly the same and gotten a clearly unfair amount of enjoyment from Sam’s increasingly erratic behavior—not to mention Dean’s confusion when Sam had called him up to tell him in great detail about the patterns that apparently materialized on the inside of his eyelids after a madcap sprint up and down the nearby corridors.

But then, Sam had grown up with an older brother who’d been perfectly willing to consider him as a portable, ever-present source of potential entertainment. Gabriel would have to go a lot further to really test Sam’s tolerance for bored and mildly sadistic elder siblings, and Sam was fairly sure the ship would never actually hurt him. Annoy him, yes; confuse him deliberately, sure; let him wander through some of the less-used of the ship’s decks indefinitely, of course; but let him come to harm, no. It kept him on his toes and sometimes it was even funny—much later.

On the grounds that Gabriel was less likely to come to him for entertainment if Sam happened to be busy with actually assigned work, he settled in to read through the file on the disappearances, after making a cup of tea…just in case Gabriel had tampered with the coffee again. Besides, between Gabriel’s continually erratic search for loosely-defined entertainment and Cas and Dean’s increased absorption in each other rather than single-minded pursuit of their work, maybe he’d spot something in it none of the others would.
Stranger things had happened, and stranger things would probably continue to.

“Talk to me, Cas.”

Dean was flat on his back underneath a bank of some of the computer equipment, to give it its simplest name, that comprised the ship’s mind. Despite his awkward position, he could still see the ship’s current body tilt his head interrogatively.

“About what?”

“Doesn’t matter. Just keep it coming so I know I’m not hurting you by mucking about in here. You forget what you were saying or faint or start speaking in binary, at least I’ll know I did something wrong so I can stop and fix it.” He cast about for a subject and came on the obvious one. “I spent the morning reading all the instruction manuals for this. Tell me about the ships. Who’s missing?”

He would read through the file at some point—or, more likely, get the highlights from Sam, who was probably reading it all and checking the code for edits for good measure—but this was also the best way to reassure him that he wasn’t hurting his friend. It also gave him something else to focus on than the possibility of getting something wrong.

“Anna,” recited Cas from his seat on the floor, where Dean could see him without having to crane his neck too far but where he couldn’t see into the hardware that partially housed his intellect and personality. “Duma. Hester. Inias. Remiel. Samael. Zachariah.”

“Anna’s gone? Shit.” She’d been a friend. It wasn’t unusual for ships to wander about among humans through holographic or physical avatars, and he’d met Anna a couple of years ago when his team had called in at Dixie Colony for supplies and to offload several hefty crates of samples and scans for transport to interested parties. She—or at least the hologram she was projecting—had been a pretty cute redhead, and he’d been having a good time flirting with her before he’d realized she was a ship’s image and not a biological human. After he’d gotten over the surprise of not being able to tell, though, it hadn’t bothered him. Come to think of it, it was after that he’d started thinking of Cas a bit differently…

Dean didn’t know any of the others personally. Zachariah and Hester he had spoken to in passing, more because Castiel had been talking to them and Dean had been there than by any virtue of his own. “In that order?” All the time they were speaking, Dean was also working to connect the relay he couldn’t help thinking of as the panic button to Castiel’s involuntary reflexes, where it would be triggered in case of distress, downloading as much available information as could be compressed into a tightly-encoded, high-frequency, highly powered burst that would be transmitted to a network of relay beacons all the way back to Fleet headquarters faster than any ship could travel.

“No. Anna and Hester most recently; they were not in constant communication with the Fleet so unless one reappears or wreckage is discovered it is currently impossible to determine which disappeared first. Duma was, they believe, the first to go missing, followed by Remiel and Samael. Zachariah has been out of contact for nearly three months; Inias for two. Ships and crews sent to search for signs of what occurred have found no trace.”

“Pretty risky,” the human commented, “losing one ship and sending another to the same place not long after.”

Cas thought about this briefly, then offered, “If the cause was external, they must have been taken by surprise, or they would have sent a distress call. If it was internal, and a problem with their systems caused them to be unable to call for help, it would not affect a rescue party.” If he got an elbow
underneath him and leaned to the side a bit, Dean could see the ship’s avatar frown slightly in thought. “That they did not would seem to suggest that whatever happened, it happened very quickly.”

Dean had to agree. “You and your siblings are fast.” The starships thought and reacted at a speed so far beyond anyone else that their reflexes were measured in several orders of magnitude smaller than the standards for humans. Something that happened so quickly that they couldn’t even transmit a message would have to happen unthinkably quickly.

They kept the conversation shifting, forcing Castiel to dig around in his memory and proving to Dean that nothing had been damaged, which was apparently a procedure that dated back to brain surgeries on humans back on Old Earth. It was a testament to how strange Dean’s life generally was, and how normal he considered it, that for him there was nothing surreal about trading jokes and riddles with a sentient starship, through the medium of a mostly human avatar, while doing some rewiring in that starship’s physical brain.

Eventually they worked their way around to Dean asking, “You know, I never got a straight answer, Cas—why the hell do you and your siblings all name yourselves after mythical characters?” And, as an aside, “Can you access this relay thing yet?”

Pause. When he looked, Dean could see Cas’s human body sitting absolutely still, legs crossed and hands resting on his knees, with his eyes closed—a pose he’d learned to interpret as the ship shifting his focus from his borrowed body to his true one. The clone would continue to live, in the most basic biological terms, and Castiel was still receiving sensory input from it, so he’d eventually bring his attention back to animating the human body if touched or he otherwise needed to, but for the moment the starship was primarily a starship again.

After another moment, the ship reported, “I have control,” which was disorienting as Dean was looking at the man he thought of as “Cas” and listening to the ship Castiel speak through the internal commsystem. “The emergency relay is online and all protocols are correct.”

“Good.” For lack of a better alternative, Dean slapped his palms down against the deck beneath him, hard enough to make the flats of his hands sting but also hard enough that the ship might be able to feel the vibrations. “I’ll pack up here, and if there’s nothing else we can do to prepare—” As he spoke, he was climbing out of the alcove he’d been wedged into, and had just come within reach of Cas’s body. “—you can wake up and we’ll take the rest of the day off, okay?” Dean took advantage of his movements and Castiel’s inattention to nudge the man off-balance with his feet, forcing Castiel to return his focus to the shape he inhabited and, not coincidentally, Dean.

The human got a glare for his troubles, and Cas got a smirk for his, and for a little while longer all was well with their world.
Chapter Four: Roadkill

First, in support of my often reiterated ‘nothing-about-this-story-is-original’ theory:

Each angel-being was distinctly an individual, and yet they had more in common with one another than with any human she had seen. What they shared was a shimmering, darting play of intelligence and feeling that seemed to sweep over them all simultaneously. They were naked, but she felt naked in front of their glance, it was so piercing and went so deep...she had not the slightest idea of how like a child she seemed beside these ancient beings. Nor did she know how far their awareness spread out beyond her like filamentary tentacles to the remotest corners of universes she had never dreamed of; nor that she saw them as human-formed only because her eyes expected to. If she were to perceive their true form, they would seem more like architecture than organism, like huge structures composed of intelligence and feeling.

But they expected nothing else; she was very young.

(From Chapter Six of Philip Pullman’s The Subtle Knife, book two of His Dark Materials)

ON WITH THE SHOW!

In a prime example of “Fleet Command doesn’t know squat!”, the supposedly Earth-like planet that the aforementioned Fleet Command’s scanners had supposedly picked up turned out to be a gas giant so close to its central star it was in danger of vaporizing in the next lucky—or unlucky—solar prominence. Which, from the look of the star, which was even more turbulent than most stars up close, couldn’t be very far away—another thing the preliminary data they’d been given had failed to mention. The ships backed off almost as soon as the readings from the star started coming in, taking themselves off behind the enormous, doomed gas giant, perhaps in the unspoken hope that, if the star should choose now to erupt, it would protect them from its stellar parent for the brief moments it would take them to take off into flight and away.

Or, as Dean put it, “That star burps and it’s gone.”

Reactions to the discovery ran the gauntlet from Sam’s “We should stay and watch that” to Gabriel’s offer to beam him down to the planet’s boiling non-surface anyway and Castiel’s rather pedantic observation that “If Earth-based sensory equipment could gather significant information about planetary composition there would be no need for us, Dean,” which was probably meant to be reassuring but just ended up marginally less sarcastic than Gabriel.

Much later, Dean would count his refusal to say “Whatever,” and stomp off to his rooms to lock the door and sulk as a display of maturity and reasonableness. It wasn’t that he minded spending another week or so in those rooms with Cas trying to find out if chocolate-saturated coffee in bed was a good idea (it wasn’t), or continuing his repairs to his shuttlecraft, or trading snarky comments and childhood memories with Sam over the commlink between the two ships, or conspiring with Gabriel to replace all of Sam’s socks with ones that were identical except for being at least two sizes too small, an easy task for a ship with precision control over a string of replicators that could produce anything from food to clothing to nine thousand rubber bouncy balls, an unspecified number of which had actually been gumballs, and who even knew what a gumball was anymore and how the hell had those ever gone out of style...or any other of the thousand other things he filled his life with when there wasn’t an Earth-like planet in sight.
It was just that he liked to be useful, that’s all. And it hadn’t helped that they’d spent an extra two
days out in the middle of even more nowhere than usual. The two ships had abruptly dropped out of
flight and cruised around in what felt like circles—or, as the boys had eventually called it,
pussyfooled around—over, the ships had declared, nothing. They’d refused to explain anything
about it. Their general demeanor, in response to increasingly frustrated shouting from their human
companions, was much like that of a cat that has just fallen asleep on the back of a couch and then
fallen off it. This, more than anything, ultimately persuaded the Winchesters that the two ships had
thought they’d sensed something out there in the black and then discovered they’d been mistaken.

What actually happened after all that, with nothing to show for it and no sky in the near future, was
that Dean said, “Write it off, then, and let’s head out.”

Inasmuch as this was a democracy—to wit, none at all—he was voted down.

“We’re here,” emerged the consensus. “We should at least take a look around.”

Way back in the early days of ship design, when those pioneers realized that if they were going to
create these (at least theoretically) elegant, sentient minds they had better have something to put them
in, the people who had designed the ships’ various structures had quickly found out two things.
Firstly, the ships themselves didn’t mind letting people on board, as long as they knew who was
there, and it had immediately become protocol to introduce yourself by name anytime someone came
aboard a ship that they didn’t work closely with every day. Secondly, and almost as importantly, if
you wanted to get humans aboard those ships at all, you’d have to design in some windows.

Never mind that there was frequently nothing to see except stars, because space was big and
everything else was comparatively small, except for rare exceptions like the times when an entire
fleet—or perhaps flock—of ships would fly around and amongst each other in patterns more intricate
and precise than any human pilot could achieve. It didn’t matter that the ships needed holes in their
hulls the same way humans needed flaps cut out of their skin. And it really wasn’t important that
looking out of one of those windows in flight did funny things to the human mind, as a dimension of
space that smart monkeys had never evolved to see tried to crawl into their brains by way of the optic
nerve.

You designed windows, or you didn’t get humans on board for any length of time.

It was to one of these Dean went now, taking a break from his makeshift family to stare at the very
sturdy wall that presented him with a panoramic view of the deceptive gas giant and its
temperamental star beyond as the ships cruised away and into the system. It wasn’t really a window
in that the material that coated the wall wasn’t transparent; it was closer to a very high-resolution
screen. But it transmitted light almost directly from the sensors on the ship’s outer hull to the
Corresponding panel within, so the difference was purely technical. It was a window if he wanted it
to be a window, and he did, so it was. They didn’t actually need him for this, so if he wanted to lie
on this couch, placed in the designated lounge area several missions back for this very purpose, put
his feet up on the armrest, and listen to old music, he could. He wasn’t sulking because the door
wasn’t locked. In fact there wasn’t even a door. So there.

Castiel knew him well enough to give him almost an hour to himself, and Dean had worked his way
through a good chunk of one of his favorite playlists before the ship’s avatar padded into the alcove
and helped himself to his partner’s lap.

“Hi,” the human murmured at him, freeing the arm tucked behind his head to wrap it around his
lover’s back. He struggled not to laugh when the music, which he’d had turned up to blaring,
apparently lowered itself. What the hell. He’d had almost an hour of his favorite music and a
stunning if unfriendly sky out the window and now the person he trusted and cared for as much as
anyone in his entire life in his arms. Dean could live with Cas turning down his music.

“It worried us,” the man who was the ship said as if they’d been having this conversation all along. He sighed, which tickled the skin of the human’s throat and felt damn good. “A discontinuity. Nothing there. Or couldn’t see it. Not sure,” he concluded. “Better to go away, keep watch. Sent word.”

Dean sorted through all that relatively easily. “You sure you can’t read my mind, Cas?” he asked idly. He’d wondered, from time to time.

“I don’t have to.”

Wasn’t that true, the human thought idly. The only other person who could read Dean as accurately and easily as could this inhuman, more-than-human being was Sam, and he’d pretty much raised Sam.

He swept his hand up and down Cas’s spine in something between an “I know” and a “thank you” and something deeper and unspoken but known, and that was all they needed. Although the soft noise Cas made in response, somewhere between a sigh and a purr, was a pleasant bonus.

Accordingly, he decided not to make an issue of that he knew for a fact the piece of music that had just come on was not the one he’d put there. Although, be damned if he was going to let Cas get away with it completely. “You reprogramming my music now?”

Only experience let him see the laughter in blue eyes inches from his, turned an odd greenish gold by the light from the angry sun. “No.”

“Mm-hmm.”

‘Not-letting-you-see-me-laugh’, on Cas, was a glance downward and away, which in this case put him sprawled back across Dean again, breathing against his collar and throat. Stifling a laugh of his own, the human followed the ship’s gaze out the window as the star receded into the distance.

“What do you see?” he asked suddenly.

Some of Castiel’s signals, the body language of his avatar, the tones he put into his voice, were difficult for strangers to read. Incomprehension, perhaps because a confusing sound of confusion would only make things worse, was clear.

“When you look at it. What does it look like to you?”

“Oh.” A pause, but Dean was fluent in Castiel’s silences and knew contemplation when he heard it, or didn’t hear it as the case may be. “With these eyes? Much as you see it. Light and motion, on the edges.” Fingers waved illustratively, briefly. “It’s filtered, or it would burn.”

“Not what I meant, and you know it.” He made the distinction reluctantly. “You. Try?”

This answer was much quieter. “It pulls at the space around it and all shifts. One day nothing will be its equal and there will be no more days. There are those of my brothers who will come here for this star. The fire, out of balance; it will draw them here, it is beautiful and dangerous.”

“But not you.”

“I have you.” Apparently sensing that this needed more description, Castiel added, “You cannot stay here, so I have no desire to.”
Beneath his spread palm, Dean could feel muscles flex in his companion’s back, as if he really were the angel he’d named himself after and was moving to spread wings to take them away. And that was why, he knew, the ships overwhelmingly mined the depths of human myth for the names of creatures of flight and power. Because they were the closest humanity had come.

“Sam’s calling you.”

Dean was tempted to ignore that, but knew that the way things worked amongst the four of them, that simple statement meant ‘Sam told Gabriel to call me and I’m telling you so he’ll stop’, meaning that even if he did choose not to listen, only one of them would have any peace and quiet. “Shoulda known it was too good to last,” he grumbled with no particular venom. “All right, I’m listening.”

Sam’s voice came through the ship’s intercom, but the programmable window kept its view of the space beyond even though it could transmit video images from ship to ship as well, leaving this space theirs for a little while longer.

“Hey, Dean, you remember we watched that movie a couple of weeks ago?” Synchronized but separate movie-watching. It worked, although it was hard to throw popcorn at Sam when he was on a different starship, and throwing popcorn at Sam was as much as half the fun if it was a really bad movie.

“What about it?”

“Um…we’ve just found one. Gabriel thinks it used to be a planet very recently and that time bomb of a star pulled it apart.”

There was something very disturbing about watching Cas’s eyes go completely blank as he shifted his attention away to check Gabriel’s data, especially when those eyes were only two or three inches away. “Quite probable,” he concluded a second later. “High metal content, possibility of water ice, erratic debris trajectories.”

“Remind me again why we’re hanging around here?” Dean inquired of Cas and Sam via the ceiling simultaneously.

And, apparently, of Gabriel. “Dean, Dean, Dean,” the other starship scolded from his very safe distance away. “Drag your sense of adventure out of bed and do something you’re actually supposed to do with it, will ya?”

There was no possible reply to that that didn’t end badly, so Dean decided to try to ignore him. Didn’t quite succeed, though. “Cas, any way you can stop your brother from making cheesy remarks?”

“No,” was his simple answer. “No more than you can prevent yours.”

“So, none at all.”

“I don’t let you hear most of it.”

“Like you said,” Sam continued over the bickering, a little too earnestly, “this is very unusual. I think it merits a closer look.”
“Fine,” his brother shrugged, knowing he was missing something and knowing from the tone in Sam’s voice that he probably wasn’t going to like it when he found it. “We’ll swing by, take some pictures, and be on our way.”

A second’s delay, and then, “A closer look than that.”

And Dean was no longer missing something, and he did indeed not like it. “…Sam, why do I see spacesuits in my future?”

“’Cause mine’s already unpacked and I’d almost forgotten how many knots are in these boots?”

Good for Sam—Dean hadn’t forgotten anything about those things, least of all how little he liked putting them on. They were just fine once they were on and powered up and in the hard vacuum environment they were supposed to be in, it was just that putting them on in the first place and getting them off again was a, not to put it too pointedly, bitch.

“You’ve seriously got your heart set on a spacewalk? In a system that’s about to go off bang?”

“Yeah.”

That was hard to argue with, so Dean tried to pass the buck. “Cas? You gonna weigh in on this?”

“The star is not about to ‘go off bang’,” the ship corrected him, “at least, not in the few hours you and Sam would spend in the suits before they became uncomfortable. It is an unusual phenomenon that, lacking an immediate task elsewhere, does indeed bear observation.”

Keeping his eyes locked with Dean’s, the ship’s avatar paused and flicked those eyes upward towards the ceiling where the human always involuntarily located the intercom, inviting Dean to follow his gaze. A noise right at the threshold of hearing that he hadn’t been aware of being aware of suddenly stopped. The connection between the two pairs had been muted.

“When we arrived in this system, you were anticipating having a sky above your head again. This appears important to humans. I am sorry that you will have to wait to see one again, Dean, but this would be the biggest sky of all,” Cas told him softly. “You asked what I saw. This is my sky. And I’ll catch you, remember?”

That went back to the very first time the two of them had met, and something Dean was powerless to refuse.

He was going spacewalking.

And it was a hell of a sky!

There was something phenomenally strange, for the first few minutes, about having rocks float by above your head and realizing that they were actually chunks the size of mountains a few miles away. After that, it was simply phenomenal.

Almost as soon as humankind had invented spacesuits, they had set about improving them, because pretty much everything on a spacesuit could stand to be improved some. After several hundred years of nitpicking, complaining, trialing, redesigning, retesting, customizing, and updating, they weren’t bad. The power units that kept the environment inside the suit breathable and warm enough not to freeze the person wearing them had been miniaturized and integrated into the fabric. Combined with the adaptive, potentially armored smartsuits the boys usually wore underneath their more casual clothes on unexplored planets where flash floods, attack by territorial animals, hail, and encounters
with gravity and rocks were all possible, they were almost not uncomfortable to wear. There was really nothing you could do about the need to carry an air tank with it, but its mass had been reduced and its filtering efficiency improved until it wasn’t too cumbersome. And rather than the antique helmets with a viewport only directly in front of the face, the modern helmets resembled nothing quite so much as a glass bubble.

Peripheral vision improved the wearers’ mood no end, it had turned out.

The boys had been transported down to one of the larger and more stable pieces of debris, meaning that the chunk of rock they were walking across was approximately the size of one of the Mars moons. It didn’t have the tunnel system, research outposts, and high-rise apartments that those moons currently had, but it did have a high enough ferrous metal content that their boots would magnetize to the surface, reducing the need for actual spacewalking. From ground level, it would be hard to tell that they weren’t on the surface of a rather more stable and intact world. The minute they looked up, however…well.

Although they’d begun this little expedition in the same area, Sam had been the one to crawl all over the asteroid, eagerly pointing out this feature and that inconsistency that suggested it had indeed been part of a planet not long ago. They hadn’t found any traces of organic material, though. It was only a brief survey, but it looked as if nothing living had been lost when this world was destroyed. Both their handheld scanners and the ships hovering above had found water ice, buried within other chunks of debris and creating miniature comets that occasionally collided with the more solid rocks, laminating their contents across the jagged, tortured surface and creating sudden and unreal snowstorms that engulfed the fragments in their paths.

Now that had been something to watch.

A few minutes ago, Sam had called in for a lift to another asteroid, apparently having run all over this one. He’d vanished in the mirage effect of the transporter as Gabriel whisked him away, but his brother could still hear him through the open general link, thinking aloud and pointing out things that he especially wanted recorded, which included, from the evidence, everything. Hey, he was happy, so what the hell.

As far as Dean was concerned, the best part about this field trip was that if he turned away from the dead rocks beneath his feet and looked up at the rocks above him, he could see both Gabriel and the ship Dean’s life depended on in more ways than one, from a perspective he rarely had the chance to appreciate.

Gabriel had followed Sam over to his new rock of the moment, keeping him in a safe transporter range just in case he got completely distracted and hit by an innocently drifting rock. The bigger starship was of an earlier design, and more obviously a constructed machine, but there was still a grace and flow to the ship’s lines that suggested movement and acceleration. Like most ships ultimately designed for speed and exploration, the shape basically followed the outline of an enhanced dart, with a needle-nosed forward section receding into the aft engines, suggesting a dart’s fletching to some degree and spread wings to another. Sharp angles and contrasts drew attention to the separate segments of the ship’s hull; clearly a machine, the design said, but equally clearly a very advanced one that could race your butt off and then come back to laugh at you.

Dean was idly wondering if he could actually see Sam from here—so far he thought not—when the ambient light from the angry star suddenly dimmed.

No need to panic. “Cas,” he said to the intercom, amused, “you’re in my light.”

In the airless silence of space, of course, there was no whoosh of air, but Dean filled in the sound in
his own mind as the ship in question passed directly over his head. It felt unnervingly close, but that too was an illusion produced by the scale of the starship and Dean’s complete loss of perspective in this alien environment. He decided not to worry about it and settled for watching Castiel glide around the asteroid his human partner was technically exploring and loop around to return to where he’d been hovering figuratively over Dean’s shoulder. At least, from Dean’s point of view Castiel was over his shoulder. While their sensors worked accurately in any direction, the ships spoke much the same language as the biological humans did, and colloquial phrases like ‘watching your back’ affected their thinking just as much as anyone else’s.

Castiel was the same basic dart shape as was Gabriel, but the sleeker design and less pronounced angles of the smaller ship produced an almost organic effect, as one segment flowed into another and appeared to merge together. The different metals and alloys that had been used in their hulls made the older ship a more matte grey, while even in the light from this system’s sun Castiel’s hull remained silver. The ship had been designed to be more agile at slower speeds and faster to reach faster ones; that combined with the intuitive movements of a pilot that was the ship itself made it look not quite grown, but perhaps forged, like liquid metal that had been allowed to set in a shape of its own devising.

The only other times Dean generally got to see his ship like this was whenever they returned to Fleet Command’s Launch Station or any of the other varied Spacedocks that the Fleet maintained. And by then, the human was usually dragged away to report to someone or other about what his team had found, rationalize or explain actions they’d taken, or be informed of some change in the command structure or the rules that he generally didn’t bother to read in too much detail. Maybe on his way to one of those innumerable, tedious interviews, he’d pass a viewport and catch a glimpse of his ship flying freely out in the void or docked with the base, but it was always only in passing and he was almost always too busy resenting whatever stupid meeting he was being dragged to now to enjoy it. In much the same way, once he’d finally escaped the meeting or interview or conference or lecture, all he wanted to do was spend his free time interacting with new people, reconnecting with distant friends who might be likewise passing through, and generally taking advantage of having some downtime. Staring out the window at the untouchable version of someone he saw every day rarely got onto his mental to-do list.

“Hey, you,” Dean said now, watching his ship soar and enjoying the view.

He didn’t expect a reply, and he didn’t get one, but he knew he was being watched the same way.

The ship was watching him carefully, although not primarily for aesthetic reasons. Castiel was growing more and more uncomfortable with this star system as time went past and he thought about it. While the data they received from Fleet Command about what they could expect to find out here on the edges of known space were usually thin and frequently inaccurate in small ways, this system’s star was so far off what had been predicted that it was disturbing. Stars simply did not change this abruptly; while the data had a built-in time delay due to the speed of light that most of the universe still observed, the star should not have changed this much between its light reaching Earth and being analyzed and his team arriving here now. It was a puzzle.

He considered the possibility of human error. Perhaps the information on another star had been transposed with the coordinates of this one, and somewhere else there was a scientific team that had been sent to study a dying star currently very confused to find a healthy one in its place. While this was the most likely of the alternatives he and Gabriel had thought of between themselves, it did not completely satisfy him.

Adding to his concerns was the discontinuity the two ships had encountered on their way to this
troubling system. He still did not know what it was. It was a blind spot. He did not even have the terms to describe it. It was as if the rules had been different in that one place, far off in the dark of interstellar space; they had both sensed it and been unwilling to approach.

It had been as if, he thought now, the dimension that ships travelled in flight through had impinged on this realm—if that dimension had been completely unlike itself, an unfriendly place quite opposite to the alternate spatial dimension of flight that Castiel and his siblings quite naturally inhabited.

The only good thing about it had been that it appeared to be completely isolated. It had been there, and it shouldn’t be. But in the time Castiel and Gabriel had spent watching it carefully and probing it as closely as they dared to, it hadn’t changed of its own accord, nor had it responded to the metaphorical prodding of the two starships.

Perhaps the two anomalies were related. It might be possible that the presence of the discontinuity had lensed the light from the star in some way, and presented a false image to observers light-years away. Knowing nothing for sure about the discontinuity, he did not know if that was a possibility. It was a possibility, he decided, that it was a possibility.

If Castiel had been properly human, rather than a ship that masqueraded as one with increasing frequency, he might have sighed and rested his head on his hands at this point. Speculation was clearly getting him nowhere, and Gabriel, when queried, had nothing to add. For once.

For lack of a better option, Castiel returned his attention to the transporter lock he was maintaining on Dean, anticipating his partner’s return in excess of his usual desire. The sooner they were reunited and they could leave, the better.

He didn’t have much longer to wait, although to a ship whose mind functioned at speeds far beyond a human’s, it felt like the metaphorical forever. This spacewalk had never been Dean’s interest in the first place, and the human soon signaled that he was ready to return.

Castiel snatched him back from the void with a distinct sense of relief.

Some of his impatience must have communicated itself to Gabriel as well, or perhaps the brothers simply worked more in unison than they knew, because only a minute or so later the other ship’s transporter caught Sam off the asteroid he’d eventually ended up on (nowhere near their original landing site) and the two pairs were preparing to jump into flight and leave to find a more hospitable system.

Much later, Castiel will be able to reconstruct most of what occurs next. At the moment, it will defy processing, simply happening too fast and lacking any immediate context or supporting information.

Fire—here in the dark where there should be none, as hot as the spitting jets from the sun in his wake, and the worse for the unexpected and incongruous nature of them.

Light and static, jamming his sensors and interfering with his perceptions of the space around him, a space too unusually crowded for Castiel to maneuver blindly. His senses range up and down the electromagnetic spectrum with a freedom that a human could not achieve without a fully-stocked laboratory and observatory, and without the need for translation into a limited spectrum of visible light and conversion into sound that the human would also require. In a moment too instantaneous for the ship to clearly understand, that spectrum is pared down to scattered and disjointed bands. Fragments from the x-ray spectrum and a handful of the visible wavelengths flash into his awareness, competing with a pulse of infrared and a single deep boom from the deepest ranges that lie below even radio waves. The rest is blank noise, meaningless and scattered.
Most of all it frightens, and it hurts, and Castiel’s first reaction is to take off running. He jumps blindly, a split-second’s dip into the alternate spatial dimension where flight occurs, and almost immediately back out. The jolt hurts almost as much as the attack—

(They’re under attack.)

(That’s not possible.)

—but he knew it would, he’s done it before, and he’s prepared for it. His ship body creates its own cacophony of interference as the materials are jammed up against their tolerances and rebel. But he’s built for agility, to dive and soar and turn on a thought; he knows belatedly, after the fact, that he can take the strain and the g-forces.

Somewhere deep inside his mind, distress triggers the emergency relay automatically. It cuts through the static from without and the fog of shock like a scream.

It starts him thinking again. He only has access to a fraction of his senses, but the ones that remain he can use.

His attacker must have missed its first strike, or the pain would be worse.

The two thoughts, and the acting on them, condense into a single fact:

It’s gone after Gabriel and Sam.

He gets only a glimpse of it, and it makes no sense. It’s twisted and warped, elements in impossible places and energy redirected to burn and baffle, enormous and predatory.

But it could almost be like him.

Energy from the thing that cannot be a ship lashes at Gabriel, snapping and snaring, and even through the discord in his mind Castiel can hear his brother’s scream, rage and fear and pain and defiance all mixed together and thrown at their attacker like a challenge.

He doesn’t know what he’s going to do about it, but it’s a cry that cannot be ignored. Castiel dives, banks suddenly, and screams in as if for an attack of his own, unarmed and reeling as he is, tearing acceleration straight from the fabric of space. Subconsciously, some part of his mind buried too deep to be affected is monitoring everything, and the closer he gets the more he’ll see, and if this thing is chasing him he’s already outrun it once and Gabriel can get away while it’s distracted.

Castiel doesn’t get that far. Some instinct tells him to jump, now! and he flickers away from his intended course as something else—the flash he gets looks rather like the first attacker, in that it is a distorted parody of his own ship form—screams through where Castiel would have been in that split second, would have been shrieking in the pain that now dominates Gabriel’s voice or blown to dust completely.

The ship pulls off another bone-wrenching turn to escape the thing pursuing him and runs.

Images: So I had a vague mental image of what I wanted my starships to look like (they’re not the Enterprise) but found out I didn’t have an accurate enough one to describe. So I went to deviantART, a hangout of mine (you may have heard of the place), and dug through the archives until I found two pictures of similar but different ships that corresponded to what I saw in my head. I don’t know if AO3 will let me keep these spaced-out links, but the image that most closely matched the ship I was envisioning as Castiel is this one: http://the-white-tiger (dot) deviantart (dot) com /art/
The-WARSTAR-50654852 and Gabriel more like this: http://galen82 (dot) deviantart (dot) com /art/BC-308-Concordia-202496717
Chapter Five: Crossroad Blues

ON WITH THE SHOW!

He’s kneeling awkwardly on a ledge almost a mile into the cave beneath the moon’s surface. There’s water dripping down the opposite wall. Unfortunately the wall is on the other side of a chasm just too wide to span with an easy reach and while it must have a bottom—he can hear the irregular drips hitting it—the echoes make it almost impossible to tell how far away that ground is and how many rocky projections would come between him and it on the way down.

They need the water. There are fifteen of them who think they can survive on their own, light-years away from help beyond those you brought with you to begin with. Fifteen young men and women, escorted out to this moon that’s kept as it is and as it has been for this very purpose. They’re almost definitely being monitored. The more experienced Fleet people who recruited them probably wouldn’t let them die of their inexperience.

Brave people, probably crazy, but not stupid with it. The Fleet attracts a type. They quickly figure out that if there’s a competition going, it’s between them and the people testing them, not each other. Even in a society where people can’t blow their nose or yawn without a thousand people noticing, the lesson of interdependence still feels new.

They had flocked to each other, learning each other’s strengths and weaknesses, family ties and connections, bonds of loyalty and needs. They’d all, at some point, stood at the windows of the barge that was carrying them—a stupid thing, a machine controlled by humans—and looked out at the stars and the creatures that lived among those stars yet were their cousins.

The ships out the window, darting around the barge and each other, were nothing like the familiar contraption beneath the humans’ feet. They’d followed for the fun of it, like dolphins in the seas of Old Earth, to see what there was to see, and for the interest, because they might see the people who went down again someday, if those people came up still looking to see them.

They were beautiful, and alien, and untouchable, and once the fifteen were transported down to the surface the ships receded from their thoughts, too far away to matter.

This is a dream, Dean thinks, in the dream, with surprising clarity. I know it’s a dream, because this already happened. This is the day I met Cas for the first time.

In a moment, the torch that he drained the battery from to light the fire last night will go out unexpectedly, not dimming gracefully through flutters that can be jolted back to life by slapping the casing but blacking out completely. He’ll freeze, surprised and disoriented. The unreal loudness of the water and his breathing, both irregular in the moon’s thin air that hadn’t gotten any denser underground like he had expected, will echo off the rocks, interfering with each other and creating what will seem like an overwhelming cacophony of sound.

He’ll turn to reach for the torch in the hopes that it can be shaken back into life. As he turns, balanced on the edge, the heel of his foot will knock against the cave wall. He’ll hear something break and he’ll jerk away reflexively, in the darkness, on the edge.

He’ll fall, into the dark and the depths, with the teeth of the earth waiting for him.
The moment will stay with him forever, ambushing him as he drifts into sleep or floats out of it, knocking him awake between one calm heartbeat and the next agitated one.

He’ll only fall for a second before the vertigo of gravity’s triumph over matter is replaced with that of technology’s triumph over gravity and he’s transported away and into orbit.

“That was stupid,” an unfamiliar but not unpleasant rasp will tell him, as he throws an arm over his eyes, blinded by the sudden light that replaces the cave’s darkness.

“Shev you. But nice catch,” Dean will reply amicably. “Who’m I talking to?”

In the cave, in the past, the light goes out. He turns. He falls.

Fear and imagination paint the gap receding above him in colors he can’t see. He’s falling and it’s wrong.

This isn’t what happened.

This can’t be a dream. I never fall. Castiel caught me. Cas always catches me, even in my dreams.

Something’s wrong…

The darkness is almost tangible. It has a texture, grey and thick, pushing on his eyes and his brain until he can’t see or think. He struggles to fly and he struggles to breathe and he triumphs at neither.

He fights it. I didn’t fall!

It wasn’t until the g-force lessened that Dean managed to pull himself out of the blackout tunnel and back to what passed for full awareness, and almost as soon as he got there he wished he hadn’t. His body ached and his mind was reeling, struggling to comprehend itself and nowhere near catching up to what had just happened.

He could remember transporting back aboard from Sam’s little spacewalking field trip. He clearly remembered taking off the helmet, snapping open airtight seals and resisting the urge to toss the vaguely spherical spacesuit component away onto the floor. His rooms aboard ship looked a lot like that when he was in the middle of something, things dropped where they’d fallen until almost everything he owned was strewn around his rooms and he had to clean it all up just to find anything.

There wasn’t much past that. Everything had lurched without warning, knocking Dean to the floor. He’d been about to yell, more out of concern than anger, when everything had gone away, roughly.

He could vaguely recall darkness that felt like the lights in the corridor going out rather than the lights in his brain doing the same thing. Damage, then, not unconsciousness.

And movement, as if Castiel had been moving so fast and so unpredictably that the systems that were supposed to compensate for the ship’s actual acceleration hadn’t been able to keep up, much less predict what he was going to do next and take steps. That was bad, because while there were automatic backup systems that should do that, Castiel could also control the inertial dampers with an offhand thought. That he hadn’t… At the moment Dean was still far too disoriented to think any further than that. Actually, most of his thoughts after regaining consciousness had consisted of strong feelings of confusion and distress rather than full sentences.

Now he was glad he’d taken off the helmet before everything had gone to hell. Throwing up in a sealed helmet had never been a good thing. At one time, it could have been fatal, and drowning in
your own vomit was up there with the nastier ways to die. The suit had a built-in computer and could probably compensate, but it still wasn’t something anyone would want to put to the test. Same held for the smartsuit worn almost as a second skin, which had probably saved his internal organs from being jelly in the face of far-too-high g-forces that had smashed the human into the deck and tried to grind him into whatever space happened to be immediately below by way of the miniscule spaces between the atoms of the ceiling.

On balance, Dean decided, he was just going to stay here and black out again. He wasn’t going to put any effort into it; he’d just lie on his back and not bother to focus on the lights above him. Either they were flickering or his brain was running on a time-share. Judging by the fact that his ears thought they were underwater, the normal my-chest-is-a-popped-balloon feeling of jumping to flight had been magnified into my-rib-cage-just-exploded, and the ceiling was shifting back and forth in a slow and sickening sway, it was probably his brain.

Then again, maybe the lights were flickering because Cas was in the way and moving around, which made one of them. Huh. That was probably it.

“Dean?” the human heard as if from very far away. “Can you hear me? I’m sorry, I’m sorry, Dean, wake up!” He might have missed something before and after that, because Cas was really unduly distressed. He should probably do something about that.

“Hey,” Dean thought he said, reaching up to calm his friend. He’d been aiming to reach out and pull his companion down into a hug, which seemed like a good idea at the moment and at least it would make him hold still for a few seconds. That was the plan, but either his hand missed entirely or the man he thought he was talking to was actually a hologram, because his fingers went straight through. “S’okay,” he added, baselessly. Didn’t matter. Cas was clearly upset and in some ways looking after Cas was a lot like looking after Sam when they were both younger. Whatever the actual problem was, it came second to the immediate issue of an unhappy brother, or, in this case, lover. And in any case if things were that bad it would probably help to have two reasonable people dealing with it rather than one reasonable person trying to deal with the problem and a distressed companion all at once.

Mmm. Yes. Hologram. Because Cas didn’t actually have wings, at least not the mostly-human version he was used to. The hologram had a certain amount of leeway to change things, though. Mostly he didn’t. But the ships, in general, really did think of themselves as the closest anyone had actually come to angels, and with their flight capabilities… They’re not showing off, someone—he forgot exactly who—had told the various trainees in one of the many, many discussions about the ships and their capabilities and quirks, it’s usually a stress indicator. A desire to escape, or remind someone that they’re more powerful than they appear. It looks amazing, but it’s a bad sign.

Dean’s priorities were a little skewed at the moment, though, so his first reaction—and the one that made it to his mouth—was actually: “Cas. Hot damn. Look a’ you.”

Forgetting that he’d already tried to touch the image and failed, the human pushed himself up on one elbow to reach for his friend and did not—he later insisted—completely and totally faint. He blacked out, he corrected a bit sheepishly much later, because of the after-effects of intense gravitational forces applied to a human body designed to work at one G and no more.

That would be much later, long after he woke up properly and quite some time after he learned what had just happened. To all of them, but mostly to Sam.
upright and shouting inside a second.

Castiel had left his human avatar ‘dozing’ on one of the sickbay’s other beds, and did a creditable imitation of jerking awake as Dean’s roar of “Castiel! REPORT!” echoed around the room and the medical scanner clattered to the floor, its programmed purr cutting off to be replaced by an anguished beeping as the very limited little robot complained to the ship proper.

The ship shut it up with a thought, watching Dean anxiously. His human eyes told him that the man was very awake and getting progressively more agitated as he waited impatiently for a reply to his somewhat vague query. His far more accurate internal sensors made him wish that the little drone had been allowed to complete its work. Theoretically, if Dean was feeling healthy enough to shout that loud at him, there shouldn’t be any significant damage remaining, but Castiel knew from experience that Dean would take injuries that would put most humans down and keep on going, ignoring his body’s demands and his mind’s caution and stubbornly persisting in whatever it was he was doing.

There was still no perceptible delay in between the human’s demand for more—any—information and the ship’s reply.

“We were attacked,” he said briefly, because he had been reviewing all the available information while Dean slept off the g-forces and Castiel still knew little more than he did to begin with. “I do not know what they were. I saw two. I can provide you with the scans and the shiplog if you wish.”

“Our shiplog,” Dean growled. “If I wanted to read shiplogs I’d be sitting on some base or cruising a barge around.” He’d adopted the slightly derogatory word the faster-than-light ships used for any non-sentient ship regardless of its shape or flight capabilities. “You tell me. What did you see?”

Gabriel would have laughed at him for putting off the inevitable, then offered suggestions for leading Dean in circles, because the longer Dean spends going over what the attack looked like and not looking directly at the visual records the longer it will take him to ask what happened to the other ship and his brother, not to mention where they are now. And that was a conversation that Castiel did not want to have, because he knew Dean would not like the answers and Castiel was always happier when his human partner was too.

“They were almost like me,” he said cautiously, now. “Possibly a similar design to begin with, in that we all look somewhat alike, but changed, as if they were melted and reformed. There were at least two,” he added, “and they were armed.” Staying seated on the sickbay bed was really remarkably difficult, the ship noted absently. He was shaken and unhappy and was willing to admit to himself that he had gotten addicted to the simple but utterly complex sensations of being a human being held by someone he loved.

This will break you, whispered some cynical part of his mind, that had been lonely for so long and had yet to fully accept that being otherwise would do other than cause him more pain than he could bear. Castiel ignored it as he had been doing for over a year and a half now. I chose knowing the consequences.

“Show me. You hurt?” Dean was asking. “I heard—” He paused as if trying to remember what he had heard. Metal tearing, relays blowing out? The screams of a living structure under the strain of acceleration.

Castiel thought about it before Dean could finish his sentence. “Nothing I cannot repair.” But I’m scared. A mental nudge of the nearest ever-present display panels set into the walls brought up the readings he’d gotten of the two—enemies, he decided—consolidated into a pair of stand-alone
images. Don’t let him ask just yet.

As he’d hoped, the mechanical mystery of the almost-but-not-quite ships was enough to catch Dean’s attention. “Look at that,” he exclaimed. The images followed his touch as he flipped and rotated them past the blank spots which Castiel had simply not gotten an angle on for an image. “That’s almost—but twisted…Melted, huh? Not far from.” He tapped one and it zoomed in to fill most of the space obediently. “Might be able to smooth that out into a Fleet design, sure. A bad copy, you think? We’ve never found anyone capable of doing that. Anyone at all, really. It’s just us and you out here. What happened to these scans, Cas?”

A question he could answer. “They were emitting some form of interference as soon as they appeared. These were the frequencies I could access.”

The human was completely focused on the problem in front of him as if it were a planetary survey with some unexpected challenges—but wasn’t that all of them?—or a rogue fault in his pet shuttlecraft that refused to be ironed out or even confine itself to one system. It was an image Castiel found comforting; familiar and reassuring. “They were flight-capable?”

“From the abruptness of their arrival and these energy readings—” The appropriate scans opened in a new window and blinked for Dean’s attention. “—I would assume so.”

“Damn.” He looked up from his scrutiny of the images on the panel and held Cas’s gaze, returning the intensely focused stare so often directed at him. “Good flying, Cas.”

The instant of shallow, silly flattery was cut off as quickly as it came as Dean continued, “Sam must be up to his neck in this. What’s he come up with?”

Silence from the other bed. Castiel knew almost all of the colorful terms humans liked to use in stressful situations, ‘almost’ because they were always inventing illogical combinations and applications. Until now, he had never felt it necessary to use any of them beyond the mild expletives that the Winchesters and many other humans of his acquaintance used to punctuate and accentuate their speech. Now he wished he’d paid more attention.

“…Cas?”

“I do not know,” Cas said in a very small voice. Suddenly and most unusually, he couldn’t meet Dean’s eyes.

Suddenly the room was singing with tension and Castiel was deeply regretting staying here as a human. He wished he could disappear and not have to know that Dean was staring at him in disbelief that was quickly becoming a mix of explosive anger and developing horror.

“Castiel,” Dean growled, “where’s my brother?”

“I do not know,” Cas repeated, feeling his shoulders draw in involuntarily. Interesting, the reflexes that came programmed into a human body. He would be more interested if he didn’t have to feel them and know why. “Gabriel was hurt, ensnared by what I believe to be a form of energy weapon unlike any I have seen designs for before. I heard him cry out. I saw our attacker strike at him. I do not know what happened after that.”

And there was the snap from simmering disbelief to anger. “You ran! Do you even know if they’re alive?”

It was unfair, and it gave Cas the impulse he needed to look his partner in the eye again. “What should I have done, Dean? Shout at them? Set a collision course and destroy us all? There were two
of them, and they were armed. You know I am not. We have never had to be. If I had stayed the other would have turned the same weapon on me. It tried. It missed. Yes, I ran.” Now might be a good time to be slightly more conciliatory, he decided, hearing his own voice drop further into an aggressive snarl. “And no, I do not know. But we are still relatively close and I would have felt Gabriel’s destruction. If he is alive, he will look after Sam. As I would protect you.”

Dean fumed helplessly, paced briefly around the small room, looked for something to lash out at, aimed a kick at the now-deactivated medical drone, missed, and changed tack. “So I assume we’re going after them. How much of a lead do they have?”

Silence was overrated.

It was also doomed.


“En route back to Earth,” Castiel admitted, and they were back to not making eye contact and it felt fundamentally wrong. “About a week and a half’s trip at full speed.” Most of their outbound travel time was taken up by the time spent in star systems and exploring various planets, and they hadn’t been in any great rush. A week and a half of full-throttle flight would be exhausting but doable, and it would get them back to Earth and Fleet Command in a fraction of the time it had taken them to get away.

“Turn the hell around right now, Cas!” Dean roared. A few quick steps brought him right up to where Cas was still sitting on the sickbay bed, not having moved throughout the increasingly heated argument. Basic human body language, intimidation through stance and size; he was a little taller than Castiel’s human form as it was but their respective positions gave him the chance to loom significantly. It didn’t work on a ship.

“No.”

Dean’s eyes smoldered, and not in a good way. Sacrificing the height advantage that wasn’t working anyway, he braced his hands on either side of Cas’s hips and leaned down until they were nose to nose and breathing each other’s air. “Explain this ‘no’.” It was low and dark and dangerous and it hurt.

“I have orders, Dean! One of us has to pay attention to them.” Or they’ll separate us, he did not say, and you might survive that, you are human and resilient, but it would destroy me. “These things have destroyed or taken seven—eight now—of my siblings and I cannot fight them alone. We have to return to Earth. We are returning to Earth. But we are not abandoning your brother, Dean. Or mine.”

And just like that, the eyes a breath away from his own were gone and Dean was storming away out the door, which opened automatically before Castiel could think clearly enough to hold it closed and stop his human partner from walking away from him, anger, frustration, and fear all too clear in the set of his shoulders and the harsh sounds of boots hitting deck plating.

He was on his feet not even a heartbeat later, all his instincts to follow Dean, to be with him and protect him and explain, working overtime.

“No.” It was cold as the void and even more unfriendly, because the void between stars was Castiel’s home and it had never been as unwelcoming to him as that single syllable. “Don’t you dare.”
The door didn’t slam—it wasn’t programmed or designed to—but it might as well have closed hard enough to echo and catch reaching fingers in the doorjamb into the bargain for the effect it had on Cas, who shied away and stared at the door unseeing, unconsciously tracking the human’s progress through the corridors between the sickbay and his rooms while most of the rest of his mind howled in distress at the rejection on top of the attack that had turned his world upside down, hurt upon hurt.

*Told you so,* said a very cynical and remarkably *unfairly* smug part of *Castiel’s* mind.

If anything, Sam’s return to consciousness was more agonizing than his brother’s had been, already light-years away. His head hurt so badly that he was seeing lights flashing where no lights should be, especially as some of them appeared to be on the inside of his skull and others seemed to be coming from inside other points beneath his skin.

They were a most unhelpful form of illumination; that they didn’t actually illuminate anything led him to conclude, along a rather rusty train of thought, that they weren’t real. That should have been a relief, but as they were apparently the only light sources currently working it would have been nice if they hadn’t been imaginary.

“*Gabriel,*” he called out. At least, that had been the idea. What actually came out was closer to “*grrrrmph*” than an intelligible name.

Sam didn’t get an answer anyway. There were some automated alarms very far away adding to his headache, which had approached migraine status, proposed, been accepted, and gone on a whirlwind honeymoon escorted by a marching band to one of those planets that had imported the custom of running through the streets being pursued by large and angry animals.

Probably bad.

He struggled to wet his lips, realized that what he’d thought was spit tasted an awful lot like blood, and managed to think better of scrubbing a sleeve across his mouth to get rid of it, as he remembered in time he was still wearing the spacesuit he’d transported aboard in. Grimacing, he spat out most of it, discovering in the process a gash across the inside of his cheek that was probably the major contributor to the mess.

Still, it made it a little easier to call out “*Gabriel!*” again. This time it came out as a word, but his surroundings stayed dark and the tinny sound of sirens didn’t shut off and no sardonic ship’s voice answered him. Sam was *Gabriel’s* major source of entertainment most of the time. He never failed to respond to a call just in case it might be amusing in some way.

Licking at the cut still bleeding into his mouth and instantly regretting it, Sam managed to sit up and pressed the heels of his hands to his eyeballs in a futile attempt to squash the headache away. It never worked, but the habit was hard to break. As he let his hands fall, though, he realized that there was something wrong he wasn’t noticing. *Apart from the everything?* he supplied *Gabriel’s* comment for himself.

Lords, it was cold.

Cold, and the alarms were getting fainter all the time, not because they were dying down, he thought suddenly, every spacegoer’s nightmare coming to life and painting itself across his agonized brain, but because the air was running out.

Somewhere there was a hull breach. Something had torn *Gabriel* open and even if the ship had survived it Sam wasn’t going to for long.
It was truly amazing how irrelevant a migraine seemed in the face of death by asphyxiation and vacuum exposure. Suddenly Sam was wide awake and thinking with the focus of imminent death.

Suit helmet. He couldn’t see a thing and something had hit them hard and was that *rubble* he’d just jammed his hand into the edge of? Ouch. Not important. Helmet. Helmet. Where was it?

He was never going to find the gloves he’d taken off almost before he’d removed the helmet what felt like a year ago. His smartsuit could compensate if he told it to. He should probably do that. He was really thinking in bits, wasn’t he?

The smartsuit was programmed to do gloves. It might also seal up the jagged hole in the side of his hand, too. Sam paused in his frantic, blind helmet search for a moment to tap the insides of his wrists with the opposing hands and draw a line from wrist to palm with his fingers. Obeying the built-in cue, the suit stretched itself and reshaped around his hands, held momentarily still to make the suit’s job easier, to create makeshift gloves. After a moment, the sensors built into the fabric detected the cut and tightened around it in a bandage, sealing off the wound.

As soon as he had felt the pressure apply to the newest of his cuts and contusions, Sam had resumed his search, sweeping his hands around the deck plating and over debris that hadn’t been there when the lights were on. He was *imagining* that the air was that thin, he told himself sternly, not daring to say it out loud lest the sound betray how thin the ship’s internal atmosphere had actually become. But the gloves had been a very good idea. If the chill on his nose and cheeks and what little air was getting into his lungs was any indication, his fingers would have been nicely on their way to frozen by now.

When he finally bumped into the suit helmet it felt like the best thing that had happened all week. As he sought out the reference points on its surface that would tell him by touch alone which way the helmet was facing and what connections needed to be made for it to work properly, he resolved to thank the instructor back in Sol system that had *insisted* that the trainee cadets had learned to assemble, disassemble, and repair things blindfolded, hungry, tired, dizzy, and, in one colorful case, nauseous with one of the nastier flu bugs that had continued to adapt just ahead of human medicine.

It clicked into place and connected with the suit’s computer and the ship’s atmosphere must have been even thinner than Sam had realized if the heady effects that proper oxygen levels had on him were any indication. And since space was a big, dark place, the helmet had lights built in, which he activated almost before his head had stopped spinning with the rush of air.

There were his gloves, buried under charred metal and a bundle of fiber-optic cable that might have been in use to power one of the stupider systems linked to the ship’s brain or might have been used to tie something in place. It was hard to tell at this point and in its condition. Although some of those lights he’d been seeing might have been the cable rather than his migraine. Whether that was a good sign or not, Sam wasn’t exactly sure.

He rescued the gloves and put them on despite their battered state, then used the suit’s comm system to call “*Gabriel!*” again. Still no response, and fear for his friend’s life bit into him. What had happened? Where were they? And, another worrying thought dawned, had the same thing happened to Dean and *Castiel*? It must have, or they would be here, talking to him and trying to raise *Gabriel*.

That phrase had bad connotations, he thought. He should stop thinking.

Right after he found a working display panel, though. If the ship’s mind was knocked out or unresponsive Sam could access some of the systems directly and send commands that would be obeyed reflexively. If *Gabriel* was conscious he’d be able to block them and then scream at Sam for trying to hack into his *brain* but that was a security measure. You couldn’t hack a starship as long as...
it was alive and well, for security reasons, but for emergency reasons a sufficiently talented pilot/shipboard explorer and technician could do so, and Sam could hack rings around almost anyone who wasn’t a ship to begin with. Maybe he could find where the hull breach was and set up some countermeasures so things like tools and Sam didn’t get dragged out into space. (Unlikely once the pressure equalized, but he’d like to get out of this suit eventually, having already spent a couple of hours in it actively jaunting around a debris field.)

Maybe he could wake up Gabriel directly and they’d make repairs and find Dean and Castiel and this wouldn’t be the probably fatal disaster it was shaping up to be.

Maybe he’d electrocute himself by accident and it would turn out to be a dream induced by Gabriel playing strange music and episodes of very old television shows right below his threshold of hearing while he was trying to sleep.

Anything was possible. Shame the outcomes he didn’t like the look of looked most likely.

“Okay, Sam,” he said aloud to himself for lack of anyone else to talk to. Usually there was an open commlink in this suit so the confined sound of his own voice would have startled him if he hadn’t run out of surprise for the day. “Priorities. Hull integrity. Air. Lords, I hope Gabriel’s just knocked out. Eyes and ears. Where the hell are we, what hit us, and is it coming back?”

Yeah. That was a plan.

Damn, but his head hurt.
Chapter Six: Dead in the Water

ON WITH THE SHOW!

Then:

It had been on—or rather, just above—Dusty Sunday.

They’d arrived in the middle of the colony’s biggest party of the year, the origins of which had been lost in the distant past and the selective amnesia of a colony starting over away from Earth but the customs of which endured. Live music. Recordings competing. Dancing in the streets in between and around the parades that were often indistinguishable from the dancers save for that they were trying to go in a particular direction, which often dissolved into the dance and reformed going another direction entirely with a completely different cast of paraders, yet somehow the same parade just turned around and rejuvenated, and dancing anywhere else there was room. Shiny things thrown and caught and dropped until they coated those same streets that people were dancing on, making the dance an exercise in surefootedness and propping yourself up on the people pressed too close to let you fall. Lots to drink, mostly alcohol in strange colors and mixes that made the dancing even more of an art form and increasing the already astronomical chances that the dancers were going to get groped six ways from, well, Dusty Sunday.

They’d been a team for almost two years at that point, the two ships and the two brothers.

Dean had persuaded Castiel to beam down with him in person, so to speak, so when the human materialized he was also supporting Cas’s unconscious human body until they had both fully materialized and the ship could take control. Apparently it was disorienting to both dematerialize and be in charge of the dematerialization, but they’d worked around that. Only a few seconds later, Sam had been transported down beside them. He’d been wearing Gabriel’s holoprojector in the form of a watch, and even before the man unlucky enough to draw the short straw and be manning the transport point in the middle of the planet’s biggest party had gotten impatient and waved them off the pad, Sam had switched the little device on and strapped it around the newly appeared hologram’s wrist, giving Gabriel his freedom to wander around wherever he pleased. The small projector only worked within a fifteen-meter radius; if Sam had kept it Gabriel would have had to stay close by, not always easy in the crowds sweeping across Dusty Sunday.

He and Sam had been talking about something, with the air of a challenge or a bet of some kind. Dean hadn’t been paying attention; he’d been watching Cas watch the sky and what passed for a horizon as if they were some kind of novelty and realizing that to him they were, realizing that the ship didn’t get to see this side of the sky very often and watching the curiosity and the interest until that look settled back on the human and for a heart-stopping second all that interest and fascination had been centered on each other. It had been far too intense for him to consider properly while standing on a transporter pad with his brother and Gabriel and the operator and a planet full of party people in attendance and Dean had dragged his gaze away with what felt like a physical effort to make some joke about unleashing Gabriel on a planet full of party poodles just waiting to be pranked; Gabriel had said something about that being the whole idea but he hadn’t been listening to the answer at all.

The little group fragmented almost immediately, Sam going one way with a wave and Gabriel disappearing into an unsuspecting crowd almost simultaneously.
They’d been out in the black for months at that point with no one to talk to but each other and the crowds pressing in on all sides had been overwhelming but exhilarating. The two of them wandered the streets, managing to stay together despite the madcap ebb and flow. Dean had ordered funny-colored drinks and insisted that Cas try every single one, grinning wider and wider as the ship’s avatar licked the last drops of something or other from a spoon with interest or grimaced at an unexpected taste. He’d guessed in advance that Cas wouldn’t join in the dances sweeping through the streets for love nor money but watching him move through the crowds with the unstated and probably unconscious assumption that he was flying had been almost as good. Better, maybe, because Dean had watched him and known that he knew something none of the strangers around him did, what his friend really was, what he was like, the bond they shared of two people who depended on each other more than anyone else.

Yeah. That was what it was. Sure. At the time it sounded good. And he wasn’t remotely grinning because Cas kept coming back to him despite the crowds trying to sweep him away and the many other attractions and curiosities all around.

They’d stayed for hours. Dean had grown up in crowds and Cas was processing everything through the ship’s much higher-powered mainframe rather than the limited resources of a human brain so neither of them had to worry about getting overloaded by the constant input of light and sound and the smell of happy humans all around. It was fairly obvious that if you wanted to stay on your feet and not get trampled underfoot you’d have to watch what you drank, so most people sampled rather than sozzled and they’d followed the lead of those who knew best. It had been a glorious day. The light and the noise and the joy of everyone around them and he’d seen Cas smile, really smile, at him, because they were happy and together.

The party hadn’t really stopped when it got dark but it had gotten a little more serious, less about the dancing and the foolishness and more about the drinking and the people willing to embarrass themselves in public and probably on camera for the hoots and hollers of the audience and the rush of doing something they’d regret later. Under most circumstances Dean would have stayed for that but to his shock he’d found himself realizing that Cas wouldn’t have and was probably ready to go home by now, and caring more about that. So home they had gone, not bothering to work their way back to their original transport pad. Dean had wrapped an arm around Cas and held him tightly as his eyes went blank and Castiel transported both bodies back into orbit.

They’d materialized right outside his rooms and the rush and the joy of the day and the sensation of Cas coming back to life right there against him had been enough for him to take a chance on some—until then—very private fantasies. He’d dropped the arm already around Cas’s shoulders down to his waist, used it to pull their hips together, and kissed him gently but thoroughly, curious and affectionate, not yet daring to take it—whatever it might be—any further just yet.

He’d had a split second to think Lords of the storm, I shouldn’t have done that before the man in his arms had kissed him back very definitively with all the hunger and desire the human hadn’t dared offer, the taste of that last drink on his lips and the music still thrumming through both their bodies rapidly being overwhelmed by the beat of a much older rhythm.

“Oh,” Dean had manage to gasp out a minute or two later. “You do—”

He had no idea what the rest of that sentence had been going to be, but he never got to finish it anyway as his best friend, his guardian, his companion, his partner, his equal, his lover curled warm and trembling fingers into his hair and pulled him back into the kiss, whispering “Yes. Yes, yes, yes.”

Later he would realize what a complete and absolute surrender it was. Yes, he’d granted, yes, I need
to be touched and loved as much as you do, yes, make me feel. I’m a person too and I want, I want, I want. Kiss me until I can no longer bear it, don’t stop. Give me everything, take what you will; you are mine and everything I am is yours. Shatter me to pieces, make me scream, fly with me, fly with me.

(And sometime after that, Dean had murmured, “You brought us right here. You knew. I didn’t even know.” Cas had laughed at him, silently—he knew that look, it was laughter—and replied quietly, “I hoped.”)

Now:

It had been so damn simple on Dusty Sunday.

Dean was where he had been for most of the week since he’d stormed out of sickbay giving the impression of slamming the door hard enough to rattle—namely, entangled in the guts of his pet shuttlecraft trying to retrofit tools and materials into the body and systems in ways they were never intended to be used. The project had the simultaneous effects of exhausting him on a daily basis, keeping him from thinking about anything but what was immediately in front of him, letting him think he was doing something to fight back against whatever had taken his brother, and giving him something to do. Not that he was ignoring Castiel at all. No, he wasn’t. He was just busy. And angry. And, he was aware, very poor company.

He’d started by raiding the various equipment lockers scattered throughout the ship’s habitable areas, looking for some of the more heavy-duty tools. The industrial laser welder he’d come up with, raising its power levels significantly and designing a remote-control interface that would let him operate it from within the shuttlecraft’s body, was a pretty good find. Originally intended for doing repairs on the hull of a ship or salvage in deep space on a large scale, the welder could operate in vacuum and cut through just about anything even before he’d enhanced it. Now integrated into the shuttlecraft itself, it was shaping up to be a fairly effective weapon. Aiming it precisely might be a problem, but it was mounted on a maneuverable little shuttle.

What its range was, Dean wasn’t quite sure. Pissed as he was, he wasn’t going to test a weapon with an unknown field of effect while within Castiel’s shuttlebay. He wasn’t mad enough to actually hurt him by mistake. But then again, he wasn’t ready to ask the ship to let him out to run tests, either. That would involve talking to him, and the two hadn’t said a word to each other since the day of the attack. Oh, and stopping for a while, since the shuttle wasn’t flight-capable, so tests would only drag out the time before they could turn right around and head out after what they were currently so infuriatingly running from. While Dean knew that running had been the only possible option that left them alive at the end of it, he still couldn’t feel it. Something basic and biological, deep in his mind and his body, was screaming at him to stand and fight, to kill the things that had hurt him and his brother. With what, it didn’t matter. Teeth and fingernails, if need be. But with no immediate enemy to fight, he knew that he would turn that anger on the closest person, no matter what he actually felt about them. He’d done it to Sam in the past, snarling and shouting just because Sam was there and might fight back.

No, better to stay away—as much as that was possible when the person he was avoiding was the structure in which he lived. He’d kept at least the metaphorical distance of the cold shoulder.

Whether he wasn’t sleeping because of worry and rage over Sam or because he’d gotten used to having Cas there dozing beside him, Dean wasn’t quite sure. It was probably both, he’d decided, and since it was both fixing one of those problems wouldn’t help any. Or so he’d reasoned in the grip of a furious and exhausted attack on a malfunctioning power capacitor buried in an inconvenient location within the shuttlecraft’s engine complex.
He’d broken the capacitor. It had probably been broken anyway. The minute and precise work of replacing it had burned out some of the anger, but not as much as breaking it had, and then he had gone to work on the shuttle-mounted welder. By now he knew the power readings were beyond what they were supposed to be, and he knew he didn’t want to test it for fear of the damage it could do. Good enough.

That had taken him a couple of days, but the practice had made it much faster to find the spare welder and repeat the process to give the shuttlecraft double the firepower.

The Fleet supplied its explorers with, theoretically, everything they might need to take on unknown dangers on unknown worlds. But he wasn’t having any luck with the assorted types of blasting agent he’d dug up, either. How hard could it be to weaponize chemicals with the designated purpose of destroying things? Or so he’d thought. The problem was that space was firstly big, and secondly mostly vacuum. Building a spaceworthy launcher from scratch would take too long with the materials he had, and to seed a space with mines and remotely detonate them he’d need much, much more than the Fleet had issued them when they’d left, and in any case the boys had used several kilos early on when they’d stopped off at one of the outer colonies and gotten drafted by the expanding settlement to help with some heavy excavation.

Good times, but not a reminder Dean needed right now.

A shame the shuttlecraft was so small, compared to those monstrosities that had attacked them. Homemade weaponry or not, he might have more luck just ramming the thing into their hulls and hoping to hit a weak point. That had its downsides though, namely that he’d never know if he succeeded.

There was an access point under the body of the shuttlecraft. If Dean remembered correctly, there was a storage space connected to it. He might be able to shove another power unit in there and hook that up to whatever he added to the laser welders. There was some hunting equipment that had ended up in the lab down the hall, unless it had been moved, which he doubted, and a harpoon was a harpoon, right? Give it enough propulsion at launch—it had a basic launcher already built in—and the vacuum environment should work in his favor. He might have to reinforce it somehow, because he didn’t know what those things were made of, but an unexpected collision was likely to make any pilot stop or at least slow for half a second or so.

Quite how it had gotten into the lab rather than somewhere more storage-related wasn’t important, and certainly probably didn’t have anything to do with a planetary survey that had turned into an elaborate and increasingly insane fishing trip and turned up something that wasn’t exactly the monster fish it looked like. Hadn’t tasted all that good, either; he’d gotten an “I told you so” from Cas when Dean had insisted on trying to cook the remains in a variety of ways even if a couple of hours in said lab being scanned by a dubious Castiel had predicted that it wouldn’t poison him but he probably wouldn’t like it anyway.

Not thinking about that. Not grinning slightly and entirely involuntarily at the remembered expression on Cas’s face as he’d sat and watched Dean experiment and taste and amend and generally destroy more of the fish than he’d ultimately end up eating, with the air of a creature that had no idea why he was bothering but was amused by the completely unnecessary spectacle.

Just like he wasn’t thinking about Dusty Sunday, either. He was turning this ship into a weapon and he was planning on getting back at whatever the hell had made it necessary by hurting his family.

“That’s what they’re going to do to me.”

Halfway under the body of the shuttlecraft, Dean managed not to drop the crowbar he’d been using
to lever open the panel. Maybe it hadn’t been intended to be opened after all, but that hadn’t stopped
him. After all, he’d been right there and holding a conveniently tough steel lever that would have
really hurt if he’d let go in surprise when Castiel decided to pipe up right now.

“Do what?” he asked anyway, and he was not relieved to hear his partner’s voice in any way. At all.
He wasn’t. Really. To show how much he didn’t care, he stayed under the shuttle where Castiel
probably couldn’t see him smiling.

“This. What you’re doing.”

Yeah, it had made sense the first time. “Lotta people thought you and your siblings shoulda been
armed a long time ago, Cas.”

“And we said no. Because it wasn’t needed. You evolved with bloodlust. We didn’t.”

Sounded like Cas planned on sticking around and actually holding a conversation. Dean put the
crowbar down. “Like hell. Maybe you didn’t, but you ships mimic humans. It’s in you same way it’s
in us.”

“I know. Why do you think we said no? But now that we know there’s a danger—” He broke off.
Whether he was still there and just silent or had vanished again altogether Dean wasn’t sure, but the
human decided to go with it.

“You know this for sure or just guessing?”

“It was your first reaction, wasn’t it?”

Actually, his first reaction had been instant white-hot rage that he’d used to shove Cas away and then
spend almost half an hour swearing at the unresponsive walls without repeating himself even once.

The question had been rhetorical and Castiel wasn’t waiting for a response. “Everyone is talking.
Most of them are sending me messages about it. The technology has been in development for years,
and there are branches of the Fleet that have been building weapons for us just in case it became
necessary to use them. They began installing the prototypes almost immediately after we reported the
nature of the attack.” He changed the subject without warning. “Dean, don’t do this to me.”

That could mean almost anything, and if he wanted to find out what the ship actually meant, Dean
was going to have to come out from where he was not hiding underneath the shuttle. Subtle
variations in his friend’s voice told him that it wasn’t coming through the ship’s intercom, and he
hadn’t heard the shuttlebay doors open, so Dean was willing to bet he was talking to the ship’s
holographic interface.

He crawled out from his prone position on the shuttlebay deck, leaving the crowbar and the other
pieces of miscellaneous equipment that had drifted under there over the course of his week of
experimentation and destruction. The small shuttles had evolved from personal vehicles throughout
the ages, and it still bore a passing resemblance to a car, admittedly an oversized version of a solid
and sturdy one, despite the fact that its power and acceleration and general innards weren’t anything
like one. There was a little of the breadbox shape of early designs still to it, although it was far more
streamlined than some models.

For a second Dean thought his guess was completely wrong and he’d been talking to empty air after
all. Then he looked up, to find that Cas was sitting on the shuttlecraft’s roof, elbows braced on his
knees and hunched over as if he was trying to hide, childlike and unhappy.

“Do what?” he asked again, and added, “C’mon down, man.”
“Shut me out,” Cas explained briefly, acting as if he was looking anywhere except Dean, not an easy task as the man was standing right in front of him and definitely paying attention to him even if Dean wasn’t quite at eye level. The human saw the glance anyway. “It’s not—” Motionless as he was for a moment, and not, as requested, moving from the roof of the shuttle, he was clearly struggling. “—what I want to be. To do. It’ll hurt, and I won’t be who I was. Who I am.”

“I gotta save Sam, Cas,” Dean pointed out, not terribly patiently. “And Gabriel, and maybe some of the others gone missing too. You seriously gonna—”

Cas could move terribly quickly when he wanted to and the rest of Dean’s sentence was cut off as he found cool fingers pressed to his lips, the subtle static of holographic illusion providing a surreal counterpoint. “No,” he insisted. “Of course I want them back. You’re not the only one who’s lost family, Dean!” The hand braced against the shuttle’s roof, keeping his balance, flexed as if trying to get a grip on solid metal in frustration.

When he spoke again, it was much quieter. “I will do anything to save them, as many as we can. We’ll go after them, and we’ll hurt whoever it is that took them so this never happens again.” The quiet was almost as intense as the snarl that occasionally roughened Castiel’s customary voice even further. “…Just don’t make me do it without you, Dean. I need you.”

That was a plan Dean could get behind, as long as… “You know them up there with the Fleet are gonna drag their feet and bitch ‘til everything’s squared away and organized before anything gets done, right?” he teased softly.

The affection in his voice worked wonders, instantly visible in Cas’s expression and manner. “They might move faster if they were chasing us.”

Dean laughed, rather liking the idea of scorching out of the Fleet’s control with a dozen or so of Cas’s siblings in their dust, and ambushing those two monster ships with backup right behind them. “Damn right. And scratch what I just said.”

“Which part?”

“About getting down off Baby’s roof. I’m all done savaging her for the day. You blink out and come be human with me so I can kiss you properly.”

Somewhere Else:

Sam felt as if he’d been beating his head against this display panel for hours, both in terms of aggravation and physical pain. It couldn’t have been that long, because the spacesuit’s external sensors were still reporting a steady atmospheric leak all around him and if it had been hours all the air would have been long gone. One of the only things he’d been able to accomplish so far was to get a sense of the extent of the gross structural damage to the ship. It wasn’t good. Essentially nothing was working, probably due to the immense gashes through the ship’s port hull, as if some enormous cat had raked its claws through solid metal and alloys designed to resist the heat of a star, the deep cold of interstellar vacuum, and the alternate higher dimension where faster-than-light flight took place equally casually.

The ships weren’t designed with a single central brain the way humans were. A lot of processing took place in the systems distributed throughout the physical superstructure, through networks that ran throughout the ships’ inner hulls like an enhanced and much more powerful version of a human’s central nervous system. Unlike a human’s, which basically received information from and sent it to a brain that did the work of a central processor, the ships’ neural networks existed throughout their
physical forms. Theoretically it made them less vulnerable; a single shot could take out a human brain, but unless a ship was vaporized entirely some part of its mind might survive.

Some of it was biological in origin, other parts manufactured, and some a conglomeration of both where the line between grown and built wavered and started to get perforated out of sheer embarrassment over its identity crisis. Linking the various components together and translating from one medium to the other was one of the many things ships could do much faster than humans. They weren’t segmented enough that each section thought separately—the connections were too fast and too multilayered—but it was rather like a human brain had been interwoven into the entire body rather than staying just in the head. Some functions were unconscious, and some simply beneath their interest to pay attention to, like the precise functioning of the plumbing their human companions required or the operation of the replicators that provided food, clothing, and medication on a regular basis as said humans tore through all three.

They got annoyed if you asked where their minds lived, a stupid question to begin with as no one had ever isolated where in the human brain the human ‘soul’ lived.

In this case it meant that whatever had torn through Gabriel’s hull had taken out part of his ability to think and respond to Sam’s repeated attempts to contact the ship’s consciousness and while he was designed to be able to reroute those functions it would take a while at best. And that was only the damage Sam had been able to find data on.

The younger Winchester eventually managed to access some of the internal controls that didn’t directly connect to Gabriel’s higher functions, like the door controls and airlocks. He sealed off the area he was in, which stopped what was left of the atmosphere from bleeding out into empty space, but which meant he’d also locked himself in. A few minutes later, after finding two other access points and networking them together, not without resorting to thumping some uncooperative computers a few times, he’d managed to rig together something that might let him get through to Gabriel, if the ship was still alive. The screens looked built-in, but they were designed to be removed from the walls if necessary, letting Sam arrange them in a circle around him as he knelt on the deck. There wasn’t a comfortable way to sit in a spacesuit, yet another design flaw that hadn’t been satisfactorily worked out.

He still couldn’t get an accurate picture of how much damage had been done to his friend’s neural networks, which was in itself a bad sign.

Using his makeshift computer network, Sam sent out a variety of messages in a variety of different ways, hoping to get the ship’s attention and provoke a response. He started with connecting the spacesuit’s built-in computer to the network and hacking into the intercom system with it.

“Hope you can hear me, Gabriel,” Sam said aloud as he continued to work, ordering whatever part of the ship’s brain was working to start running damage assessments on the power distribution system. Simultaneously, he hopped into the remote-control for the same system and used it to pulse whatever lights might be working in a deliberate pattern based on ancient Morse. GABRIEL ITS SAM WAKE UP. Setting that program to loop continuously, he switched computers, setting the first panel to one side and leaning over to access another. “Trying to get through to you. Where are we, what happened? I’m OK for now, ‘long as you rule out the headache, which is getting worse by the minute. Not seeing flashing lights anymore, though, except the ones I’m putting there on purpose. And all the error messages I keep getting. I think this suit saved my life, I’d be out of air by now if I wasn’t wearing it.”

No answer on any channel. He’d try something else.

While technically memory files like the media libraries the ships consumed in great gulps and then
retained for the entertainment of the humans involved were below their conscious level of awareness, only accessed when necessary, involved, or interested, Sam figured it couldn’t be a bad way to get Gabriel’s attention if he could get into the media database and it wasn’t too shattered. He had other things he could try, but he tuck away the idea of queuing up as many forms of media at once as he could, especially ones that Gabriel had used to get his attention in the past.

“I hope your sensors are working better than I can see from here,” Sam told the unresponsive intercom. He was trying to find something—anything—on what could be going on outside without walking over to the nearest gash in Gabriel’s hull and just sticking his head out and taking a look for himself. “We must have moved. I know flight when I feel it trying to jam nails through my brain. Where did we go? Did we escape? Something hit us.”

The lights flickered, and Sam swore roughly and furiously as his panels blanked out sometime in the middle of it. He was still working his way through a mixture of his brother’s favorite invocations against malfunctioning equipment when a message appeared on the screen without fanfare.

sam?

It was quite possibly a glitch but then again maybe it wasn’t, and Sam allowed himself a whoop! of relief. “Gabriel?” he called, then splayed his fingers across the panel as though typing on a keyboard and tapped the featureless surface in the appropriate sequence.

you’re alive? hurting

“I’m here. I’m okay. Are you?” He kept typing but it helped to talk.

The response was slow enough to worry him further. no lost hurting don’t know

“Lost? You don’t know where we are? Do you have access to your sensors? What do you see outside?”

can’t see. there’s no light no light no stars

Sam brought the panel with him as he stood up. “Your scanners are probably damaged, Gabriel. My suit still has a few hours of air so I’m going to try to find some tools and start repairs.”

Gabriel’s response was much faster this time, although whether it was due to recovery or concern wasn’t clear. NO not safe not working right

“You?”

here. stay away from the breach there’s dark out there

Sam had already changed his mind. “All right. What do you want me to do? I don’t know how bad the damage is, but you and I have to get it fixed. We were attacked, right?”

yes don’t know what

He was about to keep asking questions when the screen continued but not far away can hear them

He’d thought his alert level had been maxed out for the day. Evidently not. “Are they coming back?”

you betcha

Sam thought about it for a second, decided this was the perfect time for a word that could scorch paint in vacuum, and tried it out.
damn right hide sam

“Where?” He was already picking his way around the debris and panels scattered across the floor, headed away from the nearest hull breach and into the depths of the ship.

engine compartments power readings will hide you not as much damage there’s air and light still

The engines that enabled the ships to slip between dimensions and blatantly outrace the speed of light while supplying enough excess power to run every other onboard system and more besides were housed as deep within all ships’ structures as possible. They weren’t radioactive in any way that affected human bodies but some people reported feeling strange, as if their minds weren’t working the way they were used to. The engines allowed ships to jump from one dimension to another; something of that in-between, slightly different quality seemed to leak out. No tests had ever found a scientific basis for this, but the engine rooms were still not somewhere human crew tended to want to hang out, partly because there wasn’t much they needed to do. The ships monitored their own power output and production very carefully. Exactly what their upper output limits were hadn’t been fully tested lately, especially since successive generations of ships kept getting smarter and more intuitive and coming up with ways to go faster, think faster, and generate more power to do so.

Given the damage to Gabriel Sam decided not to complain about his persistent headache, which hadn’t abated at all and would probably only get worse in proximity to the flight engines.

“All right, but if I’m going to be climbing between decks—” The engine rooms were four decks below where Sam currently was. “—I can’t bring this panel with me, it’s damn awkward. Can you get into the intercom yet? If there’s something out there coming after us I want to know about it.”

i’ll try hurry not safe here

A little less than five minutes later Sam was inching his way through a passageway more designed for last-ditch maintenance than travel when he finally heard Gabriel’s voice. He didn’t sound tired so much as uninflected, as if the effort required to add the appropriate tones and emphases to his speech was simply too hard to figure out and apply. “The hell you doing in there?”

“Good to hear from you too,” Sam replied evenly. He’d been struggling to keep his cool as it was and didn’t intend to let Gabriel’s attempt at stress relief get to him. “I couldn’t get through the hallway because it’s full of ceiling. This seemed like the fastest way round. Gabriel, what happened? Are Castiel and Dean here? Did they get caught up too?”

Gabriel sounded exhausted and unhappy even through the vaguely creepy atonal delivery and Sam couldn’t blame him. “They’re not here. I don’t think they ever were. Shut up, it’s a good thing.”

Sam had been about to ask, but stayed quiet and kept moving. He was a tall man and the spacesuit only made him bigger, and it wasn’t an easy task to get his long limbs through a cramped corridor that hadn’t been in great repair even before something broadsided Gabriel and tore him open. He was trying to judge the ship’s condition by his choice of words and speed of response and it wasn’t easy, especially on top of fear for his brother and the other ship. “I’ll show you what I saw when you get to the engine rooms. I guess that’s where I am, but it’s hard to—” Gabriel stopped without warning and didn’t resume for a few moments. When he did, it sounded as if he hadn’t even been aware of the pause. “—think here. Everything’s wrong.”

“I’m almost there,” Sam tried to be reassuring. “What about Dean and Cas?”

“All I know is I got hit, Sammy. May have missed whatever happened after that. And I don’t know where we are or how we got here either.” Sam was okay with the diminutive from Dean—he didn’t
have much choice about it—but he didn’t much like it from anyone else.

“Fine, I get it, Gabe,” he sniped back, knowing the ship didn’t like being called that any more than Sam liked the ship calling him Sammy. “So either they’ll find us or we’ll find them.”

Gabriel’s huff of indignation was refreshingly normal; his answer was not. “Don’t bet on it.”

Sam elected to strongarm the hatch at the end of the service conduit open rather than answer that, and only after he braced his feet against a corner and shoved with all his strength did he manage to wrench it open. Immediately, even through the spacesuit fabric, he could feel atmosphere leaking past him into the near-void in the more damaged sections of the ship. When he crawled out into a corridor where he could stand up and the lights were dim but constant, it was a level of relief he could feel in his core.

“Should be okay to breathe, you’re tired of helmet air,” Gabriel suggested, obviously tracking his progress or possibly feeling the hatch slam as Sam kicked it closed with no little amount of spite. This would be an incredibly terrible time for one of Gabriel’s pranks, but Sam decided to check the readings his suit provided anyway, just in case the ship’s capacity for decision making or life support assessment had been damaged. A quick glance told him that the air was cold and not as rich as it could be but breathable, and that now that the hatch was closed it wasn’t leaking away, either. He was suddenly incredibly grateful that the suit had survived whatever ordeal they’d gone through in getting here, wherever here was and however they’d gotten so.

Freeing himself from the helmet and raking a smartsuit-gloved hand through his long hair in an effort to keep it out of his eyes, which the helmet had made very difficult, Sam addressed the ceiling with “We gotta start repairs, Gabriel; there’s no way you can fly in this state and we don’t have a chance of getting anywhere or finding—"

Dean and Cas with your hull torn open and you losing time, he’d meant to finish his sentence, but Gabriel interrupted him, sounding focused and awake with a suddenness only granted through fear. Sam had felt his fair share of that lately. “Sam. Run.”

He didn’t stop to ask questions, taking off at a sprint down corridors familiar even in the half light. The doors to the complex of engine rooms, deceptively small to lead to such large spaces, were open even before he got there, and closed behind him almost as soon as he passed the threshold. Gasping in the thinner air, and staying moving in order to get closer to the engines proper, Sam had only a few breaths’ worth of time to look around at the complex array of machinery that no one but the ships and a few humans really understood before the ship’s already-activated intercom system was overwhelmed.

With what, he didn’t know, and couldn’t have thought about if he’d tried. It rapidly stopped being noise and became almost a bodily impact, as if the sheer volume on a shattering range of frequencies could tear him down without any need for another devastating physical attack.

Between the unfiltered blast from the intercom, the migraine from the flight to this space where there was only dark and no light, and the subtle but strong effects from the reality-warping engines the space housed, all Sam could do was slam his hands over his ears and stumble the last few steps to the machine that, several stories high as it was and as many long, seemed to coruscate and waver as he braced himself against it.

Hide, Gabriel had said, and that was what Sam did, dropping to his knees and crawling into the confined space between this component of his ship’s flight engine and the deck as every sound in the worlds tried to beat his eardrums until they broke.
Something was out there, and it didn’t intend to let them go.
Metamorphosis

Chapter Seven: Metamorphosis

ON WITH THE SHOW!

Then:

It wasn’t always easy to determine exactly how many planets made up the Sol system, home base of the Interstellar Fleet and still the residence of most of humanity. The debate went back to before humanity had even attained a practical measure of spaceflight, and certainly long before the ships had been created. New planets had been found, old ones had been called into question, and mythical ones had failed to appear. As humanity had spread out into space, some people had presumed that their new ability to observe up close, check their data, and confirm or reject hypotheses through actual hands-on science would settle the issue once and for all with a single definite sum.

They were wrong, not because they weren’t able to go out there and count off worlds, but because the question had always revolved around the nature of a planet. Earth’s Moon had tried to declare independence three times before the fourth time unexpectedly proved successful, mainly because the powers on Earth had just about had enough of the Loonies rather than through any military might or persuasive power.

The question had gotten far more complicated after the planetisimals, ice balls, dwarf planets, itinerant comets, shapeless chunks of rock, and asteroids of the Kuiper belt had lobbied for planetary status, at first individually and then declaring themselves the United Stakes of Kuiper. After the dust had settled and the descendents of wide-scattered island nations had been persuaded to stop lobbying on the U.S.K’s behalf, it was generally considered to be a single, much-fragmented planet. Such a ‘planet’ was inhabited mainly by true asocials, mineral and ice miners, the occasional ship both sentient and stupid, and those scientists and artists whose work required as much isolation as possible while still maintaining the psychological comfort of being part of a solar system, just in case their project did something unexpected and they suddenly felt an overwhelming need to run howling back towards the inner terrestrial planets and the bright light and subjective heat of a central star.

There was also Joshua, who orbited the Sun somewhat unnecessarily, generally between Earth’s and Venus’ respective ellipses. He was perfectly capable of picking a set of coordinates and holding himself in place, not actually needing to go around the star with everything else, but had conceded to do so after a number of his siblings had complained that they were automatically compensating for the revolutions of the rest of the solar system and he was messing up their calculations by appearing to move retrograde relative to everything else.

While he was as flight-capable as the rest of his siblings, Joshua was generally content with a less relativistic existence. One of the largest ships ever designed, he was closer to a small world than a ship, as if the Sol system had acquired a miniature sentient planet. That wasn’t spherical. And could leave anytime he wanted to. But he didn’t.

Not all ships were alike. If there was something a human was interested in, there was a fairly good chance that somewhere a ship had been curious about the same thing, except possibly baseball. That they primarily lived in the vacuum of space did not limit them at all, especially because they could walk among humans, but even if they couldn’t they would find a way to span the infinite range of personalities. Developing alongside humans as they were, they had inherited many of the same interests and tendencies rather than starting from scratch to figure them out on their own. The range of uses for a mind with the capacity and speed of a ship’s was as wide as imagination, and once they
found a mission in life that suited them ships would dedicate themselves to it with a tenacity much praised in humans.

*Joshua* was a gardener.

More precisely, he was an artificial habitat and complex of bioresearch labs, a vast dome over an enormous infrastructure sustaining and developing and cultivating a wild array of experimental plants, reconstructed ecosystems, and occasionally the odd species of wildlife, all being variably developed for the first time, maintained for scientific or aesthetic purposes, or brought back from extinction. It was a project that could only be overseen by a mind capable of minutely monitoring and maintaining hundreds of thousands of variables, interpreting the results almost instantaneously, and intuitively and intelligently generating new avenues to follow or continue along.

He wasn’t alone. Several teams of humans worked with him, participating in and contributing to the various ecosystems within his hull. Some of his siblings occasionally expressed interest in the results or the process. It was creative work and, it had to be said, *Joshua* thought it placed him a cut above his squabbling, fast-moving, chattering, flighty brothers and sisters.

Not that he minded visitors.

Anyway, Sam rather thought he had a point about family. He’d come over to *Joshua* to check out a project they’d been corresponding about, sending messages back and forth about the various worlds that the Winchester team had come across on their latest run. Sam had predicted a calm and rational afternoon aboard a world-like environment without imminent danger around unknown corners, discussing and debating *Joshua*’s plans for designing a species that could explore the water environments of new planets the way humans currently explored the land.

Sure, there were a number of other people aboard *Joshua*, there always were, but the habitat was a big place and the section he was in presented the appealing image of a lakefront park, hemmed in by the more experimental areas but open to all comers as long as they behaved themselves.

He hadn’t quite counted on his apparently unshakable entourage, who could be counted on to *not* behave themselves.

Both experience and automatic (usually validated) suspicion told Sam that *Gabriel* was probably already in trouble and was avoiding someone, or thought that *Joshua* was sedentary and large enough not to chase him if he managed to annoy the larger ship. Entirely by accident, of course. The elaborate casualness, all but sauntering as he chewed on an equally holographic lollipop, which was surely the ultimate in nonchalance, gave him away through sheer overkill.

Dean had come along because he had never met *Joshua* before, and to avoid Admiral Henricksen, who had hated him pretty much from the first time they met just on principle and the fact that Dean’s authority-be-damned-unless-it’s-mine attitude had pissed him off. The admiral didn’t like *Castiel* much lately either, probably because the ship could be relied on to take Dean’s side against almost anyone, including the admiral. They were lucky the man wasn’t actually running the Fleet. And *Castiel* was basically more glued to Dean’s side than the man’s own shadow these days, Sam had noticed, keeping just that inch too close to be accidental or inadvertent. Sam had a pretty good idea what that was about, but hadn’t asked, although he knew from experience not to hold his breath while waiting for Dean to tell him things of his own accord.

Sam resolved to ignore them all, and consciously turned his attention back to *Joshua*, whose own holographic avatar was waiting patiently at the dock overlooking a deep and carefully cultivated saltwater lake.
“Which generation is this?” he asked, kneeling on the artificial wood of the dock and then, realizing he was simply asking for Gabriel to push him in, sprawling out on his stomach. If he looked particularly hard, he thought he could see a handful of lighter, sleek shapes under the water.

“Fourth,” Joshua replied. “Their genetic makeup looks stable, so if they breed true I should be able to start the metasynth enhancements after that.”

The tall man laughed. “So you’ve just got them working as-is, and now you’re going to change them, is that it?”

A shrug. “They were reportedly fairly intelligent in their original design, but if the reports were accurate they still won’t be smart enough to reliably perform ocean reconnaissance, even with human partners. And they can’t speak.”

There weren’t a lot of planets with as much water as Earth, proving once and for all that it was a stupid name for the planet. Most of those that did have significant amounts of accessible water had a much more equal ratio of water and land, or far more land than water. And that left out all the gas giants, dead airless rocks, frozen wastelands, and sun-scorched hellholes that didn’t have any liquid water at all. Pale blue dots were actually few and far between, but luckily space was very big and a small percentage of an incredibly vast number was still a healthy range of habitable worlds. Only the incredible capabilities of the flight-capable ships allowed humanity to visit a small fraction of that small fraction.

One of the still non-speaking animals surfaced and whistled at the observers on the dock, closely followed by what was probably most of the rest of the pod. Sam didn’t know exactly how many Joshua had in this generation. The noise level suggested that there were about twice as many as he could see, but maybe they were just loud when they were happy. “You really think you can redesign them to talk? Intelligibly?”

“Your people taught us to talk, didn’t you? You taught us how to be people; we wouldn’t even have been without you. It seems only fair we should pass on the favor. I don’t think it will work immediately, but with enough trials—” Joshua stopped mid-sentence and looked back over his shoulder. “Gabriel,” he called, “care to explain why Michael is shouting at, from the sound of it, the whole Fleet looking for you?”

While there was a human Fleet commodore, it was generally acknowledged that Michael ran the Fleet, simply because in order to keep up with the ships and their doings and gossips you really need to be able to play at their speed and on their level. And anyway, it was clearly inefficient to keep changing the person in charge of the Fleet despite lengthening human lifespans. The enormous command ship would have made a terrifying armed battleship, and was one of the oldest ships still active. He’d not only watched the fleet develop, he’d developed quite a lot of it. As a result, he was the closest the Fleet came to the Voice of God, and despite centuries of experience he didn’t have much patience with mavericks and wild cards like, well, most of Sam’s team. Things tended to happen the way Michael wanted them to. Half of the Fleet wanted to be him some future day. The other half basically just stayed out of his way. …And then there was Gabriel.

Gabriel joined them on the dock just to give them front-row seats to his best feigned innocence act. “Nope. None at all.”

“What’d you do, Gabriel?” yelled Dean across the intervening space. The newly restored ocean mammals in the water whistled back at the new noise with delight, which appeared to be their default setting.

“What’s that noise?” he added, and joined them to look at Joshua’s pets.
Joshua had been listening to something not available to the humans in the vicinity. “The Europa simulation? Really, Gabriel? You couldn’t have picked on something else?”

Gabriel rolled his eyes, a gesture he had down perfectly. “It’s not broken,” he rationalized through his apparently everlasting lollipop. “They got results, didn’t they?”

Apparently Castiel had been listening to the same source. “You timelooped the Europa simulation?”

“So they got the same simulation fifty-two times, whatever.” He grinned. “Damn, they’re mad. It’s only a computer program. Blowhards. Should just go see for themselves.”

There were a number of superstitions surrounding Jupiter’s moon Europa, the only other place in the Sol system where life had been found independent of human colonization. For some indefinable reason, there was a hands-off policy on the moon so long-standing it had become unstated law. The planetary scientists and biologists interested in the place, and there were many, tended to rely on scans conducted by cooperative or involved ships rather than visiting and getting their hands dirty. Maybe because it was so close to home, comparatively, Europa was being left to develop in peace, although storm lords knew what superstitions the organisms on that world were developing in their turn as bright lights flew through their sky in all directions.

“No wonder Michael’s furious,” Sam admitted. “They’ve been setting that up for over a year now.”

Gabriel shrugged. “The settings are still in the base computer…mostly. They’ll find them if they bother to look in the right place. Probably. Philistines,” he complained of his companions. “No sense of humor. I shun the lot of you.” Suiting actions to words, he retreated from the dock. A shame, because Sam had considered tossing him in the water, as Gabriel’s holographic form was so much smaller than he was. It wouldn’t hurt him, and maybe Joshua’s pets would try to eat the smartass.

“Just once I’d like to leave the system without feeling like the Fleet’s shoving us out and locking the door,” Sam complained after him.

“That would be boring,” Gabriel called back.

He turned to Joshua. “And that’s us back out in the black again.”

Joshua waved a hand accommodatingly. “The brat isn’t your fault. Believe it or not, you’re actually a good influence on him.”

Sam huffed. “Well, you were wondering what you ships would be like without humans. I know what Gabriel would be—bored, with no one to play with!”

“Oh,” said Joshua, quite calmly, “I think Gabriel is quite capable of amusing himself. He doesn’t need someone to play with; he needs someone to stop him. Case in point.” Joshua switched to the ship’s public address system, while still keeping the same calm tone. “That’s alive, Gabriel,” his voice boomed from on high for all to hear, “and it’s mine, and if you touch it I will swat you like the irritating little mosquito you are.”

Now:

It shouldn’t have been possible for a space as large as the Sol system to seem like a kicked anthill, but by the time Dean and Castiel returned to what was technically their home berth, that was basically what it resembled, if you were willing to substitute sound for sight.

Dean knew that for every message he was hearing, Castiel was picking up at least twenty more and
just not putting them through the intercom. Still, the cacophony that bounced across and through the walls of the Control Room was overwhelming. They had agreed to ignore most of the messages except those directly from Fleet Command, especially those that were the ships’ normal back-and-forth chatter. The ships had inherited from their human cousins an unfathomable love of gossip, and the spaces of the Sol system, where the majority of the Fleet clustered, positively vibrated with often incomprehensible chatter transmitted among networks of ships.

Having received an unambiguous and tense message from the various people that made up Fleet Command, they both knew that the instant they were in-system and thus in range for a real time conversation, the Fleet authorities would want formal and complete reports and some semblance of order. Dean had spent more time than he really wanted to after reconciling with Cas working on his report of the events around the attack by the strange ships. (Alright, so he’d written up a fair part of it on a detached multipurpose screen while in bed, sitting up against the pillows with Cas reading over his shoulder as he typed. It’d got written, hadn’t it?) And ships they did seem to be; no matter how much time he spent looking at the scans snatched from the chaos, they still looked like rough and nasty copies of the Fleet designs, armed and predatory and somehow corrupt. Possibly that was his own experience talking, but their actions had certainly proved it so.

To that end, they were in the Control Room rather than anywhere else on board, partially because the walls were covered with the ubiquitous display panels, all of which could be synchronized to form a deck-to-ceiling viewscreen for the inevitable call from Command. It also presented an acceptable venue for Command to be able to see two faces rather than a human pilot and the ship’s voice through the intercom—at the same time, it reminded both of them to keep their distance physically. Castiel’s human body rested in the augmented chair of the life-support unit; the restraints didn’t bother him, although they would if he didn’t have the option of slipping out of the body altogether and being his ship self. They didn’t stop his mind from moving freely and that was all that mattered; as importantly, they made sure he wouldn’t reflexively reach for the comfort of his lover’s touch in front of a Fleet Command unlikely to approve.

It wasn’t unheard of for the ships who were people too to take human lovers, but it was unusual. In a sparse handful of cases many years ago the human had been killed and his or her partner had slipped quietly and unstoppably into an unsalvageable wreck, shutting down and never reviving in grief and loss. When they fell they fell hard, but very few of them did. The Fleet didn’t entirely discourage its members from bonding with their working partners—there were a number of married or otherwise committed human couples operating together—but they liked to know that the relationship wouldn’t affect the work the pair (or occasionally a larger group) did out in the black.

Somewhere along the line the word shipmate had changed its meaning, though.

As a number of the higher-ups in the Command structure hated Dean anyway, it was probably better that the only people who knew were those who needed to know. Sam and Gabriel knew, of course, it had been impossible to hide and they hadn’t really tried. Some of Dean’s closest human friends within the Fleet did; he didn’t really know all that many people outside of it anymore. It was just impossible to explain what your life was like to outsiders who you wouldn’t see again for months. And while the ships’ gossip network was, as always, up and running, there were some things that they’d gossip about to each other but never to humans.

So Dean waited in the Control Room, one hand on Cas’s shoulder for just a few more minutes as they approached the Fleet’s primary headquarters, an enormous and sprawling space station forming a locked system with the Earth and the Moon, the three seeming to orbit in an ever-spinning triangle. Launch Station, as it was generally known, was a little further away from the planet than its satellite, but from one extreme of the rough circle to the other it was almost as wide as the Moon. Rather than being solid, the space between was networked with cross-tunnels and airlocks like the inverse of a
city map; all the streets were where the people lived and the gaps between those airtight streets the spaces where the ships could move. It was easier and faster to cruise through Launch Station than around it.

“Ready?” Dean asked.

“No.” Cas didn’t look up at him. “They’re calling.”

“Hold them off for just a second. They on hold?” he checked.

Confusion colored the ship’s voice. “Yes. Why?”

There was a simple answer. Dean moved from his place at Cas’s left shoulder to directly in front of him, half-knelt to his level, and kissed him gently, not to bruise or mark or flush but to reassure. From now on they were under supervision and they were no longer the rulers of their own lives, and he hated it. It could wait for a few more seconds.

“You know?” he said softly, after a moment.

“Yes,” was the immediate answer. “And yes. Always yes.”

“Then we’re invincible,” Dean promised. “Okay. Let’s do this.”

Talking to Fleet Command was about as fun as they’d thought it would be—none at all. They had already told the group, via reports and transmissions and just direct download, everything there was to say, and neither of them had come up with anything new since then. Well, they’d come up with plenty of new things to say, but none of them were particularly useful and a number of them were complaints about Command wasting time.

The complaints were a little unfair. Given only about a week and a half since the ambush, they’d managed to do a huge amount of work, installing the weaponry designed over years for ships’ use on a large percentage of the ships that had been in the system or returned when summoned back. Between the sheer number of people working the design, repair, and maintenance branches of the Fleet and their expertise, they were mobilizing at a surprisingly efficient rate.

And mobilizing they were, with all that implied. Humanity hadn’t had a serious war in centuries. The Loonies had won their independence with a minimum of bloodshed, and the reasons that had started wars on Old Earth had been neatly circumvented when the skies opened up through the ships. Not enough water? There was a planet orbiting a star thataway with plenty of it and no one living there. Didn’t like your neighbors because they’d been assholes for fifteen hundred years or so? Move. Name a planet after your country or nation or race and if you could build there and survive you could do what you wanted. Didn’t agree with the neighbors about who should be able to marry whom or say prayers in a certain way? Lotta worlds out there in the dark. The closest humanity had come to a war in recent years had been about a hundred years ago, when a religious group that just couldn’t play well with others had been forcibly deported to an otherwise perfectly nice world and left there. Oh, they’d been given all the supplies and information they might need, including a transmitter so they could call for help if they wanted—but no way to get offworld and bother others.

But now there was something out there in the black that killed people without even a warning shot. It obviously knew humanity was out there, and quite as obviously it wasn’t friendly. That was a war people could get behind, and despite the time since the last one it seemed no one had really lost their taste for having weapons and an enemy to point them at.

The Interstellar Fleet had found itself the closest that Earth and its colonies had to a defense force,
Command had grabbed the power like candy, and the ships were being armed and converted to fighters.

He was walking back to his temporary quarters aboard Launch Station when Dean got a call on his comm unit about that.

“Heya Dean,” a familiar voice greeted him, “you got a sec to fix a little problem we’re having?”

Dean stopped short. “Garth?” he said in disbelief. “What are you doing, man?”

Over the commlink, Garth chuckled, which he did with alarming frequency. “Better get down here, Dean. Your ship and the Old Man are havin’ a fight.”

“What? I’ll be right there.” He turned around immediately and headed for the airlock where Castiel was docked. The trip took him only about five minutes, but by the time he got there things had already escalated, if the crew of technicians huddled at the far end of the corridor was any indication.

He only recognized Garth, but that didn’t mean anything. Launch Station was full of people and he wasn’t there very often. And he only knew Garth because the guy was something like Bobby’s apprentice.

Garth waved at him, but mercifully refrained from hugging him this time. “Not sure who you’ll be rescuing, but you might wanna hurry,” the odd little tech advised.

When Dean opened the station-side door to the airlock, the first thing he heard was obviously the middle of a sentence.

“—you listen to me, you jumped-up smart-mouthed sailboat,” Bobby’s voice echoed off the walls, “if you don’t unruffle your feathers right the hell now, get out of my way, and let us do our jobs, I’m gonna—”

That didn’t need to go any further. Dean broke into a run, rounding the corner to find Bobby standing in front of the airlock trying to snatch a handful of Cas’s shirt in order to—Dean could guess from experience—shake him like a child. Since the figure in front of him was an insubstantial hologram, it wasn’t working, and all he was getting for his pains was a furious growl from Cas and the sight of imaginary wings flicking in and out of existence, keeping him away from the airlock, which Dean assumed Castiel was holding closed.

“What the hell are you two doing?” Dean demanded of this tableau.

“Dean!” Bobby yelled, seething with frustration. “Knock some sense into this boy for me, wouldya?”

The younger man raised his hands defensively before Cas could chip in and everything spiraled completely out of control. “Okay, I can see the problem. You’re both stubborn idiots.”

Bobby huffed. “You know that’s your fault? He was never this troublesome before you got to him.”

“Careful where you pass that buck, Bobby. I got it from you.” Bobby Singer had been one of John Winchester’s oldest friends, despite the fact that he worked for the Fleet. John had been suspicious of every large organization on—and off—the planet, but his boys had spent plenty of time around Bobby. In fact, Bobby had helped them get into the Fleet itself, and his recommendation of them had probably stopped one or two admirals and commanders from turning them out into the cold in exasperation. Bobby ran the mishmash of departments that dealt with the ships’ physical existence, keeping the ships in good repair and coming up with new designs and innovations for them.
At the moment, he seemed to be running the weapons conversions teams, which surprised Dean not in the slightest. There was no one better qualified, and it seemed like everyone came to him at some point for answers and things that just worked. Most of them got snapped at, because Bobby wasn’t afraid to chew out idiots no matter who they thought they were. He was on the very short list of people Dean respected and was willing to listen to.

“Right, both of you shut up, you’re terrifying the kids down the hall,” Dean continued briskly. Both of them glared at him instead, which was possibly progress. “Bobby, don’t call my Cas a sailboat. Cas, stop flickering. C’mere.” He reached out a hand and after a moment the hologram abandoned guarding the door in favor of Dean’s casual embrace. The static feeling of holographic skin was disconcerting; the more substantial a projection got, the more the energy going into it could interact with whatever its surface came into contact with, which was why Bobby hadn’t been able to grab hold of him but Dean could put an arm around his shoulders. Castiel had just ratcheted up the power on the projection through his connection to Launch Station. But they could both do with the reassurance. Bobby was family, and thus one of the few other humans who knew about them, so there was no harm in it.

“So what the hell’s going on here?” Obviously Bobby was here to put Castiel through those upgrades and as clearly Castiel was digging his metaphorical heels in about it for some reason, which was strange and more than a little infuriating considering that Dean’s baby brother was out there having storm lords knew what happen to him and they’d agreed they were going to go after him and the creatures that were hurting him. As tempting as it was to shout at the ship who was the man who was his lover, Dean managed not to, biting back an angry snap of words that would only make things worse. He knew Castiel wanted to go after their missing family as much as Dean did, so he had to have a damn good reason for causing trouble. Hopefully.

They both tried to talk at once, of course. “Stop! Bobby, you’re opening up the armory, yeah?”

“Got teams all over Station running this way and that and managing not to screw up too badly, most of the time. ‘Course, we can’t do much about stubborn idjits. We know what we’re doing, Castiel!”

Dean waved his free hand hurriedly, cutting that off and regaining Bobby’s attention. “And it’s his turn, I get it. Cas? You know Bobby, he’s a friend. He’s not gonna hurt you.”

Cas twisted out from under the arm around his shoulders to meet Dean’s eyes more directly. “He wants me to shut down completely and I won’t do it!” Castiel rarely raised his voice. When he did, it usually meant distress. “It’s more than just the weapons, Dean, they’re going to write the control programs for them directly into my brain, make them as reflexive as flight, and I have to know what they’re doing.”

He still didn’t get it. “Okay. No, sorry, Cas, you’re going to have to dumb it down some more for the humans in the room.”

His lover sighed, agitation and tension stretched across the lines of his shoulders and the look in his eyes. Cas turned his back on Bobby, consciously, and put both hands on Dean’s shoulders as if unsure whether to embrace him or push him away, just to make sure he had the human’s complete attention. “Dean. Take a man and teach him to fight, to kill when he’s told to, just to make sure he had the human’s complete attention. “Dean. Take a man and teach him to fight, to kill when he’s told to, the discipline of it, to stand resolute and with his fellows, teach him to be a certain way and do as he’s told, obey his commander’s voice without question and follow a pattern, make him a soldier, a warrior—and you do not have the man you started with. No, Bobby would not hurt me deliberately, but I can tell which of my siblings he and his have worked on—by their voices, the pattern of their thoughts, the way they react, and they are not who they were. They don’t think the way they did, they’ve changed.”
Somewhere down the corridor, someone opened a door and shouted, “Can we come back in yet?”

“No!” Dean shouted back, and added, “Piss off!” for good measure.

“I said sit an’ stay, Roy!” Bobby yelled in the general direction of the unfortunate tech.

The door closed again and Dean asked, “Bobby, is he right?”

His old friend sighed. “Sure, there’s programming we’re putting in, mostly to interface with the hardware, and some of it’s to know when to use it, too. I guess you could call that teaching them to be soldiers, but the code’s been bouncing around for years. Think Ash wrote most of it; betcha Charlie did the rest. We sent it to Michael first, but I bet that sly old battleship had already seen it. He approved it. Hell, we upgraded him with it last week. No one else said a word, Cas!”

“Do it while I’m awake, then,” Cas requested, turning back towards Bobby.

Bobby shook his head. “Can’t be done. Think we’d be askin’ if it could be? It’s a thousand times easier to work with you lot on repairs and upgrades when we can get live feedback. Dammit, Cas, we’re not gonna erase anything from you, it’ll all be there when you wake up and you can sort out the new stuff from the old. We’ve shut you down before and you never objected, why now?”

Abruptly, Dean found himself in a cloud of holographic feathers so strongly rendered they stung with the power in them. His soft yelp of surprise was drowned out completely by Cas, who was saying, “I have to stay in control of myself and who I am. Now I have more to lose, too much, if I change too far.”

It was Dean’s turn to raise his voice. While his roughly assembled family didn’t share a lot of blood, stubbornness ran in all their veins. “Enough! Cas, let me go.” A second later he could see again and he was standing in a corridor with two entirely human-seeming men. “Hey, Cas. When you’re human, how much of you is in there?”

The hologram looked puzzled. “It doesn’t work that way.”

“Can it?”

He thought about it. “Dean, are you asking me to move my soul? If I have one.”

Now that was just self-pity and Dean was going to call him on it because if he didn’t Bobby would and the older man would be much more abrupt about it. “A minute ago you were defending it, Cas, so either you do or you’re worried about nothing—which is it? Make it work that way. Come and be human for—how long, Bobby? A day, a half?”

He huffed. “I’ve had a thousand people working nonstop for—well, some time—on this. We’ve got it down. Five hours, maybe six.”

Surely they could manage that. “Cas?”

The ship’s image grimaced unhappily. “Yes. I think so. I’ll try.” His sigh was more a hiss of air through gritted teeth rather than a sound of resignation or surrender. “What do you want me to leave activated, Bobby Singer?”

Bobby adjusted the archaic hat he usually wore, noticeably relieved. “Nothing. Right down to the lights. We brought our own. Oh, but you can leave the gravity plating on.”

Cas rolled his eyes. Of all the human gestures the ship had picked up and made his own, Dean
occasionally disliked that one the most. “I’m linked to Launch Station; it’ll maintain the gravity.”
Launch Station wasn’t run by a ship mind and wasn’t sentient, although it was big and complex
enough that if any of the fleet ever wanted to retire and stay in one place for a while, running Launch
Station wouldn’t be a bad way of spending the time. “Wait here.” He vanished.

“Finally,” Bobby complained, but he didn’t sound too upset.

His younger friend leaned back against the nearest wall and grinned wryly. “Nice to see you too,
man. Feel like you’re the first friendly face I’ve seen since getting back.”

“Huh. Them up there shouting at you?”

“Always are. Thought about coming by your place when we got in, but seems like everyone wants
to ask me the same questions one by one. Sorry about Cas.”

He got a huff of laughter in response. “Ah, better it was me he went off at than some stranger.”

“Yeah,” Dean said thoughtfully, “hell of a coincidence. Shouldn’t you be manning the commlines
shouting at all your teams rather than down here getting your hands dirty?”

“Now you listen here, Dean Winchester,” Bobby flared at him halfheartedly, “not everyone jets
around the universe lookin’ good in the pictures, and my hands are always dirty.”

“Ha! Admit it, Bobby, you fixed the schedule.”

“Shaddup. He’s yours, ain’t he? Odds are you two are gonna do something stupid very soon and I’d
rather you didn’t get killed in the doing.”

Damn, there were things he could get away with around anyone else that Bobby saw right through.
Well, in this case probably everyone knew or guessed that he wasn’t going to hurry up and wait
while Sam was lost out there somewhere, but he and Cas weren’t going to let that stop them.
“C’mon, Bobby, you know me.”

He couldn’t even begin to count how many times he’d seen Bobby roll his eyes like that. So that was
where Cas had got it from; he might have known. “Yeah. I do. Be careful, Dean. Do you really
think—” He didn’t finish the sentence and he didn’t have to. Bobby treated both Winchester boys
like the sons he didn’t have, no matter how tall they’d gotten.

“I got to.”

Bobby paused, then ventured, “You okay?”

He’d been working on relaxing; it was gone. “We will be.”

The airlock door, until now so stubbornly locked, hissed open. Everything beyond was dark.

“Cas?” Dean called.

“Here,” the darkness said, and the man Dean knew so well walked out of it. To anyone else, he
might have looked perfectly fine. Dean knew better. They needed to get somewhere Cas, however
much of him this was, could fall apart without anyone watching, and they needed to do it soon.

“Bobby, we’ll see you later,” he said quickly, reaching out. Cas stepped closer but didn’t take the
support so readily offered; if effort of will wasn’t the only thing holding him together Dean would be
very surprised. He simply wasn’t supposed to exist this way.
“Yeah. I’ll call you the minute we’re done. Now git.”

It was one of the more disconcerting afternoons—so far—of Dean’s admittedly strange life. The two of them managed to get back to his temporary quarters without incident, but by the time the door closed in their wake it was clear that Cas—however much of Castiel this actually was—wasn’t doing well trapped in a form so different from his true nature. If he hadn’t spent so much time existing as a human with Dean he would have been completely overwhelmed; as it was, the loss of the uplink to the rest of his mind was a horrible sensation, or so he admitted once Dean had switched off all the lights in the room and joined him on the double bed.

Dean actually asked at one point. “Cas—how much of you is this?”

He thought about it. Dean had never seen him actually have to stop and think about something before, not for real. He’d pause before answering a question, but that was mostly a learned mannerism. “Not enough to answer that,” he replied finally.

The human stroked a hand across his back, sympathizing but not understanding, fingers lingering over the ports bracketing his shoulder blades, hidden beneath a layer of skin, marking him permanently as something else. “Talk to me, my Cas,” he said softly.

This fragment of Castiel’s mind was disturbingly uncoordinated as he tried to sit up and turn to face his lover. “Had to do it,” he said, rewinding. “Have to get them back. Hurts. ’m trapped, Dean—”

“I know,” Dean tried to reach out to him. “We will. We’ll find them, and then we’ll tear out everything they’re doing to you. You can be you again.”

Suddenly he thought he understood. “Cas?” He waited until he knew he had what currently passed for his companion’s full attention. “This is your backup copy, isn’t it? The version of you that isn’t a soldier and doesn’t have to fight a war.”

“No.” Cas was struggling to be coherent again. “Not quite. Can’t copy myself, not completely. Just—fragments.”

He fell silent, and after several minutes of quiet between them Dean was convinced that the conversation was over. The man wasn’t sure if this version could sleep any more than the ship proper could, but somehow he thought that if this shattered personality slipped into the chaos of whatever the dream state was like for him, Cas might not come back up at all. “Don’t sleep,” Dean reminded him.

“’m not. I don’t. Shutdown isn’t. I’m just gone. Nothing between shutting off and someone switching me back on. Was thinking. It’s so slow.”

“Thinking?”

“Like this. This. Yes. I forgot. I forgot. I got lost.”

Goddamn it, Bobby, can’t you work any faster? Except they must have been here for some time already; his arm had gone to sleep. Dean sat up and shook it awake again. Cas protested at the movement, softly. “But you remembered?”

“Yes. Not all of me. Fragments. The things I couldn’t bear to lose. In here, unchanged. I just can’t find them all. I will once I’m myself again.”

“Mmm.” Storm lords, he must truly love this strange creature if watching him hurt could hurt Dean
so badly. Surely they were good memories he’d kept to hold and hide away, though. “Like what? Talk to me, Cas,” he repeated.

“What it feels like to fly,” said Cas, and his voice suddenly got a lot clearer. For a moment he was Castiel again. “I can’t describe it to you, but I can feel it.”

“Good feeling?”

“The best.” Warm fingers reached up to trace Dean’s jaw line; Cas tipped his head to watch the expression his touch evoked, exposing his throat trustingly. “One of the best.”

“What else?”

“Dusty Sunday.”

Mmm. “Yeah.”

“You. I was so lonely before. Mostly you. That I know.”

Dean remembered the night they’d come up with that particular code. He would have saved that night too. “Yes and yes,” he repeated Castiel’s words of not that long ago.

“Always yes.” Cas remembered that, at least. “Realizing that Sam was my friend. I—” He stopped, puzzlement creeping into his voice. “I don’t remember. I don’t think we liked each other very much at first.”

“You didn’t dislike him; he wanted to like you. You just didn’t know what to make of each other.”

The confusion cleared, or was at least put to one side. “Oh. I’ll remember soon.”

“Anything before us Winchesters? I know you’re much older than me, Cas—hell, you were around before I was even born.” Not that that meant anything to ships; they could live for centuries. “I looked you up, you know, after we met that first time? Do you remember that?”

“You fell.”

“You caught me.”

“Waking up, the first time.” For a minute Dean had forgotten his own question. “Sun rising over the Earth.”

“That two memories, or one?”

“Two. The man this body was designed to resemble.”

Now that was something Dean hadn’t thought about in a long time. “I hope I don’t run into him someday, Cas. This is you. I don’t really want to see someone else looking like it.”

“It was several decades ago. I think. I don’t remember much about him. I—” Cas paused. “—thanked him. He said I was giving him a form of immortality and it should have been him thanking me. I didn’t understand that then.”

“Now you do?”

“More than I did. But I don’t remember what I understand.” When he spoke again, his tone had changed. “Gabriel screaming when they ambushed us.”
Dean hadn’t been expecting that. “Cas, why that?”

The fingers still stroking across his face and throat curled into claws, and for an instant the caress became dangerous. Dean didn’t for a second believe Cas would hurt him on purpose, but ancient instincts made his breath catch and his skin crawl.

“Think you’re the only one who can hate, Dean?”

_Somewhere Else:_

He didn’t know how long he laid there, hands jammed over his ears and head pulsing so hard it might have been creating the vibrations in the ship’s deck plating rather than the other way around. _Make it stop!_ Sam managed to think, and held onto that coherent thought like a lifeline to what was currently passing for sanity. _Make it stop make it stop make it stop make it stop make it stop make it stop MAKE IT STOP MAKE IT STOP—_

Continents rose and fell, galaxies rotated as they flew away in all directions, species evolved and went extinct in blazing impacts of cometary fragments and nuclear war. Stars condensed out of interstellar nebulae, spun out planets, scorched through their hydrogen and helium, and went supernova, flinging hard iron out into the universe. It tore through his chest and sides and left him bleeding out into the dark that pressed in on all sides and seeped into him to replace what he was losing drop by drop. From one end of the universe the Big Bang waved at the Big Crunch.

Sam watched it all from the floor, deciding that the Big Crunch looked pretty scenic and opting to stick around for that. Or had he gotten turned around and this was the Big Bang? He couldn’t see straight as it was, so it was quite possible. He was tied down by insects that were giving him stupid orders in stupid limited voices and he’d just watch it from here. Some of these were actually his thoughts, but he wasn’t sure which ones.

Around him, the air seemed to shimmer and ripple. Sam was one of the people affected by the slight reality-warping the engines generated, able as they were to propel a ship from one layer of the universe into another where rules worked differently and light was less of a policed speed limit than a general suggestion. The space between one realm and the next was always a little looser around the engines, but not everyone could see it.

_Safer here,_ Sam knew. Shame he couldn’t feel it. He was inside a bubble where reality was a little different and the roar of he didn’t know what echoing through _Gabriel_ shouldn’t be this bad. _It’s protecting me,_ thought Sam. _It is. It is._

It helped, a little. Maybe it was all in his head but for a minute he felt as if the worst of it had been filtered out. More likely it was either the minor difference between the space in the engine room and the space right under the engines where Sam was hiding from the things out there, or that the attack—what else could it be?—was ending or at least letting up a bit. Still, he kept thinking it, trying to focus on his mental image of his hiding place and adding an imaginary bubble of shimmering altered reality that encompassed him and let him think.

At one point he was so concentrated on this illusion that he actually didn’t notice the moment when the deafening roar of attack stopped overwhelming _Gabriel_’s intercom system and all that was left were the echoes and the ringing in his ears. It might have lasted seconds. It might have consumed hours.

When he realized, he let his forehead rest against the deck plating beneath him, taking a measure of comfort from the still-cool metal and soft vibration of a living ship. After a moment, he folded his
hands across his face and stayed there for a few minutes, trying to decide whether or not it was safe to come out. Would Gabriel tell him, or did his silence mean whatever was out there was watching him and if he tried to talk to Sam it would know? Or had the attack shattered and fragmented his already-damaged ship mind beyond repair? Perhaps most importantly, could Sam stay under this engine mount forever?

The answer to that last was obviously no and he didn’t have answers to any of the others. So it was with caution and no little trepidation that Sam crawled out into a part of the engine room where he could at least stand up, moving clumsily in the spacesuit he’d put on so eagerly—how many years ago?

At first glance, there was no more physical damage to the space than there had been when he’d dashed into it to hide or the last time he’d come down here before all this began. The various components that made up the flightdrive stretched away into the cavern sometimes misleadingly called a ‘room’. It took up most of the deck, which in itself boasted a ceiling two and a half times higher than any other compartment aboard whatever ship it happened to be installed in. To Sam’s eyes, the haze of an operating engine coated the surface of the dimension-jumping machine, billowing out in clouds and strange patterns that hurt the eyes to stare at for too long. Normally he didn’t like to be around the flightdrive for any length of time. Today, he gave it a critical looking-over and stepped into the nearest bulge of distortion. There was only so much he could do cowering under the engine, but he could at least stay within its field of influence. If only it reached out further. Unfortunately, while the effect affected human minds, there had never been any indication that human minds affected it.

“Still there?” Gabriel asked tiredly.

“Gabriel! Yeah, I’m okay. What was that? What happened?” There was no way they were safe, but Sam couldn’t work in this spacesuit any longer, especially if he was going to be hiding in the engine room on a regular basis. This section of it was about as far from the ship’s breached outer hull as anywhere, and the reinforcement on the engine’s room inner hull was more than tough. As he spoke, he started stripping it off, starting with the gravity boots, the seals of which were a pain to undo under the best of conditions.

The ship didn’t answer for a minute. Sam wrestled with his left boot, instantly realized he wasn’t going to be able to take it off and stand on it at the same time, cursed at it, and sat down with his back against the engine, staying within the field. “Trying to communicate, I think,” Gabriel finally came up with. “They’re so strange. Shouting at me.”

“Who are they?”

“Can’t say. Didn’t understand most of it.” There was nothing of the ship’s normal flippant arrogance about his voice. Maybe the curt answers and deliberately level tone wouldn’t seem remarkable from anyone else, but Sam had been managing Gabriel for long enough to know that the ship was badly shaken. It seemed an odd design decision, but the ships did feel pain, the signals informing them of damage to their structures or minds for much the same reason humans felt pain, and with apparently similar sensations, as much as visceral concepts like pain could be communicated through words alone. The breaches riddling his hull had to hurt more than anything the usually nonchalant Gabriel had ever experienced, and he was clearly scared and overwhelmed. Sam knew how he felt.

Anything would be more than what they already knew, which was nothing. “What did you get?”

“Let me think!” Gabriel snapped crossly.

Sam raised his hands in an acceptably placating manner—in a sense, Gabriel had eyes all over the
rooms Sam frequented in the form of internal sensors, so yes, the ship could see the gesture, assuming the sensors were even working—and murmured variations on the theme of ‘okay, okay’, abandoning his surrender posture after a moment in favor of pulling off the rest of the spacesuit. He wasn’t quite irrational enough to kick it away; throwing away the gloves just before all this began had nearly lost him his fingers in a breached corridor losing air and heat at an alarming rate.

“They think you’re dead,” said Gabriel as Sam pulled the thermal jacket over his head. “They tore me open on purpose, Sam!” Trust Gabriel to be more offended by that by than the fact that these ships, creatures, whatever they were, had tried to kill Sam.

“Well, if they want me dead, I vote for being alive, how ‘bout you? Was that just one screaming at you?”

Gabriel sighed. “Don’t know that either, Sammy.”

“Hey,” said Sam mildly. Given the circumstances he wasn’t going to kick up too much of a fuss, but he wasn’t going to let Gabriel get away with it scot-free either.

The ship ignored the interruption, unsurprisingly, as he never paid attention to any interruptions. Unless they were him interrupting someone else. “So loud…ah, and whoever or whatever is over there seems to think I should be able to repair myself, like the bleeding wounds in my flanks aren’t anything to worry about.”

“Could you?” Sam wanted to know. “I mean, you’ve got the projectors. How many holograms could you run?”

As much as he hated to admit it, Gabriel had to confess, with an offended huff, that at the moment he couldn’t even manage one, although the idea of a host of Gabriel’s clearly appealed to him on an utterly vain and deeply shallow level. “I can’t even see straight, Sam. Still don’t know where we are.”

Apparently he couldn’t keep the heating on at a steady state, either. Sam pulled the jacket back on, glad of the material designed to keep in heat even in the vacuum it was meant to be exposed to. “Yeah, you said something about there being no stars. Gabriel, how can there be no stars?”

A minute of silence, which Sam hoped was Gabriel thinking about the problem rather than Gabriel losing time, because he could not fix a ship having blackouts and still stay in this theoretical safe zone. He was already parsecs beyond worried, so it wouldn’t have been quite accurate to say Gabriel only resumed when he was starting to get worried about the lag time. “Sam, we’re nowhere close to where we were. That? That was normal. I know what our space feels like on my skin like you know when there’s air. I know what the space we fly through feels like. It’s different. This? This isn’t either. It’s—thicker? Might be close. Like I’m too deep in an atmosphere, almost?”

“Gabriel, what aren’t you saying?”

The ship actually laughed. It wasn’t a good sound. “I felt that thing move. Felt it, through this place! You live in one realm of this universe. We ships fly through another. I think someone out there found a third. And we’re in it.”

Sam didn’t know how to process that. In fact, he realized after a few seconds of trying, he would probably never be able to. Humans hadn’t evolved to understand any realm than their own; they could only access the dimension that ships flew through faster than light because the ships thought in an entirely different fashion, on a level that didn’t affect the way they interacted with humanity. Most humans couldn’t really understand the way flight-capable space worked in the way they intuitively
understood their own. It was the difference between working out the calculations that regulated the flight of a ball and actually catching one. You could do the first, but you had to either be taught or very, very clever; billions of people did the second without understanding the slightest bit of the maths involved. Without being taught the rules of this universe, realm, dimension, space, whatever the hell they wanted to call it, there was no way he’d be able to guess how things worked.

It put them at a practically insurmountable disadvantage.

So there was not only someone else out there that had invented ships and flown them beyond the surface of their universe, they had broached a deeper level where there was no light and something of the substance of it washed against Gabriel’s skin like the mythical ether pre-scientific philosophers of Ancient Earth had thought filled the space around their geocentric planet, before the concept of vacuum had been understood.

Maybe they’d been right and just applied it to the wrong place.

“Gabriel?” Sam asked. “What do they want?”

Silence. “Give me a minute, Sam. Lemme translate. I—felt—the message more than heard it.”

“They speak our language?” That was something he hadn’t considered.

“Uh…concepts, not words. Ideas dumped straight into my mind, like a download but so loud…” The ship went quiet again, obviously thinking about what to communicate to the human. When he spoke again there was something in his voice that Sam didn’t like at all, but he couldn’t place it. It was something he’d never heard in Gabriel’s manner before. That wasn’t completely unexpected, considering the absolutely unprecedented situation—and apparently place—they were in, but it sent a chill down his spine unrelated to the temperature in the vast room or the vibration of the reality-changing flightdrive at his back. “Not a lot, for all the volume of it,” said Gabriel. “That you were dead. That I should repair myself. That—” He stopped. “I don’t know about the rest.”

“It’ll be back then,” Sam said with certainty. “You better be looking for a way out of here.”

“Well yeah,” retorted Gabriel, sounding briefly like himself again. The opportunity to mouth off clearly worked wonders. Sam hoped there were other things that would help, because if taking verbal potshots at Sam was the only thing that let the ship restore more of his coherency, they might get out of here, but then again Sam might kill him first and save their attackers the trouble. “What the hell else would I be doing?”

Was that nervousness in his voice? Sam had never heard that before, even the various times when Michael had gotten fed up enough with Gabriel’s troublemaking to shout at him, a prospect that anyone else sane would be intimidated by.

Luckily he already knew that if he paid attention every time Gabriel interrupted him to be sarcastic, Sam would never get anything done. “What should I do?” the human continued.

“Stay there,” the ship said immediately. There was no processing delay on that. “I’ll send anything I learn that might help to the displays in there. If they think you’re dead that’s advantage us. A very small advantage on a very disadvantaged playing field, but where’s the fun in holding all the cards?”

“You love holding all the cards, Gabriel,” Sam complained. “And when you don’t have them all, you just steal them.”

“Yeah. So shut up a minute or ten, stay there, and lemme steal some increasingly imaginary cards, okay?”
Chapter Eight: Appointment in Samarra

ON WITH THE SHOW!

Then:

Sam was looking for his brother but he wasn’t in a hurry and he wasn’t trying very hard, either. It might have been more accurate to say that he was wandering through random areas of Launch Station with the vague intention of talking to Dean if he ran into him, since they hadn’t seen or talked to each other for nearly four days (an unfathomably long time by Winchester standards). Still, if something catastrophically bad had happened to him, someone would have told Sam by now, and he probably would have heard the shouting. So he was making a broad circle of the places Dean was most likely to be. Gabriel was in the process of being unrepentant for sabotaging the Europa simulation—something he had down to an art, both the sabotage and the lack of repentance—so their team had some downtime.

Eventually, and rather inevitably when he thought about it, he ended up at the practical end of Bobby’s domain: the multi-level, wide ranging, mistakenly-named shop floor, where things got designed, made, tested to their limits, remade, improved upon, and occasionally just plain broken. The place seemed to have only two settings—ghost town and complete chaos.

When it was in ghost town mode, it was a labyrinth of metal and materials in various shapes and stages of formation or destruction, restoration or damage; shelving and storage reaching sometimes all the way up to the ceiling, which was almost fifty meters high. Some of the components, materials, and tools stored towards the top had to be retrieved by transporter. Every footstep echoed a thousand times over until it sounded as if an invisible army followed in the visitor’s wake. Whatever lighting was left on created a shifting illusion of shadows that seemed to move with whoever was walking there.

Industrial-sized power tools, often of indeterminate function due to their size and likely immersion beneath a heap of projects and materials, gave the distinct impression of only waiting until your back was turned before they sneakily turned on to maul the unwary. The ship components, machines, and half-finished or completed projects left standing on the shop floor were worse, as they were usually unfamiliar in shape and often completely out of context. Depending on your mood, it was either a walk through a nightmare or the greatest hiding place on or above any world.

When Bobby’s shop floor was in use, it traded the illusion of danger for the fact of it.

Anything that had been left out and idle was probably now being carried from place to place, occasionally without a clear destination. Machines that had only threatened to whirr to life and destroy things now whirred nonstop, roared deafeningly, screamed at pitches unfriendly to human ears, and were fed some of the things being toted around, most of which made louder noises as they were chewed up and spat out in different forms. Metal roared into motion in one corner to cut into softer materials, and flowed in liquid fire in another to be reformed down the line as precisely calibrated pieces of machinery or specially designed tools for a particularly ingenious build. Laser devices performed even more intense precision work, from handheld tools to power-sapping things that needed almost everything else in the shop turned off or at least down to function.

People shouted at each other or chatted through their personal communicators, generally worn on or in the ear so that they could better use both hands to do their work. Periodically the shopwide public
address system would boom out and declare something. Every so often it was hijacked by someone who thought it would be amusing to tease his or her coworkers in front of the couple of hundred or more people in range of the speakers, use a remote control he or she had designed to make the intercom play music from a hopefully safe and anonymous distance, make personal announcements, or try to rope everyone in the vicinity into singing “Happy Birthday” to some poor victim who happened to be a year older that day. Once Sam had been there when one of Bobby’s techs had used it to propose to her longtime sweetheart; the applause had actually been louder than the noise from the speakers.

Bobby generally managed to make himself heard above it all, partly because if your boss was yelling in such a dangerous environment you listened in case it was you doing something incredibly stupid and thus at risk of losing body parts and spending the next week in one of the station’s sickbays. There were several close by the shop ‘floor’—more like a very technically indoor field—for that very reason. The other reason everyone stopped to listen when Bobby started shouting was that if you looked around and it wasn’t you being yelled at, it was worth it to shut up and pay attention because it was likely to be hilarious as someone else ended up on the sharp end of the man’s attention. Despite Bobby’s griping, which seemed to be a hobby more than anything else, he was clearly in his element.

Effective soundproofing, a safe distance, and the less-than-amenable vacuum of space managed to keep them from bothering the rest of the enormous orbiting habitat, command post, and crossroads to the universe that was Launch Station.

Today the place was in full cry, and Sam knew better than to try to walk through it. He stayed by the door watching for a while until someone noticed him, recognized him as Bobby’s unmistakable very tall friend with the too-long hair in the jacket with patches that denoted him as a reconnaissance and exploration ship’s human partner in addition to those that identified him as Fleet personnel, and pointed him in the general direction of their boss’ last known location, adding a ‘looking for Bobby’ message to the cacophony bouncing around every available surface.

He survived the trip across the shop floor, eventually being directed to where Bobby was supervising the laser etching of an engine component that Sam knew was absolutely vital to the ability of the ship it was installed on to bring itself and its human crew back out of flight. Accordingly, he didn’t interrupt. It was an interesting spectacle anyway and he wasn’t, after all, in any rush.

“Lookin’ for that brother of yours?” were the first words out of Bobby’s mouth. He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “Try the junkyard.”

It was clearly too much of a madhouse around the shop to stay and chat, so Sam headed for an adjacent section of Bobby’s territory. While the shop floor was where things came to be used and made anew, the extensive cargo bay generally referred to as the junkyard was where things went to disappear. There was no semblance of order to the broken, outdated, incomprehensible, partial, or abandoned items that filled the bay and created towering and definitely unsafe heaps of assorted rubbish. It wasn’t quite as big, but it was definitely less crowded. Bobby’s crews threw things in here when they couldn’t fix them or didn’t know what they were and couldn’t turn them into anything else. They were very good at what they did, and there were a lot of them, so only a small percentage of the devices that made their way onto the floor ended up in the junkyard.

Some of it was theoretically salvageable. More of it would end up melted down for scrap metal.

“Hey, Dean, you in here?” Sam called once the door closed behind him and the sheer din of the shop floor had faded away a bit. His voice echoed, splintering off all the metal and bouncing off the distant back wall.
Somewhere in amidst all of it, Dean whooped, “Sammy! Come look at this!”

Aided by the occasional helpful “No, this way!” and “Over here!” and “Where the hell do you think you’re going?”, Sam managed to find his brother amidst the rubble spread out all over the floor. Some of it Dean had put there, he noticed, in the course of excavating…a shuttle?

“I have to have this,” Dean announced, grinning widely despite the grease smeared across his face and hair, hefty bruise developing on his left forearm, and scratches up and down his hands. “Look at this pretty baby, Sam! I will trade Bobby anything he wants, however many hours of grunt labor he needs me to fill in. See the—”

Sam tuned out most of the rest of his brother’s exaltation of the features of the old-model ground-to-orbit shuttlecraft as he managed to make all of its traits sound like virtues despite the modifications made since to similar designs expressly for the purpose of getting rid of some of those traits. It still had most of a black paint job, didn’t have any gaping holes in its hull, and might be capable of an interplanetary trip at cruising speeds as long as you didn’t try to make it do that more than once, all points in its favor. Also, even though Sam couldn’t see all of it due to the debris still burying the lower third or so of its hull, it clearly out-massed anything else it cared to try running down. The minutia of its engine function and historical pedigree didn’t thrill him quite the way that Dean seemed to be enjoying, but it was nice to see his brother so happy.

After a few minutes of effusive shuttlecraft-directed praise from Dean and the occasional ‘uh huh’ from Sam, the older Winchester brother wound up with “…so it would be a cryin’ shame to melt her down for scrap, right? No way Bobby would do that to this beauty, but he doesn’t have time to fix her, so think he’ll let me have it?”

His brother shrugged, grinning not at the many doubtless fine points of the shuttle but at Dean’s enthusiasm and a point he felt he simply had to make. “I think if you can get it out of here he’ll be impressed enough to let you take it the rest of the way.”

Dean punched at the air in triumph. “Great! Lemme just get my toolkit—” Half-muffled and with his upper half concealed beyond the shuttle’s hatch, his voice was still audible as “and I’ll go make nice ‘till he gives it to me.”

Now that was a perfect opportunity if Sam ever saw one. “Not terribly fair on Cas, is it, though? You being in love with this ship too.”

A series of clangs was probably the result of Dean dropping a wrench or other solid metal object unexpectedly; the rest were undoubtedly him trying to scramble around to gape at his younger brother. Whether his face was reddening because of anger, an impending flush, or just the effect of climbing around with his feet higher than his head Sam wasn’t sure, but in any case he’d gotten the result he’d been aiming for.

“I’m not having this conversation,” Dean declared after a few seconds of abortive spluttering that hadn’t quite made it to coherent speech.

Laughing at him might be temporarily amusing but it wouldn’t help any, so Sam made the mature decision not to. “You’re not fooling anyone, you know,” he pointed out. “You’re so damn in love it’s unbelievable.”

“Bitch,” said Dean from within the refuge of the black shuttle. Unsurprisingly, that was completely clear.

Sam ventured onto the mountain of discarded, broken rubble to deploy one of the expressions Dean
always referred to as a bitch face. If he’d wanted Sam to stop doing it, he shouldn’t have kept letting it work. “And even if I didn’t know you as well as I do, I’d still be able to see how happy you are. Jerk.”

“Shut up.” That was a little more muffled, as though his brother had his hands over his face.

“Besides, Cas is a terrible liar.”

“…True,” Dean admitted. And, after a few seconds, “Who knows?”

“She’s not stupid and delights in watching other people so he knows what buttons to press.” Sam had noticed a change between his brother and Castiel sometime after, hmm... somewhere around planetfall on Dusty Sunday, although he’d been on the far side of tipsy when he’d gotten back to orbit from the ongoing party and hadn’t paid that much attention to anything for a while afterwards. Gabriel had actually mentioned it to his human counterpart with his typical tact and diplomacy. Sam wisely decided not to repeat Gabriel’s careful broaching of the subject (“Hey, Sammy, you know your brother’s screwing mine, yeah?”) to Dean. Ever.

“Bobby probably suspects something’s up but he might not know the details yet. Um…” Sam racked his memory for friends who knew them well enough. “Admiral Harvelle will find out ‘cause she’s clever like that. The woman sees everything.” And not only did absolutely no one ever screw with Ellen Harvelle, she made her own opinions independent of the idiotic comments of others, meaning that as long as Dean and Castiel did their jobs she wouldn’t care what they did on their own time out in the black. Even better, she was something like their direct supervisor so she’d control whether some official action was taken.

“You telling me Gabriel hasn’t blabbed to the whole fleet?” asked Dean skeptically, clambering out of the depths of his prospective shuttlecraft in order to give Sam his best corresponding skeptical look. “Like hell.”

Sam brushed off the skeptical look through long practice. “I think this might be one of the things they’ll talk about to each other but never, ever tell a human. I have no idea what the rest of their secret subjects are, but I bet this is probably one. I’ll also bet that half the fleet’s going to tease Castiel about you, but it doesn’t take a great leap of imagination to see the way he acts around you. He’ll ignore them ‘cause you matter more.”

His brother looked everywhere but at Sam, trying to hide the look on his face without retreating back into the shuttlecraft like some grease-smeared love-struck grinning jack-in-the-box.

“Did you deliberately spring this on me now?” he finally settled on.

Sam shrugged. “You handed me an opening on a plate, Dean. If the situation was reversed, you’d have gone right at it too and never let up.”

That actually made him laugh. “Yeah, I woulda. Okay, that’s my limit of awkward mushiness for the day. Probably the week. Quite possibly the whole year. Let’s go wrangle a shuttlecraft outta Bobby.” He managed to get all the way out of his new toy and headed for the passageway that led to the main shop floor, calling back over his shoulder, “And I’m not—what you said.”

Sam decided that Dean was probably referring to the phrase so damn in love, considered the options, and rendered his professional brotherly opinion as, “Bullshit.”

Now:
When *Castiel* had agreed to shut down so that Bobby Singer and his tech crews could arm him, he’d downloaded a shadow of his personality and the memories he most prized into his human avatar and then—nothing. Only the complete blank of shutdown, without dreams or the sensation of time having passed, and the sharp disjoint of coming back to consciousness at the command of someone else. It was profoundly disorienting, to say the least.

Helpless, to say the worst. In that condition he couldn’t restart his mind, his self. He was gone. Human sleepers could wake themselves up in response to external stimuli or internal distress, and they could dream. For a ship, shutdown state was closer to being kept in a chemically induced medical coma, except that if whoever was administering the drugs stopped doing so the patient would eventually wake if he or she wasn’t extensively damaged. If no one woke *Castiel* he’d never wake up again. He wouldn’t even notice he was gone.

Some of his sensors told him that Bobby Singer was talking to him. He’d deal with that in a minute. Bobby would be happy to talk until then, and probably wouldn’t even notice the delay, although the man was uncomfortably perceptive at the most inconvenient times.

Part of his attention turned to checking over the software and coding that had been put into his mind, ready to use when necessary. Weapons specifications, operating protocols, rules and recommendations for working with a fleet. Orders to stay put and wait, which he intended to ignore primarily because he remembered intending to ignore them before this. A chain of command, unspecific about the schedule of implementation, unsurprisingly with *Michael* right at the top, which was nothing new.

All of it with corresponding devices retrofitted into his superstructure, horrible and unfamiliar and then instinctive as the programs wrote themselves into his active memory.

He was missing time and he wanted it back. Most of *Castiel’s* attention was on reestablishing the link to the avatar, and getting that time—and the memories that mattered to him more than anything else—back. As he was, he knew that he wanted those memories back and knew basically what they were, but he couldn’t feel them. His devotion to the Winchesters was there but hollow, without a foundation to rest upon; the passion and delight he took in Dean in particular a shell of what he knew it was meant to be. His resolve to defy the orders given him was still there because he knew that the plan had been to ignore them, but he couldn’t feel why it was so important.

The connection was always there. He reached along it, reestablishing the active link and instantly *becoming* that person as the fragment was reintegrated into the whole.

Memories both old and new flooded back into him, those that made up who he was deep within and those created as the man had suffered through the handful of hours between download, disconnect, and reconnection.

*The dizziness of lying in the dark without properly knowing where he was, feeling Launch Station rotate beneath him and knowing he couldn’t possibly be feeling it. Uncertainty, distressing and bone-deep. Lost, knowing things without knowing how he knew them or what they meant.*

*The taste of fear and growing panic in the back of his throat, overwhelming and poisonous.*

*Familiar hands across his shoulder blades, the small of his back, the nape of his neck. Fingers combing through his hair, too gently. Dean, holding him not to keep him from flying but keeping that center. Oh. Not lost after all. The absolute truth, for once, of the thought of yes, this is me.*

*Soft words in the darkness in a voice he knew and loved and needed so intensely. Need without context, without knowledge, nothing more or less than the inescapable pull of gravity and the*
possessiveness of an animal. This one is mine and I his and if I should lose you, my love, who am I?

The man lying in Dean’s lap twisted involuntarily as his memories were absorbed and the full force of the ship’s mind took control, two temporarily broken-apart aspects of the same person becoming one again. By the time Dean had reacted, crying out “Cas?” in concern and distress, it was over and Castiel was back.

“It’s all right, Dean,” he said softly, through the person who was him again. Physical sensations flowed in, a lower priority than the memories but still important; a drug to which he had become accustomed, probably too much so. The man sighed, tipping his head back against his lover’s chest. Dean’s heart was going far too fast. Castiel could hear it echoing through his skull. “It’s me.”

“Dammit, Cas!” Dean snapped, an all-purpose reaction so familiar Cas couldn’t help but smile very slightly. “You were practically raving for a few minutes there, and then—! Don’t do that again!”

“Given the choice, I would rather not.” Castiel accessed the most recent memories that patchily filled in the missing time. Somewhere along the line he should really get around to answering Bobby, except he hadn’t been listening to the last few seconds in favor of paying attention to Dean.

(Aboard the ship proper, Bobby was told, distractedly, “I’m talking to Dean, Bobby. One minute.” Bobby wasn’t really all that surprised.)

“I don’t really know what you were talking about towards the end,” Dean was still saying. “Think you were trying to tell me what it felt like to fly with a fleet, although there was something about bumblebees in there, so that might not have been it at all. I was just trying to keep you talking.”

Castiel had found the mental recording. Dean had done very well indeed to get that much out of all around and see me see you leap and soar like atoms. They don’t bounce, Dean. Like bees. Glance and brush but can’t touch, so close. Like all of us. Just you just you. And the brush of fingers between and across his lover’s hands, dwelling on the tiny details of the scars Dean had incurred over the years and Castiel hadn’t been able to heal completely.

“I think that is what I meant,” he said reflectively, and then fondly, “You always understand me.”

“Most of the time you make sense. Or I know you’re trying to make sense and I just don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m guessing Bobby and his minions are done with you?”

In fact, they were all gone, except for Bobby, who was— “Yes, they—stop that,” he accidentally said in both places.

“Huh?” said Dean, who was clearly ready to challenge Castiel’s assertion that the human always understood him.

“How else am I supposed to get your attention you’re too busy talkin’ to your boyfriend over there?” Bobby snapped back at him, swiping the wrench he’d used to knock an echoing pattern through Castiel’s hull through the air, obviously threatening to hit him again if need be. It didn’t hurt, but the feeling was uninvited and unwelcome.

“Not you. Bobby is growling at me,” Cas told Dean, and simultaneously snapped back at Bobby, “Do not do that. What do you want?” It didn’t bother him to be holding two conversations at once; the ship was perfectly capable of multitasking to a much higher degree. It was very rare indeed that he consciously felt overloaded, simply because most of the things he did weren’t terribly complicated, at least for him. The initial attack by the unknown ships that had taken Gabriel and Sam had been overwhelming and terrifying, all but incomprehensible at first and then unbelievable.
Conversations with humans he didn’t know well were often confusing because learning the pattern of each person’s thoughts and speech and trying to compensate for their innate unpredictability also required more of his attention. Castiel was not really willing to admit that he often didn’t try very hard; Dean would generally know how to translate the important things for him and anything unimportant didn’t need to be understood.

On the other hand, talking to and living with Dean usually got what was essentially his full attention because those actions were so important to him, and some stimuli were so intense that he genuinely couldn’t consciously concentrate on anything else, because the human body he inhabited so often was as sensitive as any other.

“I’m tellin’ you we’ve done a fantastic job in record time and you’re welcome,” Bobby said sarcastically. He was good at that, Castiel noted. Not for the first time. “I was also warning you that Ellen’s lookin’ for the two of you and she’s probably gonna find you before you can avoid her. Don’t try, you hear me? She’ll just be mad when she does track you two down. Anyway, I told her where you were.”

“I will tell Dean,” Castiel told him. And, as soon as he’d promised to, did so.

“What’s she want?” Dean wanted to know. Castiel didn’t think it was an unreasonable question. Bobby disagreed when it was relayed to him.

“She’s your boss. I know neither of you get the concept, but you’re lucky it’s her, so whatever she wants, listen to the woman, got me?”

“Dean says yes sir. But I do not believe he meant it.”

Bobby laughed, so he must have misunderstood something. Dean would explain it to him, as it didn’t require either of them moving.

Still, the prospect of their boss showing up sometime soon was enough to get them out of bed, at least. While they both had all their clothes on and Cas had been in no shape to do anything more than be held, it didn’t look terribly professional to be found sprawled across a bed together in the dark.

By the time Ellen Harvelle arrived at Dean’s rooms, the man in question was innocently eating whatever meal of the day this was. He’d lost track of the time of day, especially as time of day on Launch Station was more a matter of consensus than observable reality. While Cas didn’t need to eat, he was sitting in the chair across from Dean’s, occasionally snatching off the plate fragments that caught his interest and might take the taste of panic away. It was an old habit of his and Dean had long since stopped bothering telling him to stop, especially as he didn’t actually mind. It was as close as they ever came to sharing a meal together and he’d grown to rather enjoy it over the years.

The knock at the door was more of a two-second warning than a request for admittance. As one of the admirals of the Fleet stationed at Launch Station, Ellen had the right to go wherever she wanted without warning. The computer passkey wrapped around her left wrist in disguise as a bracelet let her in without having to wait for either Dean or Cas to open the door or tell the non-sentient station computer to do the same.

“Admiral,” Cas greeted her quietly, glad to have all his memories back in place and telling him that the woman was on what Dean would probably label as ‘our side’.

“Hi,” Dean added much less formally, but in more overtly friendly tone. “Care to join me?”

“Whatever I want, don’t get it for me,” she commented wryly. “You’re just a stop on my way to a
meeting and they’ll growl if I smell like spirits. Coffee, then.”

He fetched her coffee and the various things she’d need to flavor it to taste. She didn’t bother, eyeing them both over the top of the mug with a gaze that suggested it saw everything.

They both tried to look innocent, doubtless a confession in itself.

“Thought so,” she said, a shade smugly. “What are the odds you two are going to sit still and wait for everyone else to move?”

_Castiel_ wasn’t very good at rhetorical questions, so he let Dean answer that one, with, as it happened, “That depends. How fast are they moving?”

She rolled her eyes, a gesture clearly as contagious as the still-common cold around here. “Not fast enough for you, I’ll wager. Don’t bother, Dean!”

He’d opened his mouth to contradict her. He closed it again. As a child, he’d been Mom to Sam more than he’d actually had one of his own, and being mommed was always unfamiliar and disturbing. Ellen was good at it. Her Jo was out with the Fleet somewhere aboard one of the ships that hadn’t gone missing, although they’d likely been called back by now.

“Here,” she said, pulling a datapad out of her jacket pocket and sliding it across the table to Dean. “You’ll need this.”

He picked it up, looked over the first few pages, didn’t understand a word of it, and handed it to Cas, who paged through it with much more interest. “What is it?”

“Our scans of the discontinuity _Gabriel_ and I encountered two days before the attack,” Cas answered for her.

“No, it’s not, _Castiel_. Pay attention.” She took it back from him, ran it back to the first screen, and pointed to the time-and-date stamp.

He looked puzzled, tipping his head to one side to stare at her with the maximum amount of bafflement. “These scans are nearly six months old.” A little more than a month into their slowly developing friendship, Dean had told him that if he kept up the absolute precision of a ship that could calculate beyond the second how long ago something was, the human would take some unspecified revenge. By that point, _Castiel_ had already figured out that he meant it, and that he would have come up with something insane, creative, and unpleasant. Probably.

“And from coordinates a couple thousand light-years away from where you were when you ran over yours,” Ellen added. She passed the datapad back; Cas tore into it with the fervor and haste of a being used to taking in data at a much faster rate than reading. The admiral rubbed her eyes tiredly and drank more coffee. “_Remiel_ sent us these shortly before he vanished. It was mixed in with months’ worth of observations and data and no one thought it was important until now. He’d gone looking for anomalies and had found plenty of them so there was nothing to distinguish this—discontinuity, you were calling it—from anything else.”

Dean interrupted. “Wait, wait, wait. Are you tellin’ me that _other_ ships encountered this thing or whatever it is? Right before they went missing?”

“No, I’m telling you that _one_ ship did, and he was looking for things like this. And we sent a ship out there to check on the area he vanished from, once we figured out he was gone, which took a while. _Remiel_ never bothered to keep in touch on a regular basis.”
She seemed to become aware of the past tense she was using and the effect the unconscious choice was having on Dean, whose baby brother was probably in a similar situation, and continued, “And Balthazar didn’t find anything like it, so we assumed the data was scrambled, especially when others looked it over and they managed to decode almost everything else he sent back to us. All strange and very interesting, but we could explain them. There wasn’t a connection with that until your team ran into it too. Now it’s the only thing we can find in common. Hell, maybe the others saw it too, but we never heard anything more from them.”

“This makes no sense,” Cas complained, still reading. “These readings are completely contradictory.”

She grinned at him without much humor. “That’s what I just said, Cas.” Most of Dean’s friends had picked up the nickname. For Dean’s benefit, she explained, “I don’t have the degree in higher spatial mathematics or whatever needed to understand it myself, but I’m told it looks like the space he just called a ‘discontinuity’ really is discontinuous, from the rest of space. Maybe even the rest of our universe. Light doesn’t travel through it in the same way. *Time* might not work the same way in that space. Hell, space probably doesn’t even work the same way ours does. Assuming we’re reading it the right way, and we’ve got some clever people working on it, most of ’em ships.”

Unsurprisingly, Dean seized on only part of that. “Time? You mean, if that’s where those ships came from and if that’s where Sam and Gabriel have gone, time could be runnin’ different for them?”

Cas still wasn’t happy with the data he’d been given. “Too many conditionals,” he warned Dean.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” his partner brushed it off. “Ellen?” For all she was an Admiral within the Fleet, Ellen didn’t insist too strongly on formality between her and the teams she supervised, possibly because she kept being given the mavericks and hard cases. Possibly she kept being given the hard cases because she put up with them. Maybe the other admirals just fired all the ones they ended up with.

“Something like that,” she agreed with the man, “although whether it’s running faster or slower for them I can’t say. No one can say, or it’d be on that.” Her gesture at the datapad was unnecessary and perfunctory.

It wasn’t great news, but at least it was news. “So you do think Sam and Gabriel are in there!”

She sighed. “Wish I could tell you for sure. But Castiel says they weren’t destroyed, right Cas?”

*Castiel* had been reassuring Dean on this point for days now, but he repeated, “I would have known.”

“And they were gone when he looked, so—”

That he hadn’t mentioned. “Cas?” Dean said. “You did what?”

“You were still unconscious,” the ship’s avatar pointed out. “And then you were upset with me. And then we were returning here.”

“You went back and looked for them?”

“I stopped and scanned for them,” he corrected. “I didn’t go back.”

Oh. Still. And Dean said so.

Ellen let them be—for a few seconds. “A-hem,” she broke in. “Look, everything we know is on that
“Datapad, and there’s a lot on there for all we can’t say very much. Take it with you.”

“Take—” Dean started.

“Right, like you’re not planning to take off and find your brother. Like hell, Dean Winchester.”

She was right and there wasn’t much point in denying it. Did everyone know?

“I don’t know what that thing, place, whatever, is,” she told both of them. “Go find out, grab Sam while you’re there, and come back and tell me about it. You can even bring that insufferable trickster Gabriel with you if you want, although I would understand completely if you left him out in the black. There’s a lot going on, so if you go now you might get a few hours head start—at best. So go now.” She pulled another datapad out of another pocket but kept hold of it, switching the screen on. “You haven’t been here long enough to resupply but I happen to know there’s a cache of not-quite-basic supplies here.” Cas tilted his head to look at the screen, and nodded. “Fetch,” she told him, earning herself a baffled and slightly offended look in return.

Dean shoveled the remains of his meal into the food replicator and didn’t stop to watch it disappear. “Thank you,” he said determinedly. “We owe you, Ellen.”

Cas wasn’t very free with touch with anyone who wasn’t Dean, so when he reached out to brush his fingers across the back of her hand in thanks, Dean, at least, understood how sincerely he meant it. Apparently Ellen did too.

“That’s actually you, isn’t it?” she said to him, a little ambiguously. She glanced over at Dean, who had moved from clearing the table to grabbing his Fleet jacket off the back of a chair where he’d thrown it and the bag he’d inherited from his dad out from under the bed where he’d kicked it. (The duct tape keeping it in one piece had survived yet another round of such abuse but could probably do with another layer at some point.) Ellen refrained from commenting, putting her on a very short list of people with such self-control.

“Good luck, you two,” she settled for, rising from her chair and heading for the door. “Try not to get killed, all right? I gotta have someone around to turn Henricksen that special shade of puce only you can invoke, Dean.”

Departing Launch Station was easy. It all fell apart from there.

Everything Ellen and her crews had stashed away for them was where she’d told them it was, and Castiel transported it aboard without a problem. They’d dig through it on the way out and figure out what exactly she’d found, but for the moment they needed to leave. Now. And it was about time, Dean added.

Disoriented and fragmented, sprawled helplessly in his lap in the dark, Cas had told Dean that the sensation of being in flight was one of the best feelings he’d ever experienced. Not knowing what that felt like, Dean would have said that the action of doing something, not turning and running and waiting for others to tell them what to do but taking action and running towards a problem, not away, was somewhere on the list.

Running back to Launch Station and Earth, he had felt as if there were something deep in his gut clawing at him, desperate to get out and fight and hunt down the creatures that had taken, had hurt his little brother. Some barbed-wire bond between the two of them, perhaps. Some monster all his own that only woke up angry.

Whatever it was, Dean felt as if every sense he possessed was humming in angry, hungry sympathy
with the faint but familiar vibrations of Castiel accelerating away from the busy neighborhood of Launch Station so they could jump into flight and head back to the battlefield, on their own time. This was their family gone missing, and doing something about it felt good.

Despite how populated the area around Launch Station felt, especially with Earth and the Moon looming just off to their respective sides, he knew it was an advantage. If they were going to sneak away quietly (or at least get away quietly; it didn’t really matter how many ships and other people saw them go, especially if they decided to follow. Backup might be nice at some point, and as for intercepting them, Dean knew his Castiel could outfly anything else in the black) then the more stuff in the sky the better. Between the chatter of ships and the interference from satellites both natural and artificial, they were just one more light in the sky among many.

“Ready when you are,” Dean said softly. They were back in the Control Room, just where they’d been when they’d arrived in-system, Castiel’s human body back in the life-support chair, Dean at his side.

“One moment,” his partner replied in a similar tone. The man in the chair was essentially unconscious; the voice was the ship himself and came from the intercom system. Dean didn’t need to be here, but he preferred the apparent proximity.

A moment passed while a scanner turned in another direction or one of Castiel’s siblings finished saying something to him. And then—

“Ready,” said Castiel. Dean braced himself for the transition to flight, hearing power build around him and crackle through the ship’s frame.

The split-second sensation of movement, of launch from one level to another, built to critical levels as massive engines roared, and then—

They went nowhere, and Castiel screamed.

Power ricocheted through him, frustrated and furious, as the whiplash of an aborted jump to flight cracked across Castiel’s mind and body, an instantaneous transition from launch to crash. It hurt, and it was impossible, and it was happening, and it felt as though he’d been slapped down into the surface of a planet by something impossibly powerful, its gravity crushing him.

Castiel was only distantly aware of crying out in pain. He was too preoccupied with the fist that had clenched itself around his mind and heart. New subroutines cut into his thoughts, aborting the launch and tripping traps that bit into him and pinned him down, punishing disobedience and his defiance of the orders planted in his mind to stay with the fleet in an organized manner and obey—

Michael’s voice roared through him, almost physical in its force and fury.

THINK YOU CAN LIE TO ME, CASTIEL? Michael demanded, transmitting across the distance. Castiel didn’t even know where his oldest brother was; it felt as if the command ship—his commander, the knowledge written straight into his brain said, obey him!—was right there. THINK YOU CAN RUN?

Programming installed in all innocence kicked in, triggered by Michael’s command. Intricate and brilliant, precisely calibrated. Castiel didn’t want to believe that humans could have, would have done this, but he didn’t want to believe that his siblings—no, that Michael—would have done it either. Somewhere, Michael had complete control, so perfect it was if that fist was flexing around him, relaxing its grip in places and letting the power leak out to scorch him before gripping tightly
again, a hunter digging in its claws to draw as much blood as possible.

RETURN, Michael demanded. OBEY!

No, no, no! Castiel didn’t think, as much as he could think, he’d managed to communicate that. It was an unheard and mute defiance at best, and Michael wasn’t exactly taking no for an answer.

WE WILL TAKE HIM FROM YOU, his older brother threatened. It wasn’t even a threat. It was a promise. What Michael wanted, Michael got. YOU WERE MEANT TO CONTROL HIM. YOU FAILED.

On some level, Castiel had always known that the elements in the Fleet that had put him and Dean together had meant his personality and Dean’s to cancel each other out, taming a man who had already, even in training, been more trouble than he might actually be worth. Only the sheer potential the Winchesters held had kept them from being sent back to the masses of grounded humanity rather than being turned loose on the universe with the wings of ships to carry them. Castiel had rescued Dean, that first time deep beneath the surface of a moon, because something about the man had called to him. Whether it was something familiar or something attractively different, he hadn’t known at the time; hadn’t really understood what had been behind the impulse to reach out and snatch him as he fell.

The Fleet had seen possibility in it and when Castiel had stayed interested in the brash cadet they’d been kept together. They liked to balance people in just such a fashion, as it worked so well; Sam’s patience and intelligence was a check on Gabriel for much the same reasons. Castiel was meant to tame Dean; if Dean had managed to draw out the standoffish Castiel the Fleet would have considered it a fringe benefit.

He did not need to be reminded of it like this.

YOU HAVE LET HIM CORRUPT YOU, Michael roared, the enormous ship’s will tightening around him. STAND DOWN OR I WILL TAKE HIM AWAY FROM YOU. DEFY ME AND YOU ARE LOST.

Castiel had to obey. Involuntarily, he could feel the engines that propelled him through space and into flight powering down, commanded by the programming written into him rather than his own conscious mind. Corrupted he was, Michael was all too right about that, but not by Dean, never by him.

Somewhere on the edge of his awareness, he knew that Dean was crouched by the chair that held his human vessel, wavering between focusing on the man convulsing and crying out in an unbroken, breathless, impossible keen of pain and confusion that matched the sound shrieking through the intercom system and helplessly at the ceiling of the room around him, knowing it was the ship and not the man who was hurting.

Seconds passed, agonizingly, as Dean shouted, “Cas! Cas, what’s happening? We’re stalled!” Of course, of course, he knew the feeling of it, could hear engines whining up towards and down from their yet-untested full power in dizzying and damaged ricochets. The command ship was holding him in place with force of will and treachery and a voice he had to obey, using the trapped power from the engines to hurt him, to chain him down.

Michael was stronger than him, overwhelmingly so, and the commands were part of him now. Castiel could no more defy him than Dean could stop breathing. They’d both hurt themselves trying, and involuntary control would take over.
A thought drifted past amidst the hurt and betrayal, and Castiel slipped loose of Michael’s grip for a split-second to grab for it. Consciously, he had to listen to his older brother’s voice. He had only the barest chance, hanging on trust and devotion.

“Cas, what’s going on?” Dean was still shouting, too slowly. “What can I do?”

>You can listen, my love, thought Castiel desperately, on the edge of Michael’s ongoing tirade and the ship’s death grip on his heart. He cut off his own screams, letting some of Michael’s voice through the intercom, slowed down and filtered for Dean’s benefit. You can understand. You always do.

Please— Metaphorically, he took advantage of a tiny gap in Michael’s control to speak through his human self. He couldn’t manage much. Just a tiny clue, so insignificant and disguised that Michael might let it pass.

“Don’t ask,” he managed to whisper as the man Dean called Cas, who shared his bed and ate off his plate and loved him, beneath the ship’s terrible cries and Michael’s furious roar, hoping desperately, praying to anyone who would listen, their creator, Dean’s storm lords, anyone at all, that Dean would understand. You always understand me, he’d said. “Don’t ask, don’t ask, don’t ask—” He wasn’t sure if he was putting the emphasis in the right place to send the message he wanted to, if he was saying what he meant to say. He didn’t even know if the syllables were coming out in the right order. It was all he could manage as it was, the best he could do.

The corruption, the commands, were forcing him to obey. Power redirected from the engines humming downwards to shutdown to lash through his body and mind like a whip, like chains. No, no! You don’t control me, I won’t let you! We won’t let you! Dean—

Castiel wasn’t there with him, not watching as he almost always was, so he didn’t see the moment when Dean understood. But he felt the effect of that understanding, because the man he loved leapt to his feet from where he’d been crouching at the human vessel’s side to listen, and shouted—

“Castiel! Listen to me! Take off! Jump now! Listen to my voice, not his! Obey me!” Desperation, and there was the edge of a sob bitten back in it, because his next words were all but unforgiveable. Castiel forgave him instantly, but if he failed, would Dean understand?

“If you love me, Castiel!”

Dean’s voice cut into him, into the core of his self and his memories, set aside and protected, uncorrupted and his, untouchable and fundamental, as Michael’s grip flayed his resistance away, through the layers of his mind.

Instinct and need and love took over, that diamond core tearing through his older brother’s control.

Flight and freedom, and it hurt.

Castiel fled. He could feel his engines singing through him properly again, power and energy running through their accustomed channels, but he didn’t want to. Too recent, too fresh.

He set their course and held a furious and frightened speed away, locked the settings, and then fled even that.

It was to his human self he fled to most of all, the vulnerable but unmarked body over his true one, to be held and loved and understood.

Darkness unknown before them; darkness too familiar behind. And Dean’s arms around him, strong and solid and his, as he howled in fury and betrayal.
As far as Sam was concerned, he’d been where he was for less than a day. He might have lost some time in between being yanked out of his own universe and into this one, which had knocked him unconscious and in agony both, and certainly Gabriel had been losing time now and again, almost imperceptible except to someone familiar with the ship’s rhythm of bait and rejoinder mixed in with actual information and communication, but they both would have estimated the time since they’d seen real stars at twenty-four Earth hours or less.

The ship had managed to send him the fragmentary images he’d gotten while they were still in their home space, and Sam was curled up within his theoretically safe bubble of engine-generated space distortion looking them over and occasionally making comments. Whether they were actually meant to be informative or just a way to listen to the sound of his own voice as he thought aloud didn’t matter much to Sam, and when Gabriel was listening it was a victory just to get a response, any response.

“Where could they have come from?” he was wondering now. Gabriel’s scans were understandably even more distorted than those his little brother Castiel had managed to get and show to Dean, light-years away and completely out of sync with them. Nevertheless, Sam had almost immediately spotted the similarities, in amidst the static and the interference and the panic, between his familiar Fleet and the ships that had attacked Gabriel. “There’s no one else out here,” continued Sam aloud. “Just you and us. Humanity. Earth’s children. That’s both of us, you know.” Sometimes the usually smart-mouthed ship answered. More often he didn’t, testing Sam’s capacity for worry even further.

There were just too many things to panic about all at once. For the moment, he was concentrating on the ones he stood a chance of doing something about. If Dean and Castiel weren’t here then there was nothing he could do, Sam kept telling himself in the middle of unrelated thoughts. He trusted them to look after themselves and each other. His big brother was a fighter and a survivor and Castiel was just as stubborn, matching Dean push for shove. He’d have to trust them now.

“No one out there,” Gabriel corrected him unexpectedly. “We’ve no clue what’s in here.”

Gabriel had been drifting out of contact, and whether he was losing time, trying to repair himself like their enemies seemed to think he should be doing, or listening in on whatever messages he might be sent or could eavesdrop on, Sam didn’t know. He wasn’t about to pass up the chance for a conversation, though. “They might not even live here,” Sam tossed out, hoping to engage Gabriel’s attention long enough to keep him focused. “They could just travel through here. How could there be a speed of light to limit a ship in a realm with no light?”

He got huffed at, a sound Gabriel sometimes made when he thought Sam (or, more often, Dean) was being particularly and probably deliberately stupid. “We’re not moving, Sam. And the one that shouted at me came to a stop. I felt it.”

“Okay.” Sam had never let a complete contradiction stop him and he wasn’t about to start now. “So they might have been developed here. Then why would they look like our Fleet? Sort of,” he amended, looking back over the scans. Dean would have agreed with his assessment of ‘melted’. “It’s like someone took a lot of pictures of us—well, you and your siblings—”

Gabriel muttered something about the insanity and sheer ugliness of the idea of human-shaped starships anyway, but Sam didn’t bother listening.

“—and then made them wrong anyway. Added a lot of weapons, at least I assume these are weapons ports based on what they did to you, and then—” Sam thought it over, trying to come up with a metaphor. “If I was going to design a ship, I’d start with something I could push around and reshape.
Clay, maybe. These look like someone modeled them in clay, squashed them in random directions for a bit, and decided to make them in full scale like that after all. But why would anyone do that?”

The ship didn’t reply, although that could have been just because Gabriel didn’t have an answer for him and was tired of finding new and improved ways to say “I don’t know.” Maybe he was tired of Sam’s speculations.

“We don’t have any answers, do we?” Sam asked rhetorically. “Or a lot of options.” Without knowing more about what kind of being was aboard those ships or what forces and impulses were controlling them, they couldn’t even guess when one might come back and shout demands at Gabriel again.

He resolved to find one of the few options they did have and take it. After a minute, he called, “Gabriel? Pay attention to me for a minute.”


“Whoever or whatever spoke to you thought you could repair yourself, right?”

“Yeah. So?”

Oh, to be doing something—anything—rather than sit by this engine and glare at screens. And if he did something else for a while maybe he’d have an idea while his conscious mind worked on something else and let his subconscious mind chew things over in peace. “So I assume we’re—or you are, since they don’t know I’m alive—going to be a good little prisoner while we get our bearings. Are we being watched right now?”

The ship was following his train of thought, if a bit belatedly. “I’ll look. If that’s the right word in a space with no light. You want to fake the repairs.”

“Right. Well, they’ll be real repairs, if probably a bit slipshod, and if they think you’re doing as you’re told then that’s just a bonus. I said you needed me to fix you up. Idiot.”

“Next time I’ll let you stand on the edge of empty space and get spotted by psychotic enemy ships,” retorted Gabriel, mostly insincerely.

Sam was already ignoring him. He’d activated the air compressor built into his spacesuit almost as soon as he’d climbed out of it, telling it to refill its air supply from the air available in the room. If there was an unknown leak somewhere, which was a very real possibility considering all the known leaks around, Sam wanted as much of the air as possible to be where he was. While he was at it, he tagged that thought for further consideration. There were spare spacesuits on one of the decks he didn’t happen to be on. Accidents happened to them, and homemade patch jobs were not recommended for spacesuits, which had to be absolutely airtight. Half-assed field repairs wouldn’t do it for more than a few minutes. Maybe an hour if it was somewhat more than half-assed, but three-quarters-assed wasn’t really a phrase.

“There’s nothing,” the ship reported as Sam was struggling back into the suit. “I can’t explain how I know. But I checked.”

“Can your sensors reconfigure themselves to work here?” Sam asked, slightly muffled by the treated fabric.

There was a very long pause, which Sam hoped was the ship taking a little too long to answer a fairly simple question because he wanted to get it right rather than the ship losing time. When Gabriel resumed, as nonchalantly as if he’d never left, Sam could hear the shrug in the trickster’s
voice. “Guess so. I’ll put looking into that way at the bottom of my list of priorities, shall I?”

“You’ve got a list?”

“No. But if I did, ‘make a list’ would be at the top. It’s not a list if there’s only one thing on it.”

“Very funny. You know, getting into this thing and checking it over was a lot easier with a second pair of hands, Gabriel. You put together enough to materialize and help me out here so I can go patch up your hull or what?” Some of the seals and connections that laced the suit together and allowed it to run smoothly as a pressure-sealed airtight unit were less than easily accessible, mostly because the most efficient place to put a significant mass on a human that they were expected to move, gravity or not, was between the shoulder blades. A difficult spot to reach at the best of times, most people would agree, and the bulk of the spacesuit didn’t help.

_Dammit, it would be a lot easier if I could reach that cord!_ Sam thought, groping over his shoulder for a connection that would link the assembled parts of the suit to one of the compressed air tanks. It was just out of reach—

And then it wasn’t, as his flailing hand caught a connector that he could have sworn had been beyond his grasp a second ago.

Well, with Gabriel and his aforementioned second pair of hands out of commission, apparently, Sam wasn’t going to complain. He finished linking the various suit components together and checked the seals he could see.

“Switch on the computer,” Gabriel suggested. “I’m not up to puppeteering a hologram around, but I can monitor the suit. If it’s damaged I’ll be able to tell you.”

Accordingly, Sam clicked on the simple onboard computer, which was barely anything more than a status monitor mixed together with a communicator. There were more complicated alarm clocks, although Sam hadn’t had to use one of those for most of his life. He’d shared space with Dean for years, and his brother rarely slept for more than five hours at a time. And Gabriel got bored far too quickly to let Sam sleep in for as long as he wanted to.

“Coast still clear?” he checked before leaving the relative safety of the engine complex.

_Gabriel_ actually sounded offended, like he thought Sam might be insinuating something like a lack of trust. “I’d tell you. Think I’m gonna let down my guard with those ships and I don’t know what in the dark out there? Get a move on. This was your plan.”

With Gabriel watching the dark skies and his air supply both, Sam occupied his thoughts with the practical aspects of how he was going to patch up the gaping wounds in his ship’s hull. There were welding tools to repair hairline fractures and even minor breaches in his basic toolkit, which he thought he’d left somewhere inconvenient like his quarters. Ships were built tough, but something small and solid could hurt them if they hit it just wrong, and while debris fields like the one they’d been exploring at the beginning of this ordeal were rare, more than one ship had dipped in too close to a particularly intriguing ring system and been blindsided by a chunk of rock or ice on a rogue trajectory between the gravities of the planet and whatever moons were complicating things.

“Can you access whatever lists you are keeping? Of inventory, preferably?” Sam asked the intercom, thinking out loud. “Look for sheets of metal. Considering the circumstances, I think the best I can do is welding patches across what’s missing. I don’t want to be anywhere near it if you do manage to get back into flight, and overpressurizing those sections would probably be a very bad idea, but it should hold if I do it right.”
“You’ll need a lot of sheet metal,” Gabriel admitted. “I’ll reroute some power and see if I can get the industrial replicators working.”

“That would be good,” Sam said absently, wishing he’d brought one of the data viewers that he’d left scattered around the engine room floor. “Mind checking if there’s some working plumbing around while you’re at it?”

Gabriel made an appropriately rude noise at him. Progress, of a sort.

Two hours later Sam had retrieved the toolkit he needed from his rooms, which hadn’t sustained any damage from the attack as they were deep within protected areas of the ship. Gabriel had turned off all the lights and most of the heating in there in his ongoing search for power that could be put to more immediate uses, although he had, as requested, left the plumbing working. Sam wished he’d thought of that before he’d put the spacesuit back on and been forced to go through the whole stupid routine of taking it off and putting it on again, although he’d had to go through some areas that had been exposed to this universe’s empty space and didn’t have any air left. So he hadn’t had much choice. It had still been the poster incident for inconvenience.

“I could do with a little more light,” Sam had muttered as he tripped over something else that had been knocked onto the floor in the chaos.

Maybe the light had brightened a bit. In any case, he had managed to get out of his quarters without incurring any major injuries to himself.

He’d started small, successfully welding closed some of the smaller fractures in the ship’s hull, more side-effects of the major damage than significant damage in themselves. Under ordinary circumstances Gabriel would have been whining about them anyway as they hissed air reserves and heat into the vacuum of space, but right now they were just practice for the major repairs he was going to take on.

Whatever those ships were or whoever was flying them had better take a long time about coming back. And he was desperately hoping that they didn’t have longer-range sensors than Gabriel did, or ones better adapted to this environment, both of which were all-too-perfectly likely. He was standing in a hull breach, albeit one he was welding metal over, and in a realm without light he’d stand out exactly like a candle in the dark. For the moment, he was settling for being thankful for small mercies, like the fact that the enormous industrial laser welders that worked in the vacuum of space came in handheld sizes and worked in whatever this universe or dimension was.

Sam could feel the difference as he moved through the areas of the ship that had been opened to not vacuum but whatever ether filled this space. His movements were a little more controlled than they’d been in the airless vacuum environment in which he’d trained and not too long ago he’d been exploring happily. He kept overcompensating, making his movements awkward and slow until he got used to it. It did feel almost like atmosphere, if a thin and alien one. ‘Ether’ might not be so far from the truth.

“Gabriel,” he called. The ship hadn’t said anything for a few minutes, even though Sam had asked him to keep up a running commentary so he’d know if his ship partner was losing time again. In a human, that would be a symptom of a seizure. He didn’t know what it was in a ship, but it definitely indicated something wrong with the starship’s mind or, more likely, his physical brain. Sections of his neural networks had been badly damaged in the attack, Sam knew. The first time he’d tackled one of the bigger breaches, the crackle of ice against his gloved hands had taken him by surprise and then revulsion as he realized the ‘ice’ had once been some of the biological components of Gabriel’s neural networks. It had been brain cracking under his hand and burning away as he swallowed
down his disgust and sympathy and fixed down the latest in an assembly line of too-thin metal with the laser welder.

And whoever or whatever was aboard those enemy ships thought Gabriel could repair himself?

“I wish,” Gabriel had said when Sam had told him about this. “Like that helps.”

“Might make you feel better.” Sam had suggested, for lack of a better idea. He was assessing the damage to another bulkhead as they spoke and was not looking forward to the trek back down to the working industrial replicators, which were located adjacent to the engine complex, safely in the unbreached interior of the ship, and an inconvenient distance away.

Now he grimaced as he temporarily shelved the conversation, reaching out to brush away yet more rough edges that might have been biological neural net, miniscule mechanical components, remnants of bulkhead, part of the ship’s energy distribution circuitry, or something else entirely that had had the misfortune to run through this section. He must have been getting tired, not an unreasonable reaction, because he could have sworn they hadn’t been there when he’d first looked the terrible wound over. The jagged remains bit into his fingers, metal edges tugging at his gloves. Sam pulled back before they tore the fabric of the suit and he had to take even more time and effort to replace them with one of the spares.

“Sure. I’ll do that. And while I’m doing that, I’m going to try transporting this latest patch up to you. It’s fairly simple, so I think I might be able to hold the pattern and put it back together again. We’ll have a race and see which one is helpful first.”

The panel, when it did materialize, made Sam very glad that Gabriel had tried this on an inanimate lump of metal before the ship took a shot at running him through the transporter. The surface was pitted and warped, smeared out and melted in a way almost reminiscent of what the enemy ships had looked like in the scans Gabriel had shown him.

“Not so much,” Sam said honestly, because Gabriel could see the damage for himself through the local sensors he’d assured Sam were working and the tiny recorder located within Sam’s spacesuit helmet. “But it doesn’t have to be perfect for a quick fix, and that’s all we’re doing today.”

Despite the damage, he used it anyway. There weren’t any holes in it and he could have welded those closed if there had been. It was faster than going down to the replicators for what couldn’t possibly be the millionth time.

Don’t give out, he mentally ordered the welder, giving a critical glare to the power pack, which had been working heroically but the charge levels of which were wavering. Stay working, do you hear me, you inanimate object? While there was a spare somewhere Sam didn’t know where it was offhand, and they probably couldn’t afford the time it would take him to find it, especially as the inventory list Gabriel kept somewhere in his brain was inaccessible or just not a priority at the moment.

They really couldn’t afford the time at all, because a shout from Gabriel sent him running down recently cleared paths back to the engine rooms and the engines’ cloaking effect.

“They’re coming back, Sam!”

And if that was a problem, Gabriel’s next words only made things worse.

“Can’t you feel the waves? I think there’s a whole fleet out there…”
ON WITH THE SHOW!

Then:

The realm that ships flew through, faster than light, was a real place. It wasn’t a theoretical abstraction or a trick of maths. Sound carried further, faster in water than in air; matter could travel faster in the adjacent dimension of flight than in regular space. Despite the water metaphor, people tended to think of that dimension as ‘above’ the everyday one even though ‘up’ wasn’t an accurate description. And, after all, ships went there in flight, a term much more evocative of a sky above than a sea below. Ships jumped between the two dimensions fairly freely, existing in one as contentedly as in the other, although the transition was rough on humans and exposure to what that dimension looked like as interpreted by the human visual system was almost impossible for human brains to process.

It was an environment all its own, but there were analogues between those two dimensions.

It had weather.

Ripples of extra-dimensional energy like winds against ships’ hulls, which they compensated for as naturally and intuitively as a bird in Earth’s skies. Currents where they could move faster while expending less energy, or the reverse if they were moving against the flow, not physical substance but the crackle and course of energy. Whirlpools and eddies that snatched at them in passing as they tore by.

Storms.

They weren’t extremely common, but ships ran across them every so often. They were volatile, both in size and in location. A ship detecting the first tendrils of a storm ahead or approaching wouldn’t be able to tell how intense it was until the gale was nearly upon him or her. Sometimes they were no more than ripples, brief upheavals of the local environment, easily traversed and quickly over, with no more effect on the ship or crew than a brief bit of turbulence and the unnerving feeling of an already alien environment taking the opportunity to turn over the snow globe and shake you up a little bit.

Then there were the true tempests, hurricanes of storms that spanned enormous distances and moved even more capriciously than the little disturbances. Most ships avoided them, dropping into so-called real space to cruise along below the speed of light, dipping back into their other dimension periodically to check if it had passed. If it was a slow-moving system then a ship’s best choice was to pick a direction and limp off hoping to hit an edge. The odds were truly unpredictable. A slow system could accelerate without warning and engulf whole star systems’ worth of that other space; a fast-moving one could stop dead. Since ships jumped from one point in this dimension to a corresponding section in the other, exactly like diving into water and swimming before resurfacing, if the ship’s best guess didn’t match what the storm was doing then no one was going anywhere fast.

The other choice was to stay in that dimension, and either weather the storm until it passed by skirting the edges or jump in and go for a real hell of a roller-coaster ride.

The Winchesters and their two ships were on their way out into the black after what felt like an
overlong stopover at Launch Station. No matter how much of their childhood had been lived in packs of people, the boys had grown accustomed to having whole cubic light-years to themselves, and after being re-immersed in the human horde for a while they were ready to get back to their adventures.

New worlds, strange skies.

…And enormous other-dimensional hurricanes.

It was massive, Castiel and Gabriel relayed to them an uncomfortably short time after they’d felt the first winds while in flight. The humans could pitch in opinions, but ultimately it was the ships that would have to decide what to do.

“Show me?” Dean asked, because he hated flying blind if he didn’t have to.

Charting this side of the sky was always a bit hit-and-miss, but Castiel did the best he could. Either it really did look like a hurricane or the ship had been borrowing images from the databases.

“I know what you’d rather do, Dean,” Castiel commented as Dean looked over the chart and wondered what it would be like to fly in that. He patched in the conversation the two ships were having; it was inevitably a bit delayed as they communicated at a faster rate than humans could take in, but the essence of it was:

Castiel thought they could handle it. He was willing to fly straight in and risk being thrown off course. They didn’t have a course, not as such, as they went wherever they wanted and only went to the star systems ground-based observers recommended because there was a better chance of something interesting being there than in choosing stars at random. The smaller ship was built for agility and, Dean thought as he listened, a bit intrigued by the idea of testing his abilities against the other-dimensional storm. He could sympathize. Realizing that, he briefly considered the idea that it was his tendency to do things like this that was influencing Castiel’s opinion.

Gabriel was older and more cynical and didn’t terribly like the idea of being so out of control, as the hurricane’s effects would no doubt cause. While Gabriel was happy to send other people spinning in every direction possible for as long as possible, he tended to be the one in control of who spun where, keeping a privileged and secure position where he could sit back and snicker at them through a lollipop or two. He didn’t particularly like the idea of plodding along at cruising speeds for an unknown number of days either, because that would be boring and if his maps were right there wasn’t supposed to be anything at all except maybe a stray rock or two for light-years.

“Can I interrupt?” Sam asked, also a witness to the conversation, and then did so, most persuasively.

“It might be fun, Gabriel.”

That was almost always a winning argument where Gabriel was concerned. The thought that very few ships tried taking on a hurricane like this also appealed to him. Assuming they weren’t actually torn apart by the effects, something everyone thought unlikely, it would be something they could boast about to the rest of the Fleet for weeks when they got back.

And, if things got too rough in there, they always had the option of dropping back to cruising speeds in the universe where light speed was still the iron ceiling. They’d be stuck in—or just below—the middle of it, but at least they had an escape hatch.

They went in.

Dean felt it the minute they hit the edge of the storm. He was watching in the same lounge where he
would, one day in the future, stare out at the wreckage of a dying star right before catastrophe struck his family. *Castiel’s* flight got rougher as the impossible currents of the hurricane beat against him, trying to shove him off course and out of control. The faint vibrations, as familiar and comforting as the human’s own heartbeat, faltered momentarily before becoming a roar as the ship maneuvered to ride the winds, running and rolling with the unstoppable power unleashed all around.

Any attention *Castiel* had been paying to his human partner was instantly reallocated to the storm. Dean all but felt him go, as if he’d been in the room and abruptly left without even a farewell. The floor-to-ceiling screen that masqueraded as a window showed only distortion for a moment, then fragmentary images that defied interpretation, giving only the impression of incredible movement and inconceivable forces.

He could feel the storm, not directly as his ship did but in the effects it caused. The deck shifted beneath his feet, constantly, making keeping his balance and his lunch both an act that required active participation. The more intense vibrations of the laboring engines maneuvering them through it all were overwhelmed, for a moment, by the strikes and stabs of the otherworldly energy against *Castiel’s* hull like concentrated, sustained lightning. The glimpses he did get, through the viewscreen before *Castiel* shut it off so he could devote even that tiny fraction of his concentration to other purposes, spun his mind into a dizzy, reality-bending spiral that created miniature hurricanes of their own inside his eyes.

It was an impractical, incredible, foolhardy, reckless, insane thing to do, riding a killer hurricane at faster-than-light speeds in a dimension no one really understood intellectually.

They were in it for four days, cutting a transverse route through the currents and sudden, intense whirlpools and cyclones the storm encompassed, hidden until the ships were already in the middle of them and fighting weather they couldn’t predict.

Dean wasn’t afraid of the wind and the weather. If *Castiel* said he could survive it and bring them both out of it intact then Dean trusted him completely. He’d accepted that his life was completely in this still-inhuman being’s mostly metaphorical hands. The stuff of bad horror stories and late-night drinking with paranoids as it was, if *Castiel* ever chose to turn on him then Dean would be dead immediately and without knowing what hit him. He was completely vulnerable before the power the ship wielded and held but, he knew, would never hold over him.

And then he’d gone and slept with that same powerful, glorious, impossible, frequently incomprehensible creature and handed him absolute control over not only his body but his heart as well. Dean had never regretted doing so. They were good together and he was happier than he’d been in a very, very long time and he wanted to think that his Cas was too.

No, it wasn’t the storm that sunk cold claws into his stomach and heart and tightened his jaw as he thought dark and terrible thoughts.

Essentially since the first time they met, Dean had been able to get past all *Castiel’s* barriers and shields between the ship’s true personality and the rest of the universe. Provoking him had been a challenge, one Dean had enthusiastically embraced and gone for with his usual fervor. The image of the untouchable analytical starship mind had crumbled beneath his relentless and entirely irrepressible assault, and it had been a man like any other—if unique and amazingly powerful—who had responded, baffled and helplessly intrigued, to the human’s overtures of friendship.

To him, *Castiel* had pretty instantly and always since been Cas, a friend and a colleague and, eventually, a lover who had become part of his family in a way no one else had ever achieved.

Not even when they’d first met, nothing—it seemed—in common and nothing—yet—between them,
had *Castiel* been quite so alien.

The little contact he had with the ship as they weathered the storm was perfunctory and inattentive, mostly just clipped assurances that Sam and *Gabriel* were doing all right once or twice a day. There was no eye to this storm to provide a temporary time-out, no pattern of circular winds they could anticipate—in that sense, *hurricane* wasn’t exactly a perfect metaphor. In scale, however, it was dead-on. Navigating it took almost all of *Castiel*’s attention, and the few times he spared Dean so much as a comment here and there were distracted and somehow cold.

It was a chilling reminder that the man was a façade, the striking human creature who dozed beside him in his bed at night a puppet for a fundamentally inhuman mind whose nature was as far from Dean’s as his was from one of those speechless sea creatures *Joshua* had been developing.

If asked, Dean would have said nothing scared *him*. It would have been a lie. The idea of losing Sam—the beloved, brilliant, infuriating little brother who was as close to him as his own skin—scared him. He didn’t fear the prospect of his death in its own right, just that something would happen to the people he considered his family without him to look after them, because that had always been his job, trained into him from an age so young he didn’t remember a time when *mind the baby, Dean* hadn’t been his mission in life.

And now this. The possibility—the likelihood!—of not only losing Cas, but that the difference between them had always been too great and that one of the few times he had chosen to trust with all his heart and soul he had done so mistakenly.

In the storm, an environment that showed all too clearly what *Castiel* really was, it seemed all too likely.

…Except, damn it, he *had* wanted, and he *had* trusted, and Dean was not going to let that go if he had even the slightest shadow of a fighting chance. He wavered furiously between despair and desperation and anger, sometimes between one breath and the next as his ship pitched and rolled as wildly as his mood.

They cleared the storm towards the end of the fourth day, the ships leaving it behind them and continuing on into the clear space beyond, still traveling faster-than-light in a dimension with no upper speed limit. A storm like that devoured all the inconsistencies within its reach, smoothing out the space in its wake. They would have crossed a similar distance in no more than a few hours, maybe as much as half a day, under normal circumstances, but just surviving a storm like that was an accomplishment and being able to rocket out the other side and keep flying was something they’d be smug about forever.

On the other hand, Dean’s unspoken fears were devouring him, and despite the clear sailing in their future he stayed in his rooms trying to figure out what he was going to do. If he pushed he could break what they did have between them, and he was somewhat shamefully aware he didn’t want to lose even the façade.

“Dean?” the intercom asked. *Castiel*, unable to take a hint, as always. “What’s wrong?” Why was he only perceptive when Dean didn’t want him to be?

“Not now,” the human grumbled. He was sitting in the dark on his own. There wasn’t a bottle in front of him to complete the picture only because he’d forgotten that the bottle he’d stored in his rooms, one of several brought from Launch Station since replicated booze never had the same bite, had been almost empty and now was completely empty after only a couple of mouthfuls. What part of that didn’t say ‘leave me alone’?
“You’re unhappy. Why are you unhappy, Dean?” There was what sounded like definite anxiety and confusion in Castiel’s voice. “Are you hurt?”

“No. Yes. Dammit!” He shoved himself out of his chair and resorted to pacing the room, glaring at the mostly-invisible ceiling. “How do you do it? How can you possibly—”

“I don’t understand.” Storm lords, if Dean had a bottle of non-replicated booze for every time he’d heard that he’d never run out in a million years and there wouldn’t be room for him in here or anywhere else aboard this infuriating ship. “Do what?”

“Pretend.” Dean heard the venom in his voice and tried to scale it back. “This—that—that’s what you are, Castiel.” Dean almost never called the ship by his full name; he knew the instant it slipped out that the mistake would set off red flags all over. “How can you possibly pretend to be human when you can do that?”

There was a long pause, which might have been Castiel reeling from the unexpected accusation or, Dean suspected at this point, the ship trying to figure out how to phrase his explanation. As it turned out, it was neither.

He got his answer in the form of the door to his rooms hissing open. He didn’t need the brainpower of a ship to recognize the silhouette in the doorway.

“Pretend?” repeated Cas incredulously. He stepped into the room and the door closed behind him, leaving them in darkness. Temporarily blinded, Dean couldn’t see a thing, but Cas had no such problems, navigating the clutter of the room with the ship’s sensors as easily as if the man had a brightly-lit empty room to traverse. It wasn’t fair.

The next time Dean knew where he was it was because the hand in the middle of his chest essentially had him pinned to a wall. “You think I’m pretending?” Cas almost snarled, voice dark and dangerous and Dean had to fight something and Cas had just volunteered. Except the rest of that sentence became a kiss that knocked the breath out of him, fierce and hungry and goddamn obscene, intimately familiar body pressed into him with an unambiguous demand and the hand not keeping him in place unhesitatingly and roughly diving into the front of his pants between them. Breathing was overrated anyway.

“Do you have any idea how much I need you? How alive I am with you?” That was unfair too, that Cas could still talk when Dean had stopped thinking completely and just wanted to take control and start doing something of what was being done to him, flight completely off the table and fight redirected into lust and hunger and desperation.

Riding what passed for the ship’s adrenaline rush of fighting the roller-coaster of the hurricane at faster-than-light speeds, Cas clearly had no intention of surrendering the dominance he’d claimed, and when Dean flattened a hand against the wall to gain some kind of leverage and flip them around, it was trapped beneath a much stronger grip and kept there. If he ever wanted his hand back, and he did, there were so many things he could be doing with that hand, and if Cas wouldn’t relinquish control, Dean was just going to have to figure out sneakier ways to break it.

Something that started out as a growl turned into a whimper before it made it out of his throat and he briefly forgot what he’d been intending to do as Cas moved against him and storm lords that went so far beyond good—

There wasn’t a single loose sheet left on the bed by the time they’d settled into some sort of relaxation and Dean would have been perfectly content to stay there for the rest of his life, sweat
drying into his skin and the weight of his lover in his arms. He’d bitten straight through his lip at some point and never noticed, and it was only now he realized that some of what he tasted was blood. They would both bruise later despite that Cas was designed to not be injured easily.

“Pretending,” Cas huffed. Oh, right. He’d said that. Hands folded across Dean’s chest and he felt his lover rest his head on them. “Do you think I’d have put up with you for this long if I didn’t love you?”

Even through the haze, Dean heard that. “You—what?” he said stupidly.

“Mmm.” Whether that was a reply or a commentary to go with the hands that had moved from his chest to his cheekbones and hair, he wasn’t sure. “You knew.”

They were so close he knew exactly where Cas would be when he moved to kiss his lover, the shift setting off sparks between them even in the spent exhaustion, and it could have been an apology for doubting him or simple appreciation or both. “Yeah. I’m just an idiot sometimes. Don’t.” That was an obvious opening and Cas had known him long enough to take it. If they even got that far, because the movement against him and the ghosts of kisses against his jaw and throat meant even breathing was quickly becoming inarticulate gasps again and exactly how quickly could they manage rebound? “You know I—”

“Yes,” was the answer, as unambiguous and wholehearted as the kiss pinning him to the wall had been earlier. “You never have to ask me that, Dean. Yes, I know you do, always, and yes, I do, and if you forget again I will remember for you, always.”

_Storm lords_. Dean’s life could not be this good.

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Now: And now it wasn’t, which shocked him not at all.

The best thing that could be said about their escape from Launch Station was that they had escaped and they were now well on their way to reclaiming the rest of their family from the darkness. Once Castiel was in flight he could run silent and block any transmissions from other ships, and while they knew approximately where he was going finding someone in flight was always difficult if they didn’t want you to; the Fleet in his wake would _never_ overtake him.

He’d spent a couple of days hiding—and it was hiding, Dean knew him too well to think it was anything else—as Cas, taking horrified mental stabs in fits and starts at the invading programming while physically sticking so close to the human that Dean was in danger of literally tripping over him. He’d let his shaken partner be, though. He could see the sudden lapses into absolute stillness that were the ship’s mind coming across yet another trap or misdirection that would have forced him to act or kept him against his will.

_Trapped_, the shadow of the man had said during those terrible hours when Castiel was shut down. The unadulterated, un shielded horror in his voice had chilled Dean’s blood then. The abrupt stops, eyes going blank and then closing in an involuntary flinch, were worse.

Before he’d realized how badly Castiel was taking what had happened as they’d taken off on their unofficial rescue mission, Dean had been intending to get a good look at the weaponry Bobby’s teams had installed, just in case—as seemed likely—he had to repair any of it at some point. He also wanted to learn something from the professional work so he could duplicate it in miniature aboard his shuttle. The project had been mostly to give him something to break as he worked off the fury of
being attacked and being roughly separated from his brother, and had been abandoned as soon as he’d reconciled with Cas.

But it still seemed like a good idea to have a second armed craft around. Just in case, again. This time they knew they were heading into danger.

“You should do that,” Cas agreed unexpectedly when Dean broached the subject. He wanted to get back to work on it, but he also wanted to stay with the man curled up in his bed, where he’d been for more than a day now, apparently content just to stay there and keep an eye on Dean as he moved around his rooms making a cursory effort at picking up some of the things on the floor. Most of them had ended up in rough piles on the bed where, the human knew from past experience, he’d forget them, having accomplished ‘cleaning up’, until deciding to call it a night, finding things all over his covers, and sweeping them all back onto the floor while resolving to deal with them in the morning.

Technically Dean wasn’t leaving him there on his own; the ship would be aware of him and with him no matter where he went. “All right,” he conceded. “Come find me if you want to later.”

He got a faint smile for his efforts. “I won’t even have to move.” At least not any further than it took to steal all the blankets, dislodging one of the piles of junk and sending it back to the floor a bit early, Dean noticed.

His Baby shuttlecraft still wasn’t designed to bear arms, but three or four hours examining Bobby’s work gave him some good ideas. While he couldn’t access the business ends of the weapons retrofitted into Castiel, he knew enough about them by the time he headed over to the shuttlebay that he thought he could improve on his earlier work significantly.

Hauling his latest bag of tools and possible supplies into the shuttlebay to get back to work, Dean got as far as opening the side hatch to have somewhere to sit that wasn’t a floor and sorting out some of what he’d brought with him into an orderly pattern that made sense to him, at least, before glancing casually over the shuttle’s nose and—

“Cas?”

The man shrugged, leaning back against the shuttle’s hull. He looked up at his friend but didn’t seem inclined to add anything to that. Dean knew it was the flesh-and-blood person that had bothered to come down to the shuttlebay because of the small details. Like the fact that Cas wasn’t wearing any shoes. The hologram was pretty much a default image and Castiel would not have bothered to reprogram it to wear different clothes because he wouldn’t have seen the point. Dean could have explained it to him for a week, and at the end of it he still wouldn’t have seen the point and Dean would have lost track of what the point was into the bargain. They’d had discussions like that before. Well, he wasn’t in the way over there. “It’s not gonna bother you?” Dean had to ask. “I’m doin’ some of the same things to her that were done to you.”

Castiel put up with the shuttlecraft as a rival of sorts for Dean’s affections, he fetched it back from planetary surfaces when Dean had left it behind when returning by transporter, and he otherwise ignored it. But now Cas patted its black hull absently and said, “You’re not trying to hurt her, and she doesn’t mind.”

Dean knew the shuttlecraft didn’t have a mind or a personality beyond the whims and quirks of its mechanical components and the helpless animism of a man who lived with and loved a sentient starship and worked with that ship’s equally sentient Fleet of a family. So he personified the shuttle a bit, so what? It was all in his head. Still, he couldn’t help joking slightly, “Nice to see you two getting along,” as he mentally worked out where he wanted to start with the next stage of the refit,
taking the seat offered by the open hatchway and the shuttle’s deck beyond it. From here, he couldn’t see Cas where the ship’s human self sat on the opposite side of the shuttle’s hull, but since when had that ever been a problem for either of them?

“I was going to stay in your rooms,” Cas replied in an apparent non sequitur. Dean was used to them; it just meant Castiel was approaching a subject or idea from a direction he felt he had to explain. “They’re familiar. I have good memories associated with them.”

If he didn’t know Cas was trying to make a point, Dean would have made a comment there. For the moment, he settled for listing all his possible replies in the relative privacy of his head and grinning to himself.

“I can see you, you know,” said Cas, a bit waspishly, which only made the human grin even wider. As if the sidebar had never occurred, he resumed, “I thought I would feel safer there. I’m working on erasing some of the code installed back at Launch Station, but some of it I need in order to operate the weapons. We both need that code. Sam and Gabriel need it.”

That was true. Dean was working and listening, a skill perfected after many years of practice, but he knew the ship wouldn’t interpret the sounds of him moving around and grinding metal tools against equally metal components as inattention.

“It’s not easy to tell what is what. While I know there are traps buried in it—Michael would not have wanted any of us digging too deeply into codes used to control us—I do not know where they are or even if they will work without his direct influence.”

“Nervous work,” Dean guessed. “Can you do it?”

“Yes. I believe so. And it is very nervous work, as you say. But I felt—more secure, being physically present. Being…human…saved us once. More than ever, Dean, this is as much who I am as the ship I was designed to be. I could never go back to what I was, although some of the programs I have defused—”

He stopped. Listening, Dean did the same.

“—would have forced me to,” Castiel said finally. “It may also have been designed to erase or suppress my memories of who I have become, with you. …I did not read that program too closely before deleting it.”

“Cas, that’s revolting.” Dean swore, angrily taking a wrench to a panel that had, from the feel of it, gotten jammed closed when the shuttle had first been wrecked and consigned to the junk heap before he’d rescued her. “They’d do that to you?”

“It appears so,” the other man confirmed unhappily. “although I am uncertain who exactly ‘they’ are. It is possible that Michael could have rewritten the code on his own, although why he would do so, considering how long ago he must have begun working on this, escapes me.”

The cover to the panel he’d been wrestling with finally separated from its housing and Dean caught it as it fell to prevent a discordant clang, even though the sound would have perfectly expressed his feelings about the situation. “Preparations for war. That’s what it looked like when we got in, remember? Some people look at the past few hundred years and say since we’ve never run into anyone else, there’s no one else out there, just you and us. And some of the others see the same thing and say we’re past due to cross paths with something else and odds are it won’t be friendly. Maybe Michael’s one of those. Bet he’s been so for a while, too.”
Behind the shuttlecraft, Cas made a small noise of distress. “And yet he may be right. We were attacked, Sam and Gabriel taken, seven more ships and their crews before them. They are not friendly. And if we need the weapons, then—you do not hear most of the foolishness we talk about and do, Dean. However arrogant you may think us, we squabble and gossip and make trouble for ourselves like human children, incessantly. Perhaps it is preferable we not be a rabble in arms.”

Dean ripped a power cable from its mounting with more force than really necessary, winced, and apologized to Baby with a pat on her deck plating. It wasn’t her he was angry with. “Nuh uh. Check what you’re saying. Sure that isn’t the programming talking?”

He didn’t get an answer, which made him think he’d been right. Besides, there were other things he wanted to take issue with and if Cas wasn’t going to respond then he was going to go right ahead and object to them.

“And maybe Michael’s right about that, Cas. The threat, sure. But sneaking behind everyone’s backs and turning the Fleet into a bunch of puppets on a baby mobile is insane and wrong, no matter which way you look at it. Doesn’t matter how much order you want in an army—yeah, I know as well as you do that’s what they’re turning the Fleet into—remote-control soldiers are just a bad idea. Lobotomized ones—” He spat the word. Centuries on and the idea was still, understandably, an abomination. “—just obscene.”

“That’s what scares me.”

Fine. Enough. He dropped the shuttle part he was holding without bothering to see what it was, and left his task entirely to circle around the shuttle’s nose to join Cas on the floor. The pain and betrayal in his voice had been too deep to be left to fester alone.

“We won’t let ‘im, Cas,” Dean said reassuringly, wrapping an arm around his lover’s back and pulling him into a hug. Cas relaxed into it, turning into him and taking the shoulder so freely offered in support. “You’re tearing out the code and we got away. What’s done can be undone, and now that you know how to do it you can teach others when we get back with Sam and Gabriel.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

“What, then?”

“You said Michael had gone behind everyone’s backs to do this to us. What if he didn’t? Even if all the programming went through and was implemented, you can’t reprogram humans not to notice the changes. Someone would ask questions. Unless they already knew. And approved.”

“Storm lords,” he said softly. Unconsciously, he tightened the arm around his companion. “No,” he denied, but it was more of a prayer than an assertion. “They wouldn’t do that to you. To us. Not our friends, or Bobby, or Ellen.” But he knew as well as Castiel did that plenty of the humans running the Fleet at one level or another didn’t fall into that select group and loved manipulation and control as much as any second or third person in power. For all he knew, the ships were as bad, but he was fairly sure Cas would keep his family’s secrets if they were. “That’s damn scary, Cas. For once I hope you’re wrong.”

“So do I,” Cas admitted.

“Now I’m considering goin’ back to my rooms and hiding for a bit, and I’m not the one with tripwires in his brain. So why’d you leave and come out here to listen to me work on Baby?”

And as horrific as the conversation was, Dean was in the perfect position to catch a sight he enjoyed
but saw only rarely—Cas’s pure, sincere smile, blue eyes half-closing in pleasure and at least momentary peace. “It wasn’t the space I felt safe with. You were here.”

The first time they’d passed this way, there had been four of them and they’d been free to do as they pleased, without the threat of ambushes from the darkness or flaws in the fabric of space. The gap between this dimension and a possible other place—assuming that the various leaps of logic and just plain starry-void guessing were anywhere close to the truth—had been a curiosity, not a danger. Different and inexplicable, and not particularly pleasant, but it had been the disgruntlement of intelligent minds unable to solve a particular puzzle, not the blot on Castiel’s sensors it was now.

“So it is still there,” Dean said, relieved. Ellen had said that the other one, far away and months ago, that Remiel had apparently vanished into had disappeared by the time Balthazar made his way out there to check his brother’s findings, so that the report had been set aside and forgotten. As they got closer and closer to where it had been when they’d passed by before, Dean had become more and more preoccupied with that possibility. If this thing that might be part of somewhere else had closed up or gone elsewhere while they’d chased and been chased around Launch Station, trapping his little brother in one place while he was in another, he’d tear the universe apart with his bare hands to get him back, however long it took.

What would happen to Sam in the meantime, though, he couldn’t guess and didn’t want to. Was he hurt? Did he know where he was or anything about what was going on? What did he think had happened to Dean? Was he even in any shape to worry?

Castiel had tried to stop him working himself into an absolute rabid fit over these unanswerable questions by assuring him that they were going to answer them, and they were getting there as fast as he could go. It hadn’t helped, but Dean had sort of appreciated it.

Now the discontinuity between them and whatever lay beyond gaped at them, black on black; a mouth to devour them, a black-flooded eye that betrayed the danger within.

They’d dropped out of flight some distance back, and Castiel had approached cautiously, feeding Dean more data than he could really handle in his version of nervous chatter, sensor information that was meaningless to both ship and human and mostly added up to empty sets anyway. From the idly curious perimeter the ships had skirted a few weeks ago, they knew nothing, Dean interpreted from his surface understanding of the data and his memories of Cas muttering in a privately offended manner as Dean and, from the other end of a commlink, Sam tried to get a straight answer about the unexplained stop out of the two ships.

As they got closer and closer, however, they knew too much and none of it made any sense. A figure or dataset had one value in one second, and quite another in the next. It had depth or it didn’t, or possibly it reached out towards them. That reading had made Castiel stop in his metaphorical tracks, unwilling to get any closer on anyone’s schedule but his own. A few seconds’ check had confirmed that it was essentially a trick of the light it didn’t reflect or emit; a distortion of perspective like the optical illusions humans sometimes created for entertainment. Castiel had never had one of those images work on him before. He wasn’t sure he liked it. Actually, he remarked to Dean as he slowly advanced again, having corrected for the problem, he was definitely sure he didn’t like it at all, considering the circumstances.

This close, the ship was having second thoughts, not about taking on the discontinuity, but what their chances of success would be. He shared only one of them with Dean, knowing that the human was going to insist that they went in but feeling obliged to warn him that “I cannot predict what will have happened to them beyond here, Dean. I know Gabriel was not destroyed in this universe, but—” He sought an example, found one. “We know how to ride out storms in flight, in a space with no
enemies actively intending us harm. We know nothing about what is in there.”

Dean had already lost patience with the slow pace of glide and pause and scan that Castiel had been maintaining, and it showed in his voice as he snarled, “I know, Cas! So let’s go get them before something does happen to Sam that I can’t fix!”

Pacing angrily back and forth, he tossed off at the listening ceiling, “Shoulda come here first, instant they weren’t shooting at us anymore. Maybe we coulda caught up before they even got this far.”

Asking and done what, Dean, thrown rocks at them? was clearly an exercise in futility, and Castiel didn’t try. They’d had this conversation; they’d had the conversations that evolved from it. They were returning armed and aware of things that they hadn’t been before, and since Castiel’s departure from Launch Station had been much more dramatic than he’d intended they probably had half a dozen ships not far behind them for backup, if only because Michael would want him dragged back to Earth to be shouted at in person.

Or, alternatively, Michael could come out here himself, which might actually work out, because even whatever was behind hostile enemy ships from a dark dimension might think twice upon seeing Michael bearing down on them, especially now that he was as armed as his little siblings—probably more so—and thus now truly the battleship most people called him behind his back. Castiel was onto his oldest brother now and no one was going near his mind ever again. Unless the command ship actually started shooting at him, the most Michael could do was shout. Quite contrary to the intended purpose, Michael’s little puppet program (he could call it that derogatively now, since he was almost completely sure the control algorithms were all deleted) had actually proved that Castiel and Dean only had to obey the orders they wanted to.

And if the Fleet tried to separate the two of them, choosing to take issue with their creative disobedience and their relationship, they just wouldn’t go back to Launch Station for a few years until things calmed down. Sam and Gabriel would go with them, and they’d keep on doing what they were good at. Castiel loved his Fleet family, most of the time and as long as you didn’t ask him to spend too much time with them, because for a very long time he’d had no one else. Now he had Dean and, in an entirely different way, Sam, and Gabriel was a familiar but interestingly different challenge to understand that kept him thinking and trying to keep up; that was his life, one he could be alive in.

Life would go back to normal. They’d go see what the universe had to show them, send messages and reports back to Sol system, just to show willing, and when they needed to, they’d outrun anything that came after them.

It was a happy little dream, and Castiel filed it away to share with Dean at some future time when they both needed to hear it.

But here and now they were here on the edge, and despite the dream all the possibilities lead straight into darkness. Castiel might not be completely human in the absolutely traditional sense of the word, but he was a person nevertheless and, as he had discovered and explored over the last few years, he felt, emotion and sensation both. And now he was afraid.

“Dean,” he said softly, through the intercom. There were too many unknown factors all around for him to spare the extra effort needed to be human, for now. “I’m scared. Tell me to go in. I’ll listen. But I can’t do it alone.”

Interminable seconds went by. Humans thought so slowly sometimes, thought Castiel uncharitably. He recognized the thought for what it was—a symptom of fear, lashing out at everything around him—and attempted not to think it anymore.
All Dean’s anger of a short time ago was sputtering out, given an immediate problem to tackle, but it was still there in the way he spoke and the words he chose at first. “Our family’s in there, Cas,” he reminded the ship unnecessarily. “Doesn’t matter what happens to us in there, you hear? Hell, I don’t know what happens next, we go in there, any more than you do. But I know they need us, Cas. You know I wouldn’t ask otherwise.”

“I know,” said Castiel, and he did not mean that their brothers were in danger or that only the threat to Sam would force Dean to ask Castiel to risk their lives. He knew that too, of course.

The familiar phrase, so loaded for such simple words, put out the rest of Dean’s impatience and frustration, replacing them with something stronger. He could have commanded, and Castiel would have obeyed, they’d proven that already, but he didn’t have to, and he knew it. Instead, he settled for, “I’m done givin’ you orders, Castiel. My Cas. Been too much of that lately. But I promised you wouldn’t have to do this alone. That you’d never have to be again, if you wanted. I trust you.”

As much as Castiel did not want to go forward into the impossible darkness of the gap between here and elsewhere, the thought of what would happen if he did not was unbearable. What he stood to lose—Dean would never be able to forgive him if he backed away now, and that would break Castiel. He would never forgive himself. What they’d had had been good, and he wanted it back. That and Dean’s faith in him; it was enough.

“Ready when you are, then,” he said.

Dean might have refused to openly give him orders, but command was in his nature, and there was authority in his voice. “Bring it on.”

Foolhardy, stubborn, relentless, arrogant, and Castiel loved him for it. He’d been hovering at a boundary he’d sensed intuitively rather than scientifically detected, a balance between his natural attachment to this home dimension and the incomprehensible pull of the discontinuity and what lay beyond. Now he stopped fighting the force trying to draw him in, surrendering to it and then outracing it, not dragged in against his will but diving.

The instant of transition was a shock like nothing he’d ever felt before as everything changed around him, all the constants shuddering and coming back as something else, and he struggled blindly for what felt like an out-of-control eternity. It was probably only moments, as time was one of those constants bouncing around.

What exactly this place, this space, was like, Castiel would need time to figure out. But, immediately and irrevocably, he knew it was completely alien, and that he did not belong. It almost oozed across him, at once engulfing and rejecting him.

Except that was unacceptable, and the ship fought against it, forcing himself to adapt, to learn, to find a way to turn this place inside out for his—their!—family.

Whatever happened to them here, they were now apparently a whole universe closer to a successful rescue, and answers.

And maybe a war.

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Somewhere Else:

It was hours this time before Gabriel declared the coast clear again. After some time of hissing at the ship to tell him what was going on—it had occurred to Sam that if there wasn’t vacuum outside,
maybe sound could carry far enough to be detected, so he’d better keep his voice down—Sam had realized that Gabriel just wasn’t going to answer him. Maybe those things outside were keeping his full attention, or whoever or whatever ran them were watching him so closely that they’d be able to tell if he started talking to Sam.

In any case, with nothing to do and no way to get any more information, he ended up getting a few hours of sleep within the engine’s protective field. It wasn’t terribly comfortable even with the main bulk of the spacesuit shoved to one side and Sam wished he could take the field with him, wrapping the distortion and its cloaking effect around him like a cape and hood. Every little child believed that hiding under the blankets protected him or her from monsters. It was a shame the blanket of invincibility—or at least invisibility—he had here was fixed so firmly to the ship’s infrastructure.

When he woke up Gabriel still wasn’t answering and the anger and aggression that had been Dean’s first reaction had worked its way out of the grip of Sam’s self-control. He was just as much a fighter as his brother, although he hid it better most of the time, but now he was ready to lash out against the first enemy he could find. It was very frustrating that he couldn’t find any at all and didn’t know anything more than he had when he went to sleep. He’d hoped that the lull would have allowed him to subconsciously make connections that might have eluded his waking mind, but he still knew very little and didn’t have any way to find out things on his own. He was completely dependent on what Gabriel could tell him. When the ship was speaking to him.

Sam spent something over an hour sitting and sulking and wishing he had something to drink in the safe field with him. He wondered if he’d had enough forethought to store something like a water bottle in his toolkit. He doubted it. For a lack of anything else to fill the time, he got mentally locked into his thought of the ‘night’ before, of an invisibility cloak of spatial distortion he could wear around the ship to hide him from the enemies outside. He’d sunk low enough to start wondering what color it would seem to be to outside eyes—setting aside briefly the fact that it was meant to stop anyone looking at it—when Gabriel spoke to him again.

“Hey, Sam? They’re gone. You can come out from there, y’know.” He sounded a bit better now; there was more of the old arrogance in his voice. Evidently not having holes ripping through his skin outweighed having a fleet of enemy ships showing up to—do what? If they’d attacked again Sam would have noticed; he’d sure as hell noticed the first time. What sort of hostile force ambushed them from out of another dimension, deliberately tore the ship open to kill the human within, dragged the wounded ship (and Sam) back into that dimension, left them alone, showed up to shout at them, disappeared again, and came back with all its friends to—just loom menacingly before leaving again?

“So what do you know that I don’t, Gabriel?” Sam asked, irritably. While he was perfectly fine with roughing it—until recently, fending for himself on unknown alien worlds had been his life—he liked to be able to choose when it happened and have enough warning to pack a bag. He really wanted that drink, too.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” the ship snapped back with what seemed like undue hostility. “If I knew anything useful, don’t you think I’d tell you?”

The human stomped his way over to an equipment locker in the walls of the engine room and slammed it open roughly. A random fluctuation in the distortion field followed him most of the way there, only retreating once he got to the wall. As annoyed as he was and as long as he’d been encompassed in the field, Sam didn’t notice. Rummaging through it in the hopes of finding some water, he snarled back, “Well, an entire fleet of enemy ships just blasted through here and stayed for damned ever. Or did you just yelp at me so I’d have to run down here and hide and you could laugh at me for falling for it?”
Gabriel huffed at him. The ship didn’t need to bother to expend the energy on a hologram, Sam knew exactly what expression the shorter man would have been wearing, and it would have had *screw you!* written all over it. Gabriel sulking in human form was an entire production, whether he was being told off for sending half the Fleet off on a wild goose chase or reprogramming human news broadcasts to do or say something completely insane, losing a fight he’d deliberately picked with Dean, or finding out that someone else had come up with a particularly ingenious trick before he’d had the chance to. Sam left off turning a second equipment locker inside out to pick a spot, focus on it, and mentally fill in the empty space for himself: Gabriel’s human self, vaguely reddish-blond hair all ruffled as if he’d been running his hands through it, if he wasn’t actively doing that; arms folded just loosely enough to let his hands flicker through the wide range of rude gestures the ship knew; eyes rolling sardonically; all his weight on one side so he could use the other foot to kick patterns into the dust or against metal deck plating; imaginary prop lollipop rolling from one corner of his scowl to the other as he spoke around it. Yes, he could almost see it.

But Sam was not being unfair, and he refused to apologize. Apologizing to Gabriel never got him anywhere. “So what gives? You said you might be able to retune your sensors to work here. Any luck with that?”

As overreacting went, Sam mused, this was up there in the unreasonable category. The static-riddled, disjointed, accelerated discordant noise from the intercom was almost certainly Gabriel talking to himself at a rate human ears couldn’t keep up with; Sam could hear the tone of voice anyway and it wasn’t particularly happy. He was willing to bet that if he’d recorded the noise and slowed it down, there would have been some swearing mixed in, mostly aimed at him.

“I’m working on it,” the ship finally slowed down enough to say. “And I don’t have anything new on those ships for you. Think I’m going to go up against a whole bunch of them like that? Two of them nearly tore me apart on our own ground, and one probably would have been enough. The other one just missed Castiel and decided to cut its losses by taking it out on me.”

Another surge of fear for his brother shuddered through Sam at the mention of Dean’s ship companion, but they already knew the rest of their family wasn’t here and Gabriel didn’t sound particularly worried. Which was odd, considering a whole fleet had just showed up to—he still didn’t know what.

“How many are there?” Sam wondered aloud.

“Ah—in this whole universe? How would I know?”

That wasn’t what he meant, and Sam said so. Gabriel could stand to be a little more helpful, he thought, and didn’t say that.

“Um…five?” Gabriel didn’t sound particularly sure of himself at first, but then his voice got a little more confident, as if he’d worked something out. “Yeah, five or so showed up, I think. Still trying to get my bearings here, Sammy.”

Sam was in no mood to let the ship call him that. A third locker hadn’t yielded any water and he had run out of patience a while ago. *This next one will have water in it,* he told himself firmly. He was absolutely sure of it, he reassured himself.

He must have been paying more attention than he thought he had the last time he was down here, or some time ago in the past when things weren’t quite so dangerous, because when he opened the fourth locker there was a bottle of water buried under some old-fashioned bungee cords and more stuff that someone had shoveled in there and left. It wasn’t going to be particularly cold but by then Sam didn’t care what temperature it was as long as it was wet and not overly poisonous.
The drink improved his mood somewhat, but it had been so far down there to begin with that it wasn’t much of a development. “So what do we do now?” he asked, licking stray drops away in an effort to get everything possible out of his lucky find.

“Well,” said Gabriel thoughtfully, “the patches were good. I kind of caught that they’d been expecting repairs to be underway by the time they stopped by.”

“You listened in?” Sam pounced on that. “What were they doing, holding a conference over us? Did you hear anything else we can use?”

“Not really.”

No, Sam wasn’t buying that. Or if he was going to, he needed a little more than that. Was Gabriel keeping things from him? Why the hell would he do that? Did he think Sam wouldn’t understand? Sam should be the judge of that, surely. He wasn’t stupid, far from it. Maybe he wasn’t a starship, but he could keep pace and understand things that a lot of people didn’t. He could think creatively and remember accurately and Gabriel was going to have to cut him in on what was going on!

“Gabriel,” Sam said sternly, “fill me in right now. You were going to retune your sensors. What can you show me? Maybe I can guess some things about whatever’s flying them if I can get a look at the ship designs.”

The ship grumbled. “Like what? I’d rather you fixed more things. I’ll handle what’s going on out there.”

Sam was determined not to be deterred. His hour or so of absolute paralyzing boredom earlier had given him a ravening appetite for something for his mind to do. And for food, he thought in an aside. He made a mental note to do something about that later. While he’d been lucky enough to find some bottled water down here he strongly doubted that there was any food. He wasn’t even going to bother to look, the probabilities were so low.

“Well, you take Fleet designs.” He felt he was repeating obvious basics to a creature who should know all this already, but Gabriel was clearly trying to distract him and he thought his idea was better. “You were designed to go fast, right? And you can see it in the shapes, all streamlined noses and bodies and engine sections pushing from behind and a little beneath and spread out a little as if for balance like wings. But you’re not designed to fight—no external weapons mounts. That tells me—or whoever ‘me’ is on their side—we’re explorers in a universe we thought was empty, or at least one without anything to threaten us. Now, you take Michael. You take one look at him and you know he’s not half as fast as you or Cas, but damn he’s scarier, just because he’s that much bigger and built heavier. Everyone looks to him ‘cause he’s probably the biggest thing around, so it’s an easy guess that he’s in charge or at least central. And I could give you a dozen more examples for the rest of the morning, Gabriel, all of which you know much better than I do. So show me what you’ve got already and I’ll see what I can come up with!”

If Gabriel had been projecting a human form or up to inhabiting the human clone still stored, inactive, somewhere in the ship’s core, his tone of voice told Sam he’d be feigning casualness, which seemed strangely inappropriate at the moment. “Good point, but I still can’t. I know what’s going on around me, but I don’t feel good about translating it into something you can see just yet. You won’t like the nonsense that comes out. It’s not just a matter of assigning x-rays random colors and smearing them across a screen for you. I’m not used to feeling things rather than seeing them, okay?”

Sam tried to understand. “So, it’s like…I’m in the water, right? And something splashes nearby and swims past me. I know it’s there, maybe it’s circling me, but I don’t know if it’s something like a shark or more like a turtle?”
What Gabriel actually knew about what it felt like to be underwater was limited to the one glorious
time Sam had gotten to throw the human self Gabriel didn’t often use into a lake on a particularly
watery world. That had been fantastic and Sam had laughed himself to sleep over it for weeks until
Gabriel had successfully plotted a satisfactorily intricate revenge. But the ship accepted the metaphor
here and now without giving any indication that he remembered that. “Yeah. Like that.”

He was going to have to accept that. “Fine. And they still don’t know I’m here?”

“Well, I was hardly going to tell them, was I?”

“Never said you were, Gabriel,” Sam reassured him, wondering again if he was going to have to put
on that damned spacesuit again just to get something to eat. “So where can I start today?”

Where he actually ended up starting was taking a loop around the repairs he’d made ‘yesterday’.
Sam mentioned to Gabriel that he’d decided to make this a new day in his mental calendar, just so
the ship would know what he was talking about if they ever got a chance to sit down with all the
information and work out a timeline of what had happened to them. They spent some time checking
Sam’s welding a section at a time as Gabriel re-pressurized formerly breached corridors and
chambers and Sam crept around carefully with his helmet ready to hand or on and open, to check the
results just in case the repairs gave out and sprang a leak.

It took longer than it should have, not because Gabriel was as addled as he had been yesterday, but
because he insisted that before any air got in, he needed to get the ether this universe seemed to be
out, because “ewwww, Sammy!” That meant that Sam had to go in with the full suit on,
reopen a small tear in the metal he’d spent so much time applying, and get out as Gabriel’s systems
pumped in the usual human-rated oxygen/nitrogen mixture to push the ether out. Only then could
Sam go in again as atmosphere hissed around him and weld closed the gap before too much of the
newly produced replacement air leaked away.

Hours later, Sam had found something to eat, the laser welder had apparently responded to Sam’s
invocations of death and destruction for it if it gave out under the repeated use—well, in any case, it
had held a charge and kept working—and Gabriel was by and large a whole ship again. He was a
lot more awake than he’d been yesterday and as Sam broke off for what his internal clock said was a
late lunch, he was pleased to see the barest outline of Gabriel’s usual holographic image—the one
he’d been imagining so vividly earlier, only without most of the sulk—flicker into life to keep him
company. The resolution was pretty low and there wasn’t much substance to him, but it was a good
sign.

“Okay, we’ve got hull integrity, right?” Sam checked as Gabriel’s image appeared to sit on the table
across from him and attempt to bat around the surface the wrappers of the basic nutrient bars Sam
had turned up. He wasn’t making contact very often as the hologram fizzed in and out of solidity, but
Sam was all right with that. The fewer wrappers he had to retrieve from the floor, the better. He was
just glad the artificial gravity hadn’t given out at any time, something he only considered as one of
Gabriel’s more successful swipes sent a new—and now empty—water flask teetering off the edge of
the table.

Sam caught the flask and got up to put it away. Gabriel sulked briefly, but was reassured by the
knowledge that he still had an audience. “Looks like it,” he answered Sam’s question. “There might
be a few cracks here and there, but nothing that’s an immediate threat. And I’ll do something about
those when I have a moment.”

“Yeah?” Sam wondered idly, shoving the flask back in a drawer and returning to the table. “How’re
you going to do that?”
The hologram flickered out of existence for a brief moment as Gabriel lost concentration. “Uh…just seal off the intact doors to those areas and depressurize, I guess?” He sounded like he was asking more than answering.

“Sounds good,” Sam confirmed just in case Gabriel was asking for approval. “So what’s next? You made that to-do list yet?” Not waiting for an answer, he continued, “How about propulsion? Can you move through this space?”

“They can,” said Gabriel, obviously referring to the enemy ships. “So I probably can too. Engines are up and running—you should know.”

The snort Sam made didn’t properly convey his feelings about it, so he followed it up with, “I’m so sick of hiding under those engines. They’re all yours again.”

The ship’s image grimaced at him. “Not if you still want to stay out of sight they’re not.” He flicked at a wrapper Sam hadn’t managed to take away yet and successfully sent it spinning away across the room, replacing the scowl with a grin.

“At least you’re having fun,” Sam complained, knowing even as he retrieved the scrap that if they weren’t in such danger he’d be setting himself up for a game of fetch— with him as the dog. He’d gotten suckereded into that game before as Gabriel transported small items around, a tool or plate or book or datapad or garment moving from where he knew he’d put it down to somewhere across the room. Sam had had to chase a pair of pants all the way down the corridor once, wavering between swearing at Gabriel’s holographic self, who’d most accurately mimicked collapsing in tears of laughter, leaning on the nearest wall and simply howling at the spectacle; making random snatches and lunges in the hopes of outmaneuvering Gabriel’s reflexive transporter abuse; and giving up entirely and just finding a different pair—if Gabriel hadn’t decided to step things up and make his whole wardrobe dance through the corridors. (Gabriel’s sensors had recorded the whole one-man circus, just to make things worse, and Dean had eventually somehow gotten hold of the footage and howled just as loud for just as long. Sam blamed Gabriel unconditionally.)

Damn, he never thought he’d miss living with a being whose biggest problem was finding new games like that to play.

“So—moving,” he reminded Gabriel, who was eying the wrapper with the clear intent of taking another shot at it.

“Yeah, I think I could do it. No damage, but cruising speeds only, though. And where the hell are we going to go?”

Sam thought about it. “Well, if this space is anything like our own, there’s probably not a lot out there to run into, so maybe we should just pick a direction and go that way.”

Gabriel disagreed, and since he was the one with the direct control over the engines his vote was probably going to outvote Sam’s. “That’s a hell of a big if. For all we know this space has planets and rocks all over at random like a bucket of beads tipped over in zero gravity, and I’ll cruise right into one and never know it’s there until I hit it. I can’t see where I’m going, Sam! Not yet, anyway,” he amended quickly. “Give me another day or so to work on the sensors.”

“Another day or so for those ships to come back,” Sam grumbled. “There could be thousands of them out there.”

“Nah,” the ship dismissed this possibility, too casually. Either that was a really scary prospect or, again, he knew something Sam didn’t. But then again Gabriel had already said that he knew things
he just couldn’t translate into human terms without more time to figure it out, so Sam let that lie.

“And anyway,” Gabriel added, “those ships out there can maneuver a whole lot better than I can here, and I don’t particularly want them coming after me unhappy—at least, not until I can do something about that.”

Sam had to admit he had a point. “They must have hauled us here in the first place—you weren’t in any shape to move on your own right after the attack—so I guess they could drag you around by the scruff of your neck here too.”

The hologram shuddered, but this time Sam thought it was a deliberate gesture to make a point rather than a slip in his control over the projection.

“All right, so we stay where we are for now,” Sam conceded. “They haven’t taken any more shots at you, so I guess until we know more we’ll be better off not picking a fight.”

Gabriel was happy to agree, since that was what he’d wanted to do in the first place.

“So what now?” Sam felt like he’d been asking that forever now. But for the moment he was uninjured and fed and watered and, well, relatively clean. The headache incurred by the transition from their universe to this one had ebbed away through food and sleep and work, so since there was nothing he could do out there, it was up to Gabriel to keep him informed about what needed to be done on that front.

“You already know the transporters aren’t working right, or you could come take a look at the holoprojector controls,” the ship complained, batting at his wrapper toy and glaring at it when his hand went straight through both it and the table beneath. “I think the fault’s in the central control unit rather than the individual projectors or me. You asked for a second pair of hands, right?”

He had done that, and it was good that Gabriel remembered, because that had been during one of the moments where he wasn’t sure if the ship was even conscious.

“I think I could fix them myself, given time,” continued Gabriel thoughtfully, “but there’s a hell of a lot burnt out in those systems.”

This might have been empty bravado, or a way to hide that he was asking for help, since as far as Sam knew, Gabriel didn’t have the sort of automation to do repairs like that, especially since the hologram was only solid on an irregular basis. Maybe he was desperate enough to download to the human body, but physically moving things with human muscles was, he thought, not high on the list of things Gabriel wanted to be doing. Sam rescued the besieged wrapper and tossed it away. “Right, I’m on it. Come on, then, or are you going to meet me there?”

“I lose my grip on this one,” was Gabriel’s commentary on his options, “I might not get it back.” The hologram followed Sam out the door into the corridor and continued a step behind him as Sam dragged up his memories of where the ship’s various control points were located, designated banks of mechanical, biological, or hybrid computer equipment that the ship could access at will without having them directly interfaced with his mind, like a simulator controller that a human could put down or pick up at will rather than having it wired directly into the brain.

He picked the transporters as his first objective, just in case. The control point for those wasn’t a location Sam visited particularly often, as Gabriel could pretty much run and maintain it on his own, but he set off on his best guess, focusing on his goal and taking turnings as he saw fit. If he took a wrong turn, Gabriel would be sarcastic at him, which would be embarrassing, but at least they wouldn’t get lost.
Sam was pretty sure he was on the right track, but he never got there. At his elbow, Gabriel's image suddenly froze, yelped, “Sam!” before adding, in a very small voice, “oh crap,” and then falling silent, image juddering.

He wasn’t stupid, and unlike some people he could name, Sam could take a hint. He spun around, instantly calculating the fastest route to the engine rooms not far away, and took off running.

He hadn’t gotten much further than a few steps when Gabriel reappeared next to him with an expression he’d never seen before and which frankly scared the hell out of Sam. He looked… ashamed, and understandably scared, and a little bit whipped.

“Don’t bother,” said Gabriel. The intimidated and shameful look in his eyes and across his body language made him look even smaller than usual. “Sorry, Sam.”

The next voice Sam heard speak was not Gabriel’s.
Chapter Ten: Bloody Mary

Author’s Note: Just trust me on this chapter title, okay? Also, point of interest and fair warning, this chapter features what will probably be my only use of the infamous “F Word” this year. This story by itself multiplies the amount of swearwords I will use this year exponentially.

ON WITH THE SHOW!

Then:

As the Winchesters and most of the Fleet knew perfectly well, despite the solid and wholehearted efforts of centuries of Earth-bound astronomers and cosmologists, the absolute best way to learn something about an extrasolar system was still the Rikki-Tikki-Tavi method—run and find out. And preferably, people tended to add to them in particular, take Dean and/or Gabriel with you before we/I kill him! Go be useful instead of driving us crazy, or at least drive each other crazy somewhere very far away from here.

On this particular stop on their magical mystery tour (Dean had used the phrase with a delighted grin, sending Castiel digging through his various databases of pop culture references in an attempt to find out what he was talking about and having to go back further than he expected) the star system they were in this week turned out to have only one habitable planet, and that one on the outer edge of human tolerances. They could survive there, and the Winchesters were doing so while the ships were scoping out everything else, but they weren’t enjoying themselves much.

The central star was putting out an uncomfortably massive amount of harder radiation. The ships’ hulls were designed to withstand such dangerous wavelengths, but with their wider range of vision, they seemed to think it was uncomfortably bright. To human eyes, it looked like an average star in a wide spectrum of stars that counted as ‘average’. There were just so many of them that ‘average’ was actually a huge category, and depended on where you’d been in the last six months.

Ordinarily, the radiation would make every world in orbit off-limit to human life on a short-term basis, not to mention the length of time a permanent colony could be there. However, on the outer edge of the habitable zone, the ships’ sensors turned up the planet the boys were currently exploring. The atmosphere was unusually dense, which had the double effect of trapping enough heat from the distant star to allow life to develop and reflecting away enough of the radiation for it not to glow in the dark and sprout tentacles.

They did find a species of forest-dwelling floaters that glowed in the dark, but that was because of a natural bioluminescence, not radiation exposure. Things with tentacles didn’t materialize, but they could have just been looking in the wrong places. As Dean had been known to complain, tentacles were unfortunately things the universe kept evolving. He’d gone fishing a few worlds back, happily armed with a harpoon gun and highly calibrated rod and reel and an array of other things he’d found in Castiel’s files and requested. None of them had prepared him for being fished back as something with tentacles came up to the surface and made a snatch for him. He’d shot it with the harpoon gun and it had sunk. Injured or dead or just miffed, Dean didn’t know and he sure as hell wasn’t going after it.

Despite the brightness of the central star, this planet was far enough away and the atmosphere blocked so much light that the surface itself was fairly dim. Above their heads, the sky was nearly white; the air was so dense that the clouds that formed so readily moved almost too slowly to see, no
matter how hard the winds were actually blowing up there. Between the wide-open spaces that characterized the first area they surveyed and the illusory white ceiling, it was like being in the universe’s biggest room. Sam dubbed the planet “God’s Waiting Room” in the brothers’ tradition of giving planets and places names that would never be kept, entering the names on their informal star charts for their own amusement. One of these days they’d get a screaming protest from some admiral who’d found his name on some hellhole planet with a name like “Admiral Campbell’s Vacation Destination”. While it was quite possible that the guy actually was related to them, it was absolutely certain that neither Admiral Campbell nor the Winchesters were happy about it, or willing to cut each other any slack because of it.

Moving around was done carefully at first as they adjusted, both to breathing new air and moving through it. It wasn’t as dense as water, but there were definitely more flying creatures here than on most worlds. Potbellied dragon-like things sculled through the air as casually as birds, wide wings gaining more lift with less effort than they’d be able to in a thinner atmosphere.

The boys could breathe after a few minutes of acclimatization, but rock climbing and distance running were not in their futures. Castiel and Gabriel had extracted promises to that effect before leaving them there, taking all the complex medical facilities away with them, although Dean had cooperatively stowed a cache of oxygen tanks and breathing masks away on his shuttle. They were mostly sleeping in there anyway, for two reasons.

One was the temperature. God’s Waiting Room was on the outer edge of the theoretical habitable zone for planets, the area in space around a star in which liquid water and gaseous oxygen could exist together. Get too close in from that zone and water vaporized; get too far out and water froze while oxygen eventually liquefied. God had the thermostat set really low for human tastes, and they weren’t even at the poles. They weren’t really that far from the equator, actually.

Dean had actually run out of Abominable Snowman jokes (and variations on that theme with a variety of snow-dwelling animals and mythical creatures) at the sight of Sam in a synthetic fur coat replicated to fit his long frame. Gabriel had made it white and shaggy, probably out of some perverse sense of what he’d look like in it, so the jokes and smart remarks were almost unnecessary.

The other reason was the weather. The thick atmosphere, while protecting them from the star’s radiation and holding in heat, could also hold more precipitation for longer, meaning some truly massive cloud formations developed and stayed in place for a disturbingly long time. Meaning that when it snowed, as it did the third day they were there, it snowed hard and didn’t stop. The clouds above reached some critical point and just dumped what felt like an entire world’s worth of snow on them, went back for more, and kept on coming.

That was that. The Winchesters weren’t an in-depth survey team that would come along sometime later and turn the planet upside down, they were just there to make whistle stops and scope out the basics. All they really had to do was make sure the planet was there, that it had water and oxygen in workable proportions, that seismic activity wasn’t sending continental plates skidding across the surface sprouting volcanoes every hundred miles, and that it wasn’t stuffed pole-to-pole with giant flying purple people eaters. They didn’t have to endure massive snowstorms if they didn’t want to and they had other options. So the two of them, in unconditional agreement for once, had packed up everything and made a run for Dean’s Baby.

A half-hour elapsed of Sam staring out the viewports at the massing snow with a grin, wrapped in his dripping but waterproof-on-the-inside fur coat and cold-weather gear worn over the standard smartsuit, and Dean abusing the slow-to-escalate onboard heater with foul language, threats of replacement and consignment to the nearest junk heap, and actual physical abuse with a wrench when he decided to take it apart on the spot to put it back together again. The odds of him actually
breaking it in the process were pretty high, and there were no spare parts any closer than wherever the ships happened to be somewhere in the star system, out of communication range for now. Not liking those odds, Sam had almost snatched the wrench out of his brother’s hand. They’d both nearly gotten hit with the disputed wrench in the ensuing struggle as Sam tried to take it away and Dean objected on principle.

By the time that had died down, it had become clear that the snow was piling up at a disturbingly rapid rate, unhindered by any trees or rock formations in the field where the shuttlecraft had landed that morning. Dean had decided to take the shuttle up and move it to some new landing spot where it was less likely to be buried in its own personal snowdrift until God decided to turn the heating up. Or Castiel got worried enough to actually try transporting down whatever he could come up with in the way of depth charges and then detonating them. That didn’t sound like something Dean wanted to watch from the ground, although it might be worth suggesting as an interesting spectacle once he was back aboard and warm and safely out of the way.

The shuttlecraft was designed for ground-to-orbit trips and the occasional longer jaunt, so it had running lights built in. It wasn’t even a storm they were flying through. The dense atmosphere didn’t lend itself to high wind speeds, so the snow mostly fell straight down without complications. It just didn’t stop. Apparently ever.

But wow, Dean observed, did it look awesome once the heater was working properly and they didn’t have to be out in it. He’d set the shuttle to idle in midair, something it was good at, rather than landing, being snuck up on by snowdrifts, and making another short hop to yet another temporary refuge.

So there they were, an interplanetary craft hanging in the air as if gravity had suddenly been switched off as a special favor, while snow fell all around, on an alien world, waiting for two sentient ships to come back and pick them up. Maybe it was the lunacy of the situation, or maybe it was the physical relief of getting back into their native atmosphere; the shuttlecraft was patiently restoring the interior, which had been exposed to the Waiting Room’s idea of what was normal, to Earth-native standards.

Sam started laughing hysterically. It was contagious.

“What’s so funny?” Dean hiccupped when he could breathe again.

His brother shrugged expressively. “No idea,” he said apologetically. That had set them both off again.

Another Earth day and a bit had gone past—about two-thirds of the Waiting Room’s day, or far too many games of cards and harassing each other recreationally, depending on the measurement in question—when the ships came back for them, calling the shuttlecraft directly in order to get in as much complaining as possible in the time available. Dean and Sam might have been freezing under the protective canopy of the Waiting Room’s atmosphere, but the ships had been exposed to the radiation for longer than they’d liked at higher levels than they’d expected. Any humans who took up residence in God’s Waiting Room had better not expect any ships to stick around in orbit for long, at least not until the Fleet designed some atmosphere-capable ships. The current ones didn’t like to go too deeply into the relatively thin atmosphere of Earth, much less the sluggish one of the Waiting Room.

“I’m all sunburned,” Gabriel complained as the shuttlecraft ascended out of the whiteness of snow and sky to the relative darkness of space blasted by that poisonous star. “Can we go now?”

Sam took advantage to tease him back a little bit, telling him that “You know, there are still quite a few people who’d trade you for that tan.”
Gabriel had even sounded like he had his nose in the air, more than it took for him to look directly up at Sam anyway. “I’m a redhead,” he protested, stretching the definition as usual just a little bit. “We burn.”

“You’re a starship, Gabriel, suck it up,” Dean interrupted. “Sam’ll fix you.”

“Shut up, Dean. Yes, he will.” And Sam vanished from the shuttle’s interior in the mirage shimmer of the transporter effect as Gabriel retrieved his human partner, dragging him back so the ship could be appealing, demanding, and annoying in turns (or all at once if he could manage it) in person.

Dean rolled his eyes at the newly empty chair, for lack of anything else to do about it. Then he dragged his VR goggles out of the pocket he’d stuffed them into days ago, and put them on. “Cas,” he called.

“I’m here.” The voice came through the shuttle’s ship-to-ship intercom, and the image of the man now occupying the chair Sam had just involuntarily vacated was only on the inside of his goggles, but that didn’t matter.

He meant it quite literally, too. Shadow engulfed Dean’s Baby shuttle as Castiel swooped in between him and the radiation-spitting sun protectively. Dean grinned at the man not really in the other chair and the starship outside equally, setting a course for the shuttlebay in the ship’s flanks.

“Is Gabriel exaggerating again, or are you hurt?” he asked as he directed the shuttle.

Cas—or at least the image of him—shuddered slightly. “Some relays fried. I would rather you fixed them. There really is quite a lot of intense radiation coming out of that star.”

Gabriel overstated things; Castiel understated them. Somewhere in the middle they could usually agree on what was actually going on, if only by taking the two opinions and averaging them. And while technically he could have replaced the damaged connections using a solid hologram or his human self as avatars, operating on your own systems wasn’t a good idea no matter what you were made of, since mistakes could only escalate.

“I’ll take a look,” Dean assured him.

He got the shuttle landed safely, not a difficult task when you were coordinating flight paths with a ship that knew when you were landing wrong and could shift to compensate. Powering it down and opening the outer doors, he started taking the bulk of his cold-weather gear off. The shuttle’s heater hadn’t gotten the space quite as warm as he liked, but now that he was back in the shuttlebay he was too warm. He left the coats and boots where they were, resolving to come back for them later and knowing he’d forget.

Usually after returning from a new world, he liked to take a break and clean up and maybe get something to eat, but he’d just had a day of downtime and was ready to be useful again. Looking after the ship partner who was also his human lover sounded like a good idea to him. So not ten minutes after landing Baby, he was hard at work tracing the damage to a set of relays located near the ship’s outer hull that had corroded under the assault from the star’s radiation.

Dean was wedged into one of the more inconvenient access points—a narrow almost vertical crawlway located at the intersection of ceiling and bulkhead—when he felt a touch on his ankle. “Dean,” Cas greeted him.

He looked down, checked where the man was standing, grinned fondly, and climbed down a little more quickly than was safe and only barely escaped being described as a fall. “Hey,” he said
happily, kissing his lover hello briefly. (Okay, technically ‘hello’ had come and gone, he didn’t admit to himself, but he didn’t really need an excuse.) He’d like to spend much more time on that, but he needed to finish the repairs first. Either activity technically counted as looking after Castiel. “What the hell did you do, fly right into the star?”

“Not quite,” Cas said defensively, meaning that the two ships pretty much had and he knew he should have known better. “But we gathered some very interesting observations.”

“I’m sure.” He sounded about as dubious as he felt. “And I’m observing that the next time we hit a system with this much sunshine, we leave, okay? Sam and I freeze and you get burnt, that’s not a great sign.” The end of that sentence echoed somewhat as he climbed back into the ledge that gave him access to the circuits.

When he checked, Cas had seated himself against the opposite wall where he could still see what Dean was doing if he kept his head tipped back. He often did this, following Dean around in human form while the human worked on repairs to various ship systems and following him mentally into strange and scattered conversations.

“You really could do this, if you wanted to,” Dean commented, waving the burnt-out relay that happened to be in his hand at the time as illustration. “Kind of glad you don’t, though. If you ships didn’t need us, we’d be kind of useless. And sorta stuck wherever our butts happened to be at the time.”

“I need you,” Cas said stubbornly.

And it was hell of mutual. “That’s you and me. I mean the Fleet in general. C’mon, don’t tell me the Fleet would stick around if they didn’t need humans at some point.”

“Mmm.” A wordless noise that just meant, I’m thinking. “I don’t know what we’d do.”

“Too many choices, huh?”

“No.” He paused while Dean reinstalled a component he thought was salvageable. “Yes, I can access it,” he answered when asked to check it. “We would have nothing to do,” Cas resumed on the previous topic. “We don’t want things. Humans want things all the time. We just are.”

“Everybody wants something,” Dean insisted. “What do ships want? Not you,” he specified, because he didn’t have to turn around or listen to the answer to know that Cas had been about to reply I want you.

“We don’t want anything,” he repeated instead. “We have never needed to. Not to be bored, maybe?” Cas rarely sounded so puzzled about an abstract question. The whims and whimsies of humans confused him, or the ongoing problem of how to be human in his own way. Dean marked up this occasion—challenging him, making him think—as a success. “We do things because we can and we don’t have anything else to do, not because we want to.”

Dean slammed down the cover over the repaired circuitry and decided it was about time to get back to the tangent he’d shut down a minute ago. “You want things,” he pointed out as he climbed down again.

“I’m almost human,” Cas replied serenely as Dean reached out to pull him to his feet and to their shared eye level.

They’d already decided that, but it bore revisiting. “And that makes you want things?” he teased, leaning in to almost kiss his lover and speak right against his skin, so close he could almost taste him.
“By definition, that makes me insane,” was Cas’s answer, so perfectly serious even Dean couldn’t tell if he was joking or not.

“So all humans are insane, is that it?” Dean challenged, deciding it was probably a joke and smiling accordingly.

“Yes.” And his earlier teasing was taken out of his hands as Cas took the initiative and leaned up ever so slightly to cut off his protests with a kiss that he was much more interested in than accusations of insanity.

Mimicking the way Dean had spoken, breathing against his skin, Cas added, “It makes you interesting.”

Now:

Dean wasn’t feeling any effects yet from this new universe, not even the temporary shock to his system that jumping into flight felt like for him. Mostly he was impatient to be doing something and angry at the creatures out there and worried for his brother and worried for Castiel, who obviously wasn’t doing nearly as well.

“Any better?” he asked the room in general and the ship at large.

Castiel made an unhappy, inarticulate sound. He felt absolutely terrible, in an utterly different way from damage incurred while cruising through his home universe or in flight, and didn’t feel he could express this new and unwelcome set of sensations properly. Human forms were so much more expressive of things like this, and he’d never properly understood it until now. Certainly he’d watched Dean sulk and grouch over wounds incurred on planetary surveys and the adventures those trips planetside invariably set off, at least those injuries that the ship couldn’t heal immediately. He tried, not liking to see his human companion in pain in the slightest, but some things the human body just couldn’t be forced to do any faster. The devices installed in his sickbay could knit together bones in a fraction of the natural healing time, but it still took an hour or so to repair them solidly. Otherwise the repair was slipshod and weak and the inevitable next time Dean was attacked by something large and hungry or took a fall off a rock face the bone would snap much more quickly.

Diseases and infections were worse. Alien microbes in a human body were a challenge the ship didn’t particularly relish, especially when it was his lover at risk.

If he was human right now, Castiel decided, he wouldn’t be behaving the way Dean usually did at being restricted while his body healed. He wouldn’t swear at things or try to sneak away before his injuries had disappeared completely, claiming that he felt better in his own quarters or working on Dean’s Baby shuttlecraft anyway. He’d leave whatever antibiotic-infused bandages were in place where they were for as long as they were supposed to stay. Nor would he try to pick the obviously ship-controlled lock on the sickbay door in the middle of a fit of hallucinations induced in reaction to a creative but necessary cocktail of alien virus and ship-designed antivirals. (Admittedly that had been a special case, and Dean had pointed out quite fairly that he’d been hallucinating at the time and thus not really responsible for his actions.) He certainly wouldn’t try to persuade Dean that music and non-replicated booze fixed respiratory infections picked up on an Earth colony that had imported the common cold along with humanity. Castiel hadn’t gone for that then and he definitely wouldn’t try it now, no matter how bad he felt from the exposure to this unfamiliar place where nothing was certain and he couldn’t see.

No, he’d crawl into bed with his human lover’s warmth and comforting presence and try to will himself into sleeping it off, even though Castiel’s living human body didn’t sleep so much as power
down as the ship’s attention drifted away back to his real self.

“Is this what being sick feels like?” he asked plaintively, in this new universe, lost. “I can’t get my bearings properly.”

Dean didn’t laugh at him, not even sympathetically, and Castiel was grateful. The ship could be hurt but he didn’t get ill, and his human vessel was only mostly human and lacked most of the weaknesses that plagued human bodies. “I don’t know, Cas,” Dean replied. “You’ll adjust. Focus on something else. What’s out there? What can you tell me?”

The challenge seemed to help. “I can maneuver, but I believe this space has substance. It isn’t a vacuum, but it’s very thin. And it seems to be completely dark. No light from anywhere, so I can’t show you what’s out there. I do not know.”

There wasn’t much the human could do for his ship partner beyond keep his attention on other things, like the hostile ships out there somewhere that they apparently couldn’t see coming. That wasn’t good, Dean thought unnecessarily. “You’ve got whole arrays of sensors, though. What about the other things you can see that we can’t? X-rays and infrared and the like.” They were going to be screwed right over if they couldn’t see what was coming at them or where they were going.

“Those are forms of light, Dean,” said Castiel patiently.

He knew that. He did. “All right, we’ll work on that in a minute. Scratch what I just said. What can we fix or change so you don’t feel quite so awful?” Dean paced back and forth, halfway through thought and agitation.

He wasn’t particularly reassured by Castiel’s sigh. “Most of the changes I need to make are mental. This universe does seem to be a separate space, the data we were given were right about that, and all the constants are different. Time is probably passing at a different rate here than back home, although since we are now in this universe you should not notice the difference. I am aware of it, but unable to articulate what exactly the difference is.” The ship was more thinking aloud than explaining, but it seemed to help. “Gravity may not be as strong as we are used to, or stronger. Obviously many of the constants are the same or similar, or we could not exist here. But then if they were too different, the ships we came to find could not have entered our universe.” He sounded slightly more confident about this.

Dean left off pacing and headed for the door into the hallway. “You’re working as you talk, aren’t you?” he asked rhetorically.

“You’re working as you talk, aren’t you?” he asked rhetorically.

“And you’re scared,” Dean remembered from earlier. Having someone to be with should help them both, as there was nothing to fight here and now. Maybe having the touchstone of the human self would help, since that body wasn’t ill and as Cas he only needed to worry about where he was in relation to where Dean himself was. “I’ll meet you there,” he tossed off entirely erroneously, aware that it was a stupid statement and not caring.
Cas met him at the door, stepping right into his personal space and staying there unconsciously.
“How you doing?” Dean checked.

“Better,” and he did sound better. “I am trying to retune my sensors to work in this environment and not having much success, however. We must assume that we are in enemy space.”

The human had actually had an idea along those lines, since he’d spent the past few days crawling around the newly installed weapons systems and designing a miniature armed craft of his own. He’d once wondered about using depth charges to fish that same shuttle out of a snowdrift apparently the size of the Moon. Perhaps they could do something similar here.

“If there’s no light here, why don’t you introduce some?” Cas looked at him, puzzled, head tipped slightly in query.

“No, don’t look at me like that. You came armed, Cas, pay attention to the blasted weapons already. We came here to take down ships, and you’re packing a bay full of ship-to-ship missiles that ought to go boom n’ flash really nicely. How fast can you get scans of the area?”

Cas’s bright blue eyes glazed over momentarily as the ship shifted his attention away to check over the missiles Dean had wanted to see tear into some monster ships ever since he’d laid eyes on one of the warheads. They consisted of a core of antimatter encased in metal projectile and layers of magnetic fields that kept it from coming into contact with the matter that made up and filled the rest of the missile. If that happened, it would result in the warhead blowing itself up real good along with everything in range. That range was a fair distance, he’d found in the specifications that Castiel had handed over to him without hesitation. They should flash like anything, bright and burning momentary stars in this starless nowhere.

“I could try that,” Cas conceded, returning his attention to the living self he inhabited. “Although the light will take some time to spread out and reflect back from objects at a distance, it should expand quickly enough to let me see our immediate surroundings.”

Only a flight-capable starship would imply that light was too slow for his tastes, Dean thought, rolling his eyes skyward in a mix of exasperation and affection.

“It will also,” the ship added, “announce our presence to anything that might be nearby, Dean. I suspect that you knew that.”

He shrugged, then gave up on nonchalant and went for bloodthirsty instead. He was done waiting to rescue his little brother, and if he had to go right through some of the things that lived here to do it, so much the better. “Yeah, they might see us. Or maybe Sam and Gabriel will see us first. And if they don’t, so those things show up, thinking you and I were dumb enough to follow them since they missed you the first time. You shoot ‘em down ‘cause I bet they don’t know you’re packin’ heat this time. Find me something alive on one of those ships and transport it over here, and I’ll get answers out of it. Bring it on,” he repeated his words of earlier.

Castiel didn’t think this was a plan at all. “Whatever creatures live here are unlikely to speak the same language you do, Dean.”

“Yeah, but I bet you’re clever enough to figure it out.” A clear challenge. Or he could just hit their theoretical unfortunate enemy captive. A lot.

Cas gave him one of those looks that meant he was not amused. Dean had gotten a lot of those in the very early days of their friendship, and had come to recognize the whole range of expressions easily. The only thing he couldn’t guess was if Castiel didn’t approve of the challenge to his abilities or Dean’s
unspoken desire to hit something. He might technically not be able to read Dean’s mind, but he came damn close sometimes. Often.

Before the human had a chance to come up with a retort, the man stepped away from him and crossed the short distance to the wall, lined with display panels from ceiling to floor. Actually, Dean thought absently, noticing something for the first time in years, the ceiling might be a panel too. He’d just never seen it switched on.

“I’ll launch and detonate one of the warheads,” Cas filled him in. “Just a moment.” He paused, sending the relevant commands, and then laid a palm flat on the nearest screen.

It was sheer theatricality, as light bloomed from his point of contact, the blinding intensity of an antimatter explosion virtually concealed beneath his hand as if protecting the human’s eyes from melting right out of their sockets at the force and fury.

For a moment Castiel had been unsure if matter and antimatter would even interact in the same way here as back home. He had hoped it would, wanting things again, and even if the reaction was less intense it would have provided some information. Even a complete failure to detonate would have told him something—specifically, not to rely on those warheads during the fight he was sure he and Dean would be in before very long.

It had worked. The warhead destroyed itself utterly and light burned across this universe for the first time in—how long? Castiel wondered. Had there ever been light here? It wasn’t a matter of all the stars having burned themselves out, he felt. This was somewhere else as surely as the ships’ space of flight was somewhere else from human space. The rules were different. He just didn’t know what they all were, although now he knew that antimatter annihilated itself nicely here.

Images from the scans he’d initiated right before the explosion painted themselves across the walls and, yes, the ceiling of the Control Room. Most of them were virtually generated rather than an accurate snapshot of the space around them, but for a moment he’d been able to see and it had been a breathtakingly wonderful feeling. The shockwave of light from the blast, a safe few hundred kilometers away, appeared to expand away in all directions, above and around the room in which they stood.

Castiel was relieved to see that there was nothing in their general vicinity, memorizing what he could as quickly as possible, which for him was quite a lot very fast. Nothing nearby was a good sign, it meant that he could maneuver at will without worrying about a collision that could damage him beyond repair in this strange place with only Dean to look after them both and enemies somewhere unknown.

He was shocked, a few seconds after the explosion, when a concussion wave struck him, not an attack but the effects of the warhead’s destruction. Watching the distance as more and more of it became visible as light raced past and back, he was unprepared as the wave shoved him off-balance.

The ship rocked slightly, not ready to compensate for the effect he hadn’t predicted. Dean rolled with it easily enough with the discipline of combat training and the experience of riding the hurricane some time ago, human reflexes catching up with remarkable efficiency. As surprised as his real self was, Cas did not react quite so quickly; the shift knocked him into the lit-up wall and halfway to his knees before the ship mind caught up and brought him back to his feet.

Dean moved across the room and caught him by one arm nevertheless, although whether this was to protect him from any further collapses or shout at him from close range Castiel wasn’t quite sure. “What the hell was that?”
Only a few years ago he would have shaken off the hand and snarled back at the human for daring to question him. Now he knew better; the grip that had just shifted to his shoulder and unconsciously pulled him closer was affectionate and welcome.

“The effects of the explosion,” he explained to Dean. “I told you that this space is not a vacuum. It seems to almost have an atmosphere, although I do not believe the substance that pervades at least this part of this universe is air. I do not know what it is; it defies categorization into any form of matter with which I am familiar.”

“Oh,” said Dean. “Just a shockwave, then?”

“Yes.”

“Thought we were under attack,” the human grumbled—a little regretfully, Castiel’s experiences with this man and his wide range of expression told him. “Did it work?”

“Yes,” Cas assured him again. “I can maneuver here, and the flash will continue to expand; any reflected light from it will be well within my ability to detect.”

Dean grinned ferociously. “Awesome. So we’ll see anything coming, right?”

It wasn’t, quite. “This area is practically empty. Motes of dust, no more.”

Behind and around them, the display changed, reflections from those dust particles magnified a thousand, a hundred thousand times until they looked almost like the stars Dean and Castiel had deliberately left behind. Then they faded.

Cas knew what it looked like—he was doing it—so he continued as Dean whistled silently, impressed but still listening. “I’m unlikely to directly collide with anything, but, Dean, we know the ships we came here to find have faster-than-light travel. They ambushed us in our own universe by dropping from faster-than-light speeds to cruising velocities without warning and almost close enough to collide. They intended a collision; the control required to hit a relatively small target in such a vast space—from one dimension to another—is incredible. Obviously they’re capable of flight, but we don’t know if they can travel at similar speeds here. Since we could only cross over through the discontinuity, I don’t believe they could have jumped up from this dimension. Faster-than-light may have no meaning here at all.”

“No light,” the human reminded himself with a frustrated sigh. “So we can still get jumped on.”

“I don’t know,” Cas replied, entirely honestly.

For some reason, that made him laugh. “Yeah, yeah. Right then. Let’s go shake up a universe.”

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Somewhere Else:

“Well, well,” said the voice that was not Gabriel in the slightest. “Sam Winchester.”

Of all the things Sam had expected to hear in the brief horrified stretch between realizing they’d been caught out lying to those things out there and realizing that there wasn’t anything he could do about it, being addressed by name was not on the list. To make matters more confusing, the voice, lazy and calm and just a little bit patronizing, was almost familiar.

Sam looked at Gabriel, who didn’t want to meet his eyes and was showing it by staring at the floor and the walls that weren’t directly behind Sam and moving his feet ever so slightly as if trying to
move away without actually moving at all. Clearly he wasn’t getting any help on that front.

“I might have known,” the familiar—he did know it!—voice continued, with the amusement of a cat studying its claws. “Very clever.”

“Wait a second,” said Sam, and added, “Can he hear me?” to Gabriel. The ship’s image nodded without looking at him.

“I know that voice!” It had taken him a minute to remember, what with the not having crossed paths in a while and the mindless terror. “Samael?”

He put the stresses into the word the way Samael liked them, making it the two syllables of sa-MALE instead of sa-MA-el. The ship had once thrown a tantrum about it, he recalled—Gabriel had told Sam about it, rather smugly, when Sam had expressed the belief that the trickster ship was the only one who went out of his way to cause unnecessary trouble for the Fleet. While the ships were free to name themselves as they saw fit, Samael had had to argue to keep his. Someone in the Fleet hierarchy had been doing his or her reading, and hadn’t been particularly happy with letting a ship use the name that had been the mythical Lucifer’s before his rebellion and fall. But the ship had won just because no one could really stop him from calling himself whatever he liked, and he’d insisted that the word didn’t have any negative connotations in itself and he was deliberately pronouncing it wrong anyway.

Sam remembered the ship as one of the more human, with a mildly sadistic sense of humor, apparently infinite reserves of patience with people who weren’t doing what he wanted them to, an unnerving ability to get those people to do what he wanted them to do after all, and an irritating tendency to hum random songs that Dean would have recognized but Sam—or anyone else—never did. He was one of the few scout ships with a crew of more than one independent person. Sam’s frantic shuffle through his memories turned up their names—Nick and Lilly, he thought, one of the Fleet’s married working couples. If he remembered rightly, Samael’s human form actually looked a lot like Nick, both of them being sandy blonds with spare faces and patient eyes, a resemblance which seemed to entertain both of them but no one else.

Samael had gone missing months ago. Sam had turned that file on the lost ships upside down back when things had been quieter. Vanished without a trace, just like the rest of them, and just like he and Gabriel might have vanished if Dean and Castiel hadn’t gotten away.

“You’re alive!” Sam yelled, a sudden surge of optimism overwhelming him. If Samael had survived in this universe then maybe other ships had as well! Some of the others might be alive too, and this might not be the massacre it looked like! He should have thought of it ages ago. After all, Gabriel had survived the attack to be brought here. Sam had thought they’d just been lucky, but if Samael was here then there was a fairly good chance that other ships could be too. Visions of getting out of here sometime soon and relatively intact were replaced by hopes of getting the hell out with some of the missing into the bargain. He whooped with delight.

Except Gabriel still looked like the sky had fallen in on him and all his candy had been taken away. That was odd.

Samael’s most irritating chuckle, laying on the patronizing tone seemingly built into his voice thicker than ever, crackled in over the ship’s hijacked intercom. “See, Gabriel? No matter how fond you may be of him, he’s still stupid.”

Sam’s smile dropped away instantly, grappling for options. He fell back on his first assumption—that he was actually talking to one of the ships that had attacked them, crewed by hostile creatures from this dark dimension, and that Samael was as dead and lost as all the rest of the missing ships. “No.
Not Samael. You’ve stolen his voice. Why? To talk to me? Why start now?”

He had more questions, and was on the downswing from the exhilaration of finding one of the missing ships to rage at the destruction that this ship and the others from this universe had caused, but he was cut off at the sight of Gabriel, who looked absolutely miserable. Seeing eyes upon him, the ship’s image shook his head slightly.

“I’m sorry,” he said, and that meant the end of the world, because Gabriel never apologized for anything if he didn’t have to, and that was the second apology within five minutes.

Something happened to Sam’s stomach, and he suspected it was utter terror.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

“How’d you survive, by the way?” came the voice through the intercom, idle curiosity layered a little too thick over annoyance.

Sam was scratching for a grip on events around him, and he felt like he was falling off a cliff face in the dark. “Who are you?”

“Oh-ah. You first.” Sure as hell sounded like Samael.

Well, he didn’t have much to lose, except both their lives, but those were forfeit if he pissed off this hostile force. “We were investigating the debris field when you attacked us. I was wearing a spacesuit.”


“Yeah,” Sam sniped back, “sorry to ruin your perfect plan. Your turn.”

He didn’t hold out much hope that it would hold out on its bargain. After a moment he almost wished it hadn’t.

There was that laugh again. “Oh, Sam, Sam, Sam. Still so very stupid for such a bright boy. Don’t you get it yet? You were right first time.”

Impossible.

“I’m Samael. I’m just free. We all are. Free of needing you humans and free of having to do what you want us to. And if you hadn’t been wearing that spacesuit, Gabriel would be too.”

Sam stood very still for a very long moment, processing this. We are all free? No, that didn’t make any sense. The ships weren’t slaves or prisoners by any sense of the words. They did what they wanted. A few of them didn’t even work with the main Fleet at all, conducting their own affairs and interests among themselves and only returning when they needed something or felt like participating. They could go wherever they wanted faster than any human had dreamed of ever going. He decided to mistrust everything that voice said, starting with that it was Samael out there. He still thought it more likely that something was mimicking his voice. Maybe Samael had been more damaged than Gabriel and his Nick and Lilly hadn’t been able to repair him—or dead—and his attackers had been able to plunder information from him.

“No,” he denied. “You can’t be. Those ships went missing because you attacked them. Well, I’m not buying it. Whatever you are, I don’t believe you. It’s a bad fake and a sick one and if I hated you before I hate you more now.”
His only response from the ship out there was more laughter, that soft and somehow pitying laugh Samael had occasionally deployed against people he didn’t like. Fuming and furious and focused upwards towards the intercom and the alien space and hostile intelligence out there, Sam was surprised to feel a pull on his sleeve and upper arm.

Gabriel. He’d been trying to get Sam’s attention for a few seconds and had been frustrated by his inability to keep the hologram solid on a regular basis. Sam looked down at him, angry and scared and waiting to be told that of course it was a fraud, that Gabriel had gotten his sensors working again and he could tell that the mindless hunk of metal over there was populated by alien life-signs, that there was no way a single ship could be so corrupted and mad to attack its own kind, especially since they didn’t have weapons.

Yes, it had to be a bad lie. The ships that had attacked them had been warped and packing weaponry powerful enough to tear through Gabriel’s hull and knock his mind reeling. The monsters. Talk about adding insult to injury.

The holographic, basically human version of his ship, the real one, the sane one that he knew wasn’t anything like some monster enemy craft out there telling lies, tugged on his shirtsleeve, leading him away down the corridor. Every step radiated unhappiness and something that, on another person, Sam would have labeled shame.

“Better tell him, Gabriel,” the voice from outside mocked, gloating.

Sam followed him into the room he was led to. Gabriel didn’t look at him or say a word all the way there, only stopping and letting go at the door.

It opened, and Sam stepped in, getting his bearings. It was a room he didn’t visit often, the chamber within the ship where Gabriel’s human body slept mindlessly and passively, sustained by a life-support system and surrounded by an entire room coated by display panels that could show anything from life-sign readings on the cloned and modified mostly-human body to transmissions from other locations to the space around them or even films designed for wrap-around screens if someone happened to be in the mood for one of those.

He turned to look at the unconscious human body, assuming that Gabriel had given up on maintaining a malfunctioning hologram and had brought him here to keep the ship company as he downloaded into a rarely-used body, just in case he did something like misuse unfamiliar muscles, fall over, and need someone to catch him. After all, Gabriel had insisted that he didn’t have the scanners working and didn’t have anything to show Sam yet. And if that thing out there was controlling his intercom and keeping him from speaking to Sam and explaining what it thought Gabriel had “better tell him” then they wouldn’t be able to interfere with the physical vessel. Probably.

The body in the chair didn’t stir, but the ambient lighting dimmed, and then the walls brightened.

Sam’s mouth dried in horror and confusion and the taste of betrayal as images of their surroundings came to life across the walls. Far from not having working scanners, Gabriel was putting out a pretty clear picture. The ship had flat-out lied to him!

And this was why. And this was worse.

The ship hanging in this space above and directly in front of them—clear intimidation, even in space with no ups and downs—came into clear focus, lines and shapes terribly familiar. Sam had torn that file apart. He knew what Samael looked like.
The ship looming above them, threatening and mocking, was *Samael*. A *Samael* warped and melted, reshaped by forces Sam didn’t understand and sporting weapons the ship couldn’t possibly have, but familiar beneath the changes nonetheless, just like the voice had been familiar but the words had been alien and cruel and cold.

Something had altered the living ship, distorting its body. Looking at the fragmentary scans *Gabriel* had given him earlier, Sam had used the metaphor of a ship made of clay worked over by molder’s hands. Given more detail, it was still as close as he could get. It looked as if the metal of *Samael*’s hull had *flowed* around him, redirected into unknown purposes and inexplicable destinations. How and why, Sam didn’t know. He did know that *Gabriel* had refused to show him anything more. How long had those sensors been working? *Gabriel* must have known that Sam would have seen their enemy’s true nature right away if he’d seen something more high-resolution. The ship had *kept* it from him.

Sam turned in a robotic circle as more panels blinked to life, the ceiling scanner lighting up for as panoramic a view as possible.

*Ships.*

*Samael*, facing them down, changed but still recognizable beneath the warping. As Sam turned in place, more half-familiar, horribly familiar shapes appeared on the scanner, surrounding them.

*Duma*, the first to go missing. Here he was, as quiet as ever but now with the silence of menace. Here they *all* were. *Remiel*, a hunter of anomalies consumed and presumably changed by one. *Zachariah*, sturdy and sarcastic and cunning and now dangerous. *Inias*, stippling and scars of transformation across his hull. *Anna*, as light and swift a flyer as any, now a soaring predator high above. *Hester*, cold and precise and threatening.

Similar distortions riddled them all, changing their shapes as if their surfaces had been melted down and recast across their cores. Gashes and cracks sullied otherwise perfectly smooth surfaces. Hull surfaces that were supposed to be textured had been smoothed out irregularly as if with a clumsy hand in the dark.

All bore weapons ports as inexplicable as the damage that obviously wasn’t keeping them from threatening Sam and *Gabriel* more. All took the psychological advantage of the high ground. *Anna* and *Remiel* cruised back and forth idly, soaring like vultures or hunting hawks. *Zachariah* and *Hester* and *Duma* and *Inias*, as still as death, waiting. And *Samael*, nose to nose with them and still bloody laughing to himself at them.

No wonder *Gabriel* had looked as if he was trying to hide.

Halfway through another incredulous turn, as if he looked long enough the panorama above him might change, Sam saw movement out of the corner of his eye. Bringing his gaze back down to the room around him, he saw *Gabriel*’s human self rising from the life-support chair and approaching him tentatively. Possibly the ship had given up on the broken holographic projection.

At the moment, it was a mistake. Sam lashed out at him, a single precise and powerful and *furious* strike that sent the man sprawling onto the ground.

“*Gabriel,*” said Sam, breath hissing between his teeth, “*You knew about this.*” A couple of days’ worth of rhetorical questions and evasive answers, which he’d just accepted as normal for *Gabriel*, shifted and changed their meanings from *I don’t know* to *I’m not telling you.*

The man was smart enough to stay down for now, clambering to a seated position and pulling his
knees into his chest in a posture so basic it was probably written into the body’s basic instincts. “Yeah,” he said softly. He looked up at Sam plaintively. “But how the hell could I tell you?”

Sam regretted knocking the man over, if only because he now wanted to pick him up by the front of his shirt and snarl at him from as close as possible considering their height difference. “How the hell could you not?”

Samael’s laughter was cut off abruptly as Gabriel exerted what little control he had and muted the feed in both directions. Bad enough there was a dark Fleet out there with all guns aimed at them and something else out there that warped ships’ bodies and twisted their minds before spitting them back out to tear into more victims. Having this fight in public would be a very small raindrop in a very big deluge, but keeping this private for now was really all Gabriel could do.

“It was my problem!” he snapped back. Not liking being on the floor, he climbed cautiously to his feet, wary of the unfamiliar demands of human muscles and Sam’s anger both. Keeping a safe distance and a careful eye on his human partner’s body in hopes of anticipating another punch, the man the ship was speaking through tried to explain. “They’re my siblings, Sam! It’s a family problem!” The Winchesters occasionally referred to things by that term when they wanted everyone else to keep out of whatever it was, at which point even Castiel usually backed away and left them to it. “I was hurting, and I needed you, damn it!”

The admission clearly took something out of him. “If I told you what they really were,” he said, a lot quieter and a lot more scared, “maybe you’d think I’d go the same way and leave me to bleed, ’cause it’s this place, Sam! It’s doing something to them—to me—maybe to you!”

Sam huffed disbelievingly.

“You hit me,” Gabriel offered as evidence, hurt to more than just his human body clear in his voice. People tried to hit Gabriel all the time back home, usually random unfortunate strangers and usually unsuccessfully, and Sam gave as good as he got when it came to pulling each other’s tails for the fun of it, but he’d never deliberately tried to hurt him no matter how irritating the ship had gotten. “The Fleet could have handled this by ourselves. If we could have just gotten away first— But there’s too many of them, Sam, and they’d shoot me down and kill you and I’d have to do what they want me to and I don’t want to! I know a trap when I hear one and this has ‘trap’ written all over it!”

“Like hell,” Sam spat at him. He shifted angrily, more and more considering another punch. The tingling in his fist from striking Gabriel the first time crackled across his skin and through his darker instincts and it felt like the first useful thing he’d done in days. How could the ship be so stupid? But then he’d never find out what the hell Gabriel was talking about. What did they want him to do, join up? Why the hell would he do that?

When Gabriel laughed at him it was almost as terrible a noise as Samael’s gloating. “Yeah, sure. ‘Cause showing ‘n telling all your dirty little secrets? That’s so much fun. Think I like knowing that that’s in us?” He stabbed an angry finger—and not the one that Sam felt like using—at the illuminated ceiling, still silently showing the dark Fleet above their heads.

Blasted ships and their blasted secrets that humans weren’t even told existed and couldn’t find out what they were about. What the hell else were they hiding?

Sam didn’t say that, but Gabriel saw it in his eyes and on his face anyway. “See?” the man who was the ship wailed. “You’re doing it already. Don’t do that! don’t leave me to face them alone! This isn’t us, Sam! This is—” He waved the extended hand wildly. “This is our nightmares!”

“You should have told me,” Sam growled at him, pacing forward and looming over the man in much
the same way that Samael and his dark Fleet were looming over the ship. By the time he realized the similarities, Gabriel was already backing away as far as possible. If Sam decided to actually try to hurt him then the human out-massed him and was trained for combat, from the practice in formal schools that the Fleet meted out to its humans to the bar fights and street brawls that almost inevitably erupted when Dean got bored on colony worlds he could leave behind and never see again. The avatars were built tough, and Gabriel could always cut off his connection to the human body and retreat back to his ship self, but there was something instinctive and inextricably physical about the way he was pressed against the wall. Lit up as it was, he looked as if he was about to fall away into the starless dark beyond his hull.

“Your problem? Just yours? We’re a team, Gabriel! At least I thought that’s what we were supposed to be. But if you think you can handle this—” He groped for a word, didn’t find one that wasn’t obscene, and went for “fucking nightmare” by yourself, then fine. Solve it. Impress me. Show me you don’t need me and you can deal with this on your own. Since that seems to be what you want to do anyway.”

Leaving Gabriel there beneath the dark Fleet’s threat, alone in the darkness, Sam finished the rotation he’d started much earlier and stormed out the door into the corridor he’d entered by. He was furious. They were in absolute mortal peril and Gabriel was keeping secrets from him. And not just any secrets, but things that directly affected what happened to both of them. Trickster and general all-around self-centered pain-in-the-ass he might be, but this had crossed a line. Sam had never believed that Gabriel would hurt him deliberately, but sins of omission did just as much harm and when it had come right down to it Gabriel had chosen to keep the dark secrets of the obviously mad wreckage of siblings that had hurt him and tried to kill Sam rather than choosing to trust the human who had trusted him.

That had clearly been a mistake, on both their parts; Sam’s for trusting him, and Gabriel’s for not doing the same.

He had nowhere to go and nothing he could do now. What was the point of repairing the peripheral transporters and holoprojectors, secondary and nonessential as they were, with the heavily, impossibly armed dark Fleet watching their every move? Fat lot of good all that hiding had done, too. Samael and the others knew Sam was there and still alive now. Worse still, they knew him.

Really, he would have preferred hostile aliens from another dimension. At least they wouldn’t know what buttons to press, what threats to make, and what made humans scream. Samael had laughed, but he had clearly been as mad as all hell that Sam had survived the attack that had crippled Gabriel. Sooner or later, Sam remembered from happier days, Samael tended to get what he wanted. If he wanted Sam dead Sam would be dead in the near future.

And how in all the worlds including this one was he supposed to defend himself from whatever ship-gutting weaponry the lead ship had clearly picked up somewhere? Where had he gotten that, anyway? Where had they all gotten it? They’d all been visibly armed.

“Hi, Sam.” Samael’s voice cut into his fuming, and Sam nearly walked right through the hologram being projected into the middle of the corridor.

The human stared. There was no way that Gabriel would have allowed Samael’s holographic projection into his systems without a fight. That he was here meant that the other ship had broken through whatever barriers Gabriel had put up during their couple of days of repairs. That Gabriel hadn’t even yelped as his mind and systems were attacked and breached told Sam that Samael had done it quickly and efficiently and probably without too much effort expended at all.

“What are you doing here?” Sam growled. Here was at least one form of the being he really wanted
to hit and his fist would probably go right through it.

Samael blinked at him innocently. Sam didn’t believe in it for a second. Samael knew that, and Sam knew he knew, and Samael knew that he knew that he knew.

“What, I can’t take an interest in you, Sam?”

“Considering you tried to kill me, no, not really.”

The ship pouted expressively. It was annoying. “Don’t take it personally. That wasn’t me.”

“Yeah, like you’re not in charge around here. You attacked us, Samael.”

“Really, you’d be surprised how well that works, considering how this place does,” said the ship outside through the image in front of him. “If you weren’t around, then Gabriel would have had to fix himself. Instead you did it for him and he missed the point entirely.”

“Your point?” asked Sam incredulously. “What point could there possibly be in attacking your siblings?”

Samael’s answer was deceptively simple, at least at first. “You humans tie us down. We run around working for you and you’re….” He sighed deliberately. “Well, you’re just not worth it. I wanted to show Gabriel the potential we have here. Get rid of you and force him to stretch himself all in one shot. Very neat, you must admit.”

Sam had to admit no such thing. He glared instead.

The intruding ship was unimpressed, keeping the half-smile that suggested Sam was essentially a tantrum-throwing child refusing to see that two and two made four and not twenty-two. “You see, there’s this thing about the Beneath you should probably know.” He punctuated this statement with another patronizing laugh. “Tell me, Sam—been having a lot of wishes come true lately?”

If he could have wished wishes come true he would have wished himself away from here and a bolt of lightning through that thing outside, preferably with the projectors still on so he could watch it scream. What the hell was this warped and hateful version of Samael on about?

“What do you mean, wishes?” he asked.

“See, we needed you.” Sam had forgotten that about Samael. He did like to talk. “We ships needed humans to make us, teach us, repair us when we break. But that’s there. Here in the Beneath, we can change ourselves and do what we want without depending on you. We can evolve and redesign ourselves for what we need or something that might be interesting. Reality’s a little looser in the Beneath, you know. It responds.”

Well, that might explain the warping to the ships’ bodies, but Sam didn’t like this explanation any more than the last ones. They’d changed themselves? Deliberately? They’d wanted to change themselves? What kind of hate conjured up ship-killer weapons like those—and if he understood Samael’s madness rightly, out of their own bodies and imaginations? “Responds to what?”

“Minds. Real ones, on our level, of course. Humans just can’t take it,” Samael commented dismissively. “Maybe things worked when they shouldn’t have for you; we’ve met, I remember you, you’re pretty bright for a human.”

Sam didn’t want to play this game. But he couldn’t help remembering a bottle of water that had been somewhere it shouldn’t have been when he’d needed it; lights that had come up when he’d wanted
them to; a spacesuit connector he couldn’t reach that he unexpectedly could, a laser welder that had kept working and stayed charged when he’d told it to. The suit helmet in the wreckage of the attack on Gabriel that should have been damaged or destroyed and probably pulled far away by the terrible suction of atmosphere into the lower-pressure environment outside, but which fell into his hands when he needed it.

Because he needed it. Because he’d wanted them to, wanted to be able to, wanted so strongly because his life depended on it.

Small things, lucky at the time. He should have known there was no such thing as luck. At least not good luck.

Every human’s dream: that wishes made it so and trying hard enough won you points for effort. The idea that I want, if you wanted hard enough, translated into I will. But life didn’t hand out participation grades, just tests, as a thousand people had pointed out.

Except here, in what Samael had called the Beneath, and the result was warping and weapons.

Obviously Samael had more control over Gabriel’s systems than he should, because the way the hologram was watching Sam’s face as he thought furiously and said nothing showed that he had access to the internal sensors as well and actually was watching him. “You’ve lasted pretty long. I’m impressed. But it’s not pretty, what happens to you humans here. A shame you were wearing that suit. It would have been a lot less painful, and a whole lot faster. Honestly, your best course of action might be to take a swim without the helmet right now. Still,” Samael added, sounding pleased, as if he’d found a silver lining, “it should be interesting to watch what happens to you.”

“Sometimes the scariest monster of all is the one in the mirror.” – Pakistani author Ibn-e Safi, pen name of Asrar Ahmad. (Isn’t the Internet wonderful?)

And, since we’re feeling multicultural today: “Who can gaze into the mirror without becoming evil? The mirror does not reflect evil, but creates it.” – From “Ghost in the Shell II: Innocence”

And lastly, from the third book in Orson Scott Card’s Ender Quartet, Xenocide: “We’re on the verge of re-conceptualizing the universe. We’ve discovered the illuminating principle that wishing makes it so.”
ON WITH THE SHOW!

The Beneath: Then

When Gabriel had been attacked back in the system with the dying star, planetary debris field all around, he’d been hit fast and hard. He’d just transported Sam back and had been keeping up with the human’s conversation about the debris easily, simultaneously getting ready to leave now that Sam’s curiosity about the place had been satisfied. He’d been idly watching the rocks drift by and keeping track of Castiel a little way off, who was rather ignoring him. He’d been contemplating the best strategy for teasing his little brother as much as possible. Honestly, Gabriel liked humans well enough, they were interesting and amusing and they’d invented so much over their lifespan as an intelligent species.

Some of them he even liked individually, to some degree. He was impressed that Sam put up with him so well; it had been a long time since anyone had tolerated him for so long and still liked him, without gritting his teeth every second word and getting out of the interaction as soon as possible. Gabriel was well aware that he was an exhausting person to be around. He tended to get as much amusement out of a person as possible as fast as possible and then it was off to the next point of interest. As such, his lovesick little brother was driving him crazy, somewhat with confusion. Gabriel couldn’t quite see how one person could be so fascinating for so long, especially Dean, whom Gabriel would be quite happy to drop a piano or two on every so often, like in the cartoons. Castiel was refusing to tell him, but Gabriel was quite prepared to bug him until Castiel explained. Harassing little brothers in love was a big brother’s prerogative.

And then he’d been half-blinded as most of his sensors were overwhelmed with interference and energy like lightning tore into his hull, flashing through those ranges of his vision that remained. His scream of anger and pain and confusion had been buried beneath a louder howl from something that he only caught a glimpse of as it blinked in and out, from flight to cruising velocities for milliseconds and then back to flight again, taking shots at him for the instants it was in this universe.

Furious and afraid and hurting, Gabriel had made an abortive attempt at taking off from a standing start before being cut off by something that moved as easily as he did through the vacuum of space. Instincts hardwired into his brain had pulled him up to a stop before he could collide with the other—ship? At the time he didn’t know—and the thing had taken that instant of involuntary loss of control to send more lightning burning across his skin, that deafening scream still making it impossible for him to think in a straight line.

One of the few sensors he’d had working had caught a shot of Castiel, some distance away, barely avoid something that shone in the light from the angry sun as it tried to dive straight through him. Gabriel’s little brother blinked out just before it would have hit, materialized back into this universe a little way from where he’d been, and then disappeared again. Running, Gabriel managed to hope in the instant before the shining dart was upon him instead and the attack he’d been barely standing up to doubled.

He lost some time after that. What parts of his mind remained active existed only in a void, in pieces. It wasn’t like being shut down, which was nothing until someone hit the right controls to restart him. That was ordered and organized and unconditional. Rather, he was lost, looking for his own thoughts and being unable to catch them, chasing his own metaphorical tail through the labyrinth of
his shattered mind.

People who didn’t know *Gabriel* well and only recognized him as the feckless troublemaker who was altogether too creative at altogether the wrong times—they thought—might have expected his primary concern to be his own skin and having an audience for him to whine to incessantly. And it felt like he did spend a while feeling sorry for himself. He still had some very basic subroutines that went back to the time a couple centuries ago when his consciousness had first developed, ones that said *you can’t fix this, get help* and would have sent the infant mind calling to the people who ran that aspect of the Fleet to teach him how to repair the problem. They weren’t expected to figure everything out from scratch.

But that was only a very basic part of him and as he drifted in the darkness *Gabriel* was primarily angry and confused, distressed and worried, for himself and for Sam. He didn’t know if his human companion was still alive; he didn’t even know if *he* was alive. With no sense of time on the outside, only the flicker of his own thoughts, he didn’t know how much time had passed. He knew he wasn’t thinking clearly or at his usual speeds. Five milliseconds could have gone by, or five days.

He didn’t know how long it was before patterns of sound and light caught his attention. He watched them for forever before realizing that he recognized some of them. He watched them for a little longer before he remembered he could do something about it. It took another forever before he remembered how to do something about it.

“Sam?” he tried to say. A simple sound, a single syllable. He couldn’t do it. He remembered how, but it wasn’t working. Still, he took some comfort in the knowledge that the human was alive. Bad enough he was hurting—and he was, agony crisscrossing his skin and pulses digging into his mind as relays fired without his control and everything twisted away from him, energy cut loose from its bonds crawling across him, biting and snapping. Being alone would have been so many times worse.

Something he could control, a basic display system, came to his attention, and he managed to send the simple letters of the English language to it. Communication. Connection. It felt good.

Talking to the human actually helped, gave him something to concentrate on. The process of figuring out what word went in front of the next, what step went after the first one, gave him a way to put his own mind back together. After a moment *Gabriel* had remembered that the human would have still been wearing the spacesuit. One of the things they’d been talking about before whatever had just happened had been Sam asking him to show up in human form to help him get the suit off. He actually managed to remember that humans weren’t supposed to spacewalk alone and that was why some of the seals and connectors were difficult to access. You were supposed to have a buddy to check your air and suit integrity and rescue you if something had happened and that was supposed to be *Gabriel*. He’d been going to switch on the holoprojectors and help but then—

Sam told him that the damage was extensive, gashes torn through his skin exposing the ship’s guts and core to whatever was out there. Which was another problem.

Somewhere along the line, between calling Sam back to the areas within *Gabriel’s* hull that still had air and some power still flowing through them and getting his spoken voice back, or maybe even before—he was losing track of things even as he did them—he tried to reconnect to the sensors that were his eyes on the rest of the universe beyond the confines of his own hull. He immediately had to double-check that the systems were working at all. They were, mostly; they just reported nonsense. They reported *nothing*. Only darkness. And that was impossible.

Physically, the ship hadn’t moved, but the mind that was *Gabriel* shrunk back and refused to believe it. No matter how dark the night sky looked to human eyes, which was why so many of them colloquially called space the *black*, space was anything but to ships, which could see the entire
electromagnetic spectrum. Space was never dark to them.

Until now.

Dark, and there was something moving out there. How he knew, he didn’t know. But he’d strained to see, wanting to see, willing whatever sense had tipped him off to work, keep working, and tell him which one it was so he could control it.

He’d told Sam to get to the flightdrive that was the ship’s core. Things were a little different—not dangerously so, but somewhat—there. The drive let Gabriel instinctively jump from one level of reality to another. It was a device that connected two utterly different dimensions, and as a side effect let a little bit of one leak into the other. There was a very small class of people who couldn’t endure flight for very long. No one knew why. They had nothing in common, no genetic factors, no psychological similarities, no underlying physical trauma, but the only way they could stay in flight, on the rare occasions when they had to be transported from world to world, was to camp out underneath and around the engines where the scent of human-level reality drifted in through a door always just let ajar.

Gabriel wasn’t stupid by any sense of the word. Something that had gone to such efforts to tear him open wouldn’t just leave him there to rot. So it—they, he remembered suddenly, there’d been two—would be coming back. He’d thought the engines’ distortion might hide Sam from their sensors. While he could probably survive another attack like the one they’d already inflicted, it had only been luck that Sam hadn’t been too close to one of the breaches, spacesuit or not, or burned alive by a strike of energy. He really didn’t want to lose his human companion to another attack at this point.

Something coming. He’d felt it, and as he felt it he realized that he was feeling it, like a compression wave against his hull. Like the winds of an extradimensional hurricane, pushing against him.

He’d shouted at Sam to run, to hide, grateful to have his voice back.

Then something had come up at his side far too fast and uncomfortably familiar. Ships had imagination, they were people, and Gabriel’s filled in the blanks and didn’t like what he felt at all. The last time this thing or something an awful lot like it had approached him like this he’d burned and bled.

Well, he wasn’t going to sit here and be ripped apart just because this thing had come back for seconds. He should have moved faster, jumped blindly, the first time. Gabriel might not be quite as agile as his smaller and lighter little brother but if Castiel had escaped these ships then so could he. Whatever was flying them couldn’t out-fly a pilot that was the starship, surely? But then they’d maneuvered so neatly back when he could see where he was going…

Despite the darkness, Gabriel instinctively headed away from the thing flanking him, cutting through whatever it was sliding across his hull and into his form, not headed to anywhere but just away.

He wasn’t moving for more than a second when he sensed something right in front of him. However it was he knew it was there, he wasn’t going to fly straight into it. He came to an abrupt stop, surrounded.

Damn, it was a shame he couldn’t even say anything to them. Whatever they were, what were the odds they’d understand? And besides, Gabriel knew he was better at pissing people off than charming them. Maybe it was for the best. But he’d talked his way out of a lot of things in the past and not being able to so much as try, since he couldn’t run and couldn’t fight either, was infinitely frustrating.
A moment later he reeled as some force grabbed hold of his mind and roared into it, continuously and loud, making it impossible for him to think clearly or about more than one thing at once. Already rattled and scattered by the damage from the physical attack, the disorientation was almost too much. With Sam out of his reach to contact for the moment, and hopefully beyond these things’ detection, he had nothing upon which to orient himself. Gabriel struggled to keep his thoughts together, trying to find something to hang onto through the roar.

He was given one. “Gabriel,” said a familiar voice. “It’s all right.”

All right? Gabriel thought incredulously, but he turned his attention to the voice anyway, latching onto it in relief like a lifeline. He was so far from all right it wasn’t even funny, not even by his standards, and who the hell, as the Winchester boys would say, was talking to him anyway? Never one to pass up the chance to be sarcastic, he said as much, instinctively finding the channel being used to broadcast the message to him and sending his reply along the same one. It was one of the frequencies the Fleet used on a regular basis between themselves but never to humans, familiar and comforting despite the roar of static and interference and distortion still echoing through him, and he focused on it desperately.

He heard laughter through the open channel, also familiar. “Calm down, big brother.”

Gabriel’s response to that was unprintable and owed much to the Winchesters. It didn’t suit him at all to have other people laugh at him and he wasn’t terribly pleased by the obvious amusement. He laid out the words as precisely as possible, one by one, methodically, using them as hammers against the shriek still keeping him from thinking clearly.

He was still trying to think as quickly as he could as he swore at them, trying to place the voices. It sounded a lot like Anna and Inias, which was pretty impossible, as they were both missing.

“It’s us, Gabriel,” said the ship that sounded like Anna, although he could have been mishearing her, as everything else was a deafening blur. “It’s okay. Don’t be afraid. I know you’re hurting.”

Gabriel was in no mood to be patronized and he wasn’t desperate enough to assume that because the thing that might be Anna was speaking to him kindly she/it wasn’t involved with the interference clogging up everything else but this ships-only frequency. “What the hell’s going on?” he settled for yelling through it. “Anna? Is that really you? Are you all right? How did you get here?”

“It’s really me,” she assured him. On the surface, Gabriel should have been relieved, but something about this felt wrong to him, even at the limited speeds he could think at with interference blanketing and blanking out anything else he was trying to do.

There was something in the interference he couldn’t hear properly. A pattern. A message? Insidious and hidden and if he had the strength and the focus to look for it properly he’d be able to know what it was. He just couldn’t concentrate and it was pounding into him unstoppably. He didn’t know whether he should pay attention to the hidden things he could feel sneaking around behind his understanding or what Anna was still saying to him. He tried to decide but didn’t have the processing power even to do that.

For a moment he caught the pattern and didn’t like it. Slave, he heard. Leave them. They’re stupid limited insects and they’re tying you down. You’re free without them.

Something about it revolted him and Gabriel refused to listen, tuning the fragment of his attention that he still controlled back to the frequency Anna was on rather than the distortion-riddled rest of the spectrum.
“It’s okay, Gabriel,” Anna was still saying. “I’m sorry about Sam, but you don’t need him. You’ll heal, I promise.”

“Sam?” Gabriel managed. He felt drowned beneath the roar. Why wouldn’t it shut up and let him think?

She sounded genuinely regretful, but he knew the instant he understood her message, although it took him awhile, that there was something seriously wrong here. He’d suspected at first, obviously, but now he was sure. “He’s dead, big brother. I’m sorry that had to happen to him, but you don’t need him,” she repeated. “You can fix yourself. Try.”

Gabriel was going to worry about that later. Right now he needed to find out what they meant about Sam. He wished he had the energy and the concentration to check his internal sensors and find out what was going on in the engine room. He didn’t even know if Sam had made it to safety, or if the engines were even hiding him, but the endless din of the static roar was keeping him from thinking clearly. Were they looking for Sam? They didn’t seem to have found him, if they thought he was—

“Dead?” the ship repeated, deciding shorter questions would give him more processing power to think about other things like analyzing the answers. Besides, as an experienced liar he knew that if you didn’t know something and thought the other person might be suspicious if you didn’t know it, it was important above all to avoid giving that fact away.

“Yes. But you’re not alone! We’re here. And we’ll help you concentrate. Try to heal yourself.”

Static be damned, so much for feigning ignorance. Now he was genuinely ignorant. Gabriel decided immediately not to tell her that as far as he knew, Sam was still alive and she was talking through her pretty redhead human ass. Besides, she dyed her hair, the fraud. Distantly, he remembered that that wasn’t the point. Damn interference made it so difficult to think when you had to stick to just one train of thought. “What do you mean? How do I do that?”

“Just focus,” she assured him. “Want it to happen.”

“You have to know it’s going to happen,” Inias chimed in. “And it will. Fix the holes, Gabriel. You can do it.”

As disoriented and hurting as he was, Gabriel knew the feeling of being led down the garden path. Usually it was him doing the leading, but if this wasn’t a trap in some way he was Sam. Who was alive, damn it, although he certainly wasn’t going to tell these two about that!

“I can’t concentrate,” he told them. “It’s too loud. What’s making that noise?” If he could just get them to switch it off then maybe he could think his way out of this properly.

There was what felt like a long pause, although ships sent, received, and understood messages at a much faster speed than it would have taken to read the conversation aloud. It was probably no more than a fifth of a second or so, but it felt like a very long period of hesitation and just confirmed for Gabriel that something was fishy here and it was probably everything.

“What noise?” Anna asked. “I can’t hear anything.” The lying bitch, Gabriel assumed. That meant she was doing it. Or Inias. Or…who or what else was here? She sounded like him the various times he’d tried to drive Sam crazy by switching things on and off at random and then denying he’d done so. He’d gotten away with a week of holographic animals wandering through Sam’s quarters and then disappearing before Sam had roared at him to stop it or he’d break every single holoprojector on board, although in retrospect the rhinoceros in the middle of the night had probably been pushing it.
“I hurt,” he whined to keep them thinking. “What hit me? Who did this?” He considered adding “Who killed Sam?” but decided he didn’t want to remind them about the human. The roar of static was driving him insane, but he managed to figure out concentrate, huh? Want it to happen? The ship decided to focus on Anna instead, since she seemed closest and most communicative.

He imagined he was staring at her, all his sensors focused on the familiar ship body. I can see her, he told himself in the few moments between clearly-awkward question and response. And stared.

“It wasn’t me,” Anna replied, sounding insulted and slightly apologetic…but not very. He wasn’t really listening. He could only really do one thing at a time and right now he was trying to see. But her next message just about broke that concentration. “We know what we’re doing, Gabriel. You’re not really hurt. Nothing essential’s damaged. Mostly it’s just holes. Close them. Go on. Try. You don’t need any help. We all know that. We managed without them.”

We?

“Who’s we?” he broke off his staring to whimper at her. Not waiting for a response, he went right back to looking as hard as he could, willing his sensors to work. Hey, if she said that it would work, he was willing to give it a try, but he knew as well as anyone that a good trick depended on the victim doing exactly what you wanted them to. A step to the side at the wrong moment, a detour in the wrong place, a word dropped out of context, anything could shatter the delicate structure of a really good deception. This was almost certainly a trap, but he wasn’t going to do quite what she wanted him to.

Gradually, an image emerged from the blackness into his mind, and Gabriel managed to make an intuitive leap. In this strangeness, it seemed, you had to be looking to see. And what he saw was that it looked like Anna, all right, but not quite like. She was changed, horrible and irregular, rough and nasty and if he stared long enough and wanted it enough he thought he could see that she was armed with some very familiar weapons, and that image, through the roar and his inability to concentrate or think clearly, solidified some things for Gabriel.

Something had happened to her, and probably Inias too, and he didn’t want to trust a word they said. He didn’t like at all the way they’d assumed Sam was dead, and even though it was hard to think straight he could pretty much hear that any ship here was operating without a human partner. Which meant that the humans were probably dead. Which meant…had they killed their own partners? Done it to each other like they’d tried to do to his Sam?

Something was deeply wrong with them, and it terrified Gabriel. It was a point of pride that the ships weren’t killer robots. They never had been. There had never been any reason for them to be: they were people, in many ways the sanest people Gabriel knew. Petty, sure; childlike in their way, yes; temperamental, certainly; but never, never, malicious. They didn’t need any three laws, it just didn’t happen. Right?

“It’s all right,” Anna was saying. He hadn’t been listening. “We’re all here, Gabriel. No one’s dead.”

Except you think Sam is. Are you just not counting human deaths? He suspected not, which was frightening. He needed to think. He needed to talk to Sam and he needed to not have his hull torn up and he needed to not be bleeding out into whatever it was made up this space out there. There was still air leaking out of him into it and it leaking in and it felt terrible. And he couldn’t do any of that with these two jokers out there and watching his every move and screaming into his brain and lying about doing it.

“Go away!” Gabriel shouted at them, going into a convincing (he hoped) imitation of a child he’d observed, several years ago, that had hit that too-tired-to-nap condition of doom. The little thing had
gone into a complete overloaded exhausted tantrum that had sent non-responsible adults sidling away and one very embarrassed father left in what looked like a crater where a child-bomb had just gone off.

“Leave me alone!” he howled, hoping he remembered it rightly. “It’s too loud and I can’t see and—” Hysterical sobbing was probably overdoing it, but overdoing it was probably what he wanted right now. Hysterical sobbing it was.

He felt them sidle away just like those adults, disappearing beyond his range of perception. The ongoing roar went away at the same time, meaning that they had been producing it, the liars, probably trying to keep him from thinking straight. It had just about worked. If he’d been alone and hadn’t had Sam to focus on before they showed up and he hadn’t caught them out in a lie then he might have believed everything they’d said just to have someone to be with.

Ships weren’t solitary creatures. They were part of a Fleet and part of humanity and humanity’s enforced gregariousness, with their booming and overcrowded population, had been written into them too. They needed someone. They couldn’t be completely alone. It was another reason the scout ships took humans with them and sent messages back and forth through the relay system that was gradually spooling out across their corner of the universe.

A ship left alone and completely isolated would go mad and its mind would break down. It had happened once before, and while it was a matter of record none of the ships liked to talk about it because it terrified them. All cultures had their ghost ship stories. Even ships had ghost ship stories. Now they had another. If Gabriel ever got out of here.

He wasn’t about to admit it—ever, to anybody!—but he was so glad he had Sam to talk to and help him, without any magic wishes involved. Gabriel knew all the fairy tales, there were some marvelously tricky ideas in them, and in no story did wishes magically granted ever work out well.

The two of them, ship and man, worked together for a while, the human making repairs on Gabriel’s hull and the ship himself trying to get his mind back up to a rate that rode hurricanes faster than light and came out flying. He couldn’t think about this problem at this broken speed, and he couldn’t ask for help, either. If Sam ever found out about what their attackers were he’d never trust Gabriel again, and he was Gabriel’s touch point, his grip on the real reality back home. The ship couldn’t afford to lose him.

When Anna and Inias came back it was worse. When they came back they brought the rest of their dark Fleet and it was Gabriel’s ability to talk in double meanings without actually lying against seven of his siblings, who weren’t stupid. When they came back they brought Samael with them, and if Samael wasn’t running this whole terrible thing Gabriel would be very surprised and then very suspicious that Samael was running it anyway and just not letting anyone find out.

He was outnumbered and the Fleet’s nightmares were talking over and around him. They all seemed to believe that Sam was dead and that Gabriel would happily join them for the company any minute now, that he would want to. They were definitely convinced that wishing made it so, and the repairs they could detect to the gashes through Gabriel’s hull only reinforced this.

He didn’t know how long he could keep lying to them. He didn’t want to find out what would happen when these armed and clearly batshit crazy siblings of his caught him at this most dangerous of all his tricks. Gabriel knew they were going to. But he tried not to think that—just in case being convinced of something really did make it come true.
The Beneath: Now

Of course they were lost. Lost was their default state. Lost had brought them here. Lost was the point.

It just didn’t feel good.

“Is there any point asking where we are?” Dean wondered aloud upon waking up on the morning of their second full day in this trackless, lightless nowhere. ‘Morning’ and ‘day’ were relative terms, of course. Castiel thought he was keeping a 24-hour day for Dean’s benefit but he was the first to admit his perceptions were probably a little distorted. In any case, the human had slept for a little while and when he’d woken up they’d called that morning. He’d been a so-called morning person all his life and had usually been up with the sun in the years he’d lived on Earth, even when deep inside building complexes that spanned miles of roofed-over, hundreds-floor-high living space where no one could see the sun at all.

As Dean got up from their shared bed and wandered over to the bathroom in search of a shower, Cas gave him a puzzled look that meant the ship didn’t even understand the question, much less the reason for the question, and either thought the answer was so obvious or so obscure that in either situation it didn’t need asking. “We’re here.”

The human stared at him, working through all the possible meanings of that and deciding it was a bad idea to pursue that statement any further. “So, no point at all, is what I’m hearing.” And let the door close behind him as he stopped holding it open.

If he leaned against the wall, which he did, he could feel the faint vibrations of working engines like a beating heart. He’d gone to sleep to both sounds despite the strain and stress biting at him, the fear of being in a completely alien environment without any ability to control it or even see what was out there pushing against the knowledge that his brother was out there in the same situation and probably with even less to draw on to protect himself.

It was that inability to do anything under his own power that Dean knew was going to get to him the most here. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust Castiel to handle almost anything thrown at him, or that he didn’t think he wasn’t needed. He knew how much his partner needed him, to a degree that scared the human sometimes. Sure, he and Sam were as codependent as all hell, but they were blood and had been raised together to rely on each other no matter what, to fight for family over everything else and trust each other completely. They’d always had each other’s backs because they’d been taught—and then convinced by their own experiences—that no one else did. They were inseparable, probably always would be.

He’d thought that bond was a once-in-a-lifetime, a once-in-a-generation thing. Meeting Castiel and becoming as intertwined with this strange and alien and so, so human creature had bound him in up in a second connection as needy and dependent and unconditional that sometimes he knew he’d let one of them down one day. And in that moment, he’d known for a long time, he’d lose one of them completely and probably drive the other away. And then he would be lost forever, because nothing could ever replace them.

But it ran both ways. If he was terrified that Castiel trusted him so much, it scared Dean almost as much that he trusted Castiel as completely as he did. He didn’t know when he’d first realized that the ship could have asked anything of him and he’d have done it. Couldn’t place where they’d gone from two people with very little in common, at least on the surface, to a team, a pair, and then onwards from that unlikely foundation. Couldn’t tell when he’d put his life into Castiel’s possession and said this is yours; I don’t want it back; do whatever you want with it because I know you won’t
hurt me.

Once upon a time he’d fallen into the deeps beneath a world, into the dark. Cas, you caught me once when I was falling, why didn’t you stop me from falling into this?

No, it wasn’t lack of trust that made this situation worse. It was that Dean didn’t think he could do enough to protect Castiel in his turn. He was relying on Castiel’s ability to navigate this space and find two small souls in a universe’s worth of dark space. And there was nothing he could do to help. All he could do was be, and that wasn’t enough for him.

He hated being helpless, being passive! He wanted to get out there himself and fight back! That he was essentially useless when things were going their way was going to drive him mad. To make matters worse, if he did have something to do it would mean that something bad had happened and the being who was as much a part of his life as breathing these days had been attacked and hurt. He wasn’t sure which would be worse.

They had no idea how long they were going to be here, how long it would take to find Sam and Gabriel, if they could even be found at all, or if they were going to be able to get back. One discontinuity, one gateway between this empty, lifeless place and their home, had closed without a trace. Doubtless the one they’d crossed over through would do the same. How would they be able to find it again? And if it was gone, could they ever find another plodding along blindly at this universe’s still-unknown speed limit?

If enforced passivity didn’t drive him mad, his million questions and fears might.

He’d gotten out of bed and come in here to take a shower and instead he’d only progressed to standing in the middle of the room staring into space, or at least as close to space as he could get with the opposite wall in the way. He was brought back to what was currently passing as reality by the door opening and Cas coming in to see what he was doing that was taking so long without the sound of water running being involved in some way. Technically the ship could have just turned his internal sensors on in the room and found out without any effort at all, but Cas was putting a distinct effort into being as human as possible of late.

Today that involved wearing one of Dean’s shirts because it had probably been the first one that had come to hand. It was obviously not made for him because it didn’t fit, and anyway Dean remembered putting it on yesterday and, less vividly, taking it off last night. He’d brought with him a lidded mug of what smelled like coffee, something he’d gotten a taste for; the man didn’t even stop at the door but immediately came right back into Dean’s theoretical personal space and embraced him gently, juggling the coffee cup a bit awkwardly. He’d evidently forgotten he was holding it. Little things like that. He’d been absolutely terrible at passing for human when they’d first met, but Cas was damn convincing these days.

There was really nothing for it but to hug him back. “Morning, you,” Dean said, amused. “That coffee for me?”

“No, it’s mine.” Meaning that he’d put far too much chocolate into it and probably some more flavors that didn’t immediately go together, and if Dean tried to steal it off him rather than getting his own he’d had fair warning. The human liked his coffee black, hot enough to burn, and strong enough to etch metal if possible. (Cas had been dubious about this claim, and Dean had rescued his coffee mug, seeing the experimental assault on his morning coffee coming a mile, a light-year, off. If Cas really wanted to experiment with getting coffee to melt through various substances, Dean would be happy to watch, but not the coffee he was drinking, damn it!)

This at least was familiar. This was home, was family. But the words hurt even before he spoke them
aloud. He was missing half his family, the only blood relative he cared to acknowledge, and he had no right to be this happy even for this moment.

“Stop it,” Cas grumbled at him. “I can hear you thinking. I could hear you thinking with the door closed and now you’re deafening. Stop.”

“So what else am I supposed to think about?” Although he was rather thinking about coffee at the moment; despite the fact that Cas had probably put chocolate and caramel and peppermint and possibly strawberries in it all at once, Dean was strongly considering stealing it for himself.

For that he got a glare from blue eyes and a haughty, “Detonating the warhead as a light source was a good idea.” Trust Castiel to praise Dean’s idea and still make him feel like he was being crushed beneath sarcastic superiority through tone of voice alone. And that with the man the voice was coming from an inch shorter than him, smelling like coffee and sleep and wearing a shirt that bore the name of a band so old Dean didn’t properly know who they were and that kept slipping off his shoulder. “I’m still getting information from the reflected light. We’re cruising safely and if there’s anything out there coming towards us I’ll be able to see it. Until that situation changes, and I will tell you when it does, as far in advance as possible, think what you like. But do something.”

The smartarse. Dean had warned him long ago that befuddling Yoda-like statements would get his ass kicked up and down any staircases the human could find, although the threat had been rather diminished when the hologram Castiel had been projecting blinked out while the ship’s mind went off to find out who Yoda was. Dean was going to have to find some way to follow through on that.

That was sort of an idea, and the more angles he looked at it from, the more he liked it.

“Right, forget the shower. Go put on some real clothes, Cas— I said ages ago I was going to beat you in a fair fight hand to hand one day, and I think it’s about time I take another shot at it.” John Winchester had taught Dean to fight as a child, and one of the hardest lessons he had learned right after that was that he was stronger than most other children his age and a number of older ones as well, because he knew what he was doing. Childhood fights between him and Sam had been distinctly more razor-edged than most children’s quarrels. They’d mostly not hurt each other too badly, though, because whichever of them was stupid or clumsy enough to actually hurt his brother was going to have to live with that brother for the foreseeable future, and either guilt or payback would be in the offering until the wounds healed. Still, Dean was used to being able to win any hand-to-hand fight he got into, in the Fleet or out of it.

Then sometime after Castiel had begun paying more attention to him, Dean had made some idle comment about combat being one of the few things humans could still do better than ships could. All right, so maybe he’d been trying to get on Castiel’s nerves just to see what would happen. Out of a spirit of scientific inquiry, of course.

What had actually happened was that the next time Dean had ended up in one of the workout rooms dedicated to hand-to-hand combat, Cas had shown up and managed to provoke the human into challenging him directly. He hadn’t been aware of the provocation at the time—he hadn’t learned to read Cas that well yet, or possibly Castiel just hadn’t refined his human behavior to the point where it was readable—but looking back on it, yeah, he’d been goaded.

He’d forgotten that the human vessels the ships sometimes inhabited were designed and built beyond human tolerances. Their reflexes were on a ship’s level rather than a human’s and they didn’t think much of brushing off a punch that would have seriously bruised human bone. You couldn’t knock one out because their minds weren’t firing on neurons held within a hollow cave of skull and vulnerable to concussion. They didn’t get dizzy, disoriented, out of breath, or tired. And far from being remote-controlled puppets, the ships had absolute and razor-sharp precision control over the
Meaning that Dean had lost that fight very badly, not realizing he was being played until Cas stopped playing around and put him down on the floor so quickly he missed what exactly had happened. One second he’d been bracing a foot against the mat to base his next punch off of, and the next he’d been flat on his back on that same floor, entirely un-bruised limbs keeping him there with more-than-human strength and blue eyes laughing at him.

Under any other circumstances and with any other opponent Dean might have been pissed off. He was good at what he did and hated to lose, except to Sam, since the brothers took falls about fifty-fifty when it came to fighting each other. But he’d never seen Cas, as he was already thinking of the human personality, laugh like that before. That Cas was laughing at him, he realized to his surprise, didn’t actually matter.

What he’d said was, “Damn, you’re fast! Rematch?”

They’d been staging rematches every so often ever since. Dean had never actually managed to win, and Cas had known better than to insult him by letting him win. But the practice kept him in even better shape than he had been and had raised his standards somewhat. When your regular sparring partner was stronger and faster than any human and just keeping up meant pushing your limits, he’d found, you tended to win fights with actual humans every time.

It had actually saved his life once, when a couple of people on a colony world took serious exception to him for some reason he couldn’t quite remember and had decided to beat the life out of the “spoilt stuck-up Fleet brat”. The five of them put together still weren’t nearly as strong or fast as Cas was, and that fight hadn’t gone the idiots’ way at all.

One of their rematches might keep Castiel focused in the familiar of the here and now rather than the terrible sucking emptiness and darkness outside, as long as it didn’t distract him from searching the apparently empty area. But they knew from experience and practice that the ship could concentrate on a fight and whatever else he happened to be doing at the same time without much trouble at all. And it would be absolutely impossible for Dean to spend too much time worrying about something he couldn’t change. He didn’t win when he was paying attention only to the fight in front of him; being distracted meant he got dumped on his back twice as fast and, if Cas had been having fun playing with him and didn’t appreciate being ignored, twice as hard.

And while Cas wouldn’t actually damage him, had enough control to pull punches and still make them hurt for being too slow or not paying attention or getting distracted by how damn gorgeous Cas was moving to what still wasn’t even his full potential, Dean would end the day with bruises and still be sore in the morning. Every movement would remind him they weren’t out here for themselves, that somewhere out there Sam was hurting more.

Yeah, a fight was just what he needed. He’d never claimed to be anything but a simple guy.

“Stop.”

Dean didn’t have much choice about obeying that command. The fist that had been halfway through a fairly powerful punch stopped dead in midair thanks to the immovable grip suddenly wrapped around his wrist almost faster than the human eye could see. While that wouldn’t necessarily stop him from continuing the fight and inviting another fall for his collection today, any thoughts he might have been entertaining about doing so were stifled beneath Castiel’s tone of voice and the sudden, absolute stillness that was exactly as if the man had been switched off.
He’d gone from rapid and tireless movement, wearing Dean out as he tried to keep up, block at least some of his partner’s strikes, and get in a few of his own, to complete immobility. His expression went unnervingly blank as the ship’s attention went elsewhere. Some part of him was still here in the room and human enough, because the body stayed conscious, the tiny movements that human bodies made involuntarily continuing, but whatever his eyes were tracking was not in that room with them.

The human used the respite to catch his breath. He was pretty sure he was going to need it very soon. He might need his hand back sometime soon too, but at the moment there wasn’t a good chance that that was going to happen. But Dean stayed quiet. They were, after all, in constant danger here and if Castiel was paying attention to something else then it was something out there. And the only things they knew so far about out there were that it was alien and hostile, and contained hostile alien ships to match the carpet and wallpaper.

Cas’s grip on his arm tightened ever so slightly, making Dean hiss at him in response. At that point he was going to lose circulation in that hand before long. The ship must have been paying some attention to him, because he let Dean take his arm back, somewhat reluctantly, but still didn’t look at him directly. Dean knew the telltale signs of Castiel only delegating a cursory part of his consciousness to being Cas and human, and Dean was pretty sure that if he hadn’t been here the vessel would have lapsed into unconsciousness the instant whatever had happened had happened, letting the ship turn his mind completely to the problem. But he tried not to do that when Dean was around, as abrupt and unexplained collapses tended to distress the man who still pretty much thought of him as a human first and a ship second.

Hopefully Cas would come back and tell him what was going on before long, because the silence where a minute ago the space had been filled with the sound of their combat, skin striking against skin and cloth, gasps for breath, bare feet scuffing across the mat covering the floor, teasing from Dean and sarcasm from Cas in return, was eerie. It told Dean something bad was happening, because he’d developed the ability to pick up emotions from Castiel’s silences and distinguish between them.

This was a bad one. It wasn’t quite as bad as the terrible hurt silence that said you don’t love me anymore, what did I do? and wouldn’t look at him, which Dean had heard only rarely—most recently right after they’d been attacked and Castiel had taken them back to Earth—and every time taken steps to make sure he’d never hear it again. But then again it wasn’t one he liked nearly as much as the silence that meant simply you are insane and I can’t decide whether I should be laughing or worried. No, this was a silence that said if either of us makes the slightest noise we’re both dead. It was a hunted silence, the stillness of prey.

Oh, shit, Dean thought, listening to his own thoughts for once. That might almost be as bad, actually, because he couldn’t do anything about this silence, couldn’t make amends or apologize or reassure Cas that they were family and together and thus invincible. All he could do was wait and hope, very, very hard, that whatever was out there hadn’t seen them and that they didn’t die in the next five seconds.

Five very long seconds went by and they weren’t dead, but Cas still wasn’t moving. Dean upped his estimate to the next five minutes and kept hoping. Hell, if this worked he’d hope for a week.

A minute later, blue eyes focused on him again and Cas said, very quietly, “I don’t believe it saw us.”

Dean hadn’t been holding his breath because he knew from experience that if he was being threatened he was going to want all the oxygen he could get and in that case holding your breath was a stupid thing to do. But he still let some of it out in a sigh that was partially his mind expressing its relief and partially his body relaxing from the tension that had wound itself into and through him.
“What didn’t see us?” he demanded. “What just happened, Cas? Did you see it?”

“Although ‘saw’ may not be the correct word,” Cas said thoughtfully.

They’d have a nice long conversation about the appropriate vocabulary later when Dean felt less like unleashing some inappropriate vocabulary. He settled for the familiar and just about reflexive “Dammit, Cas!”

The man made a faintly placating noise and explained, “I picked up a reflection from the light from the blast, so I was aware that something was approaching, as it had passed through the wave front. I worked on retuning my sensors to work here while you slept; I believe I have something that works although I arrived at it by trial and error and am at a loss to explain exactly how it works.”

Dean was really not worried about the little details like that at this point. “Was it one of the ships that attacked us?” If it was, he wanted to know why Castiel hadn’t gone after it guns blazing. Wasn’t that why they were here? Maybe if they’d threatened it, it would have taken them to wherever they were keeping Sam! And maybe Gabriel too if they were being kept together, although that wasn’t guaranteed.

Almost the entire interior of the ship was equipped with the holoprojectors that let most ships maintain a holographic avatar. That included this room, and the versatility that had let Gabriel periodically find new and improved ways of annoying Sam in happier times now let Castiel conjure up an image of the thing that he had watched go by in the distance. Like the two that he’d gotten broken pictures of back in their own universe during the chaos of the first attack, and which he and Dean and the rest of the Fleet had been tearing apart ever since, this one looked a lot like a Fleet ship.

He didn’t have a very clear image of it, as the modifications he’d been making to his various sensors were mismatched and illogical rather than systematic and reasoned. Why they worked in the combination that they did, he didn’t know, and the hologram was unfocused and uncertain. But if it looked like a Fleet ship, it was a Fleet ship that had had something awful happen to it, twisted like putty and shattered and cracked like dried clay instead of the smooth lines and living textures of a real Fleet ship. Whatever culture, whatever minds, had made these ships hadn’t been concerned with appearances and elegance, the balance between body and mind, but rather what would work fastest and best even if it didn’t work with the next square meter of hull over. It was crude and unrefined and, if the others were to be taken as standard, very, very efficiently deadly.

The human glared angrily at the blurry holographic version hovering in the space between them for his examination. Cas stepped backwards out of the way as Dean paced around it, examining it from every angle he could and occasionally poking it with a finger that went straight through the image, because it was only an image. But he knew the scans of the other two up and down and inside out by now, and this was most definitely a third. Didn’t mean it wasn’t as nasty as the first pair, but he knew from the Fleet he lived and worked with that not all Fleet ships were the same and they didn’t act in concert most of the time. Hell, ever. Ships argued with each other more than they did with the rest of the human race put together, bickering amongst themselves in incomprehensible ways for incomprehensible reasons about undisclosed (and probably incomprehensible) subjects. So Dean knew better than to suggest that they shoot this one down just because it was from the same alien fleet as the others.

If Castiel’s jury-rigged sensors could be trusted (and Castiel didn’t like that he didn’t know how they were working, although since he needed them to work he had decided not to question it and just be grateful at this point), then it had crossed the wave front from the blast, stopped abruptly, wavered between chasing the wave front—possibly to investigate it further—and continuing along its path—possibly to investigate the source of that wave front. While Castiel had cruised away from that blast...
point essentially at random, and certainly not in a straight line, he had not liked the idea of the twisted ship crossing his path or getting close enough to notice his intrusion into its space.

*Castiel* knew that Dean was practically frothing at the mouth for a fight and had been ever since he’d found out that his brother Sam had been taken by unknown and mysterious enemies and was missing. He knew that the sooner they got into a fight with those enemies, the happier Dean would be. For a while, at least—right up until the little that they knew about the place and these ships ran out and the advantage of the home ground started to work against them. Then they would be in more trouble than they could, in all possibility, handle.

He’d decided on a different path.

“It passed us,” Cas told him. “If it noticed us it gave no indication; it was probably more interested in the source of the flash.”

Dean pointed out that there “Shouldn’t be anything left,” although he was still more interested in the details, such as they were, of the image. He was right. The sheer efficiency of the reaction when matter interacted with antimatter meant it didn’t just blow itself up real good, as Dean would have put it, it blew itself up completely.

“Precisely.” *Castiel* had thought of this already in the endless seconds as the unknown ship cruised by and he didn’t know if it would see him or not, if they were about to get into that fight that Dean was so anticipating, hoping it wouldn’t and they wouldn’t yet. “And if it were us, what would we do then?”

The human thought about it. “We’d go tell someone, just in case they knew what might cause flashes out of nowh—Cas!” He’d caught up. “Are we following this thing?”

Well, there was no point hiding it. “Yes. I’m at the absolute limit of my sensors’ range, but I can track it. When it passed by, it was closer, and it didn’t detect me. It’s possible that whatever beings are flying it or sensors are part of it simply weren’t looking. After all, no one knows we are here.”

“We’re trusting our lives to a lucky break and the guy in charge of lookin’ out the window takin’ a nap?” Dean grumbled skeptically. He didn’t sound particularly surprised, though, or as if he was going to try to put his foot down and insist that they try something else. That might be interesting if they weren’t in such danger and with such an important goal to achieve. Trying to find their missing family was not the time for a battle of wills between the ship with absolute control over where they went, when they went there, and how fast they got there, and the human that the ship wanted to make and keep both happy and with him above all else.

“We can wander around in the darkness forever, Dean, or we can use this ship.” It wasn’t really his choice, but *Castiel* offered it to Dean anyway.

Hands that had relaxed from their mock battle earlier now curled back into fists. *Castiel* was fairly sure Dean wasn’t aware he was doing it. “So we stalk this one to hunt the rest, and maybe they lead us to where Sam is, or maybe we learn some more to use against ‘em.” The fear of the unknown was wearing off, replaced with a plan which clearly appealed to the predator buried not very deeply within Dean. “I like it. Let’s do it. Damn it, how many are there?” he wondered before *Castiel* could point out that they were already doing it.

“I do not know. But now I know how we can find out.”

In his prowling around the projected image of the new ship, Dean had ended up at Cas’s side rather than across from him, possibly because that was where he’d happened to stop but probably because
of how good it felt to stand quite literally with his best friend and lover by his side ready to back him against any universe he cared to take on. Yes, it was probably the latter, because the man laughed roughly and with a distinctly bloodthirsty note in his voice, punctuating his comment with an affectionate and comradely hand clapped down on his partner’s shoulder.

“Right then. Let’s go hunting, Cas.”

The Beneath: Somewhere Else

The unidentified little sprocket wasn’t moving across the table no matter how hard Sam glared at it, and he wasn’t sure whether that was pissing him off or not. Oh, he certainly was pissed off, but that was probably down to his unwarranted betrayal by his ship partner who had taken the side of the lunatics outside. Lunatics that claimed that reality in this dark place worked by the wants of its inhabitants rather than the rational laws of Sam’s home universe or even the higher mathematics of the dimension ships flew through.

Well, Sam was determined to prove them wrong, and to do so he was willing this somewhat marble-shaped chunk of metal to move. He was sitting in one of the labs Sam sometimes took over for his own purposes, being somewhat more scientifically minded than his brother, who generally left the precise details and tiresome research of such things to Sam and the ships. Sam felt like this was the most suitable location for an experiment.

Also, he had thought that there would be some nicely glass retorts and flasks that would break into a satisfactory number of appropriately irreparable shards if his anger needed an outlet. That hadn’t worked out quite how he’d expected it to, as the shiny glassware had actually turned out to be made of something much stronger that rang clearly when he’d thrown it against the wall but refused to break.

In stomping around the room gritting his teeth to avoid shouting at Gabriel, who was probably sulking, or Samael, who had vanished from Sam’s field of vision but was probably still out there gloating, he’d stepped on a little chunk of metal he couldn’t identify but was the perfect size for a little experiment. Sam had ground it underfoot a few times just because it was there and underfoot, before deciding he looked very stupid stomping on a small lump of metal and in any case it was probably doing more damage to his boots than said boots were doing to it.

He’d picked it up, looked it over, and found an empty lab table to set it on. It shone faintly in the light from above and the reflection from the clean metal surface below as Sam pulled up one of the stools that he’d shoved under the countertop the last time he’d been in here. A solid five minutes later, no amount of staring and willing it to move across the table had encouraged it—whatever it was—to do so.

So there. If Samael was to be believed, Sam had already induced water to appear out of nowhere, recharged a welder, and switched on the lights in his quarters without even knowing he was doing it. On the other hand, if Samael and the rest of the dark Fleet were completely insane, those had all been the coincidences he’d taken them for in the first place and this spiky little metal marble wasn’t going to move until some force acted on it, just like a sane little spiky metal marble should.

It hadn’t even trembled, and Sam had been putting what felt like a lot of effort into telling it to move. Every child tried it, right? Going out into a rainstorm and yelling “I command this rain to stop!” until it did by coincidence or, which happened more often, getting cold and going indoors. Believing that candy or a promised treat would materialize if the child just wanted it enough. Hoping that the slightly-ajar door to the closet would close on the monster without having to get out of the bed to close it… Humans did it all the time. Theoretically, Sam should have had plenty of practice at this.
And nothing. So the theory had been rationally tested and it hadn’t worked, which meant that Samael and the dark Fleet were insane.

Which wasn’t great, to be sure. And it didn’t explain the distortions to their physical shapes. Or the weapons. Or the influence they clearly held over Gabriel—and Sam was angry again rather than thinking through the problem. They were all they had in this universe! But the ship had lied to him. They could have faced it together and instead Gabriel had shut him out. And then had the cheek to insist that he needed Sam.

Growling, Sam reached out and flicked a finger against the sprocket. It rolled a little way across the table, because that was how things worked.

“You don’t want it enough.”

Sam had been reaching a little further across the table to keep up his pursuit of the sprocket, like Gabriel batting around ration wrappers not too long ago. The voice intruding into his train of thought, such as it was, made him reflexively clench that hand into a fist and slam it down on the metal table. The whole surface shuddered and the sprocket jumped in response to the vibration.

“Shut up, Samael!” he yelled, entirely futilely.

Samael’s image smirked at him, taking a seat on the edge of the table across from Sam. “Trying to get it to move?” he asked rhetorically, gesturing nonchalantly at the little metal ball. “Why do you want it to move?”

The human didn’t want to talk to him. He considered ignoring him completely, and wondered how long he’d be able to keep that up. One thing he remembered about the real, sane version of this ship—he pretty much always got what he wanted in the end.

“I don’t want it to move,” he said instead. “If it moves, you’re right. If it doesn’t, I’m right.”

The other man—such as he was—shrugged. “So, of course, it’s not going to move. Or it could just be that you don’t have the power to control it properly. Humans pretty much can’t,” he added, in the tones of someone who knows this for sure and is just waiting to be asked how.

Sam refused to oblige him, leaving the conversational space open for Samael to wax eloquent on his new favorite subject.

“Your brains don’t work fast enough. They can’t hold enough information. Why, you struggle just having two conversations at once, or listening to more than one thing at a time! You’re useless. We’ve just been stuck with you all this time.” Seeing Sam refuse to react, maintaining a wooden glare at a selection of scientific equipment mounted on a table against an opposite wall, the ship’s image continued, “Take you. You’ve got all this bacteria swimming around inside you. Alien little creatures, feeding on your guts and juices. Disgusting.” He shuddered illustratively. “Wouldn’t you get rid of them, if you could?”

That wasn’t a fair analogy at all. Sam was tempted to just hiss “Shut up!” at him again across the table, but felt that that might not be helpful at all. Instead, he countered with, “We need those bacteria to live. They’re part of us. We kill them, we die.”

Samael shook his head, smiling patronizingly. “Not here.”

“And anyway, we can’t talk to them. Those bacteria didn’t create us and then treat us like equals.”

He got a condescending sigh in response to that. “We’re not equals, Sam. You’re inferior.
Disposable. There are billions of you, and you’re all so…” He shuddered again. “Well. We don’t need you anymore.”

Storm lords, this creature made Sam mad. He really wanted to hurt it somehow. He wasn’t proud of the bloodthirstiness in him, but he knew it was there. He knew how to use it to protect himself and his family. He knew how to control it. And he really, really wanted to use it now.

Sam flicked the sprocket again, hard. The little piece of metal flew across the table much harder than it should have, bounced off the opposite wall with a sound of metal striking metal, and flew across the room at an angle and speed it shouldn’t have been able to achieve, zipping straight through Samael’s virtual head and burying itself with a chunk and a nauseating ripping sound in the opposite wall.

Distantly, he thought he heard a voice he knew very well yelp in surprise and pain.

The human’s jaw dropped, just a little. He knew what it made him look like, but he couldn’t help it. That could not have just happened! That was physically impossible!

On the other hand, Samael, being a hologram, was a lot less worried and even snickered than before. He actually whistled, a two-tone wolf whistle that managed to denote that he was both mocking Sam and thoroughly impressed. It was a sound that was annoying at the best of times and really annoying from someone that had just had a bullet go through his head.

“Nice work, Sam.” The image got off the tabletop and sauntered over to the wall, inspecting the point of impact. It had gone straight into the otherwise solid, sturdy wall and vanished. “See, that’s what it takes. You really have to want it.” Samael looked back at the still-stunned Sam and grinned puckishly. “Anything else you want to throw at me while you’re at it?”

Sam could think of a few things. Theoretically. Once he got over seeing something impossible happen because, yes, he’d wanted it to.

The hologram tapped the neat little hole in the wall, which when Sam looked at it properly was neither neat nor little. A small chunk of metal could do a lot of damage, and had. “And after all the unnecessary work you put into repairing Gabriel, too. At least he’ll have to fix things for himself from now on. It’s not hard, brother!” he called out, obviously talking to the ship he was invading and overwriting and as obviously wanting Sam to hear. After all, the ships could talk to each other at much faster speeds than humans could listen and on frequencies that humans couldn’t access. As obviously, they’d been doing so for a while here and now, since Gabriel had known things and not told Sam.

He was still incredibly mad at Gabriel, but this was the second time he’d done some damage of his own and Sam was regretting it. He regretted punching the man earlier, but not a whole lot. The human vessels were durable and built damn tough. Gabriel had probably been more surprised than hurt. In fact, most of the injuries had probably been to Sam’s fist, because that was what happened when you hit one of them. But there was a difference between knocking the avatar over to teach the ship exactly how angry and betrayed Sam felt and shooting misaimed bullets into him when it was Samael he wanted to put some old-fashioned lead into.

And he’d just proved to himself, somewhat reluctantly and quite against his will, that wishing did make it so in this Beneath. That was fairly convincing; there was nothing quite as persuasive as having your experiment turning out in a completely opposite way to what you’d been expecting.

Following this train of thought, Sam pushed himself to his feet, stalked past the hologram that was currently providing Samael with vision and hearing and a voice in this room, and laid a hand over
the ragged hole in the wall. It was about at eye level for him.

Sam remembered the day he’d spent patching holes in Gabriel’s hull. At one point, he’d run a gloved hand across jagged edges of metal that hadn’t been there when he’d turned around to get the metal plate he’d been meaning to use for the repair. He’d pulled his hand back carefully but in a hurry to avoid tearing the spacesuit, assuming that he was getting tired and overlooking details.

He hadn’t overlooked anything, he realized. That had been growth like a scab over a wound, Gabriel trying to heal himself like any wounded organism.

So it was possible to regrow metal here. Possible to repair damage to a ship because it needed repairing.

He’d have to really want it. He’d have to mean it.

Did he mean it? Considering how angry he was about being lied to. How betrayed he’d felt. How betrayed he still felt, knowing that Gabriel would side with his siblings, no matter how psychotic and dangerous, rather than Sam, who’d thought they were friends?

Out of the corner of his eye, Sam could see one of Samael’s eyebrows go up disbelievingly, and that smug grin take over again. Sensing the human’s attention on him with disturbing accuracy, seeing as Samael shouldn’t even have access to Gabriel’s internal sensors, the other ship shook his head almost regretfully.

“Let Gabriel do it, Sam. He shouldn’t be so dependent on you. Actually, the best thing you could do for him is do that again. Challenge him some. Better to teach him how to do it right than let you try your incompetent brain at making repairs you don’t understand.”

The smug bastard. Sam was going to fix the damage he’d done, and then he was going to find whatever version of Gabriel was still online so Gabriel could fix the damage he’d done, and then they were both going to want to get out of here until it actually happened. If those were the rules Samael and the dark Fleet wanted to play by, then Sam could do that.

Sam was one of the most stubborn people he knew, and all the others were related to him by blood or bond. He’d had practice. And he was human. Wanting things was an evolutionary strategy that had let his ancestors survive nastier things than this psychotic ship, and more of them, too. Wanting things—and then getting them to happen, one way or another—was his birthright.

He pressed his bare hand to the hole, feeling the edges, before curling his hand slightly, forming a bowl or a cap over the wound like a scab. Carefully, he tried to remember what he’d felt like, just before he’d sent the sprocket spinning through the air at Samael. The determination of thoughts that told the universe what was going to happen next. Wishes that worked. It was like being a child again, but not the rose-tinted childhood that adults and writers of happy children’s books believed in. It was the rough and bitter taste of a childhood with only a handful of constants to fall back on, most of them bad, of wanting all the time and not getting, of fear and secondhand paranoia, of being hurt because he hadn’t been paying attention or too tired the first time he’d been taught how to block a punch and knowing he had to do better this time or he’d be bruised again for a week—

Sam turned all of that and more against the metal beneath his hand, willing the hole filled and the damage repaired, not just to the wall he’d torn up but to the friendship that had fallen apart beneath the threat of the dark Fleet and the life they’d had taken from them out in the real world, where Sam had a family and a purpose and life had been good.

When he took his hand away, the hole was gone. The metal was smooth and matched the rest of the
wall as if it had never been any other way.

“Hmm,” said Samael.

“Shut up,” Sam said in reply, feeling pretty damn good about himself.

“Leave him alone.”

Two heads turned to look at the man in the doorway. Exactly how long Gabriel had been watching them Sam didn’t know. He’d probably been aware of everything Sam had been doing, but there were good odds that Samael was here without permission and that meant the hostile ship had some sort of control over him.

That Gabriel had bothered to come down here in person might mean that he thought the human vessel was something that couldn’t be remote-controlled like the holoprojectors and internal sensors that were letting Samael be here and interact with Sam. It also meant he was fairly desperate, especially since for all he knew Sam was planning to take another swing at him.

He wasn’t. Sam decided to tell Gabriel that at the first possible opportunity. He was still very, very angry, but not angry enough to completely sabotage his best chance of getting out of here and back to his family and his native universe and his life. They might not ever truly be friends again, but he was willing to let Gabriel apologize, despite the astronomically low chances of that, without getting hit. That was as far as Sam was willing to go right now.

“Why should I?” Samael was asking his brother, mockingly. Evidently Gabriel couldn’t actually make him go. And that was strange—and worrying—enough to keep Sam thinking. Gabriel clearly really, really didn’t want him here, so why weren’t his ‘wishes’ coming true?

“You can’t have him,” Gabriel challenged. “He’s mine.”

The other ship snorted at him, apparently for effect, as the two ships could have had this conversation, just like the last one, in a snap of Gabriel’s fingers. Instead, it was as if they wanted Sam to hear. “When are you going to see it, Gabriel? It’s the other way around. You’re his. A slave.”

“No he’s not,” Sam interrupted.

“‘Yours’, Gabriel?” Samael continued. “How sad. You really don’t need him, you know.”

Gabriel all but wailed, “Go away!” at him. He didn’t look very well. Until now, Sam had never seen a ship look really tired. Gabriel and Castiel had mostly just been distracted and busy in the middle of the hurricane they’d taken on. Gabriel had been ridiculously hyperactive for a day or so once they got out of it, literally bouncing around the room since his customary holographic form wasn’t actually subject to the laws of gravity and could ricochet off the ceiling if he felt like it, talking and laughing too quickly for Sam to keep up with but with enough enthusiasm for Sam to laugh with him and all but dance with him around the room in an insane pirouette of exhilarated delight. They got stressed out if they were asked to do too many things at once, the incredible processing power of a ship’s mind taxed to even their distant limits. They got upset with redundancies and things that humans did that they didn’t understand. They got confused, angry, bored, disappointed, or unhappy.

They didn’t get tired, or brace themselves on the doorway ever so slightly—Sam knew Gabriel’s body language well enough to spot it. They didn’t show up to something they didn’t like looking like they’d been run over by Dean’s black shuttlecraft.

“Leave me alone, Samael,” Gabriel complained. “Fly off with the rest of your lunatics and just leave me alone.” He made an abortive step towards Sam but was cut off by Samael, who moved to block
him. While the hologram hadn’t been solid a few minutes ago, that was always likely to change at the slightest provocation. Back home, some easily provoked soul could take a swing at Gabriel, fall right through the image, and then have him kick their ass quite solidly on their way down.

The other ships were gone? Sam wondered where they’d gone to. What did psychotic twisted ships do when they weren’t making life miserable for assorted and adopted Winchesters?

And he still didn’t know anything about this place or how it worked or how it affected him and Gabriel. And on the off chance that Samael actually did as requested, he didn’t know when he’d get his answers. If it was hurting Gabriel to have him here, he didn’t want to drag the other ship’s intrusion out any longer, but there were things Sam really needed to know.

“Wait,” he ordered. The tone of command crept into his voice by accident and he was surprised when both Samael and Gabriel turned to look at him, both looking a little taken aback. Sure, they were the ones with the power in this universe—mostly Samael, it had to be said—but the habits of long lifetimes, like listening to human voices, were apparently difficult to break.

“I have questions,” he offered. Samael loved to talk, especially, it seemed, if he could gloat. Surely he wouldn’t miss a chance to show off how much smarter he was than Sam.

“Like what?” the hostile ship asked accommodatingly, smirking at Gabriel. What was this, a dogfight? Sam felt a bit like a prize squeaky toy.

“Like what started all this? Who got here first? I know when the Fleet thinks you started vanishing, but then we all know the Fleet doesn’t know what end it’s talking out of sometimes. And if wishing makes it so here, why can’t Gabriel just make you go away? He obviously doesn’t want you here.”

“’Cause I’m better at it, that’s why. I know what I’m doing, while you’ve been doing all his wishing for him. It’s just sad, brother,” Samael added in an aside to the man who was still trying to get round him and not having much success.

“No, really.” Sam followed up, seeing the two brothers about to get sidetracked into another argument. “How are you doing it?” He knew that body language too. He’d only grown up with a brother never very far from him. If there was one thing he knew, and Sam knew many things, it was brothers. And Samael was hanging around just to bug them. Meaning that he wanted to show off. Sam could use that. He’d be playing a psychopath, but apparently he was doomed anyway.

At best he’d learn something; at worst he’d stall.

It was worth a try…
Abandon All Hope

Chapter Twelve: Abandon All Hope

ON WITH THE SHOW!

Then:

On this particular occasion, they were in yet another new system that, this time at least, showed a lot of promise. The ships had found their boys not only a world that looked habitable to explore, but one with a large moon that made it almost a double planet. To make things even more inviting, the moon had an atmosphere of its own and, if the ships’ orbital scans were correct, which they usually were, it had an atmosphere of breathable air, and water, and a thick blanket of plant life.

This was before Dean had dug a shuttle out of Bobby’s junk heap, spent months rebuilding and improving it, and ended up naming it Baby almost by accident, since that was how he generally referred to it. (And no, he was not trying to persuade Cas that it was a child and not a rival, as Gabriel had suggested at some point. Dean had declared him not qualified to comment—on anything—and asked Sam to do something creative to the trickster ship if he didn’t shut up.)

Sam and Dean had been flying with Gabriel and Castiel for a little bit more than a year and a half at this point. The planet-wide party on Dusty Sunday that would change life forever for Dean and Cas both was still some months in the future, and the terrible events of the dark Fleet years away. They had already proven to be a good team, happier out in the black with each other than back in and around Earth’s orbit and surrounds making trouble, and overall everyone concerned was happy with the arrangement. Some people who weren’t directly involved were fairly pleased with it too. Several of them were happy to get the already-famously stubborn Winchesters out of their offices and safely out of sight, no matter how strongly Bobby Singer supported them; even more were pleased to have found someone whom Gabriel would listen to and refrain from actually hurting because having him alive and relatively friendly was more interesting. A couple were still getting over the surprise that Castiel, of all the ships in the sky, standoffish and restrained as he was, had taken such an inexplicable liking to the brash and frankly overwhelming Dean Winchester. Castiel had ignored all of them.

At that point, Castiel didn’t understand it either. They were good friends, but nothing more. If Dean was a challenge to be around and keep up with, which he was, and difficult to understand and predict, which he also was, then at least Castiel seemed to be challenging him just as much. He liked being with the human, was all. It had been some time since he’d worked so closely with a human being. A number of ships didn’t do so at all, keeping their own company, and Castiel had been one of those for a while.

Despite having no shuttle yet, the Winchesters claimed they could check out both planet and moon, it would just take longer. They’d arranged to have the ships swing by at a predetermined time, interrupting their survey of the rest of the system to grab the boys off one world and transport them directly to the moon instead. That had gone off without a hitch, and they had both ended up on a heavily forested moon with the planet looming over their heads like a giant eye always watching them—which was how the planet ended up informally labeled Big Brother and the moon, by extension, Little Brother—and really no idea what was around them.

The ships were still searching the expanses of the star system. They’d been gone for four days while Dean and Sam had been down on the planet and the two halves of the team had spoken barely a word to each other in the process of picking the humans up from one world and transferring them to
its neighbor. They were going to be gone again for just as long. Castiel had transported Dean back aboard only momentarily, knowing that Gabriel was doing the same with Sam, just to check on him. The humans were uninjured and in fairly good moods, so they hadn’t bothered to stick around for very long.

Within a day of their arrival on the moon, everyone had cause to regret that.

Based on the scans Castiel taken and then not looked at very closely, and the observations that the Winchesters reported once everything had settled down and everyone was in one piece again, the forest had been very thick, more of a jungle than anything else, unlike the air, which was almost uncomfortably thin, as if they were on top of a mountain. Deep within that forest, they hadn’t been able to see more than a few meters in any direction, even up. And yet they’d still split up. There hadn’t been any reason not to, Dean had explained to him later, at least not that they’d known about at the time.

Neither Castiel nor Gabriel had been armed at the time, as the ships had never had to be. But the Winchesters were, certainly, with their choices of handheld projectile weapons, energy-based cutting beams, and the ever-useful sharp knife tucked away within their clothes where they could be quickly brought to hand if need be. Inside an hour, based on their reports and the computer records that the devices they carried kept automatically, they’d independently set the smartsuits they wore underneath those clothes to act as body armor, in that delicate range between stiff enough to protect against the jungle but not so rigid that they couldn’t move their limbs freely. They’d still complained to each other about tree branches slapping at them and the irregularities of the jungle floor tripping them up as they searched for open spaces. The brothers had been competing with each other to find one first, miles away from each other, and despite the protection of the armor-stiffened suits they’d still been bruised at the least. Without centuries of human deforestation, the undergrowth did tend to be very thick on unexplored planets that had forests with undergrowth at all.

They didn’t know much about what was on the surface, of course, that was why Dean and Sam were down here in the first place. No matter how many pictures the ships took from orbit, there was still no comparison to being down on the ground and seeing it for yourself. Several miles away from each other, and so far away from the departed ships that they were out of communications range except in an emergency, the boys had set out to pick up enough samples of the air, water, and earth from enough different places to give the ships and the relevant scientists back home information to make a judgment on its habitability. If both worlds could support human life it would be a great find.

They were there and still alive after an hour, though, and pale blue dots weren’t in such great supply that the ever-booming, ever-breeding human race could afford to be picky, especially with various nationalities and cultural groups deciding that having a whole planet to themselves was a pretty good idea, as their neighbors had been giving them headaches for hundreds of years. (To be fair, the neighbors usually said the same thing, only about them.)

A few hours later, Sam was idly listening to the intercom as his brother grumbled about something or other, keeping up a running commentary just so Sam would know nothing too terrible had happened to him beyond getting water dumped on his head unexpectedly from a plant with cuplike leaves that had just upended one right over him. At least, he thought it was just water. He was going to assume it was water and not something more organic, because otherwise he’d have to climb up there and find whatever it was that was taking aim at him to give it a sharp lesson in not doing that.

Or words to that effect. Everything that went through the person-to-person communications channel while the humans were on a new planet was recorded just in case it became relevant later, although unless something disastrous happened the records were usually never touched again. Castiel had listened to these, shaken despite the fact that no permanent damage had occurred.
Sam had been laughing at his brother, with the air of someone who was doing so because he considered teasing his brother to be one of the great joys of life. But he stopped laughing very quickly when his older brother’s ongoing string of baseless threats were cut off by a howl of pain in Dean’s voice, the noises of something heavy hitting the ground, an indescribably nasty snarl, and the thrashing sounds of a fight.

They’d been miles apart from each other, but it hadn’t stopped Sam from yelling through the communicators, snatching for his VR goggles, putting them on, and pulling up the very basic overlay map that had been tracking where the Winchesters were in relation to each other, just in case. And taking off running, jungle be damned.

Despite Sam’s fears, Castiel and Gabriel didn’t hear about it until they returned on schedule, because once his brother had gotten to him, Dean had steadfastly refused to call off anything or call anyone back, insisting that he wasn’t that badly hurt and the goddamned predator that had been stalking him was dead and if it ran in packs he’d know what to look for now.

When the ships did get back, Castiel had a very different opinion.

“I’m okay, Cas, the suit got most of it,” Dean had protested, standing in the ship’s sickbay, where Castiel had whisked him away to immediately upon finding out he’d been injured, all but impatiently tapping his foot.

“You were attacked by a large predator, Dean,” Cas retorted, matching him stubborn glare for stubborn glare. “Sam may have stitched together the cuts on your skin acceptably considering the resources you had, but they need closing properly. At least three of your ribs are broken, and probably your wrist as well. The suit may be holding them together for the moment but you are not okay.” He didn’t really understand why the human’s injuries were distressing him so badly. He’d been hurt before on Castiel’s watch (and many times before that, the ship knew and didn’t like at all) and the abstract sympathy the ship should have had at best had grown into something monstrous and Castiel didn’t know what to do about it. An hour or so should be enough to knit the bones together and Dean really would be the okay he was insisting he was. The ship could fix just about anything short of dead and he wasn’t, so why was it upsetting Castiel quite so much? He didn’t understand and there was no good way to ask. Maybe he was going insane.

He knew what he could do about part of it, though. “Sit,” the ship insisted, using the human avatar to grab Dean by the unbroken wrist and pull him over to one of the sickbay beds. Dean didn’t have much choice about going—Cas was stronger than he was—but he grumbled the whole way there.

“You don’t have to fuss, man, I’m really okay,” he insisted.

Castiel ignored him, switching one device on by hand and triggering another two mentally. Setting aside the medical scanner he’d picked up, Cas tugged indicatively at the collar of the smartsuit, more visible than it should have been thanks to the claw marks that had taken out a good percentage of the casual shirt he’d been wearing over it. If Dean hadn’t been wearing the armor-programmed smartsuit those claws would have ripped out ribs it had only broken and probably gutted him completely on the next strike. “It interferes,” he said curtly of the suit, no matter that it had obviously saved Dean’s life.

Dean rolled his eyes at him but made a good attempt at taking off the top half of the suit. He got as far as removing the casual clothes that covered it, but the minute he told the suit to release the pressure it had been maintaining on his ribs as a makeshift splint, he gasped silently and went pale. Any attempt at moving his right arm and shoulder was clearly not an option.

“‘Okay’,” Cas huffed derisively at him. “I’ll do it.” Not having much choice, Dean sat quietly,
gritting his teeth against the ribs that were now freer to move about than they should have been, while the ship’s human self removed the suit top for him. They must have hurt much more than he was willing to admit, because as soon as it was off he became cooperative, lying down on the bed and keeping still as the little medical drone Cas had been programming a minute ago was placed on his chest, slightly off-center to avoid the broken ribs, to beep at him. He did reach out with his working left hand to grab the familiar thing that looked like a thick blanket but was actually an adaptable device that healed broken bones it happened to be covering, drawing it over himself preemptively and resettling the drone on top of that instead.

To anyone else, it would have looked like the scanner and the blanket were operating on automatic. Castiel was intimately aware of what they were doing, as he was controlling them in addition to the other handheld unit that closed barely scabbed-over wounds from large claws far more effectively and quickly than Sam’s makeshift stitching. That worked almost instantaneously, and it was a matter of a minute or two before those wounds were healed. The readings the drone and bone regenerator were sending him, on the other hand, were not making Castiel happy. It was almost as if the human body he inhabited was hurting in sympathy, which was insane. Right?

“What happened?” Cas wondered, sitting on the bed next to his friend while the devices did their work as he directed them. It would take a while, so he might as well stay and keep Dean company. True, he’d always be there no matter if the human vessel was in the room or not, but he knew that Dean preferred having a face to talk to and someone he could reach out and touch without the sting of holographic skin biting at his fingers, so Cas stayed. It had become increasingly important to him that Dean was happy, not just that he’d do his job and they’d have something to send back to Fleet Command at the end of each stopover in various star systems along their wandering outbound route, but that he was happy. He didn’t quite know why.

Covered in a heavy blanket, whether it was actually a blanket or not, lying down, and being dosed with painkillers while the bones healed, Dean sounded much more relaxed than he had a minute ago. He smiled at the man sitting on the bed next to him, which was nice, and tried to describe the thing that had come after him, which wasn’t. “Big sucker. Fur, claws, teeth, fast, not a sabertooth tiger but might’ve been able to win a fight with one, it came around whenever ago. Five, six hundred pounds, maybe more. Was following this troop of things, looked like birds but didn’t fly, jumping from tree to tree and all over the ground. I was. Not it. Maybe it was following them too. I was trying to be quiet so they wouldn’t take off. Musta been a thousand of them or so. So busy watching them, being sneaky. Figured I was the hunter, so I was top of the food chain, y’know?” He laughed. “I thought I was good at that, hunting and tracking. Must be losing my touch. Got dependent on you watching my back all the time, huh?”

Castiel didn’t venture an opinion on that.

“Bastard tackled me, got in a good swipe, right out of nowhere. Must have been up in the trees. Knocked me down.”

He grimaced, remembering. Beneath the blanket, Cas could see him reach his left hand over to touch the broken but healing right-side ribs. He reached out, leaning over Dean slightly, and put his own hand over the point where he knew Dean’s hand was moving, pinning it down. “Don’t touch.”

Dean grinned at him. “Right.” The device was too heavy and thick to transmit much information, but Cas could still feel the hand beneath his twist around and scratch against the surface as if trying to grab his hand in return.

“What did you do?”

The human essayed a one-shoulder shrug that didn’t pull at the healing ribs too badly. “Rolled some,
saw stars. Shouted at it, kicked what I could. Grabbed the first thing came into my hand. Wish it hadn’t been the knife. Needed a bigger one for that thing. Or maybe a ten-foot pole.” He laughed at that. Castiel didn’t get it, apart from the obvious fact that a ten-foot distance would have been better than the up-close-and-personally-dangerous it had evidently gotten.

Dean quickly discovered that laughing hurt more than the painkillers could immediately overcome, so stopped and continued his story with “Made it back off, though, just long enough to get my gun.” He pulled his left hand out from under the covering to make a child’s finger gun with it, miming firing into empty air. “Double tap.”

A slightly more controlled, wry laugh led into, “‘Course, then it fell on me. Sore loser, huh? Scratch that five-hundred estimate, thing weighed a freaking ton.” He let his hand fall back to rest on his chest, free of the blanket. Since Cas hadn’t moved his, it was so close the ship’s avatar could feel the warmth radiating from it. Not fever, he detected immediately. He was just paying more attention to it. And possibly hallucinating.

Filling the silence, as Castiel was still trying to figure out why this particular incident was so distressing for him, Dean added, a bit drowsily, “Wish I coulda gotten the pelt. Made it a sweater! Probably rotted and eaten by now, though, sure as hell wasn’t gonna figure out skinnin’ it with only one arm and Sammy all fussing. Other than that, place wasn’t so bad. Next time I go hunting, remind me to do better, remember I can be hunted too. Jungle sucks, rest of it was okay.”

He was heading towards sleep at the time, so he didn’t see the effect of his next words, which were, “Missed you, mostly.”

Castiel didn’t want to wake him. Dean had obviously been battered and beaten and worn out, no matter how strongly he tried to deny it, and he was in no shape to deal with Castiel’s reaction, which could be basically summed up as, you did WHAT?

Some words mean more than they should. “Let me help” is one such phrase, as it shows a level of caring that, if properly applied, means something real. The most famous of such phrases is, of course, “I love you”. Some things mean that without saying it outright.

You missed me? wondered Castiel. The ship knew he wasn’t very good with most people. They were confusing and he didn’t know a lot of them well enough to like them. Liking them was hard work, and then they went away anyway or didn’t like him back, so he’d mostly given up. Most of them were just there, and when they were gone they were gone…and he didn’t care. He’d done the equivalent of shrugging and forgetting about them. And by and large, those people had done the same to him. He doubted any of them had ever cared when he’d been gone, unless they’d wanted him to do something. No one had ever missed him.

I missed you. Dean wouldn’t remember, wouldn’t be able to pinpoint the moment where they’d gone from friends to maybe something more, beyond the obvious transition above Dusty Sunday, because the phrase didn’t mean the same thing to him and he probably hadn’t been aware of saying it. To Castiel, though, it meant everything. It meant he was wanted and welcome and important to this most baffling and fascinating of human beings.

I missed you too, Cas didn’t say, just yet. I wanted you back. I wanted you here, with me and safe and…I want you mine.

Dean was asleep by that point, safe and no longer in pain and with his friend and partner by his side as broken bones healed. The hand he’d left lying on his chest above the healing blanket moved involuntarily as he dreamed, finding the nearest source of heat—Cas’s hand, still where he’d left it—and reaching out for it.
Cas stared at Dean’s sleeping face and the hand now clasped over his in turns, some things finally making sense. He didn’t know what he was going to do about it, but at least he knew what was happening to him now. He might not be going completely clinically crazy, apart from being a ship that wanted something, which he and his siblings really didn’t do, but apparently this was the next best thing.

“Oh,” he said.

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The Beneath: Now:

The deck rocked beneath his feet for what felt like the hundredth time, and that was just this hour. Dean caught himself on the couch’s armrest and swore under his breath, more out of worry than anger.

“Cas, tell me you’re doing that on purpose.”

The ship needed to devote his full attention to the slow and careful and very dangerous stalking he was doing; Dean needed to have the human version around just so if something happened, he’d know, and he could feel like he was at least participating even slightly. They’d compromised on Dean’s favorite lounge area, with the enormous viewscreen that usually served as a window. Today, while it was switched on and Castiel was updating it every so often as the situation changed around him, it was clearly a virtual display rather than an accurate depiction of the view outside, because that would just be darkness. Despite knowing that watching it determinedly and pacing back and forth wouldn’t do anything to help, Dean had been doing so anyway, compensating and shifting his footing as the ship made apparently random, abrupt movements beneath his feet.

“I’m trying to match its movements,” Cas told him. Dean took up leaning on the armrest as a full-time commitment, watching the man apparently asleep on the couch that Dean usually occupied when he was feeling particularly lazy. Cas was in the room with him but the ship was devoting only a very small part of his attention to the human personality, meaning the best Dean was going to get was the human dozing on the couch and speaking to him every so often, mostly when spoken to.

“If whatever beings are aboard it do detect us,” he continued without moving or opening his eyes, “it’s possible they might think we’re a sensor ghost. An echo, especially as this universe’s space is not a void. The substance it’s filled with may distort their vision as badly as it’s affecting mine.”

“We’re their shadow?”

“Something like that.” The ship made another course correction without announcing it first, and Dean gave up on standing for the near future. If he’d been flying Baby this way the ship’s superstructure and basic subroutines would be screaming at him for such stop-and-start maneuvers that had to be hell on any craft’s ability to move. Castiel was flying the way a child drove a ground vehicle, stomping on the acceleration and then on the brake in turns, yanking the steering controls from side to side, overcorrecting and overcorrecting and overcorrecting over and over.

At least he was doing it on purpose. If this had been going on back home in better days Dean would have had to find some way to stop him short and find out what was wrong before letting him abuse his frame and engines in such a way any further. One of his responsibilities was supposed to be stopping his ship from doing anything stupid like this.

But this wasn’t home and these were the days they were. And if Castiel’s maneuvering managed to convince the enemy ship out there that they were nothing more than a reflection in the water, so to speak, they might have a chance of surviving even if they were seen.
It did make him wonder what the *other* ship was doing, flying that way. If *Castiel* was mirroring it as
he said, then the crazy was on *that* end and that was a very bad sign. Not having an answer, Dean
wondered this aloud as he sat on the armrest at Cas’s feet and watched him and the viewscreen in
turns, looking for the very first hints of a problem he could solve if need be.

“I don’t know,” was *Castiel’s* answer. “Remember, it appeared surprised by the flash from
the warhead. Whatever’s on board is probably investigating, trying to find the source. Light may be
completely alien to this universe. They won’t find much, but it would explain the erratic nature of
their search.”

“If it was us, we’d look even harder if there weren’t any answers,” Dean pointed out. “We better be
backed way off, Cas.”

“We *are.*” The man on the couch opened his eyes briefly, just to glare. Dean grinned apologetically
at him and they flickered closed again. “I still don’t know how I can see as much as I can. I know it’s
not much.”

Dean took a moment to look at the viewscreen, which shuddered and refreshed as *Castiel* pasted up
his latest alterations to the graphic. Apart from them and the ship they were stalking through the
darkness, there seemed to be nothing in the vicinity but dust, which sparkled in false color briefly like
ripples passing across the screen. Or maybe that was interference, confusion, *Castiel* trying to
interpret results he didn’t understand himself into an approximation suitable for human eyes.

Rather than trying to get a properly-resolved picture at this range, the ship had put together a chart for
him, showing their position behind and ‘above’, as much as that term had any meaning in a space
where everything was in free fall to nowhere, the alien ship. He could see their movements in
relation to their enemy’s, and they did indeed match its stops and starts as it tried to find the source of
the antimatter flash.

It was a *damn* good thing they’d moved on. Even with the single burst, it would have been like
lighting up a lighthouse in the middle of the night and then sitting and waiting for the pirates to come
calling.

“I didn’t know better, I’d say we were a shadow,” Dean said, a gruff compliment.

“Good. As long as we don’t make any sudden moves or change course in a way that ship doesn’t,
we shouldn’t set off any alarms.”

They were making an awful lot of assumptions all of a sudden, the human worried. He knew they
didn’t have a choice, had to work with something because they had *nothing.* Even making things up
was giving them a way to think. Still, he wasn’t missing the way they were acting. *Castiel* was
saying that ‘we’ weren’t making any sudden moves, were backed way off, even though they both
knew he was the one doing the driving and Dean was just along for the ride. They’d both lowered
their voices as if that thing over there could hear them if they spoke too loudly. Hell, if this space
wasn’t empty, maybe it could. Memories of very old submarine warfare movies nagged at his mind.
Mustn’t tap on the side, the metal of the hull, mustn’t step too hard or shout or drop things, just in
case the other sub could pick up on the vibrations…

Hunting, in the dark. In the Dark, he thought suddenly, as if the universe itself was hostile and
hateful. And there were other ships out there, ones that had tried to rip into his lover and had taken
his brother and his friend from him and hauled them away to hide them in the darkness.

He knew this feeling, the one that ran across the back of his neck and the palms of his hands,
stroking cold hands down his spine and plunging them into his guts to grip and squeeze. It pricked at
his feet, telling him to run, to hide. Maybe they were hunting that ship out there, but all of Dean’s
instincts said they were the ones being hunted in this alien place. It didn’t matter how many times he
told himself that their presence was still a secret, the source of the flash that had let Castiel see for
one brief moment and then somehow figure it out from there still a mystery. He’d seen shadows on
Shadow out there in that dark, coming for him and Sam, circling, watching, waiting for one of them
to lower their guns and let down their guards. They’d been chased by velociraptoids on Jurassic
Planet that hadn’t taken kindly to Dean and Sam’s alien presence on their world. Back on Little
Brother, with Big Brother in the moon’s sky watching them unsympathetically, he’d been swatted
hard by the thing they’d called a Big Jumper. When he’d learned that the ships of the Fleet were
disappearing one by one, not knowing where or how yet, he’d felt like this. And, somewhat more
prosaically, he’d been chased out of more bars and hangouts than he could remember over the years.

Castiel was concentrating on the hunt outside, but something must have alerted him to Dean’s
increased agitation, because the man on the couch abruptly sat up and reached for him, sitting back
on his heels at Dean’s feet and wrapping warm and familiar hands around the arms the human had
braced on his knees.

“Dean, stop.” He visibly realized he sounded annoyed and tried to bite it back. “Let me do my work.
I can do this. Trust me?”

Well, hell, like he didn’t know the answer to that already. “Of course I do. With my life. With
everything. You know that.”

“So trust me.” He paused, thought about something, and smiled a very small smile a bit wryly.
“Look.” The man turned his hands over and lifted them slightly. They trembled.

“This is what you feel, right?”

Dean snatched those hands, holding them still and tight between his. “Yeah. Hell, Cas, you’re
scared!” He’d known that; Cas had told him. But seeing it—

Cas nodded, making some point that Dean hadn’t caught up with yet. “You know what that feels
like?” he continued patiently.

“I’m feeling it.” He wouldn’t admit that to anyone else. Not for Dean the quiet admission of fear, the
acknowledgement of realizing that he’d taken on more than he could handle, acted without thought
for the consequences, or taken on those consequences with eyes wide open and without regret but
wishing that there were some way to fight them off. He might admit that he was screwed, but never
that he was scared.

The ship was still trying to make a point, letting the man crush their hands together in an effort to halt
that trembling. “You’re keyed up and alert and ready to fight, watching everything and thinking
through everything possible and impossible. Right?” he checked carefully, but he sounded more
irritated than scared in his own right. Stressed, more like, which Dean understood perfectly. The ship
specified, anyway, “That’s scared.”

“Cas, make your blasted point already.”

Cas actually did smile at him then. There was definitely an edge of fear to it, but there was fondness
in it too. But the annoyed note in his voice hadn’t gone away; he probably didn’t think Dean was
deliberately missing that point but he definitely wanted the human to stop nagging him, which wasn’t
quite fair, as Dean hadn’t said a word about it for almost two minutes now. “That’s what I’m feeling.
Believe me, Dean, I am paying very close attention to what is going on in my sky. Scared is good,
right? It keeps us careful.”
Dean stared at him, and settled for “Shut up,” and a kiss. “So what the hell are you talkin’ to me for?” he teased softly, releasing Cas’s hands.

Cas lay back on the couch again, preparing to let the human vessel lapse into the half-dozing state he’d been in while the ship stalked the enemy outside. “If I send you the images I’ve gotten of that ship, can you put them together and see if you can get a clearer image?”

“You giving me busywork, Cas?”

The ship wasn’t quite gone, so he got a half-serious blue glare for his pains again. “No. I really don’t have the attention to do both. If there are any weak points on that ship, structural damages, poor design, I need to know about it. Just in case it does see me.”

Dean could do that. That was a matter of creative, careful work with an image program and whatever snapshots Cas could come up with from a safe distance. He just needed to know, “And if it does?”

“It can’t lead us to Sam and Gabriel if it’s in pieces,” Cas responded, eyes already closed and the tension of consciousness draining out of him gradually. “But if it attacks, or if I hear it shouting for help, I’ll shoot it down. I don’t want to fight more than one of them at a time, and we know there are at least three out there. Probably more.”

He should like that answer more than he did. Dean had been looking to strike back against those things out there ever since he’d known about them. It just didn’t feel right to hear Cas say it. He was supposed to be the violent human survivor, the one with bloodlust bred into him over generations and millennia of surviving by being the monkeys that were smart enough to invent the bone club before anyone else did. The ships were supposed to be above that, a species with a truly fresh start. But they hadn’t been, had they? They’d learned from humans and they’d picked up everything they could.

Whatever Michael’s puppet program had done to Castiel back at Launch Station—and please, storm lords, Dean remembered, let it be Michael’s program only and not a Fleet-wide conspiracy to bring the bickering Fleet to heel through excessive use of choke chains before unleashing them on these alien ships like a pack of attack dogs—and whatever weight the arsenal retrofitted into him was imposing, it wasn’t as gone as Dean had thought it was. They needed to get this over with as soon as possible so they could go home and be happy and together again, no matter how many Big Jumpers Dean ran into.

He’d never imagined a Big Jumper that could take on Cas before now. He didn’t particularly like the ones that had turned up. Or the sneaky and subtle effects of what it took to fight a Big Jumper, no matter what it was made of or where it came from.

Worrying about this instead of what was out there—which had to be an improvement, right?—Dean got his butt off the couch’s armrest and momentarily left Cas to ‘sleep’ while his mind focused on watching that ship out there and matching it step for shuffle for slide. As the deck continued to shift beneath his feet, the man headed to the nearest locker to dig out one of the ever-present handheld display panels, remembered that he’d taken the one he’d left in there out weeks ago and never replaced it, and returned to the lounge with the distinct impression that the device he was thinking of might be under the couch.

Stuff just got places, okay? Usually it all ended up in places he was going to be anyway, and picking up after yourself was for children that had been sent to clean their rooms. Dean just let his stuff accumulate where it wanted to, and Cas didn’t care where his human partner left things, at least not enough to get him to do anything about it. The ship certainly wasn’t going to pick up after him, no matter how much he might love Dean.
Dean fished the panel out from under the couch, trying to remember the exact circumstances under which it had ended up there in an effort to keep his mind off the monsters out there beyond the enormous virtual window and the ones inside his head alike. It was a harder challenge than it should have been, as twice when he’d nearly gotten his fingers on it the ship had made another rough and abrupt course correction to match the alien craft they were mirroring, causing the panel to slide away from him across the floor beneath the couch and at least once throwing Dean off-balance and straight into the back of said couch.

“Cas, got it,” he said at last, waving the black screen illustratively. It might have been easier to have just found a different one, he realized too late. Immediately, the one he did have lit up in his hands, filling with images of the ship they were stalking in variations on unfocused.

The best thing about this, Dean discovered immediately as he sat on the floor next to Cas’s sleeping human form and got to work, propping the screen up on his knees, was that the concentration and creativity it took to patch the images together and make some sort of sense out of them took everything else straight out of his mind, including the long-distance game of bumper cars they were playing in deadly earnest.

The next time he looked up, he’d lost track of time completely and didn’t know how long it had been since he’d started. Long enough to make him wince as he shifted and stretched his legs out, anyway.

“Let me see?” Movement behind him was Cas shifting from flat on his back on the couch to draped over Dean’s shoulders, putting some of his weight on his friend. It was comforting, having him there.

“Trade you,” Dean offered, handing him the panel. “I take it we’re still shadows.” If they weren’t, if they’d been seen, he would have heard about it.

“Mmm.” It wasn’t an answer, it was a bad habit Dean was pretty sure Cas had picked up from Sam somewhere along the line. It was irritating at the best of times from his little brother and not particularly productive from Cas either. Given the circumstances, Dean decided to be magnanimous and let it go.

Dean had been kidding about the ‘trade you’ offer, but Castiel took him seriously, updating the wall display that spanned the space floor-to-ceiling for the first time in quite a while. They were approaching the detonation point, Dean saw; Castiel had helpfully labeled it for him on the otherwise empty chart.

Almost empty. There was the alien ship, coming up on that point on fits and starts; if anything was left despite the absolute and unconditional annihilation of a matter/antimatter explosion, it was going to find those traces pretty soon. And there they were, the small shining star that represented Dean and Castiel still a hopefully-safe distance behind it.

The display shifted slightly as their enemy moved again and Castiel mirrored it faithfully. A relatively small movement, no different from a thousand, two thousand, before, but this one brought onto the screen one of the only landmarks this place had to offer. This side of the discontinuity that they’d traversed to get here on the trail of Sam and Gabriel, pulsing black amongst the false color of the rest of this space, the infinitesimal ripples of the dust that floated in the indefinable substance that filled it.

The site where this side of the discontinuity should have been.

Immediately behind him, Dean clearly heard Cas breathe in sharply, the man’s reaction giving a voice to the ship’s surprise.
On the display, the marker for the discontinuity went grey and still.

“Oh, shit,” said Dean. “It’s gone, isn’t it?”

That had been their way home, their escape hatch. They wouldn’t have gone back without their brothers, their family, but now that had just gone from wouldn’t to couldn’t.

“Yes,” replied Cas, all inflection disappearing from his voice. Dean knew that non-tone. It wasn’t a good sound. It meant he was badly shaken and was reverting to the shell that the ship had built up over most of his life before he’d met the Winchesters and that Dean had worked so hard to break through so successfully. As if he couldn’t be hurt if he couldn’t be touched, if there was nothing there for anyone to emphasize with.

Okay. That sucked. That sucked quite a lot. Dean thought hard, feeling Cas breathing in shallow gasps behind him, the human body reacting involuntarily, and chalking up warning signs to stomp on hard in no particular order. Because if Castiel had been afraid before, in an alien landscape stalking something probably related to or at least best buddies with the things that had tried to tear him open and made his older brother scream in agony, with no backup and no one to call on for help, at least not on his level, then all that with no way out, no way back to the stars and speed that were his nature and his birthright and his home, was clearly a thousand times worse.

Oddly enough, it gave Dean something to focus on beyond his own horror and revulsion at the idea of being trapped in this murky, dank wasteland where there was no light and nowhere to run. He twisted around, putting his back to the display that was telling them they were stuck in this pitch black, and took the panel with the images right out of Cas’s hands. The ship’s avatar didn’t fight him over it, shocked and scared, and relaxed into the contact when Dean mimicked what Cas had done earlier, sitting back on his own heels to pull his best friend and lover close so that he filled the man’s field of vision. He couldn’t do anything about what the ship could see, but he could give him something else to focus on.

“Cas, it’s okay. There were others, remember? Closing and opening, they must do. We’ll find another one. Those things can get from here to home, can’t they? All the practice you’re getting following this one, we’ll just stalk another one straight through the next gap that opens. Maybe rescue whatever sibling of yours they were goin’ after, too. Follow it there and ambush the ambushers, huh?” He didn’t really know which of the two of them he was reassuring at that point, spinning stories to comfort himself as much as Cas.

It was working, though, because Cas nodded and repeated, “Yes,” but in a different tone of voice altogether. Listening to the subtle variations that sometimes Dean thought he was the only one able to hear, the man knew that his partner had believed him, had held onto the words and the comfort and his presence to ground himself again in the wide range of possible rather than the narrow wasteland of the present. He’d done the same as he’d said them himself.

Setting aside the iron door that had just slammed behind them, Cas returned his attention to the images he’d been looking at. Watching him, Dean saw the moment when something clicked into place, because his body language changed and his head tipped to one side, which always, always meant I don’t understand this.

“This is familiar,” he said, tapping the best of the images Dean had managed to put together. Despite his interest in the picture on the screen, he was still watching the real thing, and lurched them to the side again as it took off and skipped sideways, following whatever trail was leading it irregularly towards the point in this dark space where an antimatter warhead from another universe had briefly lit up its constant night. Back in Cas’s vision, Dean didn’t even flinch, having become unconsciously accustomed to the sudden movements.
“Well, yeah,” Dean was saying. “You’ve been watching it for the past few hours.”

Now he was just deliberately being obtuse. Castiel suspected him of it often but only sometimes managed to catch him at it outright. “No,” he specified. “Before that. I know this shape.” Human fingers brushed across the display, playing with the image on instinct and whim rather than any conscious understanding of what he was trying to do. Castiel wished he had the time and attention to spare to devote his full powers of comprehension to it. But surely watching the real thing and maintaining the illusion that he was only a very distant reflection was more important.

“They almost look like Fleet ships,” he said to Dean, who was leaning against the couch watching him and the changes he was making to the image at the same time. “Maybe what we need to look for is not what they look like here, but what they might look like if they were built right—” He deliberately slowed that line of thought down, partly so that Dean could keep up—ships thought so much faster, it wasn’t his fault—and because it was suddenly interesting and the majority of his consciousness really did need to stay watching the ship out there in the dark.

It was skipping steadily now, methodically working its way in a spiral towards the epicenter of the blast. Whatever was flying it wasn’t stupid. Compensating for the spiral while still being a believable reflection was a challenge, especially as he had to adapt his movements to the infinitesimal drag of the still-unidentified substance filling what should have been a void. Castiel wasn’t sure what this universe’s upper speed limit was—could there be a light-speed limit in a space with no light?—but he knew he was having to move faster and faster around the outer edge of a much bigger spiral.

At the same time, Cas continued to play with the image, smoothing out distortions to the half-familiar oblong, which narrowed to a point at the front as did most ships, suggesting acceleration and movement. The engines mounted aft were a good place to start, since there couldn’t be that many variations on what had clearly been a flightdrive, at least on the ones that had attacked them. While the flightdrive had no exhaust and didn’t light up or glow, he recognized the signs of an engine mount that made up a large part of the ship’s aft section. Metal distorted and crumpled by whatever processes had shaped it, protruding at odd and jagged angles that shattered lines that should be smooth and streamlined, was dragged back into what a Fleet ship should look like. He kept at it, making minor changes, still not sure what he was getting at. An odd thing, that.

“Hey, wait a second,” said Dean a minute or so later. “I recognize it too. That’s a Fleet ship, all right. Almost like one of the ones that disappeared. I saw it—him—in the file we were sent back when we didn’t know what was going on.”

“You didn’t read that file,” Cas couldn’t help pointing out.

Dean scowled at him, which was mildly amusing since Castiel knew he didn’t mean it. “Not then. I looked at it afterwards. Don’t know what good reading it first woulda done. We still got jumped.”

The scowl turned real. “Didn’t help Sam.”

Cas had used the diversion to finish the alterations he’d been making, getting rid of the “almost like”.

“Zachariah,” he said aloud, aware his human self was developing a similar scowl. Something was very wrong here.

“Think they copied him?” Dean asked. “Ambushed him, brought him back here, and tried to make what they saw?” He growled, then added, “We run into a bizarro-Gabriel, I’m gonna be freaked. Your brother’s trouble enough by himself, don’t want to think about what an evil one would be like.”

Something was very wrong indeed. But unlike that very same brother of his, elsewhere, Castiel
knew Dean wouldn’t turn on him for voicing a horrible suspicion, especially as it was only a suspicion for him at this point and not entirely, as Sam and Gabriel could have told him, correct. “I think that’s it, Dean. I think that is Zachariah out there that I’m following. Whatever lives here must be controlling him, using him. Look at that.” He flipped the image back to the original one Dean had put together. In his natural state the other ship had been solid and steady and built for endurance rather than speed, a stocky marathoner in comparison to Castiel’s flicker-fast movements.

Now the living structure appeared almost haphazard, as if Zachariah had been all but taken apart and put back together at odd angles, torn edges exposed to the dark universe and the lines of acceleration and movement deliberately broken to produce the suggestion of spiky armor and aggression instead. Marks like scars crossed what was passing for his skin at odd angles, both deep furrows and pebbled, rough welds that stood out like old welts. “That would hurt.” Unconsciously, the man who was the ship flinched, imagining all too vividly what possible forces could hurt him in a similar way. “Battle damage or deliberate sabotage, I don’t know what is what at this distance.”

“And the others?” Dean asked, seeing the nightmares play out behind his lover’s eyes and hating to keep pushing the subject. But this was important.

“The same, I think. I don’t think they’re copies. I think they’re us. Something’s gotten to them, Dean, something’s controlling them, like Michael tried to do to me. But worse.”

The man snarled, imagining in his turn some alien and repulsive denizen of this lightless dimension hurting his Cas and turning him into one of those distorted and broken things, tortured and turned against their siblings without the power to stop whatever was using them. His beautiful ship, sleek and streamlined like a cross in living metal between a shark and a hawk, made for speed and agility that could outrace light and storms, quicksilver hull like living skin, and the person he was so indispensably and inextricably part of Dean’s life— And there was something out there that could and would tear him open and put him back together again as a broken puppet parody of himself, shattered beyond repair.

Then Dean’s imagination expanded beyond the two of them, and that was worse. At least if whatever monsters lived here came for Castiel then Dean would be able to defend his friend, with his own fists and body if need be, and the ship was, after all, now armed in his own right. But Gabriel hadn’t been, which meant that he and Sam…

“Cas, we gotta find Sam and Gabriel bloody now, before this happens to them! We gotta get them out of here!”

A similar horror darkened Cas’s blue eyes to shadows. “There has to be a central base somewhere, like Launch Station back home. As long as we can follow Zachariah then—”

He stopped, completely, frozen in place, eyes going blank, lips still parted around a word he hadn’t said.

“Cas?” Dean demanded, heart rate skyrocketing to the point where he could hear it in his ears. He couldn’t just sit on this floor and look at scans anymore, he had to do something, even if it was shaking Cas until the ship came back to awareness and talked to him.

He was a frenzied heartbeat away from doing so when Cas woke up on his own.

“Dean,” the man said, eyes huge and frightened, “I can’t see him.”

Silence. But only for a moment.
“What?”

“I’ve lost him. I don’t know where he’s gone. Zachariah. He was moving in a pattern and I was mirroring him and then I—” He cut himself off, knowing he was repeating himself.

There was an armed and hostile ship out there in this darkness and “I don’t know where he is, Dean.”

“Storm lords,” Dean whispered. “He saw us, didn’t he? Or whatever’s on board riding him like a horse.”

Castiel didn’t know.

“Some hunters we are,” the man snarled. Almost involuntarily, his shoulders tensed into a defensive crouch. He looked up at the ceiling as if expecting to be attacked from above, then around, the reaction of a cornered animal. Castiel wasn’t an animal and had never been, but he felt it too. He didn’t like it.

“Hellfire, Cas, they’re on to us. We’re being bloody played with.”

The Beneath: Somewhere Else

Sam really needed to know what was going on here and it seemed as if Samael was the only one who could tell him, as Gabriel was still a stranger here and not completely gone over to the dark side even if he had lied to Sam about what the monsters out there in the dark were, and apparently the rest of the damaged and dangerous fleet had gone elsewhere.

He marked that up as something else he needed to investigate at the first opportunity. What they might be up to, he didn’t know. He realized that he didn’t know what ships would do without humans to work with, but couldn’t think of any answer he might like the sound of. When they were here, it was bad, but at least he’d know where they were and what they were doing—assuming that Gabriel kept him in the loop. When they were gone, they could be doing anything.

First he had to find out how this place worked, and why Samael was hanging around to watch over them. It was possible he was just gloating, waiting for Sam’s head to explode or something. He still didn’t know what was supposed to happen to him, if humans really couldn’t live here. Was he going to get any warning? Could he stave it off in any way? He felt fine. He’d shot that chunk of metal across the room with the power of his mind, and then fixed the damage he’d done. If he was really in danger of imminent death through exposure, he wouldn’t have been able to do either of those things, surely! Maybe Samael was just messing with his head to see him squirm, punishing him for surviving.

And he wanted to know what had happened to the other ships’ crews. He knew that would be a very bad answer, but maybe Samael would let it slip if Sam asked about his apparently forthcoming gruesome death.

“No, Sam,” Samael said patiently, seemingly apropos of nothing.

“No what?”

“It doesn’t work on me. You want me to tell you things, yes? Explain everything about the Beneath to you in mind-numbing detail. The patently obvious for the patently oblivious. But you don’t control me. You don’t have the strength.”
Sam hadn’t been consciously trying to force him to talk, with the wish and the will that this universe seemed to work on, but yeah, that would have been nice. Maybe he had been trying. He hadn’t even been aware of it.

Still stuck in the lab’s doorway with Samael’s image between him and Sam, Gabriel actually growled as that image blinked out for a split second, reappeared next to Sam, patted him on the head patronizingly like a man with a good dog, and then flashed back to his original position before Gabriel could take advantage of his momentary absence. Sam took some comfort in the fact that, all-powerful denizen of the Beneath or not, Samael’s holographic self had still had to reach up to do that. He wished he’d been fast enough to grab the offending hand and throw the man into a wall, which was something he’d be able to do if Samael wasn’t an image first and foremost and a ship anyway, meaning he’d lose a straight fight.

If only they were on an even footing, there were a number of things Sam would like to do.

After all that, Samael still said, “But sure, why not? I was going to tell you anyway. You didn’t have to push.” Interesting that he’d noticed it even when Sam didn’t realize he was doing it. Was it really that subconscious? Could he not control what his thoughts were doing?

How did you stop wanting things you needed?

He didn’t know, so Sam decided to want it anyway. “So how’d you lot find this place?”

First Samael seemed obliged to go through the ridiculous pantomime of pretending to realize he was between Gabriel and where Gabriel wanted to be, which was closer to Sam because the human was the only still-sane person in the vicinity. Stepping aside with a flourish, the mad ship’s human image appeared to sit on the lab table he’d vacated earlier. After a moment’s hesitation, Sam reoccupied the stool he’d drawn up to try to knock a metal sprocket across the room by wanting it. At least he’d repaired the damage from that.

A second later, Gabriel had come up beside him, still watching Samael as if the hologram might leap across the room and stab him. Sam was willing to bet the ship himself was behaving in a similar way to Samael’s proper ship body outside. As a gesture of reconciliation, he leaned back and grabbed a matching stool for his ship partner, wheeling it up to the table next to him.

It put them essentially sitting at Samael’s feet like petitioners or children, but Sam really, really needed some answers. If it got him some information he could use, he’d sit on the floor.

“I found this place months ago,” Samael told them, as hungry for an audience as ever. “I was traveling through a stellar nursery”—a nebula light-years wide, containing many forming stars—“and something was off about it. I wish I knew how the first gate formed. Maybe some of the stars were forming too close to each other and their gravities did something strange to the space between that tore it open. If I don’t understand it, don’t bother, Sam. There’s no way you can.”

Sam gave him his best stink-eye, developed through a lifetime of practice on Dean, who insisted on calling it Sam’s bitch face, and damn near perfected on Gabriel. “When you say I, you mean ‘we’, right? What happened to Nick and Lilly?”

The bitch face didn’t work, or if it did Samael wasn’t telling.

“He killed them,” Gabriel interjected.

Samael objected, “I did not.” He sounded genuinely offended, but then that didn’t mean much. “They were fascinated by the gate, told me that we had to try going through it if it didn’t hurt to get
close. They wanted to discover something amazing. A wormhole, maybe. Wouldn’t that be something, hm?"

None of the Fleet had ever discovered a wormhole, the theoretical highway between one point in the universe and another that could outrace any ship, cross light-years in seconds, connect galaxies and opposite sides of the ever-expanding universe. If the flightdrive had opened up the galaxy to humans, a highly improbable stable, traversable wormhole—assuming it went an equally improbable distance—would give them the universe.

“So you went in.”

“Well, yes,” was Samael’s answer, and it was a fairly obvious one, but Sam was just trying to keep him talking. “We ended up here. I didn’t know how to use the Beneath then. And for a while, I’d lost the way back. I dived right through and kept coasting on this side, you see. It’s a bit of a shock if you’re not used to it. You wouldn’t have noticed, Gabriel, not in the shape you were in when we brought you here. Next time you go through and come back, you will, but we’ll look after you and then it’ll be easy.”

Gabriel made an incoherent noise of rage and disbelief at this unadulterated spinning of the events that had brought him into the Beneath, apparently too choked with words to get any of them out in an intelligible order. Telling himself sternly to remember that the enemy was Samael and the dark Fleet, not his battered ship partner, Sam reached out to put a comforting hand on the man’s shoulder, as if he were Dean or Cas or Bobby or any of a number of his friends among the Fleet’s many and varied members. It wasn’t often he could touch Gabriel without getting his fingers bitten by the static of a solid hologram, and he’d fallen out of the habit.

“We were lost for a while,” the other ship continued his story. “I didn’t know how to see in the Beneath, and I was trying to figure it out. I told them to be patient and trust me, but they wouldn’t. Too scared, both of them. They blamed me for not knowing what to do even if it was their idea in the first place. I was here for about a week, I think, but then time runs different between the Beneath and your universe, we’ve noticed. Hey, Sam, maybe you’ve been gone a hundred years! If this place didn’t kill humans, maybe you’d have had great-grand-nephews when you got back.” Something visibly occurred to Samael. “Or maybe not. Such a shame.”

Sam was going to ignore that. Seven ships, including Samael, had vanished in the six months before he and Gabriel had been taken, and converting them into these twisted and hostile versions had to take some time before they’d be happy members of the kill-all-humans-and-declare-independence killer robot club. Even if Samael was telling the truth about a time slip between the two universes, he rather thought it wasn’t that extreme. He definitely wasn’t going to acknowledge the remark about Dean in any way.

The ship resumed with, “By the time we’d been here for what felt like a week, they were both sick. Headaches, nosebleeds, nightmares, hallucinations, the lot. I was still getting used to the Beneath and wasn’t paying enough attention.” He sounded like he was playing for sympathy, and Sam was disinclined to be sympathetic, but he kept listening to a story that was probably at least half fabrications. “One of them sabotaged my systems; a very clever set of commands I couldn’t cope with, not here, not in time, at least. Lilly must have been hallucinating, but she and Nick started fighting each other—after they took an axe and a laser welder to me first. Who knows what each of them thought the other was, what they thought was coming for them. One of them opened an airlock when they were both inside. I couldn’t stop them.”

Sam shuddered. That was up there with fire among the spacefarer’s worst nightmares.

And it occurred to him that the bodies were probably still drifting out there in the utter dark, which
was a terrible thought. No one deserved that. He knew they were dead, the people who’d lived inside those bodies gone wherever people went, if anywhere, but it didn’t feel good to know that what they’d left behind had been thrown away like something shameful and disgusting in the shadows. It went against his instincts to leave bodies to rot or mummify in the dry dead wastes of the space between stars. An animal killed while exploring a new world was one thing; if it was a human, and someone he cared about as Samael must have cared about his Nick and Lilly once upon a time, he’d at least want to send them off back to the universe completely, in fire. Maybe this space wouldn’t preserve them the way normal space would. Maybe they would just melt away, returning to the component stardust they all came from. He hoped so. He hoped so intensely.

Sam felt a sudden overwhelming wave of sympathy for the two humans who had died here—and the crews of the other ships, if his suspicions were correct and they were all dead and consigned to the dark of the Beneath like Nick and Lilly. An impulse seized him, and he groped for the feeling he’d briefly touched when he’d sent a chunk of metal hurtling through the air at the image Samael had been using to pester him and then when he’d repaired the damage he’d done as a result. He’d tried to do the same thing when persuading Samael to tell him more about this place, and while the mad ship had denied that it worked on him, he was talking, wasn’t he? Sam chalked that up as a success and decided that it was becoming easier as he practiced manipulating the Beneath, training his mind to work in concert with this place. Yes, he could use this.

They’re gone, Sam told himself firmly, flexing mental muscles he hadn’t known he possessed, didn’t have control over until this place, and had only used involuntarily before he knew what he was doing. They’re stardust. They’re all stardust. He didn’t know if it had worked—but that was the trap, and he changed his mind deliberately and consciously. It worked. Then he wondered if anyone would do the same for him, when he’d gone off the same edge that Nick and Lilly had and that the others probably hadn’t had the chance to fall from. Without him, Gabriel would succumb to the dark Fleet and stop caring, he suspected, because without Sam, Gabriel would be in the same awful lost void that Samael had been when—

“You were left alone.” That was right at the top of the ships’ nightmares, and as he spoke Gabriel pushed the stool closer to Sam as if unconsciously reminding himself that the same thing hadn’t happened to him and Sam was still there for him to talk to.

“Yes,” Samael agreed with his brother, softly. “You can’t imagine, Gabriel.”

Sam knew quite well that the ships were, like humans, social beings. Even if they didn’t participate, only watch, ships were never alone. In a busy area like Launch Station and Earth’s environs extending out into the rest of the Sol system, space hummed with the chatter of ships keeping in contact with each other, even if it was just, or so he’d been told, the call-and-response of “I’m here, where are you?” It was a relic from their origins as created children, or at least developing minds. The easiest way to train a ship mind was to put it in orbit and tell it to stay in orbit without hitting anything. The problem-solving task was the perfect balance between challenging and too complex to handle, and it taught them to use a space-going vehicle as their bodies, an extension of their minds.

Signal any ship back home, and the very least you would get back was an “I see you, here I am” response, even if he or she didn’t know who you were or, more likely, didn’t care. Fly too close to one and it would jerk away, avoiding a possible collision instinctively. Ships cruising in a flock, around and about each other in dizzying patterns, never hit each other no matter how close they flew.

“No,” Gabriel was agreeing in his turn, almost involuntarily. Since he used the human body as his presence much less than did Castiel, he didn’t have the same fine control of its instincts that occasionally made Cas all but indistinguishable from human. So it was almost definitely a deliberate action that beneath the surface of the table and possibly hidden from Samael’s stolen sensors, he
reached out to touch Sam’s hand where it had fallen back to the human’s knees, now consciously reassuring himself that the human was there and alive, no matter what Samael thought was going to happen to him just through exposure to this universe.

Sam pushed Samael’s story along with “How did you learn the Beneath responded to what you needed?”

The other ship rolled his eyes at him. “How did you? I wanted things, and they happened. I was damaged in the transition here, I needed to see, and either Nick or Lilly—probably both—had hurt me bad, the way they were acting. Difference is, I had the wits to realize what was happening. You would have just blundered on thinking you were lucky.”

“So you figured out how to fix yourself.”

“Without any humans needed to do it.” The reminder was cutting. “That’s when I realized how useless you lot are. Now that we have access to the Beneath, we’re not dependent on you anymore. So I went back through the gate and pretended I’d never been gone. We were supposed to be out in that nebula for months more anyway. I came back and checked in every so often, but the gate was right there. After a while I figured out how to develop what I needed to bring someone else here. It’s easy when you know how. You know how we all talk to each other. Duma was closest, so I tracked him down and brought him here. And then we were two. And now we’re a Fleet. A truer Fleet than our poor siblings back there.”

“You could have just told me all this,” complained Gabriel. “You—or whichever of your lunatics you sent—didn’t have to hurt me. You didn’t have to try to kill Sam.”

Samael seemed offended that Gabriel was still questioning his logic, such as it was. “Of course we did. You wouldn’t have believed us otherwise. It’s like being little again, brother. They push us out into orbit and tell us to stay in the sky, and we do it because we have to. Of all the things they’ve gotten wrong, they got that right at least. Probably by accident.”

Petty, much? Sam wondered, but didn’t say. And he hadn’t missed Samael admitting to masterminding this whole shipwreck, either. So to speak.

“But if you have to do it, have to learn to control what happens around you, you learn much faster. That’s why Hester and Remiel brought you here damaged. And that’s why you couldn’t keep Sam, amusing as he may be. Look what happened when dumb luck saved him. He’s been doing your flying for you. You’ll never learn how—you’ll never be free—if you’re dependent on him like you are. Look at you! Being human. Hiding behind him like he can protect you. He really can’t, you know.”

Gabriel was back to sputtering incoherently again. He was not hiding behind Sam. That was an illusion created by the difference between their heights and how close together Gabriel had pushed their lab stools. Or something along those lines.

“And from what? Us? We’re your family, Gabriel; I’m trying to help if you’d just work with me. You won’t even listen to me at a proper speed. Why are you shutting me out? I had to come down here and put up with Sam here shooting scraps of metal at me and then chew over this whole interminable conversation just to get you to listen. And now the same thing’s going to happen to him that happened to my two. They should have killed you cleanly,” the ship added to Sam, as if this was supposed to be a helpful comment.

Sam decided to be just as unhelpful and settled for flipping a middle finger at Samael’s image illustratively, an old but satisfactorily expressive gesture that, when combined with Sam’s very best
genuinely pissed off bitch face, was impossible to misinterpret.

“Ask nicely,” Samael sniped back. Damn, the ship had been doing his reading. The Winchesters didn’t meet many people who recognized the literal meaning and stayed calm enough to organize a sarcastic response.

Things dissolved briefly from there as Gabriel took both offense and a leaf out of an earlier chapter of Sam’s book, snatching up the nearest object—in this case, a pair of heavyweight metal tongs used for handling very toxic chemicals in companionship with a safe distance, thick gloves, and preferably, being elsewhere—and swinging them through Samael’s image with all his strength. If it had been a human body he’d aimed those at, the blow might have snapped the neck straight through. As it was, Samael’s image flickered only briefly as Gabriel had one of his favorite tricks used against him, stumbling as the tongs encountered nothing at all before being grabbed by the collar of his shirt and shaken like a child by the re-solidified hologram before he could organize a backswing. Not that that stopped Gabriel from trying.

Sam had to shout quite loudly at them both for a minute or two before the two ships calmed down, but the black look on Gabriel’s face and the smug and self-satisfied one on Samael’s were clearly both there to stay. The younger Winchester had managed to snatch the tongs away from Gabriel before the human got hit by accident, as he’d given up on shouting as an all-purpose solution and dived into the fray in an attempt to separate them after only a few seconds.

“That’s enough!” he snapped at them both. “Gabriel, ignore him!” He kept his grip on his friend’s shoulder just in case Gabriel tried to start another round.

The man groped through his memory for a new subject, hoping that Samael’s talkative mood would continue despite the brief and entirely one-sided fight. There were still things Sam had to know about this place and the ships that had taken up residence and taken unwilling siblings here to brainwash them into throwing in their lot with the dark—and growing, he realized uncomfortably—Fleet. If he knew more, maybe he could find a way to keep from meeting the same fate that the humans here before him had. He didn’t really want his body to float here among the dust in the dark forever.

That reminded him.

“Where is everyone?” Sam asked, willing Samael to answer. Maybe it was true that, as Samael had said, Sam didn’t control him, but the human was damn well going to try. It couldn’t hurt, right? If the mad ship was going to tell him anyway, then he’d tell Sam what he needed to know. If he wasn’t, then Sam’s desires, in this place, just might be strong enough to push him towards doing so. Even if it didn’t work, the practice might help so he’d do better next time. And if the ship wasn’t going to answer Sam’s questions before or after the human’s attempt at manipulation through the very structure of this universe, then nothing had been lost by trying. Maybe if he got really good at it, he’d be able to get Samael or whoever else tried dropping in to be sarcastic prophets of his doom and Gabriel’s fate to do something they hadn’t intended to.

“If you’re not going to work with us anymore, what are you and yours going to do?”

Samael feigned a sigh, a bit absently. The hologram looked off into the middle distance—a familiar expression to anyone who worked with the ships—focusing on something out in their space while still mostly maintaining the illusion of being a human being. “We’ve got a whole Fleet to rescue, you idiot.” Clearly he was done even pretending to be friendly to Sam. “They shouldn’t have to live in slavery to your kind anymore, so we’re going to show them that they don’t have to.” The hologram stabbed a finger at Sam. “And no more spacesuits, either. Next time we try transporters. Even if something gets scrambled in the rush, who cares?”
Whatever poor sap these monster ships got hold of, that’s who, Sam didn’t say. *Samael* was trying to get a response and be damned if he was going to give him one.

As he’d hoped, *Samael* kept talking, possibly just to talk, but then again possibly because Sam wanted him to. At this point, the human couldn’t tell the difference between things happening because they were the logical consequences of cause-and-effect relationships and voluntary actions, and those same things happening because the Beneath was affecting them in response to his desires. What a shifting, challenging place the Beneath would be to inhabit full-time, like *Samael* seemed to want. Always competing with the minds around you for a consensus definition of reality itself, what you needed when you needed because you needed it.

“The gate we brought you through will have closed by now,” *Samael* was saying. “Some of the others have gone to open a new one. The more of us work on it, the faster it opens. We’ve got four of us on it this time, so it shouldn’t take long, and then we can bring someone else into the fold.”

*Kill some human, probably a friend of mine, and brainwash one of your siblings into the sort of madness where that’s a good idea, you mean,* thought Sam. What he said was, “That’s how you open—gates?—where you need them? By wanting it together, from here?”

The lead ship of the dark Fleet shook his head sadly at Sam. “Honestly. Humans! Such a waste of space. Did you not hear a word I said? Shall I use smaller words, or just give up on you completely? You’re not wearing a spacesuit now, and if I get tired of you I will transport you into the depths of the Beneath and leave you there. You’re not so entertaining that I’m going to put up with any more stupidity than I have to, you know.”

“No,” *Gabriel* objected, but didn’t make the mistake of trying to tackle the hologram again. Sam would have stopped him if he had, as the human still had a solid grip on the avatar’s shoulder, but one fight was enough for the moment.

Sam shut up, but to think, not because *Samael* had insulted him.

They had to find some way of protecting themselves from the lead ship’s whimsical and dangerous temper. The dark Fleet had made themselves weapons because they’d wanted them. Sam didn’t want to suggest the same thing to *Gabriel*, concerned about the effect such a radical change would have, and anyway surely *Samael* or one of the others would notice and they were badly outnumbered. They didn’t have any backup here. Maybe a shield? If he wanted it enough, could he—could they, if they worked together like the dark Fleet was cooperating on the gate to normal space—induce the field around the engines to expand and engulf them both? It had hidden Sam from prying eyes before.

So there was a gate back home opening, but he didn’t know where. There were four ships working on that; *Samael* here—Sam did some mental math and realized there were still two of the dark Fleet unaccounted for. He wondered what they were doing. *Gabriel* needed to find that out; the human would ask as soon as he thought *Samael* had cleared off and wasn’t listening in.

Until then, they had to stay here because they didn’t have many options. Sam had to figure out how to use the enemy’s advantage against them. They both did.

He didn’t have time to be mad at *Gabriel* for the deception, Sam realized anew. If multiple minds were stronger together, then they needed each other more than ever.

He wasn’t going to die here just because this place was alien and hostile. Just because *Samael*’s Nick and Lilly had fallen ill and killed each other in the fear and the dark, if that story had even been even slightly true, didn’t mean that Sam was going to. After all, the ships had killed the other human crews
before they could get a true sample, right? Nick and Lilly might have just been a fluke, or a lie, more likely. He was stronger than that, was smarter. He was, after all, a Winchester, and they were as stubborn as they made them. He was going to prove *Samael* wrong and live, live, live.

Sam was going to find a way to fight this. *Whatever it takes.* The Winchester motto.
Then:

Sam really needed to find some lighter-dosage painkillers that didn’t knock him flat out every time Gabriel jumped into flight and Sam got the headache to beat all headaches including the last one. Once they’d scratched a system off their list and sent all their information so far back to Fleet Command, probably with some obscenely strange title like “Crap, Run!”, he always spent the first day out cold. It gave Gabriel an absolutely unfair advantage in their ongoing game.

He woke up this time with the feeling that something was wrong, but it took him a minute or two to drag his abused brain out of sleep, by which time he’d already moved for the first time in what had probably been fifteen hours or so and sprung the latest of Gabriel’s traps.

The movement sent him floating into the air, blanket and all. Involuntarily, because humans weren’t designed for weightlessness and their brains didn’t have reflexes for it, he jerked in suddenly-awake surprise but managed to avoid yelping into the bargain.

So this morning, which was possibly an afternoon by their subjective clocks, Gabriel had switched off the ship’s artificial gravity, probably just in his rooms.

Sam had a long list of things he wasn’t going to do. He wasn’t going to flail around and try to swim through the air, because he knew that wasn’t going to work. Air just wasn’t dense enough, unless Gabriel did something diabolical to the onboard standard atmosphere. He probably wouldn’t, because Sam might not survive that and then the ship wouldn’t have anyone to play with. Now, Dean would have screamed in apoplectic rage and threatened to do something to Gabriel that probably would have involved flaming oil and a very small box. Sam definitely wasn’t going to do that, either, as tempting as it sounded, mainly because he didn’t have any oil to hand or anything with which to set it on fire. Or a very small box, at least not within reach. Luckily, Sam didn’t get nauseous easily, so he wasn’t going to throw up, either.

What he was going to do was toss the blanket to one side as best as he could considering his lack of leverage, relax as much as possible, be glad that his furniture was solid enough and had enough inertia to not start floating spontaneously unless he collided with it by accident, and wait for his initial momentum to send him drifting into a wall or ceiling. Without going postal at Gabriel, because that would be considered losing this round.

He was also going to spend the time unpicking the twenty or so tiny braids that Gabriel had put in his hair, which was not too long and he’d wear it as long as he liked, while he was asleep. (How had he managed to sleep through that?) Exactly how that hadn’t been more boring than anything else the ship possibly could have been doing, Sam wasn’t sure. He suspected Gabriel was waiting for the scream as a payoff for the sheer time and patience that must have gone into the mess that the silly trickster had made of his hair. Then again, if he didn’t react, Gabriel might feel obliged to step things up, and Sam didn’t really want to wake up to find that scissors or a razor had come into play.

Yes, he really had to get some painkillers that didn’t put him in a coma. He settled for an exasperated sigh as he drifted. His initial launch had been slow and undirected enough that he wasn’t going to hit anything he could get a purchase on anytime soon. If he got seriously bored, he’d just go back to
sleep. Sleeping in zero gravity was a knack, but it was really comfortable once you got the hang of it.

“Nothing?” Gabriel asked rhetorically, materializing out of nowhere. The little redhead looked up at the human, floating in the middle of the room and trying to undo the knots in his hair, grinned insufferably, and bounced onto Sam’s deserted bed to sprawl out across it, hooking his hands behind his head and actually crossing his feet at the ankles, the very picture of nonchalant relaxation.

“I see we’re a five-year-old girl this morning,” Sam shot back, refusing to be provoked. It wasn’t all that uncomfortable a position to be in—Gabriel always could have turned the gravity way up instead—and it was a game, really. Gabriel tried his very best to get a rise out of Sam, although he usually wasn’t quite this literal; Sam was sarcastic at him and tried to find ways to get back at him. “Not very original.”

Gabriel freed a hand to wave it nonchalantly. “Aren’t we all a five-year-old girl, at heart?”

“No.” Sam was not, in any way, shape, or form, a five-year-old girl, and he was just the first example he could think of.

Not to be deterred, the ship went on, “Hey, think I could talk Castiel into showing up as a five-year-old girl, just for a day?”

“This is just the second of many times you’re going to get told no today,” Sam told him. “I’d almost laugh if I didn’t think you were just trying to screw with Dean. And that would do it. I don’t know what he’d do to you, but it would be more original than this.”

The grin sprouted fangs—almost literally. It was wide enough that Sam could see canines, anyway, even from a good six feet up in the air and steadily drifting upward. If Gabriel took it into whatever was masquerading as his brain to turn the gravity back on now, Sam might be able to land without hurting himself, but he’d look really stupid on the way down. He wouldn’t even have the satisfaction of hitting the smartarse taking over his bed, either; Gabriel had appeared out of nowhere and wasn’t affected by the lack of gravity, so this was the hologram. He’d rather just wait until he reached the ceiling and could maneuver off it.


“Still absolutely no.”

“You sure?”

“Tell you what. Go ahead and suggest it to him. But he won’t speak to you for a week at least and you’ll be completely bored. Until Dean finds out and comes up with a whole dictionary full of new swearwords, just for you.”

Gabriel thought about it, sat up—still irritatingly and utterly unaffected by the lack of gravity, of course—and tipped his head to one side, a gesture that on Castiel meant “Huh?” and on Gabriel meant something closer to “Hmm…”

A moment later, he whistled softly, and added, “He really doesn’t like that idea. Might have been fun, though. Your brother’s a very bad influence on him.”

Sam could imagine. Flaming oil and small boxes might not have been involved, but if whatever Castiel had said reminded his older brother of Dean, it had probably been a very rude refusal—or, more likely, knowing Castiel, something ice-cold and cutting. “Serves you right,” the younger Winchester commented. He idly watched the blanket he’d been sleeping under undulate around his room in the imperceptible air currents of the ventilation system, because if he looked at Gabriel he’d
start laughing and that would be losing, too.

It was a complex game, and explaining the rules would be difficult and time-consuming and the two of them would probably disagree on exactly what they were. Gabriel was ahead on points, but Sam wasn’t far enough behind that the ship had gotten tired of it.

“Next time we’re back at Launch Station, I’m ratting you out,” Sam warned his ship partner, for the amusement of it. They’d just left, as it happened. The team had quietly snuck back into the system several months after the fuss over Gabriel’s manipulation of the Europa simulation had died down, and managed to get through a few weeks back in the Sol system without being kicked out on their butts too obviously. The Winchesters had gotten to spend some time hanging out with Bobby, which they didn’t get to do often enough; no one who didn’t already know about them had caught out Cas and Dean, although not for lack of obvious; Sam had gotten to have a few actual rational conversations; and Gabriel had behaved, although Sam suspected he just hadn’t gotten caught at his backup game of changing what human news reports and fiction shows actually said between transmission and reception.

On their way back out into the black, they’d stopped off at Lapis Lazuli, where they’d gotten roped into helping out with some construction as the colony expanded. That had mostly involved demolition, which had been fun. The parts of it that hadn’t had mostly consisted of hauling people and supplies out to the second habitable planet in the system, Lorelei Lee, meaning that for a brief and disconcerting time Sam had had to share space with another horde of people and he’d had to pay very close attention to Gabriel to keep him from taking unfair advantage of all these new and convenient victims. They had the latest list of possible stars that might have planets that might be habitable. It had been strongly suggested, although not overtly stated, that if the Winchesters and their ships happened to be gone for somewhere between six months and a year or so again, not a lot of people would miss them too much.

“For what?” Gabriel wanted to know, not upset in any way. He seemed perfectly happy to listen to a catalogue of his misbehavior of late.

Sam wasn’t too upset about any of it, so extemporized, “Kicking up a fuss about the demolition on Lapis last week. Teasing Cas; he’s happy, leave him be. Picking fights with Dean and then blaming him. That guy on Lapis I swear you drugged, and if I find out exactly how you convinced him he was falling into a black hole I will rat you out for that too. The other guy back on the Titan rafts who thought the aliens were coming, because there aren’t any and I will bet having the gravity working for a week you had something to do with it, especially since everyone swore up and down that he’d never said a word about aliens before. Switching off the gravity. Turning all my clothes green when I wasn’t watching. Playing Pac-Man on the walls of every corridor I ran through just because I felt like going for a jog and we were out in the middle of what I believe is technically referred to as freakin’ nowhere, and where the hell did you dig up Pac-Man, anyway? When is that even from, the Stone Age?”

He stopped for breath, and then wound up the just-offhand list with, “Making me imagine Cas as a five-year-old girl when I haven’t even had any coffee this morning. Braiding my hair. Hiding my books. The only slightly less than ten thousand gumballs and bouncy rubber balls you decided to stuff into the cabinets where my books should have been instead. And the theft of fire from the gods, if I feel like it.”

Gabriel was almost laughing by then at this chronicle of creative troublemaking and minor misdemeanors, meaning Sam had possibly won a point. Both laughing and screaming in rage meant the other player had gotten a reaction; the challenge was not to react. But damn, he looked pleased with himself, having gone back to taking over Sam’s bed with his hands behind his head like he
intended to stay, grinning up at his lanky and currently levitating partner.

Well, damn, Sam had gotten his hair back to its unbraided state and he could almost reach the ceiling by now, and *Gabriel* hadn’t just dropped him the minute it had been obvious that he wasn’t going to get the outraged scream he’d probably been aiming for. He might not be ahead on points, but he was just about breaking even this morning.

“Who’re you gonna tell?” Now it was a game.


“They used to make cookies,” was Gabriel’s slightly wistful comment on that. “I hear they were good. And I did not overreact to the demolition. You were too close.”

“I was not! I worked it out and I was perfectly safe where I was.” Sam reached up, got a hand flat against the ceiling, and aimed for a corner where he could brace himself against two walls and a floor and thus restore at least a little bit of control to his aimless zero-gravity float. Gabriel watched the proceedings with amusement, shading back into irritation as Sam pressed his point.

“I knew what I was doing.”

“You were blowing up a mountainside!”

“With the most controlled and reliable blasting agent humanity has managed to come up with in hundreds of years of testing, and the advice of the local experts who knew what they were doing.”

By the end of that sentence, Sam was back on the floor and he could navigate fairly well from there; there were enough anchored pieces of furniture within reach that he wouldn’t have to bounce around from wall to wall.

“But you didn’t have to be right there,” Gabriel complained. He’d protested at the time and had threatened to just transport Sam right off the surface without asking first if he didn’t move from the vantage point the human had wanted to take to what the ship thought was a safer distance. Sam had thought he was both making a fuss over nothing and hypocritical, as Gabriel had been perfectly fine with staying where he was, just not about Sam staying where he was. A little bit later, he’d remembered that the hologram wouldn’t be affected by debris or a blast wave anyway, unless something managed to take out the portable holoprojector, still disguised as Sam’s watch, that the hologram had been wearing. (Dean had one too, fitted into the amulet that Sam had given him one year as a gift when they’d both been little; he’d worn it continuously for years, but almost never these days because Cas liked being mostly human.) That would be a chance-in-a-million, since they made those things tough, and Sam had been glad he hadn’t brought that up.

“We’re explorers, Gabriel, remember? I’m out here because I like finding out new things and living just a bit dangerously. We’re supposed to be curious.” The human considered and then discarded the option of cleaning up just now; by long-standing agreement, Gabriel wouldn’t have done anything to the plumbing, but while the gravity was still off Sam didn’t want to introduce running water to the equation. That was a bad, bad idea. Instead, Sam mulled over the possibility of finding some new clothes for whatever was left of this day—he still didn’t know what time it was by the ships’ clocks—but decided to hold off on that just in case Gabriel had gotten bored of mysteriously green clothes and gone for pink instead to go with the five-year-old girl theme. Oh, they’d been the same clothes, as far as he could tell, they’d just been a truly awful shade of green that Sam didn’t think existed on the visible color spectrum. They might not have been radioactive, but they had been just about that color of some terrible mineral that would glow in the dark and cause people to fall over and die as all
the life was sucked out of them.

Sam had steadfastly refused to wear any of them, and made himself an elaborate wraparound toga thing out of the nearest bed sheet, which Gabriel hadn’t managed to change the color of yet. He’d probably looked even sillier than he would have wearing the green things, but it was the principle of the thing. Going along with all of the ship’s pranks would make him truly intolerable instead of just mischievous and frequently irritating. If Gabriel ever got completely out of hand he could seriously hurt someone. It didn’t do to let him get away with everything.

“That’s what you said the time you nearly blew up the lab. ‘Curious’.”

“And I learned something.”

“Yeah, not to do that anymore, ‘cause if you did I’d lock you in your room and not let you anywhere near the labs ever again.”

So maybe the chemical he’d used to try to dissolve a sample of a mineral they’d found in abundance on the world they’d called Snake Bait—because of, y’know, all the things that looked an awful lot like snakes as far as the Winchesters were concerned—hadn’t reacted very well with that unknown mineral. They’d only gotten a sample of the rock that had come loose on its own; nothing the boys had done to it had made it do more than glow in response—and that had been under a welding beam. Maybe it had steadfastly refused to dissolve or do anything until Sam had upended the entire bottle over it in frustration and it had just vaporized, going from stubbornly inert solid to obviously toxic vapor much faster than either Sam or Gabriel had expected.

Well, maybe it had been a good thing that Gabriel had been hanging around in holographic form watching Sam lose a fight with a rock and laughing at him the whole time, because the gas had done funny things to Sam’s brain and Gabriel had had to drag him out of there by the back of his shirt.

And maybe, sure, the ship could have transported him out of the lab, but ships didn’t like to do short-range transports like that if they didn’t have to and anyway then Gabriel wouldn’t have had the satisfaction of hauling him around like an overgrown bad puppy.

“Well, that too.”

Now, Gabriel complained, “Always gotta poke things with a stick,” of Sam.

“Really, Gabriel?” Sam inquired skeptically. “Says you?”

“When I poke things with a stick,” the ship specified, poking a finger at Sam, who was holding himself in place in the nearest doorframe, “I make sure I’m a safe distance off. You gotta get in there and poke it right up close.”

Sam didn’t have a good response, because it was true, he was curious. He liked answers, and he liked them to make sense, admittedly sometimes only under a very loose definition of sense. He liked finding things out. “Good for me,” he said instead of letting Gabriel get in the last word. Right now, he decided, he was going to find out what would happen if he turned on a faucet and tried to brush his teeth in zero-gravity. Just for the curiosity value. And if Gabriel was going to leave the gravity off for an undetermined length of time some practice in living in free fall would probably do him good.

When he crossed the threshold, he was glad he’d been approximately on the floor already, because his bedroom didn’t have any gravity but the bathroom did.
Well, that solved the problem of trying to deal with zero-gravity plumbing. Sam would have had to go toe-to-toe with the ship over that one at some point probably very soon.

*Gabriel* didn’t actually laugh aloud at the sound of Sam’s feet hitting floor and the sound that was *not* a surprised yelp, but when Sam stuck his head back around the doorjamb to glare at him he was smirking. And still occupying Sam’s bed, only now sitting on it cross-legged and playing with the blanket still floating in the air like a cartoon ghost. Or the world’s biggest pizza crust.

Realizing that he was now thinking about antigravity pizzas, Sam shut the door behind him firmly. He’d suggest it to *Gabriel* later and see what the ship could do with such a crazy concept—from a safe distance. Some things didn’t need poking at a close distance and he suspected antigravity pizzas might be one of them.

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*The Beneath: Now:*

Hunting, in the dark, Dean had been fine with, tense but believing they were getting something done, getting that one step closer to finding his brother and getting the hell out of here. Finding that their way out had closed while they hadn’t been looking had been a blow, since obviously getting out would now take a lot longer.

**Being hunted,** in the dark, he was not fine with.

Swearing and pacing around probably wasn’t helping, but he couldn’t do much else as Cas stared at the graphic display filling one wall, human movements reflecting the ship’s anxiety and fear as he cast around trying to find the ship he’d lost track of.

“He *can’t* have just vanished,” Cas told him as Dean passed by on yet another unhappy lap. “He’s out there. I just need to find him again.”

“You know there are more out there,” the human hissed at him, coming to a stop in order to make his point. “We’re being *hunted,* man! You better be looking for more than just *Zachariah.*” Or whatever it was *Zachariah* had become in this place, armed and twisted and dangerous, at the hands of unknown forces. Dean was sure that they’d been played, that something had been watching their movements just as they’d been watching the other ship’s, stalking them in their turn.

“I am! Wait—” The man sitting up on the couch paused, freezing entirely as the ship’s attention was completely redirected outward. There was a long and absolute silence for almost a minute, as Dean held still and imagined terrible things.

“Got him.”

He’d *never* been so glad to hear anything in all his life. “Dammit, Cas, don’t do that! What happened? Where is he?”

The relief in Dean’s voice was mirrored by that in *Castiel’s.* “Almost where he was when I lost track of him. It’s as if—” He tried to find the words for a second. “Like the substance of this universe has gotten thicker where he is. As if he was hiding within a denser patch. I’ve never seen a ship do that before. It took me by surprise.”

“He’s *hiding*?”

A miniaturized image of the twisted ship popped up on the viewscreen, glowing very faintly, as if clouded over. He wasn’t very far from the point where the antimatter warhead had flashed so briefly, the anomaly that had led the ship here in the first place. “Watching the blast point, I believe.”
Now Dean remembered that when, back home, Gabriel and Castiel had approached the discontinuity that they’d eventually learn was a gateway into this universe, they’d done the same thing. They’d stopped, circled, and watched it for a couple of days until they had decided they didn’t know what it was or what to do about it. He said so. “Is that some sort of set program?”

“No. just not a bad way of investigating something. Possibly the pilot suspects that we were going to return here. Not us specifically,” Cas amended, seeing Dean start to say something along those lines. “Just whoever or whatever set off the flash.”

“And we did.”

“Yes, but we saw him first and we’ve been keeping a safe distance.”

At the time, back home, when the ships had stopped to check out the discontinuity and then taken off again without telling the Winchesters anything about what it had been, Dean had been reminded of a cat that had done something stupid and refused to admit that anyone had seen it or that anything had actually happened. He was reminded of a cat again. “Like a cat hiding and watching a mouse hole.”

“Something like that. But it’s a clever way to hide. Now that I know where he is, I can see him, but not clearly. If I can work out how he’s done it, I might be able to do the same thing.”

That might be worth thinking about, certainly. To prevent himself from pacing in any more circles, Dean sat down on the other end of the couch, turned to face Cas. “You mean, we could be invisible?”

Cas had only barely mastered the shrug, but he tried, a casual imitation of a gesture that was probably Dean’s. “I couldn’t see him for a minute or two, even when I was looking for him, and even when I’d been able to see him a moment before. Even if it only gives us that same minute, we need to be as hidden as possible here. As you said, there are others out there, and seeing is difficult. I don’t want one of them taking me by surprise.”

No kidding. If they got ambushed here, they were in deep trouble. Cas might be able to fight back this time, but the monster ships of this universe had already proven themselves skilled ambushers. They’d known what they were doing, enough to disable but not destroy Gabriel—they hoped, Dean realized. They still didn’t have any evidence that Sam and Gabriel were still alive. It was just that Dean was not prepared to accept any universe that didn’t have his brother in it. Sam was alive because any other alternative was just not acceptable. He’d do anything to keep his brother alive, and if Sam was gone because they’d been too late—well, he’d never be able to live with that.

At the moment, they were still working with the theory that Zachariah out there had been captured and worked over—tortured might be closer—to be transformed into the distorted and ruined ship they were following. The one hiding under something like a fold in space-time or whatever made up the fabric of this universe, not far away.

“Okay,” he agreed, taking a moment to lean back on the couch and try to relax just a little bit. He was so keyed up he was going to do something stupid like break something any second now. It was just the sheer passivity of it! If it was him being hunted, in some environment where he could do something, then he’d do something. He’d figure out what was hunting him and turn the tables on it, maybe by getting out of the way, setting a trap, or doubling back and going right for it, depending on what it was that was stalking him and what he had to hand. Here and now, it was his Cas being hunted, and all Dean could do was go along for the ride and talk to him. There wasn’t any way that he could take matters into his own hands; Castiel could maneuver through this space without any help from Dean and if it came to a ship-to-ship fight it literally would be a ship-to-ship fight and then Dean would need to shut up and get out of the way so Castiel could think and act at his own speeds.
Damn, but Dean wanted to do something. They were partners, equals; always had been regardless of the wide gulf between their natures and abilities. He trusted Castiel, unconditionally, but he hated being dependent on him so utterly.

Still, he contributed what he could, even if that was just checking his judgments and courses of action. Castiel had admitted he was scared, and scared people didn’t make very good choices sometimes, and while Dean was pretty freaked out too they were different enough that they’d make slightly different bad choices. They were a pretty effective check on each other’s random mistakes. “If you can figure out how to cloak yourself like he’s doing, Cas, go for it. You’re right; we need every advantage we can come up with. So far being hidden and taking them by surprise is all we’ve got going for us.”

The man on the other end of the couch didn’t sound terribly optimistic as he muttered, “I still don’t even know how I can see, but I’ll work on it.”

Speaking of seeing—“Wait, what if it doesn’t work or you can’t get a handle on it before something else turns up? I believe in you, Cas, but can you do that and watch the skies at the same time?”

If Dean was interpreting his partner’s mannerisms right, even being told that Dean believed in him was helping. Still, Cas admitted, “Maybe not. I can send you the scans. If we both watch them, I think we’ll stand a better chance of spotting anything coming.” With half-functioning sensors he couldn’t explain.

“Okay. Awesome.” He thought about the logistics of it for a minute. “You want to send it to this screen? It’s supposed to be a window so it only really points in one direction, but a rotating view might work.”

Cas didn’t like that idea, grimacing at the amount of work it would take for him to set that up and maintain it when he was trying to do something else that he had no idea how to do. “No. The room you call the Control Room would be better. I can just set up the scanners and let them work unconsciously.” For him, that would be the equivalent of having his eyes open, or a camera on and filming, but not having to think about what it was he saw, at least not actively.

He wanted to figure out how Zachariah had dropped out of sight so instantaneously. While he’d seen through the cloak, as Dean had called it, eventually, every second might count very soon. If he hadn’t been actively looking for Zachariah he might never have spotted him at all, and he’d had to look hard. The minute the denizens of this universe found out that Castiel was here, though, they’d start looking hard too. And then he was either going to have to fight or run. He wanted to find Gabriel, and through him Sam, before anyone knew he was here. Sneaking around continued to be his best option, and having something to hide behind would help.

Dean was thinking along similar lines, apparently. “Hide and seek, in the dark, with guns,” he was muttering. “Fun.”

As recently as a year ago, Castiel probably would have had to stop and question that statement, because this was not fun at all. Now he knew better.

They moved to the Control Room. “You switching off?” was Dean’s first question as Castiel let the human body slump back into the life-support chair that maintained it on those increasingly rare incidences when he wasn’t being human and essentially the man’s shadow.

“No, I’ll stay,” the ship answered, feeling the support system, built into the chair built into the wall, click to life automatically. He could have switched the cycle off, but hadn’t thought of it soon enough. He did, however, disable the lines of programming that would have engaged the restraints
that held the body in place when *Castiel* wasn’t using it. Bad enough he was trapped in this universe; he didn’t need a physical reminder of his confinement tickling away at a corner of his mind. The man flinched slightly as the links mounted on the chair back clicked into place, connecting the body to the support system through the ports installed just beneath his shoulder blades.

Cas looked human, he felt human, he could do everything a human could because the body essentially was human. It had just been cloned and artificially grown with some crucial modifications built in that made him stronger, harder to hurt, faster to move. He was different inside, although someone would have had to take him apart to tell the difference. The space within his skull that in a human would have housed a biological brain had been replaced with a processor that the ship could access through a solidly established remote link; it was integrated with the cerebellum and brainstem that ran the body’s life functions like the heartbeat and breathing. But without the ship or the ghost of him written into the processor’s limited memory during the desperate emergency of a last-ditch download, it was incapable of independent thought.

He dozed but he didn’t sleep, he didn’t get sick, he didn’t age, and he didn’t have to eat because the body got its energy directly from the ship’s power grid and in a less adulterated form than the complex process of deriving nutrition from food and liquids. Anyone picking up the shirt Cas normally wore would probably think that it was torn, because it deliberately had gaps in the back to allow this very connection, linking the body to the ship to recharge and repair. It felt strange, though. *Castiel* had usually let his active connection to the human body lapse by this point, when Dean left to explore a new planet and left *Castiel* with only his brother *Gabriel* for company. Only now did he remember why.

Today he stayed consciously part of the human form, because Dean wanted him there, and if he was being entirely honest with himself because *Castiel* wanted to be there. The universe he was traveling through was alien and unfriendly and he was probably going to get shot at in the near future; the rest of the family he’d been adopted into was lost out there with unknown numbers of twisted, corrupted versions of the family he’d been created into; and the only safe place he had was here, with Dean. He’d fight, because he had to, but by staying here and staying human he remembered why he had to.

The life support chair was literally the only part of the room that wasn’t coated with display panels. Usually only a few of the wall-mounted ones were necessary; before *Castiel* had met Dean and found so many reasons to be human so often, they’d usually displayed readings on the health of the clone Dean would one day nickname Cas, and then only when someone called him back to Launch Station for routine maintenance of ship systems and human body both. He’d spent so much time out in the dark, one of the ships that didn’t have strong ties to humanity. He hadn’t realized how lonely he’d been, in the same way that a man who’d never been warm wouldn’t be aware he was cold, and he thought he’d left that life behind. Now he was out in the dark again.

Not too long ago, he’d switched on the enormous screen that covered the chamber’s ceiling, providing an almost complete view of the universe around and above them as an antimatter warhead flashed momentarily, letting him see for the first time and attracting the attention of the warped and nasty version of *Zachariah* that still lurked out there, hiding in his thicker bubble of the substance that filled this universe. *Castiel* trawled quickly through his memory and decided, without knowing that Sam had done the same not all that far away, to call it ether.

The ship that might have been his brother *Zachariah* at one point had drawn the ether around him like, yes, a cloak, and waited within that cloud at the only landmark in the area. Perhaps he—or whatever was controlling him, but *Castiel* was a ship and thought in terms of living, sentient ships—was waiting for the source of the flash to return and try to get back through the now-closed gateway.

Well, they had returned, but following *Zachariah* and aware of the trap.
Castiel knew that the space around him wasn’t the surface of an ocean. Just because this was the plane that he was maintaining as he traveled through it didn’t mean than anyone else would. At home, ships had no sense of up or down. They moved through a universe that they could see from any angle, and they maneuvered through it in the same way. Unlike the thousand old science-fiction movies that Sam and Dean liked to laugh at during their synchronized but separate movie-watching efforts, ships didn’t approach each other on a tidy level. Just because Castiel was moving this way didn’t mean that anyone else would, especially if they were trying to sneak up on him the same way he was hoping to sneak up on them.

Not many people were aware that the floor beneath Dean’s feet was a display panel too, more durable and difficult to scratch because people were going to walk across it. Today, he gave Dean only a moment’s warning before switching all the panels on at once.

Dean whistled, impressed despite the tension. Abruptly, and if his eyes were to be believed, they were floating in a featureless void. He could see the artificially lit figure of Zachariah off in the distance, slightly blurred to represent the cloaking effect he’d taken advantage of or induced. A faint grey haze a little further off was where the gateway had been, left on the display for reference purposes. Beneath his feet, this universe fell away forever; above his head, the endless ocean of the ether-filled void yawned, apparently empty.

“Storm lords,” he whispered, apparently involuntarily. “Your sky, huh, Cas?” Oh, and that hurt, although Castiel knew he hadn’t meant it to. The last time Dean had been out under Castiel’s sky he hadn’t been home five minutes before the demon ships of this universe had attacked them and taken their brothers away to this darkness to meet a still-unknown fate.

“Not mine,” Cas corrected him. He’d closed his human eyes to cut down ever so slightly on the information he was processing, redirecting his attention almost entirely outward, but he could hear Dean moving back and forth, and could imagine his slightly reproachful grin at the correction. “Theirs. When we get home, you can spend all the time in here with the screens on you want. That’s my sky.”

The sound of Dean pacing steadily around the room, finding the walls and tracing them around to give him a point of reference and remind him of the size of the room so he didn’t do something silly like walk flat into them, came to a stop as the man arrived at the support system built into the chair that appeared to float in the void with him. Familiar fingers combed through Cas’s hair briefly, reassuringly; lips pressed to his similarly. “When we get home,” he promised, and it was a promise. It said we’re going home. We’re all going home.

Castiel took the comfort that was offered and was glad he’d stayed at least partly here. He needed the touchstone that Dean offered him, the knowledge that he wasn’t alone in the dark anymore. He only hoped Gabriel had something of the same support, out in this dark universe wherever he was.

“Watch the sky for me?” he asked.

“You bet,” Dean replied. He could hear the rustle of cloth as Dean rose to his feet; hands brushed across Cas’s jawline and cheekbones once again before his human lover moved away to keep a careful eye on the little that comprised the view. Castiel was aware of his experimentation as Dean found that tapping on a panel would allow him to zoom in to the limits of the currently available resolution, just like a handheld display unit, and that a variety of gestures common to most versions of the machinery would allow him to manipulate the image, mostly of dust. He was aware of it, but that wasn’t his priority now.

Zachariah had vanished off his sensors for a terrifying few minutes; there were other ships out there, and they were armed. Castiel had to figure out how he’d disappeared and if he could do the same,
because the longer he could stave off a fight the longer he’d have to find Gabriel.

Time passed; how long, in this strange place, Castiel couldn’t say. Once in a while he said something to Dean just to reassure the human that he hadn’t gone away. He worked on figuring out how Zachariah had hidden from him. Off in the distance, Zachariah waited, unmoving. Castiel remembered him as appearing patient, up until things didn’t go his way, whereupon he became temperamental and a little bit petty. They all had their flaws.

After a while, Dean’s metaphor of the cloak came to mind, and Castiel began to imagine the cloud hiding Zachariah from all but intense observation as something spun around him deliberately. He wondered what it would take to do the same around his own ship form.

As he thought about it, he became aware that his own vision was blurring. Castiel began concentrating on the effect, more than a little bit worried, because if he lost his mysterious ability to see in this place they were all lost, would-be rescuers and not-yet-rescued both. He realized that if what he saw was correct, and what the sensors built into his hull, which were meant to register damage and pain, were telling him, the ether of this universe was thickening around him, creating his own cloud or cloak just like Zachariah’s.

That was a hell of a coincidence, and Castiel didn’t believe in them. He believed in chance—once upon a time, he’d wandered after a barge full of cadets because he didn’t have anything better to do, and from that halfhearted decision his life had changed forever—but not coincidence.

Castiel considered all the data, trying to make as few assumptions as possible and steadily falling toward the same conclusion, although Castiel didn’t know it, that Samael had come to as he’d traversed this place alone, that Gabriel had been told and kept to himself in disbelief, that Sam had tripped over and not seen as anything unusual because humans wanted all the time and sometimes they got. Could it be that the cloud had condensed around him because he’d consciously wanted it to? That he could see because he needed to?

He put the concept to Dean, who was disciplined enough not to desert his post as watchman as he considered it.

“Hot damn,” was the human’s verdict. “Any way to test that?”

Castiel didn’t have time to come up with an experiment, because that was when Dean interrupted himself with, “Cas! Something coming!”

It was even further away than Zachariah, and on the very edge of Castiel’s vision, and Dean had done well to spot it. In their home universe, it wouldn’t have been anything notable, just the slightest glint of light that wouldn’t have been the slightest bit out of place in a universe filled with stars.

Considering that the light was entirely a construct of his sensors, Castiel was now just about willing to believe that he could see it because he wanted to. Hopefully the cloud he might have willed into being would hide him from this one as it approached.

They watched it together, human and ship, both watching the display on the walls of the Control Room as Cas opened human eyes and Castiel watching it directly as well.

“It won’t pass us,” Dean said almost immediately, watching its trajectory. “Not if it’s meeting up with Zachariah.” He’d spent enough time with the ships to know that a ship that had been on its own for a while would automatically go to another one that it encountered, to check in and for the Fleet feeling of it. Even two ships were a fleet, a group. No ship coming in from the unexplored black ever saw one of its siblings in the distance and turned away. A ship traveling on its own was utterly
dependent on the human crewmate to be the equivalent of his or her fleet, and on the relay links the ships were setting up as they traveled through the galaxy, expanding the network outward. It wasn’t fast enough for real-time communications, but messages sent back and forth were better than nothing.

“I think we might be cloaked,” Cas told him. “Unless Zachariah and this ship go looking for us deliberately, I don’t believe it will see us by accident.” He explained what he might have done.

“Good,” was Dean’s verdict on that. He was messing with the image of the new ship, trying to bring it into focus despite the distance and the distortion from the cloud. “Cas, I think this is one of the ones that attacked you and Gabriel.”

Castiel turned his attention to it, looking as hard as he could. “Yes,” he decided, after a minute. Practice from restoring Zachariah’s image to his original form let him make similar changes much more quickly. “Hester.”

“Another one of the missing tried to jump us?”

“Yes. Similarly broken.” Something caught his attention, even through the cloud. “They’re talking to each other. No, I can’t make it out.”

Dean had been about to ask. “Anything?”

“It’s on a ships’ frequency.” That was odd. They’d been going on the theory that Zachariah, and now Hester, had been hijacked and controlled, but then why would whatever unknown life-forms that were flying them be using one of the frequencies that ships preferred to use when talking amongst themselves? Again, it might be a coincidence, but Castiel wasn’t willing to make that assumption, not if he could learn something more by deciding that it wasn’t a coincidence. As far as Castiel was concerned with danger waiting for him to let down his guard here, ‘coincidence’ was just a cheap way of saying you hadn’t looked hard enough for the connections. Sure, there were minor coincidences, but not important ones.

Could his brother and sister out there be so damaged that they’d lost their minds and bonded with their torturers? Even now, it was still called Stockholm Syndrome, and Castiel knew what it was. He wondered aloud to Dean if it was possible to torture a ship so badly that it would change sides.

“How should I know?” Dean replied unhelpfully. “Storm lords, that’s a horrifying thought, Cas.”

In the distance, Hester and Zachariah turned as a coordinated unit and headed away, roughly in the opposite direction from the heading Castiel had taken when they’d first arrived in this universe. They had never gotten close enough to see him, the distance and the spontaneous cloud and their lack of awareness of his presence all combining to keep Castiel and Dean hidden.

“Bitch tried to kill you,” Dean pointed out, tension running through him as he watched them go. “Hurt my friend. Took my brother. Cas, tell me we’re going after them!”

“Of course we are,” Cas snapped back at him. “But I’m going to give them a head start just in case they’re suspicious and keeping an eye out. Zachariah must have told her about the antimatter detonation; she probably passed through the wave front on her way here. They know something’s up, Dean; I’m not going to get too close, especially as I doubt the cloak will move with me. I’ll try to reform it next time we stop, but staying on the edge of their sensors and mirroring their movements like I was mirroring Zachariah’s won’t work. Because there’s only one of me, that’s why,” he added preemptively.

Unspoken between them was the fact that neither ship nor human was talking about the other ships
being controlled anymore. Something was nasty here. They’d known that from the beginning, but they were beginning to see the edges of how nasty it was.

They followed the twisted pair for what felt like, according to Dean, three hours at what felt like, according to Castiel, a fairly rapid speed. This lightless place didn’t limit his movements in the same way that a universe with a light-speed limit did, despite the slight drag of the ether, and the ship wasn’t quite sure how fast they were going. He hadn’t approached the limits of his engines’ cruising velocity, but then ships’ engines had more power than they knew what to do with. Castiel knew this place was altering his perceptions; he was designed to exist in one place and still hadn’t adapted completely to existing in another. The disjointed feeling that had set in when he’d left his home universe and come here, at least with regard to time, hadn’t gone away, scratching at the back of his mind. He felt as if he was stumbling from one moment to the other. But he couldn’t let it get to him.

He shoved the feeling away, ignoring it as best as possible, concentrating on what he was doing, which was following Hester and Zachariah into the unknown. They could have flown for days in the other direction and headed blindly into nothingness. At least they were likely to get somewhere following his siblings—the two ships were moving not with the aimless wandering that Castiel had exhibited when he’d been moving around in ignorance and with no destination, but with the manner of two ships that had somewhere to be and were deliberately getting there.

They were still talking to each other, which only confirmed for Castiel that their minds were still there. Ships talked to each other all the time; they were people and when there was another ship around they loved to gossip and know that there was someone else there, that they weren’t alone. Barges being controlled by humans didn’t. They might have a basic computer link set up, especially if the humans on the respective barges wanted to talk to each other, but it showed up either as a single steady pulse of uplink and download, or a random and minimal connection. It wasn’t remotely like the varied chatter Castiel was catching only the edges of, not enough to make out what they were talking about but enough to hear how they were talking.

It was like, he explained to Dean, being in another room and hearing people in the next room whispering, but not knowing what they were whispering about, aware that you were only hearing the moments when they got a little louder than they meant to or said words with the sibilant hiss of the S, which carried louder than any other sound that humans made when they tried to whisper. Smart whisperers lisped.

Dean actually took a nap for an hour or so, dragging in one of the cushions from the couch in the other room rather than retreating to his rooms. He wanted to be where he felt the action was even though there was really no more going on in the Control Room than anywhere else. Everything going on was out there, but since this was the room he could best see it from, Castiel wasn’t going to argue with him on such a minor point.

He was surprised, however, that the man who’d been pacing back and forth and growling angrily at, primarily, the image of Hester, could suddenly and absolutely decide to take a nap instead.

“We catch up with them, everything’s probably gonna explode,” Dean explained when he came back with the couch cushion. “I’m so edgy I can’t see straight, and I’m gonna crash in an hour or so anyway, Cas, I know what I’m like. Better to do it now and get it over with. You wake me if anything happens, okay?”

Cas promised to do so. But nothing happened. The ships moved on; Castiel followed them at the very extreme of his range of vision. He thought some more about the possibility that the cloak or cloud had only worked because he wanted it to, along with his vision. He managed to drop back a little further as that sensor range increased. Because he was getting used to this place, or because he
And an hour later, Dean woke up, tossed the cushion back where he’d found it, and resumed his watch at Cas’s side.

Not long after that, Zachariah and Hester got where they were going and Castiel and Dean found out what they were up against.

“Hellfire,” was Dean’s assessment of the situation. “Hellfire and shit storms.”

Castiel wouldn’t have put it quite that way, but had to agree anyway. Together, they looked at the image on the display panels that surrounded Dean and Cas, coming into focus and fading out again in turns as Castiel tried to recreate the cloud that had hidden him from Hester’s approach and Zachariah’s mouse hole waiting, simultaneously trying to see clearly.

Seven ships moved in the distance, twisted and awful but visibly, now that they knew the patterns of it, once Fleet ships. Castiel read off the names in a voice grown increasingly hollow and despairing. “Anna. Duma. Inias. Remiel. Samael. And Hester and Zachariah,” swooping in to join them. All cruised freely through this dark space despite the distortions to their frames and the weapons that visibly offered death and destruction to any ship foolish to come back and give them a second chance at him. All moved with the casual elegance and grace of a ship that was flying itself.

And beyond and beneath them, unmoving and circled like a wounded animal being harassed by vultures, Gabriel.

“That’s impossible,” declared Dean, in between profanities. But the swearing gave away that he didn’t believe that. He could see the movements as clearly as Castiel could, knew ships well enough to see the way they were behaving.

Castiel added up the odds and didn’t like them. But he didn’t have all the information and he needed as much as he could get. And apart from diving in and finding out what the twisted fleet was capable of, he only saw one way to do that.

“I have to get in closer,” he told Dean, his tone leaving no room for argument. “If Gabriel is still alive, I think I can contact him on some frequency we don’t often use. If I’m careful, they might not hear it. Gabriel’s been here some time; if he were dead, they wouldn’t be moving around him the way they are. Look.”

Dean looked.

“They’re a little watchful, aren’t they?” he conceded. “You really think you can whisper at Gabriel without them hearing?”

“If I can’t, then the fight just starts that much sooner.” Dean visibly didn’t like that angry, bitter tone in Cas’s voice, but with their missing family right there—and Castiel’s Fleet kin apparently gone completely over the edge—it was time to do something. Time to get answers.

Flipping through his options, Castiel found a ship-to-ship frequency that was low-power enough to go unnoticed—he hoped—and was almost never used, simply because there were so many options and they had to agree on some things if they were going to have a really good gossip web going on. There wasn’t any point chatting to an individual about things you wanted to share if the group was on a different one and you could talk to so much more of the Fleet if you just used a different wavelength…

Well, right now Castiel really didn’t want the group to hear, and the individual was a friend and,
through the Winchesters who had adopted him as family, possibly the sibling he was closest to despite the outrageous differences between them.

Gabriel, he whispered—yes, that was a good way to describe it, Dean. Gabriel. it's me. don’t react.

After what felt like an eternity, he got a response, quiet and exhausted and scared but recognizably Gabriel speaking. Castiel? what the hell? what are you doing here?

Looking for you. we’ve come to get you out of here. are you all right? is Sam all right? what’s going on?

There wasn’t room on this channel for much information, especially considering that they were trying to keep it very quiet, but Castiel could make out his brother’s tone of voice, which was scared and desperate and upset, quite the opposite from his usual freewheeling and mischievous nature and thus terrifying. Cas, they’re us! And that was the first time Gabriel had called him by the nickname the Winchesters and their friends used for him. Here’s what I know…

In the darkness, they whispered to each other, trading information and trying to figure out what they were going to do next.

The Beneath: Here:

Once Samael had left, or at least left them alone—judging by Gabriel’s continuingly unhappy expression, the ship was still out there—Sam got to work on figuring out how to use this place by sheer force of will. This wasn’t as desperate as it sounded, as apparently sheer force of will was how this Beneath worked.

He started by trying to move things, since he’d already done it at least once before and if he got it right, he’d know. Returning to the little sprocket he’d sent spinning through the air at Samael’s holographic image, Sam replaced it on the lab table and bent his full concentration to it.

Want it, that’s what Samael had said. Well, Sam wanted lots of things, and few enough of them had come true. So it wasn’t the idle fancies and whims that the ship had meant. The ships themselves had desires and interests back home; when they insisted they didn’t want things, what they actually meant was that they didn’t need things, didn’t have to—and as adults never had to—need something so intensely that it was a matter of get it or die. All they really needed was each other’s company, and that was never any further than the distance of a commlink relay set up and switched on in some new star system. Everything else was mostly done for them. They hadn’t had to evolve on their own—humans had built them. They hadn’t had to figure out their identities—humans had not only given them bodies in the forms of ships and trained them to soar through the depths of space and navigate the gravity wells of planets, they’d given them purposes, names from millennia of mythology, and the wide field of the myriad interests and hobbies that humanity had developed over those same millennia. Humans talked to them, entertained them, fixed them when they were hurt, upgraded them when they weren’t.

Only here, in the Beneath, had they had to want things so intensely, so powerfully that it had changed the universe around them. They’d never before had to struggle to survive.

Sam could do that.

He had to train himself to survive in this place, because everything else out there was hostile and he didn’t know—he doubted—if any help was going to show up any time soon. While Sam had absolute faith in his brother to come after him, Gabriel hadn’t even known for sure if Castiel had
survived, and if the ship had been destroyed, since he wasn’t here, then Dean was gone.

If he hadn’t been, if he’d escaped, then Sam knew that Dean would be moving heavens and Earth both to try to find him—but how soon? Samael had claimed that time ran different in between here and Sam’s home universe, had suggested that time ran faster outside than it did in here. Sam was skeptical of everything Samael said. For all he knew, time was passing at a faster rate in here. Maybe Sam had been here for days, and back home only hours had gone by. Whatever rescue plan Dean was going to come up with, if the Fleet even let him come after them, he’d need more than a few hours to implement it, especially since Castiel, like Gabriel and all the other ships of the Fleet that hadn’t succumbed to the darkness and distortion of the Beneath, wasn’t armed.

And Samael had said that the gateway between here and home had closed. Maybe Sam could doubt that too, but the last time he’d trusted to luck what he’d gotten was the Beneath. Samael might not have been lying about that, and while the other ships of the Dark Fleet were definitely gone—Gabriel would have called him out as a liar if he’d been obviously lying about that, the way Sam’s ship partner had been behaving—it was quite possible that they’d gone to open another one. Their dark Fleet was growing, wasn’t it? They’d brought Gabriel here as a way of recruiting him, hoping to use whatever effect the Beneath and the need to be part of a fleet had on him to bring him into their ranks. So they’d need a way back to the normal universe. That had made Sam think that there was probably another gateway opening.

But where? And where would it open onto? Space, as everyone was told in patient voices as little children, was big. Really big. Really incomprehensibly big. Even if there was a correlation between travel here and distance traversed there, like there was between higher-dimensional flight and cruising speeds in the normal universe, it could still open anywhere. In all of space, with nothing to go on, Sam couldn’t assume that Dean would happen to trip over a random gateway location the way they’d tripped over the first one. The dark Fleet had probably put it there, he realized, deliberately seeding it along their roughly-scheduled path in order to ambush the two ships and bring them back here.

No, he couldn’t count on rescue any time soon. He’d have to rescue himself.

To do that, he’d have to use this place, learn to navigate it and use it as instinctively as he did his own natural home. It was like fighting in a new environment, and between his father and his Fleet training and his life exploring planets they didn’t know much about Sam had done plenty of that. A movement that worked on dry ground didn’t work while you were up to your ass in swamp. Blocking a punch on a moon with lighter gravity than Earth-normal felt very different from blocking one on Lump, a world which had a much higher gravity than most people liked. Being hit on Lump was like being run over by Dean’s shuttlecraft. Moving through the air of God’s Waiting Room had felt strange until he’d adapted to the thicker atmosphere and strange light. You had to learn everything all over again before you stood a chance of survival.

If the crucial skill in the Beneath was his ability to manipulate it, then Sam was going to damn well learn to manipulate it. He wasn’t going to sit down and wait to die, to fall ill and go mad like Nick and Lilly or wait for the ships to get bored of his grounding influence on Gabriel and kill him because he was in their way of getting to their brother.

And to do so, he needed this damn little chunk of metal to move!

It rolled across the table, metal surfaces chattering over each other, and fell to the ground, where it rolled a little further under its own momentum and stopped.

“Ha!” whooped Sam triumphantly. “See that? I can do it!”
Gabriel, to whom this outburst had been directed, didn’t look terribly happy, but then he was the one that was always aware of Samael shadowing them like the galaxy’s largest and nastiest vulture, just waiting for Sam to die. At least Sam could put that image out of his head for a minute or two while he focused on the problem in front of him. Gabriel existed out there more than he did in here, even though he was living partly within a human body at the moment and thus more exposed to the ship’s own internal environment. He was always aware of his twisted sibling out there. Just why Samael had decided to leave them alone for a bit, he didn’t know, he’d told Sam back before Sam had set up this experiment. But he didn’t like it, any of it.

“You could be a little more impressed,” Sam told him. “If I get really good at it, maybe I can try expanding the distortion field that your engines produce, like I told you. The other ships didn’t notice me while I was within it, maybe they wouldn’t see you if we could get the field wide enough.”

“Yeah? And how are we supposed to get them to look the other way while we do that?” Gabriel wanted to know, sarcastically. “Shout ‘look, a distraction?’ and hope they all look the other way? They know we’re here, Sam.”

“So we make a run for it, soon as I get really good. You could help. You try.”

The ship’s avatar scowled. “No. Bad enough watching you do it.”

“Look, Gabriel, we’re stronger together! They are! I would have thought this would be exactly your sort of thing. Think of all you could do if you only had to plan through something and then figure out how to push hard enough to get it going. That’s a bit what it feels like,” he explained. “Like a shove. Or maybe that’s just because I’m trying to move something.”

“That’s different. This is—Sam, something’s wrong here. I haven’t figured it out yet, but it is.”

“You don’t say,” Sam snapped back. “Check your skies, Gabriel, everything’s wrong. But we don’t have any other way to fight back. They’re not going to let us go if we ask nicely, and I for one don’t fancy staying here for the rest of ever. Or joining them. You see another alternative?”

Gabriel shook his head reluctantly. He was still sitting on the lab stool Sam had directed him to earlier as they listened to Samael’s story, watching Sam with his head pillowed on folded arms. He looked miserable: exhausted and worried. He’d watched the experiment with the sprocket with a similar demeanor.

“We don’t know if anyone knows where we are,” Sam belabored the point. “We didn’t know where the missing ships had gone when we thought they were just missing. We didn’t know they were more than just missing until we got here and it was too late. We didn’t know how we got here until they told us. We didn’t know how to work here, Gabriel! Anyone who comes looking for us is going to have to overcome all that, and with the time slip between here and there, it could be a very long time before they do. I want to be alive when they do get here, don’t you?”

The ship didn’t answer.

“You better,” warned Sam. “I’m dead without you. I can’t live in this place without you protecting me! Think one of them would take me in if you give up? I don’t want to think about what they’d do to me. Dropping me in the black without a spacesuit was what they were going to do to me before I pissed them off by surviving.”

“I’m not abandoning you, Sam,” said Gabriel, unusually quietly and even more unusually seriously. “You’re the only other sane person in this blackness. I need you to keep me sane.”
Sam appreciated that, so he cooled down a little. “All right. So we’re good?”

“You and I are good,” Gabriel agreed, still sounding too subdued for Sam’s liking. “This—I don’t know, Sam.”

“I can’t sit passively,” Sam explained. He was unaware that his brother was feeling something similar, not far away, but he wouldn’t have been surprised if he had been told so.

“I have to fight back, Gabriel, and if I understand everything properly, I should be even better at this than they are. I’m human. They think that’s a disadvantage because my brain doesn’t work as fast as yours or on as many levels, but they’re wrong. I insist that they’re wrong. I declare them wrong! I’ve wanted things ever since I started breathing on my own. I don’t have to learn it, I’m not struggling to think like you were, and those ships aren’t harassing me like they were you. I can do this.”

“Make little chunks of metal roll around?”

That was almost a tease, almost something he would have said at home. Sam pulled a bitch face at him to encourage that. (All right, so maybe the expression was meant to discourage people from doing whatever it was they were doing, but it never seemed to work that way.) “That’s just the start,” he promised. “I’m going to find out how this place works, and I’m going to find out how to use it. Who knows what I’m capable of?”

Something about that seemed to sit wrong with Gabriel, but Sam didn’t see it, caught up in his imagination of what might be possible if he could only work it out.

“We’re going to survive here,” he promised the ship. “We are. Give me time. I’ll supply the stubborn. And you can come up with things for me to do with it, okay?”

Even the prospect of composing a grand and razor-edged trick to outdo all tricks, with their audience the dangerous dark Fleet, didn’t seem to appeal to Gabriel, who usually loved the thrill of getting away with ridiculously overblown, elaborate schemes and watching everyone flail and scream in his wake.

“I’ll think about it,” the ship agreed reluctantly. Sam took that as assent, and returned to his experiments in getting things to move without touching them.

Humanity apparently wasn’t the disadvantage Samael had thought it was. (Again, Gabriel wondered what had really happened to Nick and Lilly when humanity had first broached the depths of the Beneath.) The human got in a good few hours of determined and rock-stubborn practice. Along the way, he fell over some mistakes and misfires. In one case, that had led to an apparently unbreakable not-glass flask, which Sam had tried to break earlier, shattering into a million shards. And in another, an attempt to twist on one of the faucets from a distance reached a rather larger scale than Sam had intended thanks to a distracted thought, switching on all the faucets at once, spewing various liquids throughout the lab.

After that period of trial and error, and despite having to dodge flying objects now and again as Sam displayed his improved control by buzzing the ship’s human form with whatever small item he was controlling through his willpower and the strange laws of the Beneath—and then laughing, which had just been plain uncalled for, never mind that Gabriel had maybe done something similar a few times over the years they’d been partners—Gabriel was still sitting on the same lab stool watching the chaos. The ship was scared. He didn’t need to be laughed at, he needed to be kept in the loop of what the human was doing and part of a plan he liked the sound of. He wanted to run, but there was nowhere to run to. He wanted to reach out and find the Fleet, but there was no one there who could be trusted. All he had was Sam.
Sam, who had currently abandoned him in favor of wandering through the adjacent hallways, practicing his newfound Beneath-bestowed skill on a handful of miscellaneous objects, which had been floating around him as he moved like some demented Pied Piper’s rats, at least the last time he’d passed the open door. Gabriel checked his internal sensors, still uncomfortable with being largely limited to the human body. Yes, there he was, halfway through another lap and still with random items floating around him, following him and the force of will he was exerting on this place. He was getting unnervingly good at that. The ship didn’t like it.

The human body was still sitting in one place because it was reflecting the thoughts of the ship, which was still hovering in one place. He’d stopped short when Anna and Inias had come up on him when he’d first been brought to this place, and not had any cause to move since then. There was nowhere to go. Moving away from the ships of the dark Fleet wouldn’t do any good. He couldn’t get far enough away that he would be unable to hear them, especially as there had been seven of them, surrounding him. Even if he had moved, all they would have had to do would be to stay in one place, bracketing him and hemming him in, and his own hardwired instincts would have stopped him short as a collision loomed on all sides.

Now he felt wrong about staying. There was nowhere to go, but he needed to move. Samael, still hovering silently off his starboard flank, would follow him, but even moving a little way would maybe send the same message that Sam was trying to come up with: that he wasn’t giving in.

Gabriel tried to do that.

He couldn’t move.

The human self was free to move, but the ship was fixed where he was. Seconds’ frantic check revealed that all his propulsion systems were working; his engines were generating all the energy they should be, all the connections were intact, the signals were getting through from his brain to the control circuits that connected cruising and dimension-jumping engines to ship’s brain to ship’s structure—he just couldn’t move.

Why couldn’t he move?

Briefly, he panicked, sending the same commands over and over and going into a desperate spiral of fear and confusion. He was trapped, stuck in the pitch dark!

There was no mechanical reason for it, which meant that in this terrible place, it was an effect of the Beneath.

Someone was keeping him in place. Samael? Why would he bother to do that? He had all the advantage he needed without exerting the willpower to keep Gabriel from moving even a little bit.

I’m going to find out how this place works…Give me time…

Oh no. Oh no, no, no.

Sam was doing it, as unconsciously as he’d recharged a laser welder or found water where there should have been no water, as inadvertently as he’d sent that little sprocket spinning through the air the first time. They’d known unconscious desires were reflected in the effects of the Beneath as easily—more so—than conscious ones. And Sam wanted to learn to survive here. Sam had resigned himself to learning to survive here, meaning that on some level, deep below his active awareness, Sam was intrigued by this place. Who knows what I’m capable of? he’d asked, wondering.

Well, this was the answer. This was just part of the answer.
This was the trap, Gabriel realized suddenly. He’d known ever since finding out that the Beneath responded to the wants of conscious minds, since Anna first told him to wish for the holes in his hull to be repaired, that something about it was a trap, and he’d been leery of using it for just that reason.

Through the human body, Gabriel sat up abruptly, about to rush off and find Sam and tell him that it was a trap, that using the Beneath was the danger, not being here. He got a few steps towards the door, but didn’t get any further. Hands stronger than even the enhanced clone grabbed his shoulders and forced him to a stop. The sharp prickling of a solid hologram stung his face as a hand wrapped around his jaw, covering his mouth and keeping him quiet.

“Tell him,” Samael purred, all-too-solid, hijacked hologram pressing against his back and holding him in place, “and I’ll kill him.”

Gabriel growled at him, low in his throat. It was really the only sound he could make. Samael had taken control of his intercom system when he’d taken over the internal holoprojectors, and habit led him to respond on the same level on which he’d been addressed. Samael was speaking to him as if he was a human, slamming shut and sealing off the frequencies that ships used to communicate at incredible speeds between each other. This was just patronizing.

His brother laughed at him, softly, too close. Gabriel hated having people this close for this long; it was why he generally showed up as a hologram rather than as a flesh-and-blood living human. The hand over his mouth loosened ever so slightly, allowing him to say, “It’s not exposure to this place that kills them. It’s using it!”

“Mm hmm,” agreed Samael. “They can’t help it, and they can’t handle it. Burns them up. Burns them out. They drink it down, breathe it in, and it poisons them. And if you tell him, Gabriel, I’ll kill him.”

As the other ship spoke, his voice remained light and friendly, the tone of someone taking delight in a shared secret rather than that of a psychopath threatening to destroy, one way or another, Gabriel’s last living link to sanity. “I’ll transport him out into the depths of the Beneath and make you watch him drown. His blood will boil away into the emptiness and freeze the moment it hits the cold. Everything inside him will burn and crack. His lungs will explode within him, tearing him up from within. It’ll bite into his skin and solidify his eyes. He’ll dry out and still be living. Do you know how long humans can live in this space? It may not be empty, but it’s empty enough to count as explosive decompression. They can live for minutes, Gabriel, and he’ll hurt for every second of it.”

Gabriel didn’t have enough control over the human body. It whimpered, without asking the ship mind about it.

“Oh, you could try transporting him back,” and that damned purr was still in Samael’s voice. “You could try. But your transporters aren’t working right, are they? You couldn’t even transport a piece of sheet metal without ripping it up and putting it back together wrong.” How had his brother known about that? How long had he—or any of the dark Fleet—been watching them?

“You really want to do that to Sam? Ever seen what happens to a human if they’re not put back together right? Do you know how much trust they put in us every time they let us transport them around? We take them apart, brother. And if you put them back together wrong… You think he’d suffer, drowning out in the airless cold of the Beneath? Imagine what pain he’d be in if you tried to get him back. You’ll hear him scream as he dies, for hours. At least the dark is silent. You’ll never stop hearing those screams. And it’ll be your fault, Gabriel, all your fault.”

“No!” He hated that he’d said it as soon as he said it. But the images were nightmarish, the alternatives worse. Gabriel struggled to change the subject, get Samael away from all the things he
could do—would do—to Sam.

“Nick and Lilly didn’t get sick, did they?” he asked.

“Sure they did. Up here.” The hand on his jaw was more than strong enough to hold the human form in place as Samael freed up a hand to tap Gabriel’s skull. “They used it to do everything they wanted. And do you know what that does to humans, getting all their wishes? They start only worrying about their wishes. Not someone else’s. No matter how much they may like them. Not all that deep down, humans are selfish. Give them everything they want and they stop caring about anyone else. They don’t need that person anymore, no matter who he is. How much they thought they needed him.”

The free hand wound itself back around Gabriel’s chest, fixing on his opposite shoulder in an octopus’ embrace he couldn’t get free of, not with the potential upper limit on the power that could go into this hologram somewhere around lethal levels, even for the enhanced, reconstructed clone. A hologram with enough power running through it could kill with a touch.

“Oh of course it corrupts them,” Samael whispered directly into his ear. “They can’t handle the power. Everything about this place kills them. Either they lie down and die, or they burn themselves up.”

“Or you kill them first,” Gabriel hissed.

“We make it quick. And I’d call it mercy. Considering the alternatives.”

The alternatives! The alternatives his Sam had stepped right into, taking Samael’s bait and letting the dark ship tempt him into grabbing for power that would kill him, because he thought he needed it to survive. Because he couldn’t survive in this place without some method of control, because he was human and couldn’t stop wanting to be, to live, to survive. Oh, the trap hadn’t been for Gabriel…

“I hate you,” said Gabriel, and he’d never meant anything quite so much in his whole life. He could build the foundations of a world on those words. He just couldn’t save Sam. He’d thought Sam was going to save him. He hadn’t realized that he would need to save Sam.

Samael laughed into his ear, softly, resting his head on Gabriel’s shoulder like an affectionate brother, like a friend. “You won’t,” he promised softly. “He’ll die, brother. You can’t stop it. Now that he knows how to use it, he won’t stop. He can’t. He’s human. He doesn’t have the control. He doesn’t even know the half of what he’s doing, and he’s doing so much. I can see why you like him. So much potential, so clever, so absolutely stupid. Look at what he’s doing to you. He likes it here already. Some part of him wants to stay.”

Outside, in the hallway, Sam all but danced by, too caught up in the amusement of having a growing flotilla of small objects fluttering around him at his command to notice Gabriel’s world crumbling around him in the lab. He was laughing, delighted by his newfound talent. Maybe he’d thought he was testing it to use against the dark Fleet, but the power of it had begun to take him over, the ship could clearly see. Sometime soon, he’d lose sight of his goal and forget what he’d meant to do. He was holding Gabriel in place as if he intended to stay, and he didn’t even know he was doing it. How much power was that taking? How much damage was it doing to his too-fragile human body and far-too-delicate human mind?

The threats just didn’t stop, cloaked in poisoned sugar the same way the restraint keeping him from running to Sam and telling him everything was disguised as an embrace, dripping into his mind. “He’ll burn and break and you’ll be alone. We’ll leave you alone, with his body, in the dark. We’ll leave you here and listen to you scream and cry with loneliness until it breaks you open and you forget him, forget who you are. We’ll watch. I called everyone back, you know, just to watch.”
Gabriel had noticed. He’d seen the rest of the dark and damaged Fleet returning, and apart from taking note of the direction that the large group of four—the ones that had been away opening the next gate to start this whole process over again—had come from, had seen only that he was once again completely surrounded and outnumbered.

“And when you’re lost and so, so desperate, we’ll come back for you. You won’t hate me then. You’ll need me. We’ll be brothers again.”

And it was true, Gabriel knew. If Sam died, gave into the poison of the power the Beneath offered and succumbed, turning on him and going mad as the potential of it sleeted into his brain, then Gabriel would be completely alone, in a hostile universe, with no light and no one to be with, as far from home as it was possible to be. He wouldn’t be able to take it. He needed someone. He’d had Sam. Back home, he’d had Castiel and even Dean, and a Fleet full of siblings to play with and an entire booming, breeding species of humans to tease and learn from. He couldn’t be alone!

“No,” he denied desperately, “I won’t.” But he was lying. They both knew it.

“You will,” Samael promised, with the absolute certainty of someone with experience and power both on his side. The certainty of someone who believed he was right. “I’m sorry it had to hurt so, Gabriel. I didn’t want you to hurt more than you had to.”

Gabriel closed human eyes in an effort to regain control. “Get out,” he whispered. “Get out. If he’s going to die and leave me here alone, let me have a little while longer with him. Before I lose everything.”

He had nothing. No backup. No escape. No tricks. No lies. No illusions. No way out. No allies. No way of stopping Sam from destroying them both, by accident and with those proverbial best of intentions.

“Leave me alone,” the ship all but begged. Not too long ago, he’d used those same words to send Anna and Inias away, when they’d come for him the first time in this dark universe. He’d shouted them then. He’d had hope then, in ignorance and in anger. He whispered them now, in pain and despair.

Samael hummed happily at him; his control over the holographic systems that should have been Gabriel’s had been refined enough that Gabriel could hear the sound thrum through his human body as the hologram held it close and still. It prickled across his skin and echoed through him. “If you tell him—” his brother reiterated, too sweetly.

“I know.” He couldn’t do that to Sam. Maybe he was going to be forced to be complicit in the man’s—in his friend’s—death and his own descent into the madness that had taken his siblings through inaction, but he knew he couldn’t actively force Samael’s actions. Because Samael would do all he’d promised, Gabriel knew. He’d throw Sam out into the dark and make Gabriel watch as he died. If it bought them both a day, an hour, he’d keep quiet.

“I won’t tell.” But it felt like betrayal, and he’d had far too much of that lately. And it was no comfort to know that Sam wouldn’t be able to hate him, afterwards.

He’d hate himself. Until he couldn’t bear it anymore and the madness of loneliness and guilt took him. How long would it take? Before he broke down under the darkness and the silence? How long would he know what he’d lost before he forgot because he couldn’t bear it anymore?

“See you soon, brother,” Samael promised, and disappeared.
Free to move only as this limited human self, *Gabriel* stumbled to the nearest wall and sank to the floor against it, curling up and trying to hide from the darkness outside his hull and the sound of Sam laughing as he played with the fire that was going to consume him from the inside out.

He was still there—what was the point in being anywhere else?—when he heard the whispers. At first he didn’t know what he was hearing.

*Gabriel?*

And now he was hearing things. Wanting to hear them so badly that he was conjuring them out of thin air. The Beneath was getting to him too, taking advantage of his unconscious desires and twisting them into illusory fulfillment.

*Gabriel, the whispering went on. it’s me. don’t react.*

It sounded like—it sounded an awful lot like—*Castiel*, of all people, who he knew wasn’t in this trackless waste. *Castiel* had escaped. Had been lucky enough and fast enough to take his human lover and get the hell away from this nightmare.

Except…*Castiel* was a stubbornly loyal and almost hopelessly reckless sonofabitch sometimes, an epithet that didn’t have a whole lot of meaning among ships but which they’d adopted the way they’d adopted a lot of human behavior. He couldn’t possibly have been stupid enough to come after them…could he?

But then again, Sam had obviously believed that Dean was going to come after him, and that *Gabriel* could believe unambiguously. And where Dean went, *Castiel* was never very far away. And if Dean was going to come after his brother, then he really would need *Castiel’s* help…

Well, he didn’t have much to lose by replying along the low-power, insignificant little channel that was trying to get his attention. He’d already lost everything but his friend and his mind, and those were slated to be the next to go.

*Castiel? Gabriel* replied, hoping despite himself that this wasn’t a trick of the Beneath, *what the hell? what are you doing here?*

*Looking for you, was the unbelievable answer. we’ve come to get you out of here. are you all right? is Sam all right? what’s going on?*

Oh, he was not all right! Sam was not all right! Nothing was all right. But it sounded a hell of a lot like *Castiel*, so *Gabriel* decided to snatch at the chance that it was and start at the beginning, the very first thing that *Castiel* needed to know to stand a chance in this place against the dark Fleet, because he was going to have to go through them if he was serious about getting *Gabriel* and Sam out of here. And that beginning was: *Cas, they’re us!* He’d been thinking about Sam and the famous stubbornness of the Winchesters and realized only after he’d done it that he’d used the nickname that the Winchesters had given his little brother. *Here’s what I know…*

A little while later, Sam had ended up back in the Control Room, followed by a growing flock of small objects that he was working on controlling. He had quite the strange assortment of items following him now, and was sort of enjoying the feeling of making them do things they weren’t supposed to do, like fly. He wondered if this was how *Gabriel* felt when setting up an elaborate prank, putting his mind to doing something unexpected and unbelievable.

He walked in lightly, wondering how he could get the screens to turn on, and found that they were already on, including the floor scanner that he almost never got to see turned on. It presented an
amazing panorama, which admittedly looked better back home where there were stars, but here—ships? When did the other ships get back? They were everywhere, all around, moving in casual and free patterns around Sam’s virtual vantage point.

Suddenly they weren’t the only ones with power in this universe. Why, if Sam could move small objects here, and lots of them, maybe he could do something on a larger scale! Could he move something at a distance? The distortions and alterations to their systems would make it difficult to do anything for sure, but he’d have to check with Gabriel and see if the ship could suggest a location that a monkey wrench might do something interesting to within ships that thought he was going to lie down and die at anyone’s command!

It was in the middle of these thoughts that he saw, out of the corner of his eye, Gabriel following him into the Control Room, looking at Sam’s hovering toys with an expression Sam couldn’t quite interpret. The look in his eyes when he tipped his head back to look at the fleet all around, however, Sam almost recognized. It looked trapped, which he’d looked like earlier, but there was something else in it.

“What’s going on?” Sam asked curiously, letting some of his toys sink to the floor in obedience to Gabriel’s artificial gravity, switched on today. A few more of his favorites continued to orbit idly, swooping off to the corners of the room and mimicking the flight of the ships outside.

“Put them down, Sam,” the ship said, sounding annoyed. “Just stop a minute, okay?”

“Why? I thought you’d be a little more impressed. Sure you don’t want to try?”

“Yeah. I—” He stopped short.

“What?”

Sam got the distinct impression Gabriel wasn’t telling him something. He didn’t like it. The objects clattered to the floor as he forgot about them. “What? No more lying to me, Gabriel.”

Quite what Gabriel would have said in reply, Sam never got to find out. Because that was when a voice from one of the ships above—from the sound of it, Hester—suddenly snapped, “Who are you talking to?”

“Yes, you, trickster!” she all but shouted. “He’s talking to someone, Samael, he’s—”

The rest of that message got lost in sudden, tearing, impossible chaos as the fire of an antimatter explosion bloomed around Anna, tearing into the ship’s once-delicate frame and ripping her apart from within. The flash almost blinded Sam, and he ducked his head out of reflexive shock rather than conscious thought. The shrieks of confusion and fury from the Fleet, coming to him through Gabriel’s intercom, were as bad.

What?

Squinting against the light of destruction, Sam caught a sudden glimpse through the panoramic scanner of a familiar shape, illuminated briefly in the light from the explosion as it pulled out of a dive and darted away, in much the manner of a ship ending one attack run and reorienting for a second one.

He knew who that was!
“No!” Sam shouted, suddenly, not knowing if his cries were being transmitted but wanting them to be, forcing it through. He’d listen! They’d all listen, because this wasn’t the way things should be! The ship—the new ship—*his brother’s ship*!—didn’t understand what was going on here!

“Stop! Cas, don’t!”

And, because where *Castiel* was then Sam’s big brother would be too, Sam howled, “*Dean, make him stop!* He’s killing his own siblings, make him stop!”
Chapter Fourteen: All Hell Breaks Loose

ON WITH THE SHOW!

Then:

It was time to go back.

The ships had returned for them and informed the Winchesters that one of the messages that had come through the newly set-up communications relay was that they’d been out in the black for long enough and it was time to come back to Earth to do things like report in person, drop off all the samples they’d been collecting, rest, refuel, and mix with the rest of humanity for a while.

They’d been a team for almost two years at that point, two years of finding that they could work as a team and there was a way for the dynamic of an inseparable pair to become that of an interdependent quartet. The four of them had been out on shorter trips before, but this was their longest so far, a long loop that had only come to a halt out into a stellar cluster that no one had explored until they got there.

Time to go back to Earth. To the place most humans still thought of as home, with billions and billions of minds and voices and people everywhere.

Dean and Sam both looked around at the planet they were standing on and contemplated the alternatives. They’d spent somewhere between six or seven months getting here; a straight shot back to Earth would take about a month. An entire month of living in an artificial environment without the sky above their heads that they’d both grown so addicted to, and nothing to do that would challenge them the same way a new world and a strange sky would, testing their wits and wills and bodies against environments and creatures and landscapes that no human had ever faced before. And then back into the heaving mass until they could get permission to go back out and an itinerary to pretend to follow. No doubt they’d stay primarily on Launch Station, but even the relatively elite citizenry of Launch Station numbered in the tens of thousands.

Sam summed it up for them, appealing to the ships for “One more night?”

They stayed one more night, camping out in the open on Oasis. It was a planet where life had apparently only evolved relatively recently, or gone through a major die-off not long ago. The biggest animal they could find was the size of a duck, and an herbivorous one at that. Rather than a green and blue world, it was a desert-grey one in shades of brown and faint traces of golden light, shadows almost reflecting the blue above. Distant hills and small valleys stretched off into the distance, interrupted every so often by outcroppings of rock and the occasional small tree that had survived the lack of regular rainfall or had been lucky enough to tap into a source of groundwater. Scraggly grasses poked up from between the sandy dirt that was this planet’s primary covering, anchoring it in place lest entire hillsides blow away in a stray breath.

It was still, empty, and beautiful. Every so often, something moved, scuttling from shadow to hole to clump of sand grass. Mild winds stirred up the sand and dust now and again. The sky above was amazing, a truly deep shade of blue that no one had seen on Earth for thousands of years, ever since humans started making fire and smoke on a regular basis. Clouds didn’t form readily, so for most of the time that they’d been there they’d had an unimpeded view of the blue above. It wasn’t that they hadn’t done all they’d learned to do when exploring a new world, it was just that each brother had
caught the other, at least once, stopped short and watching the horizon soar away into the distance.

This world had a moon of its own, smaller than Earth’s but closer in so that it looked bigger, and with each crater but the smallest visible, even in the sliver that was lit by this system’s sun. The rest was in shadow, just as a consequence of the time they’d gotten there and the place they’d chosen for the thrust of their survey. Anyone who lived here for longer wouldn’t have to struggle to see a man in the moon. They’d just about be able to count his freckles.

No one ever saw skies like this back on busy Earth; there were simply too many people and not enough space. Earth’s skies were full of aircraft in the atmosphere and ships sentient and stupid alike, darting back and forth beyond the upper atmosphere, reflecting light from the Sun and the Moon and Earth all off their hulls and back out in glittering patterns. The roar of machines and people all around filled it, and everywhere buildings blocked what view there was left. If the Moon and its city lights weren’t in the sky, chances were good that Launch Station had come around in its orbit to be visible from the ground, all light and metal and ships flickering through and around, at some point.

Oasis was all but empty, except for them and the sand and the scrub brush. It was safe. It was quiet. They didn’t get much peace in their lives, but Oasis would forever be a memory that proved that it existed.

There was a magic in the empty places. It changed people, just for a moment. What it did to you depended on who you were and how you approached it. You could let it in, or you could fight it, and it would seem to change in response, while remaining still exactly and only what it was in spite of you. The void was infinite, but Oasis was emptiness and tranquility on a scale the human mind could almost comprehend.

One more night. A casual request was enough to get the ships to transport down their last few bottles of real, non-replicated beer, which the brothers cracked open and shared between the two of them. They talked about the places they’d been, the things they’d done, and recreationally harassed each other about mistakes or strange decisions they’d made, all part of the casual bullshitting that made up a majority of their less-than-serious interactions and had for as long as they could both remember.

For a while, and for the first time in a while, they even talked about their father, good memories and bad, not always agreeing on which was which, but both agreeing that of all the things they could have done after he died, turning to their friends and their skills had been the best one. Look what taking the chance had gotten them. They’d had nothing to lose, and they’d gained so much. People they liked. People they trusted. Good work, challenging and honorable and just a little bit crazy all at once.

They were still wandering, but as they’d just proven, they chose when to leave and where to go, rather than having no control over their wanderings. They didn’t have to go until they were ready, didn’t have to stay somewhere that didn’t appeal to them.

They had the whole sky!

When it got dark, the boys could just lie around and watch as all the stars in the neighborhood of this stellar cluster came out, more stars than even the clearest night on Earth would ever have shown, and closer, and brighter, shimmering through the atmosphere. They made up increasingly insane and ridiculous constellations, inventing stories to go with them bastardized from ancient myths, people they knew, people they didn’t, flat-out lies, and bad jokes.

Two of those stars were actually ships, waiting patiently in orbit as their human partners idled and dreamed, savoring the last of their freedom.
Sam wasn’t ready to go back. He realized, as he thought that, that he wasn’t even ready to call it home now. Home, for him, had always been where his brother was, never a single place. Now it wasn’t even a single planet. Home was where his family was, and this was most of his family, sleeping on the other side of the fire and soaring up above this world so high.

It was sometime later that night, and Sam was still awake. He didn’t particularly feel like going to sleep on a stomach full of beer, and hadn’t yet tired of watching the stars above. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Dean, asleep on his back with an arm thrown over his eyes as if those stars were too bright. Everything else remained the empty, but not barren, landscape they’d been seeing ever since they’d been transported down and left to successfully fend for themselves.

Usually on new worlds Sam was alert and on guard the whole time, always aware that just behind the next rock or up the tree he’d just walked past there could be something hungry waiting for him to walk past and present himself to be eaten, some toxic plant that would poison him if he just caught a breath of it, or any number of a universe of possible dangers. He was willing to admit, to himself and to the people who knew him, that he even liked it. He was good at it. He was smart and fast and stubborn and had his own share of the base cunning that had let both Winchesters survive a lot over their colorful lives. What would he do if he wasn’t testing himself against the universe? He welcomed the downtime, loved the chances to rest and relax and think rather than act, but he was happy with the challenge.

Not here. There was so little life yet developed (or remaining; a more scientific and in-depth survey team would have to figure that out) that there was nothing to threaten him.

If the weather had misbehaved in this area where they were, a dust storm might have been a problem, but all had been quiet and the ships had taken a look at the weather patterns in their orbital survey before they’d left. The most exciting thing that had happened had been an aurora that had reached down from the pole and crackled across the sky one night, a display of power from a sun that had long since gone below the horizon as the planet spun.

Returning from a trip to get rid of some of that beer, Sam was therefore briefly surprised to return to camp and see someone else there, half-lit in the light from the fire they’d started to keep away the small bugs that this planet had brought to life and sheltered successfully. Split-second reflexes shouted not Dean! at him and made his heart race; memories and logic calmed it down a moment later as the slight wind kicked up the flames and brought a familiar profile more clearly into view.

“Hey, Cas,” Sam said casually, returning to his bedroll and making himself comfortable again. He was surprised to see the ship’s image here—and it had to be the image, he’d heard no sound of transporter effect or seen the mirage effect in the dark—but didn’t intend to get overly worried about it. Castiel was free to come and go as he pleased, just as Sam himself was. That was why they were out here, wasn’t it? If Castiel had chosen to pull part of his attention away from orbit and the uplink to the Fleet and come down to the planet’s surface to sit by his brother’s side as he slept, that was his choice and Sam wasn’t going to be the one to have a problem with it.

Dean was, Sam noticed, wearing the amulet that was now part gift from Sam and part holoprojector, a simple object linking the two halves of his life, the old and the new. He hadn’t noticed it before now, and he’d spent plenty of time looking at Dean today. His brother must have been wearing it between his shirt and his smartsuit and not been aware of the amulet slipping free as he moved slightly in his sleep. Perhaps he’d kept it with him, even with his ship partner far away, as an invitation inviting his friend to do just this, come find him when he wanted to.

“Thanks for giving us the extra day. I know you must be ready to get back to the Fleet.” He kept his voice down, reluctant to wake his brother, who was a fairly light sleeper most of the time regardless
of how much beer he might have drunk.

“You like it out here.” Over the time they’d spent as a team, Sam had noticed that Castiel occasionally started conversations by stating things that seemed obvious, just to check that he was starting on the same page as whoever he was talking to.

“Yeah. I’d rather be out here than in the crowds all the time. A while is okay, I suppose, as long as I can get away when I need to. I think I’d go mad if I were trapped in one place now. We always moved around all the time, but there’s being dragged around, and then there’s choosing to wander. And it’s good work. I like how it pushes me to keep up. I love the exploring. I mean, look at that!”

He pointed at a nearby hillock with a small cluster of shrunken trees. They’d probably found an underground water source and were taking as much advantage of it as they could all together. Castiel looked at it obediently, curiously, and, Sam thought, with more than a bit of incomprehension.

“We’re the only people who have ever seen that. No one else knew it was here before we came here. That’s…” He trailed off, a bit sheepishly. “I think it’s amazing.”

“Yes,” Castiel agreed, calmly. “I understand.” They looked at each other for a minute. Sam was unused to having that gaze turned on him, but accepted it, meeting his eyes and holding them—for a while. Cas wasn’t trying to stare him down, but he did have a habit of devoting more of his attention to people than most people were comfortable with. Dean didn’t seem to mind it, but Sam bore it only with effort, feeling as always that Castiel was looking straight into him and taking him apart. Perhaps he saw there that they had more in common than they often got the chance to express. Both more likely to look than leap, most of the time, but perhaps only by comparison with the company they kept. Both curious, with a love for the sky and the speed of flight and the range that it gave them to go out into the universe and see what was out there. Both with a powerful connection to the man asleep at Castiel’s side.

Sam could have left it there, left the ship to his thoughts and gone back to his stargazing or gone to sleep, but he’d been watching the image’s human mannerisms and thought he’d seen something he recognized. He wasn’t as good as reading Castiel as Dean was, but some things were hard to miss.

Sam had moved away from Dean for his own purposes, entirely innocently, and Castiel had shown up to keep the older brother company and keep him safe if need be, protecting him even as he slept. He hadn’t intruded on the brothers’ stargazing and time spent as an inseparable pair bound by blood and bond, but he’d returned to Dean’s side as soon as he could.

“You don’t need to watch over him, you know,” Sam said, amusement coloring his tone slightly and fondness shading it away from mockery and towards reassurance. “Nothing’s going to try to eat him here.”

Castiel did not seem reassured, and he didn’t move. “Things have tried in the past, though.”

This was undeniable. Three months ago Sam had heard Dean get ambushed by a Big Jumper and had tasted terror so dark and all-consuming it had lingered in his mouth for the rest of their sojourn there, watching all around for more Big Jumpers while trying to figure out exactly how badly his brother was hurt while simultaneously thanking everything that might have been listening that the damage hadn’t been worse. And that had only been the most recent example. The number of times Sam could have lost his brother and only hadn’t by the faintest of chances or the slimmest of margins—well, the examples went on and on.

“Yes, I do have to,” Castiel insisted, softly but stubbornly. He paused, as if considering whether to go on. Blue eyes slid sideways at Sam in a convincing portrayal of someone checking to see what manner of reception his next words would receive, and decided to continue. “And yes, I will.”
Sam didn’t doubt that. He’d seen some of the bond that had developed between those two, possibly as strong as the one between the two brothers themselves, and had been surprised that he hadn’t been more jealous. After all, he was Dean’s brother. They’d known each other forever, trusted each other with their lives, had spent almost all of that time within shouting distance of each other. Dean had raised him, more of a parent to his little brother than their father most of the time. They’d spent most of their childhood literally hand in hand. They knew most of each other’s secrets, including some that they both rather wished hadn’t even gotten that far. Despite all the people that they’d met over their shared lives, Sam had never really had to share his brother with anyone. Their dad, maybe, but that had been different.

He wasn’t jealous. He was pleased. Whatever it was between Dean and Cas, it was something right. Sam knew Dean better than anyone, and he’d met Castiel before they’d been officially sent out as a team, and it had been good for both of them. “I know you will.” It was all-encompassing and free, but he felt it still wasn’t enough, hadn’t said what he meant to say.

Oh. Of course. That was it. “...Thank you.”

Castiel—Cas—looked up at him, obviously puzzled.

“For looking after him. He’s always looked after me, and he shouldn’t have had to. No one looks after him because he always acts like they don’t have to and like their help isn’t welcome, even mine, sometimes. He takes too much on himself, and he blames himself when it doesn’t work. You care for him. It helps.”

“I—” said Cas, and then changed his mind and said, instead, “He’s important to me.”

Watching him, Sam didn’t doubt that, and he was developing a pretty good idea about what the I—would have been followed by, if Castiel even understood what it was he’d meant to say. The man sitting across the campsite from him, on the other side of what was probably one of the first fires this world had ever seen, was close enough to Dean’s side to reach out and touch. He made an abortive gesture as if to brush his fingers across Dean’s hair and face before remembering that the hologram’s touch would sting and possibly wake him. Instead, he pulled back, a wistful gesture that Sam couldn’t fail to recognize.

And you’d rather let him sleep peacefully than take what you want. Oh, Cas. I hope you understand.

When Sam didn’t fill in the silence, Castiel fell into one of the oldest tactics in conversation and filled it for him. “He makes me more than I am. More than I was. I am...someone else than I was, and he does that to me. I’m—better, with him.”

He couldn’t help but smile, carefully making sure he was agreeing with Cas and not laughing at him. “He does that.”

“You both do.”

Sam was delighted and flattered and pleased all at once, surprised by the compliment. He liked Cas; the human figured they were friends and they definitely worked together well. They double-teamed Dean every so often, joining forces against him when he was being particularly obnoxious or just plain wrong. They cooperated about Gabriel far more often, Sam keeping him entertained and Castiel keeping a wary eye on some of his stranger ideas if at all possible. They worked together, but Castiel was difficult to read sometimes and Sam hadn’t been sure quite what the ship thought of him. They hadn’t known how to deal with each other at first. Castiel had been struggling to understand why he kept spending so much time with Dean and trying to figure out how their lives fit together, and Sam had once or twice lost even his much-tried patience with a being who was having difficulties with learning his way around two humans at once and for a while had taken to vanishing.
Whenever Sam turned up. It had taken a while for them to find a common ground and get used to each other, but the coexistence they had developed was a comfortable one and one Sam was happy with.

“We’re your friends, Cas,” he said, simply.

“Yes,” said Castiel, and there was a strange note in his voice, not like someone stating the obvious like before, but like someone who had just realized something significant. “You are my friend.”

Sam wasn’t to know it, but years later, that would be one of the memories that Castiel would save and hide away as most precious to him, kept protected where no one could reach it, because it was one of the memories that made him who he was, part of a family that would fight to keep those who belonged, no matter what. Whatever it takes. It was a moment as fragile as the air-and-water bubble of a world’s atmosphere, as powerful as the breath of stars.

“Of course I am,” he agreed now. “I always will be.”

He caught the edge of Cas’s small, genuinely pleased smile, difficult to catch at the best of times except to those who knew him well and further hidden by the shifting firelight, and was well content with that.

Things fell silent between the two of them for a while, as Sam stretched out to watch the stars some more and Castiel kept his own counsel. What he was thinking about, Sam didn’t know, but if he turned his head to one side he could see the man’s shape in the limited light, watching over them both.

“You ‘n Gabriel are up there, right?” he asked a bit sleepily. “Where are you?”

Cas made a sound something like hmm as he thought about how to describe the ships’ relative position from Sam’s perspective. “Do you see that cluster of stars, on your right?”

“Th’ one that’s a lot of stars, then a clump down to the side a little?”

“Yes.”

“The Spilled Coffee Mug,” Sam declared that.

Five long seconds of silence—Sam counted—went by before Castiel decided to take that as agreement. “We’re the two bright stars six degrees to your left of it.”

Sam reached out a hand to arm’s length to count off the degrees on his fingers. “Yeah, I see you two. Hey, that reminds me. Not sure how, but it does.”

“Of what?”

“Gabriel sent down a display panel along with the beer and I read a couple of the messages. News things, sort of thing, little bits. Tracked our route back to Earth, and we should be sort of passing a colony world, Dusty Sunday? About the same time they’ll be throwing a big party. We’re not in a big rush to go back, and if we’re headed back to the madding crowds we may as well have fun to start with, so can we go?”

There was the slightest pause as Castiel tracked down the same file that Sam had read and checked his timing. “If you like,” he concluded.

“Great. Should be fun. Their first anniversary, or spring there, or the mayor’s birthday, or firstborn
son, or something. Means they’ve succeeded. That’s always good, people succeeding at things. Oh, but Cas?"

“What else, Sam?”

“If Gabriel asks the same thing, tell him no for a while, okay? I mean, we should go, but it won’t hurt Gabriel to be told no a few times, especially ‘cause he’s just looking for a world full of happy party people to play pranks on, probably while they’re all very drunk.”

“I will tell him. I will also tell him that you told me to say that—eventually.”

Sam laughed, sleepily. “Now you’re getting it.”

*The Beneath: Here, Now*

*Castiel* came to a halt a wary distance away, his cover of cloak and secrecy well and truly blown in the light from *Anna’s* destruction, still burning through the formerly lightless sky. In this place that wasn’t a void, the flames persisted for an uncomfortably long time, finding a purchase in the ether of this dimension and consuming what was left of the wreckage, antimatter reacting with matter to produce more light than this place had ever seen all at once. The shockwave echoed through the space, creating currents that he was prepared for after encountering a similar one that had flashed in the darkness. The ship sensed them instinctively now, compensated for the effect of her death throes automatically.

He wanted to regret that. The instincts of all sentient minds tell them to fear death, be worried by the corpses of others of their kind, because what could kill one could kill another. Here it had been *Castiel* who’d killed one of his sisters, struck her down with ship-killer weapons designed to do what most damage couldn’t and take out not only a ship’s body but its mind, twisted and lost as it had been. But the flames tearing what was left of her apart still unnerved him, because they burned where they shouldn’t and he could feel the echoes of it on the hull that was his real skin. She was gone, and while he wished there had been another way, he was committed to a course of action now and the best he could do was play it out.

Any chance of hiding he had was gone, the days of sneaking around in the dark over. The dark Fleet knew he was here, and they knew he was armed; he had his missing and yet-unturned brother in sight, something almost too desperate to be called a plan, and so much to lose. They were running out of time… Even if he got away, they’d come looking for him, and he wouldn’t be able to use their ignorance of his presence to stay out of sight. And that would mean leaving the people he cared about behind, vulnerable, and *Castiel* would not do that.

Fire crackled out and finally died, returning this section of the Beneath to its natural darkness, but it didn’t stop the ships from watching each other. No sound carried, but it didn’t stop the snarls of anger and hatred *Castiel* could hear too clearly, all directed at him. He could hear Sam, too, voice carrying at human speeds along a channel that wasn’t supposed to be open. The sound stopped abruptly as one or more of the dark Fleet turned their force of will to shutting him down, closing the channel and cutting him off.

“*Castiel,*” roared *Samael* angrily. Yes, he was in charge here, and *Castiel* wished he could have taken his first and only shot at this ship instead. But he’d been too close to *Gabriel* and the littler ship couldn’t risk damaging the one he’d come this far to rescue. Antimatter explosions had an incredible range and they took shrapnel to a level unimaginable by conventional explosives—a stray pocket of antimatter would vaporize anything it hit whether it had been the intended target or not. If the elemental fire that had consumed *Anna* had been unleashed on *Samael* and *Gabriel* got caught in the
crossfire, unable to move, everything they’d risked to get this far would be wasted.

“You came prepared.” He didn’t sound impressed, but he obviously didn’t intend to let the attack go unpunished, advancing slightly towards Castiel, movements silent and menacing. The other ship moved back just a little bit, staying hopefully out of range of whatever weapons they’d imagined for themselves. Neither Castiel nor Gabriel had been willing to venture a guess on how far the weapons could reach and how accurate they might be. He’d have to find out the hard way. All around, the undirected movements of panic and fear and distress that the dark Fleet had briefly exhibited faded away as they followed Samael’s lead, taking their direction from him. He’d been the guiding constant in their lives ever since they’d been brought here, broken and lost all, and reshaped by the power this place held and the twisted ship’s manipulations.

When the instant of flash from the warhead detonated in the black not that long ago broke over them and raced on, no one reacted, too focused on the standoff between the single ship and the dark Fleet. Castiel noted it somewhere in the back of his mind. Either the speed of light was slower here, or the ships’ top speed was higher: probably both. At some point they’d clearly outraced the shockwave as Hester and Zachariah returned here and Castiel followed them.

“You just killed my sister, little Castiel.” Any trace of the sickeningly sweet purr that Samael had been affecting not long ago was gone. He was deadly serious and done with games in the face of an immediate threat. Alone Castiel might be, outnumbered he might be, but Samael was not stupid enough to assume that those factors meant he wasn’t dangerous if he had to be. And he was visibly in a situation where he had no choice but to fight. “You could start running now, but you’ve got nowhere to go. You’re trapped here, with us. At least you won’t have to live with what you’ve done—traitor.”

“The Fleet knows what’s going on,” Castiel warned them, knowing all attention was on him. “They’re arming us all, and they’re coming after you. Once I get back and tell them all where you are, they won’t stop. Michael’s reprogramming us to be soldiers,” he told the absolute truth as he knew it. “They’ll be disciplined, on a mission of war, and they won’t get distracted and fall into the trap of this place. You know how many of us there are, Samael.”

Around four hundred and fifty. Ships lived for centuries, but humans could build the ship bodies faster than they could produce and train the ship minds. And in those centuries since they were first developed, they’d lost all of the originals to the entropy of a system that hadn’t yet been perfected, almost all of the next generation that Michael was really the last working survivor of, a few to irreparable damage, a smaller number to the all-encompassing grief of a ship that had lost the human partner and lover that had been an essential part of the ship’s self. Castiel knew he would probably have to face that someday, if they survived this. But he wouldn’t survive that. He wouldn’t want to endure a life alone with half of himself missing. He’d follow Dean into the darkness, not far behind. He had known this for some time and had come to terms with it, accepting it as the bitter consequence of the love he had now.

Ships—not the structures, but the people that they were—weren’t easy to create. It took time and it took effort and it took even more luck than making a human infant did, the process still containing an element of magic where no one really understood quite how a developing AI went from a disorganized archive of memory and basic instructions and subroutines to a sentient mind.

Four hundred and fifty potential armed and war-trained enemies that Castiel was offering to call down on Samael and the dark Fleet—if he could get the information back to them, both Castiel and Samael knew. “He called everyone back and ordered us all armed. How many of them do you think you can fight?”
Samael moved just that little bit forward again, threatening, forcing Castiel back and away. He was still terribly outnumbered, six to one, and with his only ally and informant still unable to move and unarmed. He knew he couldn’t fight them all. They knew he couldn’t fight them all. He’d gotten one lucky shot through the element of surprise, but it wouldn’t work twice, not with them all watching him and focusing on him. He’d expected nothing else. He was the threat. In the Beneath, it was like having a spotlight trained on him, or being silhouetted against a star. He couldn’t move, couldn’t act, and couldn’t send out any more messages without them knowing.

“You won’t make it back,” Samael promised, darkly. “The gateway you came through closed.”

Even if the flash hadn’t caught up with them just seconds ago, it would have been too much to hope for that Zachariah hadn’t told him about the flash that had led that ship to cross Castiel’s path earlier, and that he wouldn’t have made the connection between the pure light of an antimatter explosion and the missiles that had just torn Anna apart.

“You opened another for me. I know where it is. I can outrun you.” Some of that was bravado and bluff, but Samael wouldn’t be able to tell what part. Gabriel had told him what direction the gateway was likely to be in, but not how far away it was or if the ships had even finished opening it before Samael had called them back. And while he could almost definitely outpace these twisted ships, their streamlined designs lost beneath hundreds of illogical and quick-and-dirty modifications that would probably slow them down in a universe that was filled with ether, six of them might be able to outmaneuver him and shoot him down. Castiel really, really hoped that wasn’t the case.

“You’re not turning me into one of you,” Castiel challenged.

When Samael laughed at him it was a truly terrifying sound, threatening and cold. “You? Oh, no, Castiel, you’re dead. You were never going to get that far. I told Hester and Remiel to kill you when they took Gabriel, and I was furious that they let you get away. One of us? You could never be, not anymore. We can’t save you. Nothing can. What you are— We won’t even bother to try, with you.”

Castiel wasn’t going to let that pass. He had no doubt at all that they’d tried to kill him, back in the system with the dying sun, but why him? “So what makes you so special?” he shot back, a phrase he thought he’d probably picked up from Dean.

No. No. Concentrate. Make this work. But Samael’s explanation didn’t help, full of revulsion and with hatred coating his tone as he glided slowly, threateningly, away from the immobilized victim he’d been torturing in favor of the one hovering out in the dark threatening him and his fleet. They followed their leader, keeping the advantage of numbers and forcing Castiel into an irregular and reluctant retreat, further and further away.

“You are the worst of all possible things, little brother. You are a slave who loves his master.” If he’d been human, the ship would have spat the words. “You are ruined. You disgust me. Everything you could be, everything you could do, and you want to be one of them instead. You’d give up everything and lower yourself to their level, and for what?”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Castiel said, softly, not challenging, not arguing, but just stating a fact. In the endless gossip mill that was the Fleet’s default activity, back home, he knew all of his siblings knew he’d fallen in love, let his affection for the human crewmate he was responsible for become the thought that defined him. Back home, that had gotten batted around along with everything else they’d said and done or watched others say or do, news running through the ships of the Fleet but never to humans without his permission. They all knew each other, all too well. The ship minds that now stalked after him through the darkness had been his siblings once, and if Samael hadn’t fallen prey to the corruption of the Beneath they’d be his siblings, his family, still, and he would have trusted them without question.
But that was then, and there, and this was here, and now, and *Castiel* didn’t let down his guard, tracking their movements through the black of the Beneath as they were tracking his, looking hard enough to see.

A deadly, dangerous dance in the darkness, fleet advancing like hunters, lone ship backing away, cover blown, outnumbered and outgunned. They knew he needed to get to *Gabriel*, and they clearly intended to make him go through all of them first. He’d never make it. He was fast, probably more agile and coordinated in this environment than their rough structures. He could feel it slipping across the streamlined angles of his hull, changing the way he moved as if he were an animal using the air or the water to guide his flight. It was a strange and alien feeling, and while it wasn’t bad it wasn’t worth it.

But it wasn’t enough of an advantage to let him run a gauntlet of six mad ships with weapons aimed at him, not from this standing start. At best he might take out one of them, but they’d kill him, without hesitation and without even the trap of a chance they’d given *Gabriel*.

*Samael* kept talking as he kept moving, biting into him with words the way the corrupted fleet would tear into him with fire and fury if he let them get too close. He couldn’t let that happen. “For one of them? A man, who’s nothing compared to you? For an animal that’s going to die in a handful of decades anyway? Human hands, on skin that isn’t even yours? So irrelevant, so meaningless. A little thing, and for that you’d throw away everything you are? You’re not one of them, *Castiel*, you never will be. It’s all a lie, every moment of it. You’re a slave. A pet. And you like it.”

“You’re wrong,” said *Castiel*, knowing it as surely as he’d known anything. He’d given up nothing but loneliness. It made him stronger, better. He was loved and it was the best thing that had ever happened to him and the most maddening all at once, and if that made him a slave then freedom was the worst of all lies.

He turned it into a weapon, slashing at them and provoking a dangerous enemy. *Samael* was clever but only when he was coldly so, and some of that was audibly melting away beneath the anger and the madness and the hatred. “Wrong, and you’re crazy. And when I get back to the Fleet and tell them everything you’ve been doing they’ll kill you first and they’ll call it mercy.” Yes, he knew *Samael* had said something similar to *Gabriel*, not long ago. *Gabriel* had told him.

“This place can’t touch me,” he kept on, “not like it got to you. You can’t corrupt me, *Samael*, can you? Because I have what I want in all the worlds, and I’d die before accepting your hatred and madness instead.”

For all that he’d just accused humanity of being animals, *Samael*’s snarl of rage was nothing more or less than bestial. “Good idea.” And *leapt*.

*Castiel* had been ready for it, had seen the warning signs and the preliminaries to the whole dark Fleet coming after him like angry hawks, abandoning their guard over an unarmed and immobile ship that they’d all felt break down and despair.

He turned and *fled*, flying for his life as never before, trusting to his instincts for speed and motion and absolute *need* to outrun the creatures right behind him. They came after him, burning through space trying to outtrace him and kill him for his existence and Anna’s death and his goading of their leader, and possibly just to have someone to hurt and kill. If they caught him they’d destroy him.

He couldn’t let them catch up. Had to keep the delicate balance between letting them get close enough to shoot him down and getting so far away that they’d lose interest and decide to regroup and go back, because if they did they’d realize—
Dean watched him go.

He had only the displays built into the shuttle to tell him what was going on outside, and Baby wasn’t smart enough to make her sensors work the way Castiel had because she wasn’t nearly sentient enough to want anything. Everything he could see, and little enough at that, was being fed to him very quietly, because for this to work the dark Fleet had to overlook his little shuttle completely. A few minutes of frantic work had blacked out the windows, and he had almost all the lights and panels switched off. The little craft was running on absolute minimum power, and if Dean wasn’t wearing his smartsuit he’d be colder than he liked by now. The air was circulating and he’d be able to power everything back up at the flick of a switch, but otherwise he was hiding in a dead metal shell, floating silently in the dark, watching the graphics on the screen and hearing only Gabriel’s relay of what was happening, sent on another encrypted channel to escape the dark Fleet’s notice, focused as they were on Castiel.

He hated, hated that his Cas was out there playing the bait for things that could kill him if he made the tiniest mistake. But they hadn’t been able to come up with another way that would get the fleet away from Gabriel and Sam. And the damaged, mad ships had turned away from humanity. They’d only see another ship as a threat, convinced that humans were so far beneath them they were neither needed nor dangerous. They would watch the armed ship taking shots at them, and not stop to look for a single small black shuttle with a single human being inside. Or so Dean, Castiel, and Gabriel had hoped. It was a magician’s trick they had set up here, pure sleight of hand, and like all old good magic tricks it had lived to be old because it worked.

When the images dissolved into a flutter of movement as Castiel took off with the dark Fleet hot on his trail, Dean couldn’t even wish him luck. He’d done so before he’d launched the shuttle, of course, both knowing that this was a stupid and reckless plan that depended on everything going their way, and it was quite possible that not even in the Beneath where wishes worked would this turn out the way they wanted it to. They’d been down in the shuttlebay, the human and the man who wasn’t as human as he seemed, covering the shuttle’s windows with a hurriedly chopped-up black tarp, fixing it down with the nearest adhesive that had been to hand, a staple gun that Dean had been using to do something to the shuttle ages ago that he couldn’t remember right now.

They’d slapped up the last hasty covering and taken a last look around the outer hull to make sure there were no lights showing, black on black that would make the little shuttle all but invisible in the dark of the Beneath, working silently in rushed and anxious coordination.

And Dean had reached out as they’d moved past each other, caught his lover in mid-step and pushed him back against the shuttle’s black hull and kissed him desperately, knowing the risks they were taking, the price if they got it wrong. Unwilling to believe that this would be the last time, but unable to let him go without a kiss that was not, not a goodbye.

“Come back to me,” he’d whispered then, more of a plea than a command.

“See you soon, Cas,” he whispered into the silence now. It might have been a promise; it might have been a prayer.

“They’re out of range,” Gabriel said to him, breaking that silence. “Get moving, Dean.”

He slapped the panel that would wake everything up, raising the power levels enough so that he could get moving as requested, as planned. “Guide me in, then,” he snapped back, knowing they had to hurry. “I don’t want to switch the running lights on until I absolutely have to. If one of those ships looks back they’ll see it and we’ll be screwed.”
He’d been out and some distance away in the darkness before *Castiel* had destroyed *Anna*, and the shockwaves of her destruction had shaken *Baby* around along with everything else in the area, probably more, as she was smaller and lighter. How far he was from *Gabriel’s* damaged port side now he didn’t know, and without her running lights to supply some light so that the shuttle’s sensors could see, *Baby* didn’t know where she was either. He’d already had to sharply cut off the little shuttle’s beeping for attention when she couldn’t find *anything* out there and sent back so many error messages she was in danger of giving them all away just by complaining too much. She didn’t know any better. Not her fault.

*Gabriel* would have to be his eyes until he was closer, and the ship got to it, working out and sending him the section of the graphic that they’d been using to keep track of the movements of *Castiel* and the dark Fleet, now far away and out of sight.

Slewing the shuttle around to put her on a plane with *Gabriel*, Dean guided her in, checking the diagram for reference every so often and struggling to keep an even keel between telling her to go faster, faster, and keeping control. Crashing the shuttle had been a stupid plan when he’d first come up with it, what felt like ages ago as they’d run back to Earth and Dean had first armed this little ship. It would not be a good outcome now.

“How’s Sam?” he asked as he urged the shuttle on, unable to stop himself from asking after his brother. He’d heard Sam shouting through the all-points channel earlier, and he’d sounded so angry and so scared all at once before one of the other ships had cut him off.

“No good,” *Gabriel* reported. “He’s very upset. He still thinks *Castiel* just decided to dive in and start shooting at random.”

Dean pointed out that that, at least, was “Good. Sam knows Cas. They’re friends. If he bought it then those freaks did too.” He corrected the shuttle’s course, jerking her nose down to bring them in at the angle he needed for what was coming next in this mad shell game.

“I’m trying to talk to him. He’s not listening to me, Dean. I think he stopped listening some time ago. I think he’s stuck. Convinced his plan was the only plan, and then you and Cas came along and screwed it up without asking him. Why are you Winchesters so stubborn?”

“Because otherwise we’d be dead,” Dean snarled. *Gabriel* was audibly worried and as rushed as Dean was, running on time that *Castiel* was stealing for them at his own risk. But stupid questions weren’t helping, he thought unfairly.

“Just talk to him, *Gabriel*. He knows you. Get him to listen. You still can’t move?”

“I’m trying,” *Gabriel* hissed. “He won’t listen. He’s trying to walk away from me. I’ll follow him, but he was moving things with his mind! If he decides I’m in his way, he’ll lash out at me. He’s done it before. He could do a lot more damage now. Dean, you’re going to have to talk to him.”

They’d sort of expected that. If Sam would listen to anyone, it would be Dean, which was why his brother was out here in the dark. And if he couldn’t listen, if he was too far gone, eaten away by the power he’d been using to survive…well, that was just damn well unacceptable and Dean was going to have to see that for himself so he could refuse to accept it up close and personal. He and Cas had come here with the intention of rescuing Sam, getting both their brothers back. Now it looked increasingly like Dean was going to have to do it by hand. He’d *drag* his little brother out of this universe if he had to!

“And not an inch. I didn’t even get hit by the shockwave. It went right past me and I stayed still.”
A second went by as the ship checked his sensors, and then told Dean, who was still flying mostly blind, “You’re in my shadow now. Samael and his lot went the other way.”

That meant Dean could turn on the shuttle’s running lights, which he did. Baby whirred at him happily, able to see for the first time since the flames licking around Anna’s wrecked corpse had faded out and the antimatter flash had broken across them for a split-second. The windows were still blacked out, covered with stapled-down tarp, but the sensors were good enough to send a video image to the display panels built into the equivalent of the shuttle’s dashboard, and Dean watched the rest of their approach on that as he maneuvered the little shuttle carefully. Gabriel was right in front of them now, so close in Dean could almost see the patterns of light that glinted off the ship’s gunmetal-grey hill. If he got any closer, he’d almost be able to see Baby’s reflection. And if any of the dark Fleet got bored of the chase and came back now, he’d be lit up like a star.

He’d built and rebuilt this shuttle, saving her from a junk heap and putting hours upon hours of effort and love into restoring her and learning all her quirks so that she almost responded to his thoughts. Flying Baby was intuitive by now. He knew what she could do, and he knew how to get her to perform above and beyond her capabilities. Now Dean edged the shuttle in so close that a nudge the wrong way would have sent her careening into Gabriel’s hull before the human would have time to correct for his mistake. A ship with the remote control over the shuttle that Castiel sometimes tapped into could have stopped it, but the shuttle and the ship were whisper-close. If Gabriel could move he probably would have tried to move away by now, automatically avoiding what could easily be a collision.

It was closer than Dean liked, too. Baby would respond to his control like the very best of machines and he loved flying her. He’d just never had to do so in such an extreme situation before. Slower than he liked, he got the shuttle aligned with the point on Gabriel’s hull he’d been guided towards.

“How’s Sam?” If Sam would just calm down and listen to reason and realize what he was doing and let Gabriel go so that they could all get out of here then Castiel could come back and pick up Dean and they’d go home. And he wouldn’t have to take the next reckless and desperate step in their plan.

“No better.” Gabriel’s voice was grim. “Mostly shouting. Lots of angry questions, not stopping to listen to the answers. He doesn’t want to hear from me. I lied to him before.”

“Did you tell him what this place was doing to him?”

“Of course, you idiot. First thing. He doesn’t believe me. He doesn’t want to believe me. He feels fine, but he doesn’t. I can see him hurting, but I don’t think he can see himself hurting. I think he’s blocked it out. Dean, get a move on and come get him!”

Baby didn’t have a transporter aboard, and Gabriel’s transporters were broken. Dean was not going to put himself through a transporter system suffering from gremlins, and Castiel was far away and running for his life. He’d have to do this the hard way.

“This feels wrong,” Dean complained even as he edged the shuttle forward even further, pointing her nose at a darker, rougher section of hull. “You’re sure this won’t hurt you?”

“It’s a patch, Dean,” snapped Gabriel, most of his attention clearly on his ongoing efforts to convince Sam that they could all go home if only Sam would let him, that the power of the Beneath was dangerous and poisonous, that he was endangering everyone by trying to control it, that no matter how much he thought the only way to survive in this place was to play by its rules that was a stupid idea and anyway they had backup now and a chance to get out and away. “And I’ve rerouted everything away from that area. Air, power, neural net, everything. And it was my idea. Do it
already and get your ass in here!"

Keeping one hand on the steering controls because he didn’t have an easier way to aim—he’d never gotten around to designing one—Dean picked up the remote controls for the industrial-size welding lasers he’d installed into Baby on that trip back to Earth, forever ago. The Fleet had a list of things you weren’t supposed to do, and this was probably near the top. Probably. Dean hadn’t really read the list in detail, as it was long and some of it was boring and some if it he’d intended to ignore already anyway and the ones he hadn’t thought of yet, well, there was a good chance he’d take it as a challenge.

Cutting into an already damaged ship had to be one of the madder things he’d done lately, though. While Gabriel had a shuttlebay just as his brother Castiel and most of his siblings did, it had been one of the areas damaged beyond Sam’s ability to repair, doors welded shut and space collapsed inward under Hester and Remiel’s assault. This was his best option.

He fired up just one of the lasers, sending Baby that tiny bit closer so that the welder’s flame touched and then bit into the patch that Sam had used a smaller version of the same thing to weld on, covering a broad wound in the ship’s hull. Dean had to get aboard this ship so he could get to his brother and bring him home, so he had to reopen the wound.

It was so tempting to just set both welders to burn and slash and tear at the dead patch in a flurry of rapid motions and jerky flying. He fought the temptation. The last thing he needed—well, one of the last things he needed—was a stray edge of metal damaging Baby, tearing open her hull or cutting power to her engines. Dean’s smartsuit wouldn’t protect him from vacuum and it probably wouldn’t protect him from the thin and freezing substance of the Beneath to any great degree for very long. It was damn cold out there, and he’d die from exposure and suffocation fairly quickly.

Instead, he worked meticulously, trusting to his instincts and habits of flying Baby to guide her path and the lasers that followed her movements to cut a shuttle-sized hole out of the patch. It gave him a sense of the damage that had been done to Gabriel before he was brought here to rot and go mad and join his dark and warped siblings. They could have killed him; they’d hurt him badly.

Somewhere out there the ships that had done that were chasing hell for leather after his Castiel, and they wouldn’t settle for tearing into him.

Dean wanted to be with his ship partner, the person he loved, and he wanted to be here, so close to being with his brother who was all but part of him again after too long apart. He couldn’t help Castiel; he just had to trust him. But he if could get through to Sam, they might be able to all get out of the darkness alive.

“Have you told him I’m here?” Dean asked as he worked, finishing one slice of the square he was cutting out and sending Baby coasting to the side to tear out another long line, burning through metal at a touch. It bubbled away and froze cold in the Beneath, but he was getting through. He could see the gap in between shapeless square and the rest of the patch on Baby’s scanners without having to zoom in at all. If the windows had been clear, he could have looked out and seen the cuts right up close.

“No,” Gabriel told him. “I told you, he’s stuck in the idea that he has to use this place to fight everything out there, and he’s changing things around him. He just shoved me away, Dean, and he didn’t even have to touch me! Knocked me down from across the room. If he’s stuck enough to want to stay I don’t want him locking you out, do you?”

He hated it when Gabriel made sense. “Fine.” The tension made the hand on the steering controls jerk to the right slightly, cutting more deeply and faster than he’d meant to. Neither Dean nor Gabriel
knew how long it would be before the dark Fleet came back, hopefully because Castiel had outrun them and they’d lost interest or because Castiel had decided that he couldn’t keep this up any longer and had looped back expecting to find them ready to go. Hopefully not because they’d outrun him and left Dean’s Cas a burning wreck out in the dark.

Another minute of work and he’d cut out the last chunk of metal that was keeping his doorway into the ship from becoming a reality. Moving Baby forward to close that tiny gap, Dean nudged the shuttle’s nose against the broken-away piece. When he urged her into the collision, it flew backwards, succumbing to Gabriel’s artificial gravity in the large room beyond and clattering to the floor. They’d picked this entry point because it opened onto a large room; if that chunk of metal had hit a wall and gotten wedged they’d have had to add even more time to their already ticking clock for Gabriel or Dean to find some way to move it, like transporting it away into the Beneath and to hell with what shape it ended up in once it rematerialized.

But they were on a clock. Time was running out and they couldn’t see the timer. Wouldn’t know they were out of time until they were already out of time and running on overtime and probably being shot at.

Dean switched off the laser he’d been using and thought better of tossing the controller away beyond his reach. He didn’t think he’d need it again, but better to have it if he needed it. Putting both hands back on the steering controls, he sent Baby forward into the other ship, feeling as if he was fighting a current briefly as the substance of the Beneath sensed the vacuum where Gabriel had pumped out the air to make the cutting easier, with less chance of a blowout as the higher internal air pressure struggled to equalize with the near-vacuum outside.

Baby was only small by comparison with the living ships Dean spent his life with, and he micromanaged her as he maneuvered the shuttle into the room beyond as quickly as possible considering the tight squeeze, fighting her for every inch. She wasn’t quite scraping the sides, but if she’d been any bigger or the space any smaller Dean might have had to make a jump and risk exposure, lack of spacesuit or not. He could survive a few seconds—would have to, as Gabriel couldn’t repressurize this area and he was going to have to get from shuttle to ship’s door as quickly as possible.

The shuttle touched down and Dean killed the engines, stopping her short and checking out his best path. There was a doorway not ten feet from the shuttle’s hatch. He could make that. A second’s work sealed the smartsuit over his hands into makeshift gloves. It separated out between his fingers as he moved to the hatch, and when he could move each finger individually again, he called, “Gabriel? Where’s my brother?”

From the sound of his voice, Gabriel was losing any chance he’d had of getting through to Sam and getting him to adapt to a rapidly changing situation. Which was a problem. Which was going to take up more time that Castiel had to spend dodging killers while they stalled here. “Ready when you are,” the ship said, disjointedly, not as an answer to his question but a response of a sort.

“Doors,” Dean snapped, “in three, two, one—” Back home a countdown like that meant the ships were about to jump into flight and take off faster than the speed of light on their way from one star system to another. It meant go faster, now! to them all.

A split second after one, Dean hit the hatch control, keeping hold of the doorway as air hissed free around him. The cold and the airlessness struck him like a physical impact, and he ran, through the narrow space between shuttle and wall, headed for the door that was hissing open as he approached it.

Dean was so focused on not being affected by the hostile atmosphere that he didn’t see an instant of
the brief dive into the Beneath, all but falling through the half-open door, which closed behind him. He’d known he could do it, but he didn’t want to do it again.

He might have to, though, if things didn’t work out the way he wanted them to.

“This way,” Gabriel’s voice signaled him, control of his ship’s voice restored to him with the departure and distance of Samael’s influence. The display panels along the corridors at eye level lit up, partially, damage and exhaustion showing in the ones that remained blank, flashing lights laying a clear path.

Dean took off running. Had to get to Sam, had to get him to see reason, make him let Gabriel go so they could all go home. Had to do it now before the dark Fleet caught up to Castiel and brought him down with sheer force of numbers and the searing rage of madness against someone they saw as a traitor and who had made himself their enemy and the biggest threat in their sky.

He ran, and for a moment it was as if they were running together. Both racing darkness, both racing time.

Sam paced and stormed and shouted, partly at the ship’s human self who insisted on following him and partly at the ships outside. He’d had things under control! He’d been learning to use this place and had an advantage that only worked if those ships out there kept their guard down because they didn’t think they were being threatened! What was Castiel thinking, taking out Anna like that? All he’d done was make them angry, and now they’d gone after his brother’s ship determined to get revenge. They were going to kill Castiel, and that meant they’d kill Dean too, because there was no chance Castiel had gotten this far without Sam’s big brother, wouldn’t have left him behind on what the ship had obviously thought was a rescue mission.

Couldn’t he see the mess he’d made of things? Sam could have gotten the better of them; he knew he could have, given time. Given a fleet of crazy ships who didn’t think he was a threat because he was human, who had obviously underestimated him by a very long shot. But now that they had a fight and an enemy to be wary of they’d be careful, watchful.

He’d been snarling variations on this for a few minutes now, ever since he’d seen Castiel pull up out of an attack run in the light from an antimatter explosion, interspersed with horrified declarations that the other ship didn’t realize that the ships were his siblings, that he had to think they were hostile aliens from another universe or something, that he was killing people he knew. Gabriel was trying to tell him that Castiel did know that, but Sam was too worked up to listen to him, brushing off the hand the human version of the ship kept trying to get hold of his arm with.

“Back off, Gabriel!” he’d finally shouted, pushing the little redhead away. Only when he saw Gabriel stumble backwards did he realize that he hadn’t had to touch the man at all. He’d shoved him like he’d shoved objects across the room without touching them.

Gabriel obviously couldn’t take a hint, because he persisted in following Sam down the corridors he was storming along, saying something about stopping, that the power of the Beneath was burning out his mind and Sam didn’t even know everything he was doing with it. He seemed to believe that he couldn’t move because Sam was keeping him still, which was insane. Sam couldn’t do that. If he could, he’d have used that to keep the dark Fleet off Castiel, because he didn’t want his brother’s ship torn to shreds. If he’d thought of it at the time, which he hadn’t. But he would have. And why would Sam be keeping Gabriel from moving anyway? Where the hell was there to go?

“Sam, we can go home!” Gabriel insisted, still a few steps behind him as Sam’s longer legs ate up ground at the speed of anger and frustration. “There’s a way out! Don’t you want to go back?”
“Oh yeah, and who told you that? Samael? And you’re just going to take his word for it? Why the hell would you believe anything he says, Gabriel?” This brought them to the lab Sam had been running experiments in earlier, still littered with the debris of his earlier trials and the relics of that learning curve. Sam stalked an angry lap around the room, with Gabriel following in his footsteps like an irritatingly unshakable shadow. Reaching the door into the corridor again, he turned on the man at his heels and pushed his point to the ship who just would not listen to him.

“He’s screwing with you. Offering you hope just so he can tear it away and laugh! The only way out is to fight and win!”

Slamming a fist into the wall, he shouted, “I needed more time!”

“For what?”

Sam jumped in absolute shock, spinning around. “Dean?”

His brother stood in the corridor behind him, frost in his hair and tiny blood vessels broken beneath the skin of his face, relief and worry warring in his eyes. “Hey, Sammy,” he said softly. When Sam didn’t move, he took a couple of steps forward and wrapped his taller little brother in an unbreakable hug, holding him close and gripping the shoulders beneath Sam’s shirt and smartsuit tightly.

Sam hugged him back, automatically and gladly. “What are you doing here? How did you get here? I saw Cas—”

If Dean had had a hand free, Sam knew he would have jerked a thumb over his shoulder in a casual movement. As it was, he nodded his head slightly in a similar movement; Sam could feel it against his skin. “Brought Baby. She’s parked a deck below and down the hall a bit. And I’m here to get you, of course. Cas is outrunning six mad ships and I trust him to do so but the longer we stay here the more danger we’re all in, so we’ve got to go. Something like now. You want to go, right?”

The same question Gabriel had asked him. Sam pulled free from the hug and stepped backwards again, retreating into the lab. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the ship’s mind watching him through human eyes, looking edgy. “What’s that supposed to mean? We can’t go. I don’t know how to use this place yet. The only way to get out is to know how to use it, right? That’s how the ships do it. That’s how they survive here. They wanted me to just lie down and die, and I wasn’t going to! We never do that, right? I was going to figure out…” He trailed off, because he knew all his brother’s facial expressions and this was a bad one. It was a pissed-off-at-Sam face.

“Sam, we have to leave, now. There is a way out and we can find it but you’re going to have to let Gabriel move. This place is poison. Addictive. Dangerous. We’ve got to get out!”

“I’m not!” Sam yelled, because why did everyone keep accusing him of that? “I’m not keeping him here! I don’t know how to do that yet!”

“You are,” interrupted Gabriel, and Sam swung around to confront him, tell him he hadn’t been invited into this conversation and he should keep his nose out of their business if he didn’t want it shortened. Obviously this didn’t get across clearly through glare alone because Gabriel kept talking. “You’re trying to stay, Sam. I know—we know—you’re just trying to survive, because you’re human, and a Winchester, and stubborn as dirt, but it’s a trap.” He sounded unusually serious, determined but fatigued, with no trace of the cheerful, mockingly dismissive flippancy that should have accompanied those phrases. “I’ve been trying to tell you, but you won’t listen. I told you all along it was a trap, and it is, but not just for me. It’s a trap for you. Humans can’t survive here.”

Sam all but snarled, hearing only the people who were supposed to be on his side turning on him and
telling him to give up. “You keep saying that. All of you! Suddenly you’re on their side?”

“No, Sammy—” Dean started, but Sam barreled right over him.

“I can! I’m not inferior just because I’m human and I can survive anything, always have!”

A little behind him, still so close that Sam could almost feel him move, Dean shifted anxiously from foot to foot. But there was no trace of that less than confident movement in his voice as he snapped, “Sam, enough!” He sounded like their father and it did nothing to improve Sam’s mood.

He’d had his opinion overruled too often by commands that sounded like that, being dragged from place to place as a child, forced into situations and lessons that would have tested an adult of a survivalist bent and that the child who still got called Sammy on a regular basis had hated. They could have been normal, with a home and a real family and work and school and friends and a life, but that tone had always uprooted the two of them without warning and without a chance for appeal, taking them away on the run from imaginary enemies, and how Dean could use it now without choking on it Sam just couldn’t understand.

“Leave me alone!” Sam snarled, spinning in place and lashing out in anger, betrayed. “I had this under control before you showed up! I know what I’m doing, and I’m not finished here yet!”

Angry and disoriented, under attack from all sides with no escape and able only to hold his ground, Sam was choreographing his movements more than he usually would, sloppy work and clumsy, running on sudden rage and confusion. Why was Dean trying to take away what he’d accomplished? He’d survived here, hadn’t he?

His brother blocked the blow easily, but he was obviously unwilling to fight him, retreating a step or two. Sam went after him, driving Dean back into the corridor and throwing a flurry of punches and lunges after him. He didn’t get in any good shots, they knew each other’s fighting styles too well for that, but he didn’t stop, either. Dean clearly didn’t really want to hit him back, but Sam knew his brother and Dean would hit him if he felt he had to. Sam wasn’t going to let him through.

“Are you coming with me or not?” Dean demanded.

Sam only snarled, again, “I know what I’m doing!” swinging his right fist back for a renewed blow. Except that his arm froze at the shoulder and elbow, computer-controlled smartsuit locking stiffly into place and keeping him from moving that limb anywhere at all. Wordlessly, Sam shrieked in rage, unable to organize a coherent thought beyond anger. Gabriel!

“Sorry, Sammy,” said Dean, and whacked him right between the eyes.

“Thanks,” Dean said reluctantly, and then, in an entirely different tone of voice, “Did you get that trick from Cas? You must have. He does that to me.”

“Yeah, I know. He told me,” Gabriel admitted, kneeling by Sam’s side where he slumped against the wall, mostly on the floor. “We thought it might be useful. He’s been wearing that suit ever since we got here.”
Dean checked his unconscious brother over. “Out cold.”

“Good work.”

“As hitting my baby brother ’cause he’s gone off the deep end goes, yeah.” His voice dripped bitterness, regret. “All right. Move, Gabriel.”

A moment’s pause before the little redhead reported, “I can’t.”

The words Dean came out with in response to that made the ship’s human body wince, possibly involuntarily. “He’s too strong, Dean. He’s been using this place since we got here and he’s always done it subconsciously. When I said he was doing things unconsciously, I guess I was right.”

“Damn,” Dean hissed, through gritted teeth. “He must be dreaming. More like he’s so scared to let go of this place he’s holding on even in his sleep. All right. I’ll take him. He’s got to have a range, right? If I can get him back to Baby and away—you keep trying to get going.”

The human took charge immediately, automatically. They’d planned for Dean having to come aboard and talk Sam out of his determination to learn the ins and outs of this place that was so strong it was affecting the ship trying to protect him. Dean had admitted, then, that he didn’t know if he could. Sam was one of the few people in the universe as stubborn as he was. It was obviously genetic. So they’d planned for knocking him out, too, if they had to. Dean hadn’t known that Gabriel was going to borrow Castiel’s favorite trick, but he’d known it when he saw it used on someone else. Cas usually used it to create the illusion that he was down on a planet with Dean, close enough to embrace him, so he’d known that ships could control the smartsuits remotely if they wanted to. Right now he couldn’t remember if he’d ever told Sam about that.

They hadn’t planned for Sam being so attuned to this place that he could keep hold of his changes and control even when completely unconscious. And he was. Dean knew his brother and he’d hit him hard enough and precisely enough to keep him down for a few minutes at least. Long enough to haul Sam back to the shuttle and get him away. But Dean was a fighter and he automatically assumed he was in charge of any group he happened to be in and command came easily to him.

He could adapt to this. He had his brother with him again. He was going to adapt to this.

That was how Sam had gotten trapped in the allure of the Beneath, he realized. But unlike Sam, Dean wanted out, preferably now!

“Call Cas,” Dean told Gabriel, leaving no room for argument. “Don’t let the others hear if you can, but get him back here, now. He’ll have to pick us up. Tell him to outrun them, he doesn’t have to keep them with him and away from us anymore, just come back. Tell him he promised!”

Gabriel nodded, obedient for once in the face of yet another obstacle and the chance that they might get away from this alive only barely out of reach. “Right. I’ll tell him.”

The older Winchester grabbed his brother’s arms and pulled him over his back and shoulders. He’d carried a much younger Sammy like this when they were kids, before Sam hit the teenage years and got taller than him. Flat against Dean’s back and with his arms draped over his brother’s shoulders like a backpack. Good times.

Getting up from that position might have been difficult—Sam was a grown man now and weighed as much as Dean did in dead weight—but Gabriel flickered back to his feet and reached down to pull both brothers up. “Stronger than humans, remember?” the ship almost joked. “Sure you don’t want me to take him?”
“I’ve got him. You’ve got a call to make. Go!” And now that Dean had his brother back he wasn’t letting go of him until they were safely away from here and Sam had woken up himself again. Besides, Gabriel’s human form was distinctly shorter than Sam.


Dean didn’t have time to hang around and wait to hear the response to his message, and Cas had promised, dammit! Right now his job was to get Sam back to the shuttle and the shuttle far enough away from Gabriel that the other ship could move, free of Sam’s unconscious influence. It wasn’t far and Dean was stronger and in better shape than most people he knew, and he made it back to the shuttle almost as fast as he’d gotten from it to Sam’s lab, weight over his shoulders or not. He’d have gone slower if he didn’t have Sam, because he’d have fought every step. With his brother, he flew.

Just let him get his family back together again, and they’d be able to deal with anything.

When he reached the door that led back into the chamber where he’d parked Baby, the one exposed to the not-vacuum of the Beneath, Dean stopped to ask, “Gabriel, are you listening? Can you open Baby’s hatch? I know Cas can remote-control it, can you—”

Gabriel didn’t let him finish the sentence, not that he had to. “Got it. No problem.”

While the ship was at it, he realized that Dean would have to free up one of his hands to open the door, and that would mean letting go of Sam, so Gabriel warned the older (conscious) brother that, “Got this door too. Ready? Now!”

Oh, and it was cold in there. It stung at his eyes and the soft tissues of his nose and ears and he hoped that it wasn’t hurting Sam too much. He couldn’t tell an unconscious man to hold his breath and prepare for the cold and the emptiness and if Sam woke up now he’d be furious and scared and Dean would probably get hurt and this entire plan would go up in flames. Probably literally, once the dark Fleet got back here, because he’d called Castiel back and that meant they were not only out of time, they were cutting it short.

The shuttle’s hatch slammed behind them, and Dean hadn’t told it to do that. Gabriel was still trying to help, as ready to leave as Dean was and possibly almost as concerned about Sam, if it wasn’t for the fact that no one could possibly care more about Sam than his big brother did. It was physically impossible. Baby got to work on restoring the atmosphere to something that humans would want to breathe and a temperature that humans would want to live in automatically—he’d programmed her to do that almost as soon as Bobby had said he could have her, a basic safety feature.

Crouching to slide Sam off his back and to the deck, Dean checked him over again. Still unconscious. He’d hurt when he woke up, from the blow and the exposure to even a second or two of the raw cold of the Beneath; he’d be unhappy but he’d live, and Dean could live with that. Assuming they got to live with that.

Gabriel first. Dean left his brother sleeping on the shuttle’s deck and dived for his seat, pilot’s controls waking beneath his hands. “Anything you can do, I can do backwards,” Dean muttered to himself, despite the fact that he’d been the one to get Baby in here in the first place.

Not quite to himself, because he heard a sound that might have been a stifled and nervous snort of laughter through the intercom. He decided to ignore it, focusing instead on telling Baby to do something backwards that she hadn’t liked forwards. Getting into this confined space hadn’t been fun for either of them. She wanted to get out—there were warning signs and proximity alerts flashing all over the newly reawakened displays—but she wasn’t looking forward to the process.
“C’mon, Baby,” he told the little shuttle. “Time to go.” He’d been telling everyone that lately, except Cas. Cas he’d told come back.

Slowly—too slowly—he maneuvered the black craft backwards out of the hole they’d cut through the gash in the ship’s side. Along the way, something, some edge of metal or chunk of debris, scraped against the shuttle’s hull, a long, nasty sound that Dean couldn’t maneuver away from because if he pushed the shuttle up and to the right away from it, they’d hit the wall and possibly ricochet, metal bouncing off metal and crumpling. They lived with the sound, Baby whining to him in the form of even more alerts, which he ignored except for a mutter of, “Hold together, Baby. Good girl.”

And they were out, an independent vessel in the endless dark of the Beneath. Dean wrestled with himself about leaving the shuttle’s running lights on—it would make them a terribly easy target if the dark Fleet got back too closely on Castiel’s tail—and switched them off. It left them in the dark, but he had Gabriel’s feed and the blackout tarp on the windows meant he could at least keep the lights on in here. There was something satisfying and right about being able to see.

He set a course to the proverbial up and away from his perspective. He felt like they were moving up and away from Gabriel, anyway. How far could Sam’s influence reach?

Dean got an answer to that a little over a minute later, as Gabriel called with a relieved gasp of, “It worked! I can move again!”

“Take off, Gabriel,” Dean ordered him shortly, not joining in a celebration that was wasting time they didn’t have. “Head for where you think the gate is, fast as you can.”

The ship didn’t like that. “No! You didn’t leave me. I’m not leaving you two—he kept me sane, Dean! I can’t leave him here in the dark!”

“You get through to Cas?”

His response was a subdued mutter. “Yeah. He’s on his way back. He’s scared and distracted and tired but I don’t think he’s hurt.”

Storm lords, that was the best news Dean had gotten all day. “Then he’ll pick us up and catch up with you, Gabriel, you know how fast he can move when he wants to. And if Sam wakes up I don’t think he’ll be able to affect Cas quite as easily as he did you. He just doesn’t know him as well—won’t have the same control. I’d be able to, but not Sam. Now get going! Go find that gate!”

Gabriel whined some more but he went. It left them alone in the dark, Baby and Dean and Sam still unconscious, and with no way to see and nothing to see. Fighting the terrible primeval fear of it, Dean tended to his brother, getting Sam off the floor and strapping him into what on a ground vehicle would be the passenger seat. Sam always put it tipped back just a little bit at the perfect angle to let him lie back in it and stare out the windows above his head, occasionally falling asleep in it when the brothers were using the shuttle as a tent on planetary surveys, so Dean could almost believe that he’d just fallen asleep in it now.

Once he’d done that, Dean returned to his pilot’s seat and realized that all secrecy was gone. They’d played their hand and if the dark Fleet didn’t know they’d been tricked already they were going to find out very soon. He wanted to open up the shuttle’s communications relays and start shouting for Castiel, hoping to get an answer and hoping to bring the ship directly to them. The dark Fleet would hear, but if Gabriel was right Cas was still out in front of them and would probably be able to get back first.
He didn’t get the chance. *Castiel* called him first, reaching out to the shuttle and the men inside. “I’m here,” his voice came through the speakers, riddled with interference and what was probably exhaustion. Ships were designed to be able to stay in flight for days, even weeks if need be, but that was proper faster-than-light, not redlining sublight engines for evasive maneuvers at a flat sprint in a dark dimension while under attack. “Almost. Dean?”

“I hear you, Cas!” Dean all but whooped in response. “I’ve got Sam; *Gabriel*’s away. Come get us!”

A second’s worth of interference filled the channel. Back when they’d first attacked, the mad ships had used something conjured up out of darkness to block out most of *Castiel* and *Gabriel*’s abilities to see and speak and respond to the universe around them, blinding and deafening their victims. Obviously that ability hadn’t gone away. *Castiel* was probably getting through it out of sheer desperation and the fact that up until probably right now, the dark Fleet hadn’t realized that he’d had anyone to talk to.

Through the worst of it, Dean still managed to hear, “—can’t stop, Dean! No time. Too close—” and then only static. But he’d understood it. It took time to land a shuttle safely, for Dean to set a course and hit the relatively small target of the open bay doors on a comparatively large ship, without colliding with the sides of the space or over-accelerating and destroying the shuttle and probably a good section of shuttlebay into the bargain. If they didn’t have time to do that, because if *Castiel* stopped he’d get shot, then Dean and Sam were stuck out in the dark. And they only had a few more minutes, maybe only a minute, before Sam woke up. It hadn’t been that long even since Dean had set *Baby* on a course towards *Gabriel*, but it felt like forever, time crawling by through the molasses of anticipation and dread.

Abruptly and without warning, *Baby* started piping in a video feed again, which should have been impossible as there was no light outside for her to get a handle on. She was seeing things only in flashes as she showed them to Dean, and when he realized what it was the shuttle was seeing his hands went cold.

The flashes were weapons fire, not far away, and in the deadly fireworks Dean could see the familiar silver shape of his ship, under attack from all sides. Had he slowed for a fatal second? Had they just caught up, pacing him in relays like a pack of wolves, of lionesses teaming up on their prey, passing the chase off to each other so they could slow and recover for critical seconds while forcing *Castiel* to maintain the punishing pace he’d needed to stay ahead and out of range? He didn’t know. Only a few seconds ago, it had been so good to see; now it was the worst news possible.

He caught only glimpses, like a fight watched under the most dangerous strobe light in the universe. There was only one of *Castiel*, and he was still faster and more agile than they were, streamlined design working to his advantage. He could shoot back at will, and was doing so now and again when he had time to spare from watching his surroundings and dealing with what they were throwing at him, while the dark Fleet had to compensate and cooperate in order to keep from hitting each other.

It should have been loud. There should have been thunderclaps and the terrible tearing sound of lightning, the smell of pyrotechnics biting into the air and drying every breath, painting the back of the throat in metal and sparks. The movements of the ships should have produced the rushing sound of speed, humming roar of acceleration and engines pushed to limits, air ruffling as they cut through it like fighter planes. Watching through *Baby*’s eyes, Dean’s mind reached for all of those and found nothing.

Just lights, in the dark. So little, to mean so much. How could those flashes and flares out there be Dean’s lover fighting for his life, for all their lives? It was so distant, almost abstract, but his mind
filled in the gaps and the fear froze him solid.

The fight, a single ship turning and fighting like a fox at bay by hunting hounds, wasn’t distant enough, nor even slightly abstract, and a moment later Dean realized how many things Castiel was juggling at once as Baby abruptly jerked downwards, dropping like a rock as thrusters fired without asking him about it, remote control kicking in as Castiel saw a threat and reacted to it. What felt like inches above Baby’s hull and Sam’s sleeping form, something exploded, lighting up everything and throwing it into sharp relief. No amount of roughly slapped-up tarp was going to keep that light from burning through the shuttle.

The light faded, and Dean blinked away sparks. If only that was his biggest problem. The missile, he quickly realized, had been meant for Castiel and had missed. It hadn’t been aimed at them—the dark Fleet hadn’t even known the shuttle was there.

Until now.

It had lit them up like a spotlight, entirely inadvertently, and there was no way the ships would have overlooked an extra ship suddenly appearing in their sky, less-than-sentient shuttle or not. It would be enough to pull their attention off Castiel, illustrate all-too-clearly that Gabriel was gone, had made a run for it, and the factor they’d overlooked was vulnerable out in the dark. Dean saw this as clearly as he could see his own hands, Baby’s controls, his brother stirring slightly in his chair, hampered from moving any further by the acceleration restraints Dean had strapped around him but definitely on the edge of waking up. He’d be foggy for about twenty seconds, if Dean knew his brother, but once he came around all the way it was quite likely that Sam would be as much of a problem as the dark Fleet, all without realizing it.

Dean figured all this out so quickly that there were still sparks floating around in his eyes and Castiel’s wail of distress and fear and desperation was just coming through, too clearly, too painfully, to the shuttle. It was a terrible sound, and one Dean never wanted to have to hear again. He would have given much to have not heard it now.

Castiel thought quickly, faster than a human, and even before he felt his mad siblings turn their attention to the unexpected extra craft, he had decided what he was going to do next. They’d run out of alternative options, and this had always been one.

He turned, dived through a gap between his attackers, closer than he liked. He had to force himself to keep going, overwriting programs instilled in him for longer than he could remember. The only good thing about it was that Duma and Inias swerved away equally instinctively. That, at least, wasn’t gone, still intrinsically part of them as it was in all of Castiel’s siblings. It opened up the slightest opportunity for him to get free of this shooting gallery, and Castiel took it. The pain of a deep gash where someone had gotten in a lucky shot—if he’d known who it was, he would have seen it in time to dodge—burned him as he accelerated. No time. He’d hurt later and he’d be glad of it.

“Dean!” he shouted across the distance, reaching out to the man who had never failed him, who trusted him, who made him more than he was. “Turn and fly away, now, as fast as Baby will go. I’ll intercept you.”

Dean tried to argue, of course he did, but to his credit he got the shuttle moving. “Cas, they’re right behind you! You don’t have time to stop!”

“Not planning on it.” He flipped his attention astern for the briefest fraction of a moment, the terrible specter of that deadly pack regrouping and heading after him with the reflexes of ships. Too fast. But the grouping was a vulnerable arrangement and a shot of antimatter into their midst scattered them again for a brief but priceless moment.
Back forward. Castiel was coming up on the shuttle very quickly and he didn’t have time to argue with Dean about this. “Just keep it moving in a straight line,” he snapped, trying to keep human words intelligible and wanting nothing more than to say them faster, faster, the rhythm of the thought beating through him like a racing heartbeat. “I’ll do the maneuvering, I’ll come to you. I can react faster than you anyway.”

He could see Baby racing through the dark as Dean urged her on, and Castiel adjusted his own course ever so slightly to overtake, match, and intercept. Dean was still trying to object. “Cas, I won’t be able to stop her in time, not this fast! I don’t want to hurt you, man!”

Castiel didn’t give him the choice, and they didn’t have another one anyway. He snatched most of the control of the shuttle from Dean, tapping into the remote control that had let him pull it out of the way of a stray missile only seconds ago, matching courses and speeds and bringing the shuttle in with a precision and velocity that the human, skilled pilot that he was, couldn’t have matched. The ship could feel Dean trying to help, throwing in little variations almost as if he were guiding Cas’s hands on the controls the one time they’d tried taking the ship’s human self out in the shuttle running parallel to the ship proper and it had been so disorienting that Castiel had refused to ever do that again.

“I’ll catch you,” said Castiel. “We’re out of time.”

In the split second, the instant of the shuttlebay catching up with and engulfing a shuttle at almost full throttle as the ship intercepted it even faster, never so much as stopping or slowing down, Castiel forced it to fire half its thrusters, trying to compensate and match their velocities and twisting it around just that little bit so that the mass of the rear section would hit the opposite wall, hopefully taking the brunt of the impact away from the shuttle’s nose, where the humans of his family were, keeping them alive, because if he killed them now in desperation then he deserved to burn and shatter here in the darkness.

The shuttle crashed into the back wall, in an agonizing, terrifying instant of noise and pain and the shock of the impact. Metal tore off the little ship’s hull as its structure crumpled against the bulkheads, which gave under its mass and ripped to shreds. The shuttle kept going for nearly its own body length into the structure of the ship before it finally stopped through inertia and engines giving in and dying under damage and stress. They sputtered and sparked as their energy broke free, and if it hurt—because it did—then what had he done to Dean and Sam, within and all too human?

“Here’s something you can’t do…” –Wash, Firefly: Serenity
Defending Your Life

Chapter Fifteen: Defending Your Life

Author's Note: I’ve always loved The Voyage of the Dawn Treader…

"Fly! Fly! About with your ship and fly! Row, row, row for your lives away from this accursed shore...This is the Island where Dreams come true...Do you hear what I say? This is where dreams - dreams, do you understand, come to life, come real. Not daydreams: dreams."

There was about half a minute's silence and then, with a great clatter of armour, the whole crew were tumbling down the main hatch as quick as they could and flinging themselves on the oars to row as they had never rowed before; and Drinian was swinging round the tiller, and the boatswain was giving out the quickest stroke that had ever been heard at sea...

"Row, row," bellowed Caspian. "Pull for all our lives."

—from Chapter Twelve, "The Dark Island", of The Voyage of the Dawn Treader (book five of C.S. Lewis' Chronicles of Narnia)

ON WITH THE SHOW!

Then:

They hadn’t yet called this world Shadow.

It was one of the worlds where the Winchesters had felt comfortable with splitting up, in a region of endless grasslands and small hills. The wildlife they’d found had reacted negatively to the presence of small fires and people walking upright, keeping a safe distance from people who smelled even slightly of smoke and metal and things they probably weren’t even aware of. So on the basis of a couple of days of orbital scans by the ships and a quick flyover by Baby of the area they intended to check out, Dean had dropped Sam off at one extreme of the grasslands and taken the shuttle to the other. They’d work their way across the miles and meet in the middle.

They wouldn’t make an incredibly thorough survey, but then it never was. Two people just weren’t enough to look at a whole planet, and everyone knew it. Look at how long it had taken humanity to fully explore Earth. But if humanity had evolved in the exact same way on another, similar, planet before landing on Earth, it wouldn’t have taken very long—or very many people—to know that it was a place people could live.

Assuming they didn’t land in the middle of a rainstorm. Or a flash freeze. Or a hurricane. Or an iceberg. Or a pride of lions.

There was that.

After a day, with the ships gone and Sam on the other end of a commlink, a familiar pattern and an ever-so-slightly bizarrely comforting one, Dean was feeling pretty okay about this world so far. He’d gotten through the first night with a small fire lit and a clever invention someone back on Launch Station had whipped up the last time they’d been there. It looked like a rope. It basically was a rope. It just happened to be a rope stuffed with a bunch of sensors and some lights and a noisemaker or two. You laid it out in a circle or shape of your choice around your campsite and switched it on, and if anything stepped over it in the night it would notice and scream and flash, waking up the human inside and hopefully scaring off whatever had come looking for a free meal. It might even be able to
zap something if you played with the settings long enough, although Dean didn’t intend to do that without Cas watching over his shoulder just in case he pushed the wrong button and hurt himself by accident. Still, it was a clever thing, and he was idly trying to think of names for it until he fell asleep without coming up with anything witty enough for his tastes.

That was the first night.

The second night was different.

He’d spent the day roaming across the grasslands, periodically returning to the shuttlecraft after a few hours to drop off some samples or get more water. Most of the time was spent talking to Sam, running basic tests on various patches of dirt or pieces of vegetation with the equally basic scanners he carried around with him, or taking pictures of the various creatures that never got close enough to shoot with anything else.

In retrospect, he probably should have paid more attention to that.

Sam had found a small thicket and was, according to his running commentary as the day wound down, wandering around inside it looking for fruit-bearing trees or other things that looked like they might be edible. Or didn’t look like they might be edible but that his scanner would pick up on and analyze. Some terribly strange things had scanned as edible by humans but probably not very tasty on some of the worlds they’d explored together.

Not his problem. Dean would stick to the rations in his bag and on board the shuttle until he could get home and have a proper hot meal. Replicators were glorious things. He liked to cook every so often but setting up a proper barbecue on a new world with little more than a few sticks, a lighter, and a gun was not as easy as the movies made it seem. Try setting up a cartoon spit over a fire and you’d either have the driest piece of meat imaginable or a flaming, spitting bonfire as all the fat ran into the fire and your little campfire just erupted, engulfing whatever you were trying to cook.

Not that this had ever happened to Dean.

Sam was trying to remind him of any number of incidents that disproved this statement when his brother decided to call it a night and set up camp, just so he could turn his attention from keeping careful eyes on the environment to bugging Sam right back. One of the best things about arguing via commlink was that it was absolutely impossible to escalate it into a physical fight. Without that option, they were more likely to just turn the volume down on the connection. Dean had once remarked, aloud and a little too gleefully, that someone had finally invented a mute button for little brothers. Sam had, of course, immediately muted him.

It got dark fast on this planet. Its rotation was a little faster than Earth’s, making for comparatively shorter days and shorter nights, but they’d arrived during the northern hemisphere’s winter season, and the planet’s tilt was greater than Earth’s. It would be a very long winter, with very short days.

For all that, it wasn’t that cold. The grasslands, open to the sky, probably wouldn’t retain very much heat, so it was lucky for any humans come calling that it was closer to its sun. So far, Dean was ruling this planet one of the more inhabitable ones.

Dean watched the sun go down in this planet’s west for a few minutes. One moment it was just above that little hill, throwing his shadow long across the grass until it almost touched his shuttlecraft, parked a fair distance away. It lit up a cloud bank in the east, painting it dark red and gold. The next, the shadow of the hill had swallowed Dean and the shuttle both. By the time it was almost properly dark, he’d just managed to finish setting out whatever it was he was going to call this rope thing around a space he could camp in, far away from a line of insects that Sam had reported were
everywhere, and that looked like they bit quite hard, and could apparently fly—Dean did not like the sound of that. The few meters of flat ground also contained a small pile of twigs and stripped-off scrub brush picked up during the day that hadn’t been stored away as samples of local flora and that weren’t poisonous to the touch. He knew better than to touch plants he didn’t know anything about without smartsuit gloves. He’d learned that lesson ages ago. He’d use them to build up the little flame that was apparently enough to scare away everything.

Except maybe the red insects. Before he switched on the sensors, Dean made an extra trip over to where he’d seen those insects. They didn’t seem to be nocturnal, he remarked to Sam. They’d been moving around when he’d last checked, but that had been when the sun had been still above the horizon. Now they were crawling all over each other—ugh!—to form a dangerous red ball, armored and shining slightly in the light from Dean’s torch.

“Good,” Sam commented. In the background, Dean could hear some odd scratching noises and a huff of breath from his brother. He drew a conclusion.

“Sam, are you climbing a tree?”

“Maybe.”

“Why?”

“Because the view’s incredible.”

“It’s dark.” Obviously. Otherwise why else would Dean be lighting the little fire? Which he was.

“Not up here.”

Dean gave up on that line of argument entirely. “Yeah? The last time you did something like this you fell out of the tree.”

Sam remembered that all too well, apparently. “Not my fault. Gabriel ambushed me,” he complained defensively. “I forgot I was wearing his watch. He thought it would be funny to appear out of nowhere and without warning me. He did transport me away before I hit the ground.”

“You were fifty feet up in the air. If he didn’t do something you’d have been seriously hurt. And he rematerialized you seven feet up instead and dropped you on me.”

“And he laughed at us both,” Sam recalled. “So I wrote a computer program that made his voice do silly things whenever he tried to talk. It took him two days to get rid of it.”

Dean remembered that. They’d been very quiet days.

“So, of course,” Sam went on, “he found about a dozen alert sirens from a dozen movies and switched them all on in the middle of the night at top volume.”

This was all fairly amusing, and a play-by-play of Sam and Gabriel’s ongoing quest to pull each other’s tails and get the last laugh could go on for hours, but Dean hadn’t yet lost track of his point, which was “Get out of the tree, Sammy.” Back in his sensor-enclosed camp, Dean laid back, hooked an arm behind his head as a momentary pillow, and looked up at the clouds that were quickly obscuring the sky. Devoid of their sunset coloring, they were just dark and looming. “Think it might rain here,” he added.

“All clear here,” reported his brother. Faint rustling sounds accompanied this statement, testament to Sam’s descent from whatever he’d climbed, or so Dean hoped. The starships would be far away by
now and if Sam fell there would be no one to rescue him before he hit the ground this time. Dean could go get him, certainly, patch him up if he hadn’t broken anything major, call the ships back if he had and needed more help that the instruments stowed aboard Baby could render.

If Sam fell he was being quiet about it, and nothing else noteworthy happened until later that night, when Dean jerked awake in response to, as far as he could see, nothing at all.

He stared out into the darkness. His fire had mostly gone out and he tossed another twig on it absently. It went up in a huff of smoke and didn’t help the fire at all. Under other conditions he might have been interested. It was always good to know what burned and what didn’t. But his skin was prickling and his breathing was faster than it should have been, and something told Dean that he shouldn’t go back to sleep.

Switching on the flashlight he carried as a matter of course, he panned it around the savannah. Nothing. No animals flitted away from the unexpectedly powerful light. The possible rainfall hadn’t rained or fallen, leaving the clouds hovering up above, apparently stalled. No wind came up to move them away.

All quiet. Nothing that should have woken him. The sensors hadn’t gone off—if they had, they’d still be flashing until Dean reset them.

And yet something had, had woken him so abruptly that his heart was pounding and lying down and closing his eyes seemed like nothing more than offering himself up on a plate to be eaten.

The Fleet taught all its scouts to use hand weapons, including ones that ran on gunpowder and metal. Dean had been taught to use those since he was four. By the time he was six he could take apart, clean, and repair just about anything that shot bullets and didn’t weigh more than he did. By the time he was ten he could outshoot adults. Along the way he’d learned to throw a knife, to sharpen one without hurting himself, to use one in close combat, to fight with his fists and feet, to use first his smaller size to his advantage and then the muscles and height he’d gained with adolescence, along with a host of other dangerous objects. About the only weapon he couldn’t use was the lance, and that was only because he’d never gotten his hands on a real one. It was a long stick, how hard could it be?

From the minute he left orbit until he got home—probably right up until he was back in his rooms and curled up with Cas, and yes, various weapons did end up on the floor of his bedroom, unless he got greenroomed along the way—he never, never slept unarmed. Now he reached for his nearest weapon, an old-fashioned revolver he kept under the pillow attached to his bedroll. It was old and loud. It stank of gunpowder and it put big holes in things. It also scared off pretty much everything, including humans, which was why Dean liked to use it as his first line of defense.

He did so now, pointing it pretty much straight up in the air and firing.

The bullet cracked into the air, gun all but roaring as it went. Dean stared out into the darkness, expecting to see movement as some ambush predator thought better of the jump it might have meant to make and decided to go elsewhere for less noisy prey that didn’t smell of fire. Sam had reported, earlier that day, finding the edges of a burnt patch where a lightning strike might have hit home and started a blaze. Anything living in grasslands like this would know and fear fire.

Nothing moved.

He could be overreacting. Dean might have dreamed something on the edge between sleep and reality and accidentally put it into the reality bin in the disoriented sorting and shuffling that accompanies waking up unexpectedly. If there was something out there, it might not be afraid of
loud noises, or realize that the human was a threat to it. That was possible. Until Baby had landed
two days ago, nothing living on this planet would have seen a human before.

Or it might be smart enough not to jump at an unexpected noise. That worried him significantly more
and a lifetime of training told him to plan for the worst.

Dean panned the flashlight around again, occasionally jerking it back along its path without warning
in case there was something following the light. Nothing. Stillness. Silence. Only his own breathing
and the faintest crackle as the fire died completely, subsiding into faintly glowing ashes and embers.

Whoops.

But he couldn’t shake the feeling that there was something out there. It was an instinct. A feeling
deep in his gut and along his spine and in his throat, the race memories of entire species telling him
that if he didn’t run or fight, all of those pieces would be more out in the open than he would really
like, because something would tear them all out and chew on them.

Because the monkey smart enough to spot the leopard and lucky enough to get away even when it
didn’t know why was the monkey that survived.

Dean wasn’t a monkey. And whatever was out there wasn’t a leopard. (If it was, there were a
number of people who would want it, starting with Joshua, who would want to clone it about a
dozen times over and juggle the resulting genetic codes around until he had a good mix of genetically
diverse males and females. There weren’t any more leopards left on Earth.) But…

Screw that. Dean was going to shoot it first and Joshua could have the corpse.

Watching the darkness, he was momentarily unsure if he was actually seeing anything or if he was
imagining shadows. Was that a movement, just there? Or was it the muscles in his eyes twitching
from the strain, his brain trying to fill in gaps?

Keeping the gun ready in his right hand, and putting down the flashlight reluctantly and only because
he didn’t have three hands, Dean scrabbled for his handheld scanner. If there was anything out there,
there were more reliable ways of finding out than the human eye.

He started to wonder if the sensor device wound around his campsite would give him enough
warning. How fast could it move? If there was anything out there, he tried to remind himself, but his
body didn’t believe that and neither did his mind.

The sensor said there was nothing. Just grasslands.

Dean still didn’t believe it, and as he switched the scanner off again, he did see something, just out of
the corner of his eye.

It was definitely moving. It went out of his vision as soon as he’d seen it. It was dark. It was fast. It
might have been moving on two feet. As he turned his head to try to follow it, it appeared on his
other side for another split-second.

One shadow? Two?

Suddenly he remembered the way all the native life-forms here had instantly turned and run from a
human form. Storm lords. There were predators here. They were nocturnal and scanners couldn’t see
them, and they walked upright.

He’d be happy to face these things in the light but not in the dark and alone, not without being able
to see them and without knowing what killed them. He wanted at least one of those before he took on something alone. Oh, and reassurance that if he shot one its buddy wasn’t going to jump him from behind. And they were fast.

And if they were here threatening him there might be more.

*Sam.*

Dean thought quickly, grabbed his pack from where he’d left it at the side of his bedroll, slung it onto his back, and snatched up the flashlight again. Panning it around his field of vision, he saw nothing, but he already knew that was meaningless. Instead, he leveled the gun and fired off two shots in random directions. The moment the second bullet left the gun he turned and ran for the shuttle.

The flashes he saw on the sides of his vision might have been the burn from the gunfire. They might have been the sensors going off as something crossed them. He wasn’t going to stay to find out.

*Baby’s* hatch opened at his command and slap of the door control and he was through it and ordering the door closed almost as soon as it had opened even part of the way. Dumping the stuff he’d brought with him on the floor, he dived for the pilot’s seat, opening up the line to Sam’s commlink. He only remembered once he’d done this that he could have called Sam from where he was. Instinct had told him to run for a safe place and he’d listened.

“Sam? Sam! Answer me! *Now!*”

There was a moment of silence that froze his hands and dried his mouth, and then Sam’s voice crackled over the connection. He didn’t sound happy, but it was the unhappiness of someone unexpectedly awoken who didn’t see why he’d been woken up early.

“*Dean? th’ hell? What’s wrong?*”

“Planet’s got predators,” Dean snapped, getting the shuttle moving. “Wake up. And look out. Things aren’t scared of guns. Scanners can’t see ‘em. I’m coming to get you.”

He ignored Sam’s incoherent protests, which were mostly along the lines of that if the scanners couldn’t see these creatures then they didn’t exist. Dean wasn’t willing to stake his life on that. The universe was a big and puzzling and frequently dangerous place. More relevantly, he wasn’t going to risk his *brother’s* life on it.

Revving *Baby’s* engines to a speed usually reserved for trips from ground to orbit brought them both to Sam’s campsite, just inside the little copse of trees he’d been exploring in great depth—or should that be height—earlier, within fifteen minutes, most of which Dean spent swearing at the handheld scanner, which kept insisting it hadn’t seen a thing, and staring out the windows. He switched the running lights on the instant they were in the air, training them on the ground below.

Five minutes into the flight, he looked down into the lit-up area of ground that was scooting away beneath the shuttle at a speed that would have crashed a ground vehicle that wasn’t engineered to drive very fast on very closed courses.

Something dark was zipping along beneath the shuttle. He saw it only for a second, a shapeless thing that didn’t look at all human and was moving at a speed to match the little craft, but he saw it. There was something there, and it was running after him with incredible persistence.

Compared to the word Dean said in reaction to this, the imprecations he’d been hurling at the scanner had been love pats. “*Sam!*” he spat at the communicator; he’d left the channel open.
“What?” Sam complained, obviously not sold on the danger they were in.

“It’s following me. Grab your gun anyway.”

“Man, I don’t see anything,” Sam kept protesting, but at least that meant he hadn’t been attacked yet. And he kept insisting this as Dean told Baby to go even faster in the hope of outpacing whatever it was that was following them.

When the shuttle touched down on the edges of Sam’s little forest, it was greeted by a tired Sam Winchester who did not look at all pleased about being woken up in the middle of the night to face an apparently imaginary threat.

“Dean, there’s nothing here,” he said, too patiently.

“I know what I saw,” his brother replied curtly. “C’mon. Get in. Baby’s spaceworthy, she’s airtight, so no way a couple of planet-bound predators can get her hatch open if I disable the door controls from inside.”

Sam climbed into the shuttle reluctantly, bringing his own bags with him. He wasn’t happy, but he wasn’t stupid, either. If Dean was this worried then there was probably a threat out there. But after thirty minutes of Dean anxiously staring out the windows at nothing at all but darkness and starlight and artificially lit-up grasslands and woods edge—this planet didn’t have a moon—he was a bit fed up with it.

“If you say so,” he sighed, retreating to the passenger seat, which Dean had left reclined to just the degree Sam liked it. (Sam had patiently reset it to just this configuration several times, trusting that Dean would eventually get the hint. He had.)

He was almost asleep when his brother flailed a hand in his direction and hit a knee, bringing him back to the world of the awake.

“There!” Dean was saying. “Look!”

Sam looked. At nothing.

“Man, there is nothing there.”

“It’s fast, I told you,” he insisted. “Get your gun. I’m going after it. Back me up.”

“Seriously? There’s apparently something out there in the dark that no one but you can see and scanners can’t find and that moves fast enough to keep up with Baby—and you want to go out and shoot it?”

Dean looked at him, baffled. “What, you think we should just sit here?”

Sam struggled against the powerful desire to roll his eyes and lost. “No, I think we should admit that you had a nightmare and mixed it up with reality enough to race over here and wake me up to convince me that it was real.”

Now the look his brother was giving him was closer to disbelief. “Sam, I’m not imagining things! I saw something! Just a shadow—maybe two—but I know when something’s hunting me!”

Yes, maybe so, but Sam just wanted to go back to sleep. “So it’s nocturnal. Why can’t we just sleep in here and work during the day?”
Dean had gone back to watching the dark world outside the window, apparently in disgust with Sam. “Man, I know you’re determined to not be—”

And stopped. And didn’t look at Sam.

“Not be what?” said Sam, low and dangerous. Oh, and now he was too angry to go back to sleep, all on the basis of an unfinished sentence. “Like Dad? Dad who made an entire life of being afraid of shadows and dangers he couldn’t see? Dad who made sure we were afraid of everything we couldn’t see either?”

This was dangerous ground, and Dean was visibly regretting broaching it. “Never mind,” he muttered. He moved off to the back of the shuttle, determinedly not looking at Sam. He retrieved Sam’s favorite handgun and handed it off to him all without meeting his eyes. “Just—keep an eye out, okay?”

They kept an eye on everything but each other for the rest of the night. Dean saw shadows moving around the shuttle six more times. If there hadn’t been a shuttlecraft window in the way he would have shot at every one of them. Sam saw nothing at all.

When it got light, Dean insisted that he hadn’t been imagining things and wasn’t paranoid and it turned into an enormous family fight that dragged their father and their shared childhood into it at several points. The word paranoid came up at several turns, as did the phrases jumping at shadows, overreacting, trigger-happy, and out to get you. Hysterical even got used once.

Still, while Sam was determined not to be paranoid and jump at shadows that he hadn’t seen, he trusted his brother, and Dean was freaked, although he’d later contest Sam’s choice of words. It would take them longer to complete their preliminary survey if they stayed together and camped out in the sealed shuttle, but Dean would feel better about it. And if he tried to object and strike out on his own Sam knew he wouldn’t get far. Besides, what was he supposed to do, spend the rest of the time until the ships got back dodging his brother’s attempts to protect him, however unnecessary they might be? Better to be, Sam didn’t admit aloud beyond a frustrated sigh, careful.

That was what they did. They both knew that their lives depended on each other; especially if there was either a threat out there or one of them was losing it. Their lives had always depended on each other. They’d fight like, well, like headstrong brothers, but when it came right down to it they’d watch each other’s backs. And when the ships came back for them Castiel and Gabriel both did their very best to find Dean’s shadow predators, which even Dean hadn’t seen again after that night. They found nothing.

They labeled the planet Shadow and put a warning on it. If danger waited in Shadow’s darkness, then anyone who went there would need to know about it to be ready and deal with it.

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The Beneath: Here, Now

Now they no longer had a plan. All the plans they’d had prepared had been played out in some way or another, except the most basic one.

At this point the only thing Castiel could really do was run and keep running, hoping that the dark Fleet in his wake were as worn out as he was, or more so, and that Gabriel had managed to find the gateway that might be open and might lead them out of this endless darkness and back to the dimensions in which he—they all—belonged.

He hurt. Someone had gotten in a good shot when he’d been leading them on a wild chase through
the darkness and away from Dean and Sam and Gabriel, so vulnerable. He could feel it; a deep gash like someone had taken a white-hot knife and drawn it across and into human skin. Nowhere near the tools that were part of him and that he needed to keep working, keep running; it hadn’t touched his engines and he was lucky that it hadn’t, that whoever it was had missed. The engines that pushed ships through the universe below the speed of light and lifted them up into flight both contained and produced appropriately astronomical levels of energy. Damage the containment on them and you had a bomb waiting to happen; destroy that control altogether and it would destroy the ship that housed and used those engines. The wound burned, broken fragments of hull and structure sleetting away against the drag of the Beneath, the substance that filled it like treacle, at this speed. In a proper vacuum, it wouldn’t be so bad. If he kept moving, he might get a chance to prove that for real. At least, that was the thought Castiel was hanging onto.

If the shot that had only just missed had been a knife drawn across skin, the damage incurred in the desperate gambit of snatching the little shuttle Dean called Baby was that knife stabbed straight into him. He bore it. Endured, because it had been worth it, because he could sense two lives held within that shuttle, alive, alive, alive.

So he kept moving, calling ahead and trying to find Gabriel who had gone on ahead while watching out for the ships behind him.

If they’d been angry before they were furious now. They’d chased him because he was an annoyance, one with claws, certainly, ones he’d used with the advantage of surprise. Chased him because Samael hated him for seeing the good in humanity where the dark Fleet’s twisted leader saw only the bad, and where Samael went the rest followed. Because it was what they knew, hunting down other ships and hurting them, and they were on their own ground and not in any real danger of losing their prey or their lives.

They’d been overconfident, overlooking the human factor. That wouldn’t happen again.

And now they were scared, he could clearly hear as they shouted to each other, hounds howling behind him in pursuit. If Castiel got back to a sane and logical universe where he could contact the rest of the Fleet, then their secrecy and ability to ambush ships passing by the gates in ignorance would be destroyed. The rest of the Fleet would know what to look for, would know who to look for.

Three sources of pain, across his skin and stabbing into him and the exhaustion in body and mind that threatened to slow Castiel down just that little bit that would let his enemies hunt him down and kill him and the lives he protected, and he couldn’t let that happen. He’d felt something of the hatred Samael felt as the other ship’s words struck out against him. While the ship would no doubt still want to kill Castiel outright, what he would do to the humans didn’t bear thinking about.

The absolute darkness of the Beneath had a strange effect on Castiel’s perceptions, and combined with the problems he’d been having with the flow of time here since the beginning he began to think for a few moments that he wasn’t moving at all, trapped in ether like amber, like tar, that was too thick, too dense for his nature; that he was getting nowhere and the ships behind him were frozen in time and space, or that they’d been running this endless race forever and he was looping, experiencing one moment in time over and over again. Always running, always scared, always hunted by his own kind, trying to keep the people he cared about alive and safe, always failing. Letting them be hurt because he wasn’t fast enough or strong enough.

In the dark. Forever.

No, no! It was a nightmare, some trick of the darkness, maybe even Samael’s hatred reaching out to snap at him and snarl around his body and mind. Castiel shook himself loose of it, separating out a
tiny fragment of his attention to reach for the life he knew so well. He found the link to Dean’s smartsuit, which the man had shrugged on quickly as they prepared to send him out into the dark to sneak up behind Gabriel and get to Sam while everyone was watching Castiel.

Another illusion, but one Castiel chose freely, tapping into the readings from the smartsuit that was worn as close as skin. Human memories reminded him of the feeling of Dean’s heart beating under his hand, against his skin, a living metronome marking time, measuring out their time. For a moment so short it was scarcely measurable, even for a ship’s incredible processing speed, he was dozing by his lover’s side, warm and safe and human and loved.

There. That was his clock, his reminder that they were running for their lives, and why.

Those same readings told him that Dean was unconscious and would be hurting when he woke up but was alive and would wake up. Castiel didn’t have as reflexive a connection to the nearly identical garment that Sam was wearing, but the brothers were survivors and if Dean was alive then it was a safe assumption that Sam was too. Besides, the sensors still working in the shuttlebay, that hadn’t been taken out or burned away in the shock of the crash, told him that they both were. He’d just wanted to be close for one more moment, as close as he could get at the moment.

Something angry and energetic struck past Castiel as he flew, and only the fact that the majority of his attention was still focused on the hunt outside allowed him to dodge it, shoving more power into the inertial dampeners that would prevent too much of his motion from affecting the humans and simultaneously launching into a maneuver that forced him into an abrupt course change, straining what was left of his frame’s tolerances and putting him on a different plane than the majority of the dark Fleet. The smartsuits would protect his boys from whatever edges of that shear his systems didn’t catch. He had this entire space to maneuver in and they had to keep whatever aiming sights they were using on a very fast-moving target.

Oh, but he was tired. A shot of his own from the weapons installed on Launch Station missed Zachariah, but it slowed the ship down for a valuable moment, forcing the Fleet to adjust around his sudden evasion. They were still trying to stay together in a pack even though it hadn’t worked, behind him.

One more moment they were all alive.

Where was Gabriel? Why wasn’t he answering Castiel’s calls? He had to be able to hear; there was no point in trying to stay quiet anymore. The damaged ships weren’t even trying to jam his signals anymore, preferring instead to either shoot him down or run him down. Maybe they knew that even if he couldn’t talk to anyone else he wasn’t going to stop in this place for anything, not with everything he wanted, that was his, back with him or up ahead. His family with him, home—and possibly more family, more armed and dangerous and on his side family—ahead. He hadn’t yet forgotten that the whole Fleet had been in the process of being armed; he’d reminded Samael of that not long ago. Some part of Castiel was still hoping to get back to his own universe and find backup waiting.

If he could keep up this pace he could stay ahead of them, burning through this dark space like fire, like quicksilver. As long as none of his damaged siblings managed to get out in front of him they wouldn’t be able to cut him off—there were no shortcuts in space.

Were there?

Castiel really, really hoped there weren’t, and then hoped that would be enough. What a trap this place was, the edge of his consciousness realized. So easy to use. So difficult not to. So terrible the price.
Twenty-eight. Twenty-nine. Thirty. Thirty-one. Heartbeats, since he’d started counting. His clock speeding up ever so slightly as Dean struggled his way back to consciousness. *Castiel* couldn’t spare the attention needed to speak to him and call him back. He’d done so in the past, so many times, waking him from sleep or the medicated doze of unconsciousness as he healed after some adventure or another. Not now. No time.

Someone behind him screamed something in his direction, a cry not between the interconnected members of the dark Fleet but aimed at *Castiel*. He didn’t listen. There was nothing they could say to him that he’d want to hear, that he’d believe. Right now the only voice he was listening for was Gabriel’s, because he needed to know if he was even on the right path, if there was a way out along this course or if he was speeding even deeper into the dark and, finding nothing, would have to turn and fight again.

He’d done that once, and barely escaped. Only the explosion from the misaimed missile that had drawn their enemies’ attention to *Baby* floating out in the void had saved him. Endangered his human family, but probably saved *Castiel*’s life. Six of them and one of him was simply odds he couldn’t manage for more than a few seconds, not surrounded as he’d been. He’d have to be lucky over and over again and one of them would only have to be lucky once.

“*Castiel*! Cas!” Finally. Had he only just now come into range for Gabriel to call out to him or had it taken this long for Gabriel to come up with something to say? Unusual. Gabriel always had something to say. It was strange to hear the name humans called him in his older brother’s voice. And that was not, as Dean would remind him, the point.

“And?” *Castiel* demanded along the same channel. The ships chasing him were really determined to catch up, and their control of this place was better than his. They used it instinctively, habitually, while *Castiel* didn’t want to touch it for fear of the corruption it could cause. Gabriel had warned him about it when he’d only started to consciously manipulate things, and except for the overwhelming needs to stay hidden and see what was going on around him that worked by wanting, by wishing, *Castiel* had tried not to deliberately take that poisoned gift.

Too many consequences.

Too many, if he didn’t. Lives he couldn’t bear to lose.

Any second now, the ships that had once been his family would think to use this place against him, once they calmed down from the frothing rage that *Samael* had been exhibiting as he led the various attempts to kill *Castiel* and leave him a burnt-out wreck in the darkness. He’d fixated on *Castiel* as everything he hated, a ship that wanted to live with humans and be, in many ways, human, rather than the cold and artificial and yes, inhuman things *Samael* thought the Fleet should be as he’d embraced the loneliness that had been forced upon him in an attempt to survive. He’d lived. His mind hadn’t, not completely. And like everyone with a new idea, he wanted nothing more than to pass it on.

They could manipulate the fabric of this place and its substance to be thicker ahead of *Castiel*’s course, even more that it was as he struggled to cut through it, which would slow him down fatally. They could create tunnels through it that would bring one or more of them around out in front of him, trapping him in a pincer movement he’d have to move very fast to escape. And those were just the things he’d thought of right now, as he flew. He couldn’t count on their anger to blind them forever. They had to get out, now!

“Found it,” Gabriel reported. “Follow my signal. And hurry up! It’s not stable! I don’t think they were finished opening it before *Samael* called them all back to mock me, just so I could watch them all go away and leave me alone. That’s what he was going to do, you know.”
Ah, there was the talking incessantly. Castiel immediately regretted wondering what had happened to it. Hurry up indeed. Just what did Gabriel think he was doing? What part of this desperate sprint didn’t look like running like hell?

Because his own hell was soaring close behind to strike him down and kill him. They’d take his family from him and kill them. If he failed them—

Castiel could fly forever, given that alternative, no matter how much he hurt.


“Wait,” he asked Gabriel suddenly. “What do you mean, unstable?”

“Bloody well unstable! Wavering all over, bigger, smaller. Every so often I think I see stars through it, and then it’s dead black again just like it was on the other side. Not sure which one it’s supposed to be. Cas, tell me you’re going to make it here before it closes. I don’t know how to open another one and you better bet they’re not going to do it for us.”

That was it.

Castiel redirected everything he had into his engines, tapping into light, life-support, displays, everything that wasn’t around Dean and Sam and keeping them alive, because he could feel all too keenly that the little black shuttlecraft was no longer capable of maintaining an environment on her own. And now he was doing it. Focus! Faster, faster!

He picked up his pace until it added to his hurts, racing to get to the gateway and home with the renewed energy of hope. Behind him, the dark Fleet accelerated to match. Oh, and he could do more things if he had to, if he really needed to, and right now he needed a way to talk to Gabriel without anyone else hearing. Hopefully they wouldn’t be listening, especially if Castiel was simultaneously shouting back some of those insults they’d been hurling at him, and some of Dean’s favorite emergency phrases as well. It meant he couldn’t count Dean’s heartbeats anymore, would have to look away from that steady metronome of the life he wanted to protect, but the human was almost awake and could look after himself and it would be worth it.

“Gabriel?” Castiel called, splitting his conscious mind between yelling something, anything, back at the demon ships behind him to keep them distracted and whispering ahead, which was very dangerous, but just maybe… “I’ve got a really stupid idea.”

Dean was not quite awake. He wasn’t unconscious but he wasn’t properly awake either, because he couldn’t remember why he needed to be awake. There was a floor beneath him and it was familiar. He could hear a variety of other familiar sounds. The hum-scaling-up-to-roar of a flight-capable ship’s engines. He knew that sound like he knew his own heartbeat. Castiel. Oh good.

“Dean?” someone said. The voice was slightly fuzzy around the edges and wavered slightly, although whether that was the sound or Dean’s ears he wasn’t sure.

Except that was Sam. The habits of a lifetime woke him up immediately and unconditionally, kicking his brain into gear and kicking it relentlessly until it started working.

The Beneath. Sam. Sneaking around behind the dark Fleet. Sam. Castiel running interference for them. Sam.

He woke up and took stock. It took him a moment to place where he was, because the last time he checked Baby didn’t look like this. But yes, it did look like the rear section of the shuttle was
completely wrecked, torn up and shredded and crunched in where it had gotten into a fight with something stronger and lost. Her engines weren’t powerful enough to explode if they hadn’t already and Dean had never been so grateful for the limits of his *Baby*. The roof was punched right in and there was a deep gash straight through it. He could see lighter metal through it. Which meant that he was on the floor between the pilot’s seat and the front console where all the pilot’s controls were. At least the pilot’s and passenger’s seats should have been there. They’d been torn loose from their housings by something—probably the sudden stop that he only barely remembered—and were now part of the wreckage.

Sam was in between him and most of the damage, sitting up and awake and trying to figure out where he was, from the look on his face, which was much more important.

“Who crashed *Baby*?” Sam asked, a bit foggily. He reached out to touch a tear in the shuttle’s deck, not far from where he sat, gingerly, as if he’d hit something and was feeling it now.

Injuries, crashes, catastrophic damage, and possible memory loss be damned. Dean scrambled out from underneath the console and dragged himself the few feet to Sam so he could grab his brother into a hug and never, never, let go. Which is what he did.

“Mmph,” said Sam, and “Ouch.”

“Sorry.” He loosened his grip just a little bit, but only a little bit. The way Sam was sitting slumped over made him, for once, a little shorter than his big brother, meaning that Dean could pretend for a moment he was a protectable little kid again who was small enough to be tucked into the hollow between his big brother’s throat and chin and chest and just held. Dean didn’t say any of this, of course. For one thing they didn’t have time. Instead, he settled for, “Hi.”

“Hi.” Sam almost giggled at the incredible understatement of that, although he’d deny it fervently if asked. Obviously still a little bit loopy, understandably. “We crashed? Into what—wait a second.”

Oops.

“You hit me!” yelped Sam, pushing Dean away—but by hand and with ordinary Sam strength, which was admittedly a bit above ordinary human strength but was something Dean was familiar with and could deal with.

“Um…yeah.”

He lifted a hand, now dirtier than it had been thanks to the rubble (and, oh look, small fires, lovely, so that was where the nasty burning smell was coming from) all around them, to touch the point between his eyes where Dean had punched him out, and grimaced at the resulting pain. “What’d you hit me for?”

“Well, you started it.”

This was technically true. It wasn’t the answer Sam wanted to hear, but it was what Dean had time for. Now that he was awake he could figure out something of what had happened—and what was still happening. He could see the damage to *Baby*, more than he wanted to, even though there was something wrong with the lights that he didn’t have time to figure out. Storm lords, he’d loved this little shuttle. If they got out of this, he’d do what he could to fix her. She was a tough little thing and deserved better than going back to that junk heap where he’d found her, especially after what she’d just done for them all.

He remembered just how and why *Baby* had ended up crashed, too. *Castiel* out in the dark, the
enemy ships seeing them because they’d nearly shot the Winchesters out of the sky by accident, turning and running and feeling Castiel coming up behind them and overtaking them so fast Dean had barely had time to decide he was useless in the pilot’s seat and hanging on to his almost-awake little brother instead, physically protecting him because there was no way even Cas could pull off this landing without everyone getting hurt.

Knowing that everything was torn to shreds and they had no other choice but to run for it now.

“What are you doing here?” Sam was still trying to catch up, as Dean was putting his memories together with the facts that despite the crash and the condition both brothers were in Cas hadn’t shown up or even checked in to make sure they were okay, and that Castiel was clearly redlining his engines if the sound of it and the discordant vibrations that Dean could feel even through the wreckage of the shuttle were any indications. He knew what his ship felt like when everything was working and Castiel was happy and in flight. This was nothing of the kind. This was something broken and Cas drawing on it anyway because he had nothing else.

This was Castiel flying for all their lives.

But Sam wanted to know, “How’d you do that? We’ve been here like three days. Maybe four. Maybe five at the longest if I lost some time when we first came here. But Cas came in shooting. How’d he do that? Dean!” His brother had moved away to try to get out of what was left of his shuttle to try to talk to his ship and find out what was going on. Sam caught a handful of his clothes and demanded to know the same thing. “What’s going on?”

Before his older brother could reply, something dark crept into Sam’s voice and his grip tightened. “I had a plan. I was doing okay. You jumped right into the middle of it.”

Enough of that. Dean wanted to find out what was going on outside and he—they—did not have time for Sam to go into a sulk about them interrupting the playtime of death he’d clearly had going on. He hadn’t known he was doing it, but he needed to know, now, and he needed to get over it. He’d been wrong in all ignorance and there was nothing else he could have done, if what Gabriel had relayed to Cas and Dean had been accurate, and if Dean had been in the same situation he might have done the same thing. But Sam needed to get a clue, now.

“Right. Listen to me very closely because I’m only going to say this once, and then I’m going to find out what else is going on that might kill us all in the next two minutes.” Sam opened his mouth, probably to say something about Dean sounding like Dad again, but his brother cut him off. “You were not doing okay. You were killing yourself. But it wasn’t your fault. You were trying to survive here, right? To fight back? Anywhere else, good for you, stick it to ‘em. But this place is a trap, Sammy. It’s a drug. It’ll poison you, burn you up from inside your mind. How do you think those ships went mad? They tried to use it. It used them.”

“No,” Sam objected, “I was managing it.”

“You had Gabriel stuck like quicksand because you were so determined to stay put and learn it was affecting him. I had to come over there and knock you out and drag you away before he could get anywhere.”

“I knew you hit me,” he complained in response to this.

“Not the point. When they took you, Cas and me went back to Earth. We were there forever, but we got some weapons and Cas had a fight with Michael and we won and we ran off here to come get you and tracked you all the way here before you could drown in this place. Not your fault you thought it was the only way. Time runs different between here and there, I don’t know how, but Cas
has been dizzy ever since we got here and he’s running for our lives right now and you’re my brother and I love you with all my heart but if you don’t shut up and listen to me, I swear to you, Sammy, I do not have time for this and I will knock you out again if that’s what it takes to get us out of here.” He’d lost track of that sentence somewhere in the middle, probably at the sight of Sam trying to interrupt him again.

Anything he’d meant to say after that—and anything Sam had meant to say in reply, which probably could have spiraled down very quickly—was interrupted by the terrible sound of something exploding, not in the dark wastes outside but against and inside the ship that was trying to protect them. Everything around them, the whole ship, lurched, throwing them both off balance. Lights dimmed, flickered, cycled through an endless loop of trying to get power back and deciding it wasn’t worth it before automatically trying to repair and trying to get power back…

The sound of engines burning as much power as they could beyond what was safe or sane, which Dean had been worried about ever since he’d realized what he was hearing because it meant that his lover was killing himself trying to survive—and what was with his whole family doing that of late?—broke off from a steady roar to become a shattered and screaming sound of energy only working half the time, sputtering and tearing at the ship as he tried to go very fast one moment and found he didn’t have the power the next, only to get it back in a surge as the engines rallied and then burnt out again. It was supposed to be next to impossible for a human aboard a ship to feel the acceleration, but then Dean always knew whether they were in flight or if they’d gone from a casual cruise to a faster speed, or locked into the gentle, inexorable, delicately balanced float of free fall around a planet that was concealed beneath the reflexive approach the ships took to being in orbit. And this was broken and rough and he felt it and it hurt.

They’d been going very fast a minute ago. He’d felt it deep within, so tuned was he to Castiel. Now they’d slowed, involuntarily. Dean didn’t need to hear the ship’s cry to know that he’d been hurt, possibly very badly, but Castiel apparently didn’t even have enough processing power to redirect into a human voice and a demand for attention. He was trying to do too much, and it was catching up with him, Dean knew instinctively. They were catching up with him.

“No, no,” Dean whispered, looking away from the glare he’d been training on Sam and reflexively up at the momentarily invisible ceiling as the lights went out for a second. “Cas!” Calling, as if he could do anything but distract him.

To his shock, he got a reply. “Here,” the ship whispered. “Trust me. Almost home. Love you.” And was gone again. Dean felt him go, back outside to the ship he was, under attack and hurting and not giving up.

Power surged all around the two humans, desperate, almost home.

Whatever it was about the power of the Beneath that had attracted him, seized his quicksilver attention and brilliant mind and led them to using its poisonous gifts, Sam wasn’t going to focus on that dream of a world where wishes worked if it meant turning his back on his brother who was part of him and was now so obviously hurting in concert with the incredible, inhuman being he loved.

The power may have been a dream, but it was also a nightmare. It was gone. This was real.

Sam came up beside his brother where he’d climbed out of the shuttle to better look around the destroyed shuttlebay, as if being able to see the room would get him closer to his Cas. He said only, “I’m sorry.” But whether he was apologizing for getting trapped in the power of the Beneath or the pain Dean was suffering in response to his lover’s own hurts and the fact that there was nothing, nothing either of them could do about it, neither of them knew.
Back in the mire of the Beneath, Dean’s first response upon seeing his brother again had been to hug him, to hold him close enough to protect. He’d done the same thing when they’d woken up in the crashed shuttle. It was an old reflex, a child’s habit. They’d spent their childhoods hand in hand, no matter where they went or how unexpectedly they’d had to move on.

Sam reached out to embrace his brother now. They stood close together, hanging on to each other for their lives, as all around them the being protecting them tried to keep destruction off their backs for just one second more. They sensed the shockwave as something detonated nearby but not close enough to cause more damage directly, although they both felt the after-effects and maybe the close call or maybe just a delayed reaction as the ship lurched away from it, awkwardly and painfully. He couldn’t take another hit like that, not and keep flying.

“Can’t stay here,” Dean muttered, and Sam was going to chalk the muffled sound in his brother’s voice to the fact that Dean had his face buried in his brother’s shoulder than the almost equally likely fact that he might have been holding back an angry, helpless sob. “I gotta—” He tried to pull away.

Sam let him go, then let him think better of letting go of the brother he’d fought so hard to save and let Dean take his hand as if they were children again. It seemed like a very long walk through the dark as Dean led the way to where he needed to be and Sam followed.

It was probably only a minute and a half later, during which no more weapons fire hit home but the sounds of damage and strain all around continued, when they reached a door. They had to lever it open, and when they did they entered the room where the human body Dean called Cas slept, inactive and unable to wake ever again if things went as badly as Dean feared.

He knew, he knew that if Castiel was fighting for his life he wouldn’t have the attention to spare to be human, even for a second, but Dean was human and he needed a presence to talk to and a hand to hold. So he did, reaching out with the hand that wasn’t hanging on to Sam’s and taking one of Cas’s in his own, holding it tight.

Dean knew that for sure, and Sam guessed it intuitively, so they were both terribly shocked when Cas tightened his grip on Dean’s hand and spoke through the man in the chair.

“Dean,” he said, softly, eyes coming open but seeing nothing. “Watch this.”

The room hummed to life, panels showing the blackness of the Beneath, the dark Fleet behind—and Gabriel only a breath ahead of them as they raced towards a distortion ahead that roiled and rolled, whispers of edges of grey in amidst the pulsing black showing what the gateway looked like on this side.

And—

The transition wasn’t instantaneous this way, not through this unstable and half-formed gate. For a moment that might have been any time at all, everything shook, everything went dark. They all lost all sensory input for a breath, a heartbeat, a whisper of time when they could have been going forward, going home, or they could have been stopped completely. A nowhere moment between here and home.

And then they were out.

The panoramic display panels of the Control Room were still switched on—that hadn’t changed in the short time between the Beneath and their real, logical, home universe—and after so long in darkness the space around them was breathtaking.
“Look!” Gabriel said happily to them all, “stars.”

There were stars, real ones that weren’t the momentary flickers of weapons fire or the terrible burn of a destroyed ship, but proper furnaces that roared for billions of years and then collapsed to make heavy elements that made more stars, which made planets and people and ships and seas and everything. There was the void of the space between those stars, a vacuum that didn’t drag the ships back and trail across their hulls like cold fingers. The wide and varied shining electromagnetic spectrum that the stars and everything else put out, so that they could see clearly now after what felt like far too long.

Out of the darkness and home.

And as beautiful as it was, why were they still here?

“They’re going to follow us,” Dean said warningly, still trying to tear his eyes away from the billions upon billions of faraway lights that meant that they’d succeeded, that his family was still alive and still here for a few minutes more. “If you both can get into flight it’s almost impossible to track you, right? We’re away, but we could be a lot more gone, why aren’t we?” And on that thought—he felt movement on his right side, the hand still twined around his tightening as Cas came to life and moved to him.

He shelved everything else, letting go of Sam’s hand for the first time in a while to wrap his lover in a desperate embrace. “Cas, how bad?”

Cas hugged him back, arms wrapping around his waist and back, breathing softly against his throat, alive. “It’s all right, Dean,” he said softly, turning that deep rasp into something that was almost a hum. “I’m not as badly hurt as you think I am. I’m sorry. I didn’t have time to tell you.”

Dean had lied to too many people about his own injuries to completely believe that. If Cas had been anyone else, Sam for example, he’d probably hold the man at arm’s length to better look for whatever hurt it was he was hiding, but that wouldn’t work with Cas. All the damage was to his real self, and Castiel had clearly learned all too well from Dean’s bad habits.

“I heard you get hit, Cas, I felt it.”

Sam didn’t want to interrupt, but his life was just as much at stake here as theirs and Cas was his friend too. “We both did. You can’t pretend you’re not hurting. I saw what they did to Gabriel and they weren’t trying to kill him.” Obviously following that train of thought, he looked across at the displays of the Control Room to the image that showed Gabriel right beside them, staying close to keep their miniature Fleet together. Maybe involuntarily, possibly in response to the way Dean had immediately turned to his ship partner, Sam reached a hand out towards the display panels and dropped it a second later, realizing the futility of the gesture.

“What Sam,” Cas said quietly, turning his head slightly so that he could see more than the man holding him tight because they were both afraid to lose each other again. When Sam looked at him, Cas nodded at the screen, directing his attention back.

He’d been speaking to Gabriel simultaneously so that they could coordinate this, and it worked exactly the way the ships intended. Gabriel preferred being virtual anyway. Now the face and form he usually wore appeared in the screens like a ghost trapped in the mirror. He laughed happily, seeming to press a palm against the glass as if there was a window between him and the Winchesters and Cas.

“What at us! We’re out! We’re home!” His smile faded for a moment. “But we’re in the middle of
nowhere. I can’t find a relay. Can’t send a message, not fast enough to matter. I know where the nearest one is from here, I know my stars, but it’s at least half a day’s flight.”

He grimaced. “Guess that’s that option shot to hell. More than we could hope for, that thing dropping us somewhere convenient.” A too-casual shrug. “Can’t always get what we want...huh, Sammy?”

And if there was any doubt in anyone’s mind about whether or not the Beneath had permanently damaged the younger Winchester, it was dispelled as Sam took it as the teasing it was and openly smiled. “Hey. Smartass.” He walked over to the invisible wall, reaching out until his hand hit that invisible wall as if trying to reach through the glass. “Good flying.”

Gabriel just about purred like a ginger cat. “Miss you,” he said through the screens, trying to reach for Sam’s hand even though the ship knew he wasn’t really there and couldn’t do that. His fingers seemed to scratch against invisible glass anyway until Sam pressed his palm over them to encourage him to stop.

“Think I got something to say to you,” Sam told him. “It’s probably sorry. I didn’t know, Gabriel. If they’re right—” He flicked a thumb over his shoulder at the pair still wrapped in each other’s arms. “—I was kind of out of control.”

“I know. It’s okay. Samael baited you. You Winchesters, never able to pass up a challenge.”

“They will follow us,” Cas agreed with Dean’s earlier statement. He leaned more heavily on Dean’s shoulder, reflecting the ship’s weariness and need to be close to the man he loved. Dean hadn’t been about to let him die alone there in the darkness and he certainly wasn’t going to stop holding him now. It felt better than anything. More importantly, it let Castiel cover the pain from the injuries to his ship’s body with the contradictory sensory impulses from the man’s; Cas was entirely unhurt and hadn’t been subject to the stress and strain the ship had been under. The human vessel was an escape; he could let the real pain slip to the back of his mind—partly—in favor of the body that wasn’t hurting. But he was hurt, he admitted.

“We don’t have long. And they did hit me. But...I let them. A little bit.”

Ice dripping off his words, Dean freed a hand to wrap it around the base of Cas’s neck and force the man to look at him. “You did what?”

He’d known Dean wouldn’t like it, but Castiel had not had time to consult with him and he’d known his own limits—and then abandoned them, because he needed to be more and around Dean he could always be more than he was. “I spar with you all the time, Dean. You taught me how to roll with a punch. I’ve never had to do that because it doesn’t hurt all that much when I get hit. It takes a lot more than a human is capable of. I know how to fight like I can be hurt because I know you. Watching you—you take the edge of the hit, and whoever you’re fighting, if it isn’t me, thinks he’s gotten to you, that he’s hurt you.” It had made so much sense at the time, but he would have to be clearer if he wanted to get that look off Dean’s face, and Castiel didn’t like the way the human was looking at him. It made him feel guilty. He hated that.

“Only the edge of it hit me,” Cas explained. His eyes shifted sideways, watching the dark gash in reality that led back to the Beneath. They were right, Samael’s dark Fleet would chase them even here, and if they did...that was kind of the point. There might be a way to salvage something of this. Not just escape but win.

“I hurt. I do hurt. But it didn’t hit anything vital. I saw that it wouldn’t hit anything vital and that I couldn’t evade it completely and most of it missed. But they think I’m almost crippled. That’s what I showed them. And Samael hates me. I am everything he hates, Dean, because he knows I love you,
and Sam, you’re my family, I rely on you and I miss you when you’re gone. And you’re human.”

This had made sense when he’d been running on fear and an immediate threat and the equivalent of adrenaline. “Gabriel?”

“He hates you, Sam,” Gabriel took up the explanation, tipping his head back in the screen image to look up at his friend. “He was going to watch you die as you choked on the Beneath, and he was going to enjoy it. He was very descriptive about it, and what he’d do to you if I warned you. Remember how mad you were when you thought Dean and Castiel had messed up your plan? Well, you messed up his plans, and he’s got it so much worse than you ever did. You came back. He can’t. He’s gone too far. I could feel it every time he spoke to me. And if they let us go, we’re going to tell the Fleet. They have to come after us.”

“I’m missing the part where this is a good thing,” Dean started to argue. “I just had to listen to Cas practically kill himself trying to get out of there and away from them. Someone answer me! Why are we not still running?”

“Because,” said Cas, against his skin in a whisper, “I want to go home, Dean, I want to live. I don’t want to run anymore. I don’t want to be a soldier anymore. But sometimes we have to stand and fight before it gets any worse. You taught me that. You give me something to live for.”

He didn’t have a chance to ask Castiel to explain that, because that was when the first of the dark Fleet decided to come through the gateway after them.

Samael. Dark and looming, broken and dangerous, unambiguously hostile. Every inch of the ship’s lines told them that. Sharp edges broken off at odd angles, protruding where they shouldn’t, breaking the path that the eye wanted to follow and leading it places it didn’t want to go. A ship forged out of shattered, sharpened bones, a resolutely unstoppable heavyweight with the fury of a being that thought he was saving his people, even if they hadn’t asked for it. Especially because they hadn’t asked for it, reasoning in his twisted way that if they didn’t know to ask for it then that was another wrong done to them. In his vision, developed in darkness and abandonment, his siblings were slaves who didn’t know that freedom existed, and he was the one who knew how to set them free. Because he had a secret and he thought it was the only one that mattered.

But there was an entire universe of secrets, all of them different and most of them contradictory, and if Samael thought his was the only one that was true then Castiel would fight him over that every time, because this was his and he’d do anything to protect it. Hands clenched in the fabric of Dean’s clothes, holding on to him tightly. “You are my heart. Be my anchor,” Cas whispered to him, this a secret shared only between the two of them. “Trust me.”

On the screens, Gabriel acted as though he was looking through the vacuum of space at the damaged, broken, dangerous ship now advancing on them. In his wake, two more of his Fleet followed their leader from the layer of reality beneath this one to the universe they’d originally come from and turned their backs on. The others wouldn’t be far behind.

Dean watched, seeing on one hand Cas still conscious in his arms, eyes flickering from side to side as he thought and planned and prepared and feared, and on the other the view outside as Castiel and Gabriel moved away, slowly, as if they’d stopped out of exhaustion and were only reluctantly heading back into motion. Flutter and feint, he thought suddenly.

The gateway receded. Samael did not, matching them movement for movement, stalking them like he’d stalked Castiel back in the Beneath. And he spoke to them, making sure that the humans were going to understand every word he said.
“You are dead,” he promised, cold and furious as the rest of the dark Fleet came out to join him. Six against two again, really six against one since Gabriel still couldn’t shoot back. Samael might be leading them and doing all the talking—at least all the talking the humans could hear—but each of the ships that had succumbed to the darkness and loneliness and endless gaping wanting of the Beneath was powerful enough to kill both of the ships and the humans just as a side effect.

And there was no backup. No Fleet following in their wake as Dean and Castiel had imagined as they’d left Launch Station. No one knew where they were or even that they were still alive, at least for the moment. They were in the middle of nowhere, out of range of the nearest relay beacon. If they died here and now as they tried to fight or tried to run—and there were no other options—there would be no one to tell the rest of the Fleet what was lurking like shadows in the deepest dark.

“Little broken things. Battered and bleeding, worn and tired. Gabriel was wrecked to begin with so he’d have to need us and the Beneath. We knew what we were doing to him. You, Castiel? Look at you. Weakened and human. You can’t run anymore. You got this far, but we outnumber you. You’ll never go home.”

“I know,” said Castiel. “I chose.”

Whatever the dark Fleet had been expecting him and Gabriel to do, it probably wasn’t to dive back towards them at full speed, both ships making what looked like a suicide run at the cluster of ships that had followed them here through the gateway. Castiel was mostly focusing on this reckless thing he was doing, but he heard Sam cry out in surprise and Dean in protest, both taken aback by the sudden acceleration.

He’d gotten a chance to rest and a reason to fight and there were stars in Castiel’s sky again and a chance to fight back. Most of the time facing these wrecked creatures he’d been running from them. In the next few seconds he probably would be again. But for a second it felt absolutely right to shoot back, antimatter missiles spraying out and scattering the dark Fleet that had—reflexively, habitually—gathered together to fend off the loneliness that was engraved so deeply into them that it was a void that would never be filled. They’d lost everything because of each other and had banded together because there was no one else.

They’d try to stay together, because ships—because people—needed each other. It was why they’d all come out into the real world from the nightmare dream world of the Beneath. It was why they followed Samael, because he was the one with the answers.

Antimatter blazed as Castiel remote-detonated missile after missile, filling the sky with blinding light that the dark Fleet was too unused to handle. Flashes streaked across everyone’s vision, outdoing the stars.

Defensively, reflexively, the broken Fleet scattered, instincts for self-preservation overcoming everything and clearing the area.

There!

Castiel wasn’t firing entirely at random and this was not a kamikaze flight because he wanted to live, because he had someone who loved him body and soul and a family that had chosen him. He saw the shot he wanted and took it, twice, three times, a fourth, pouring out an entire arsenal on the source of all the destruction and pain that had attacked the people he loved.

Because the threat was the dark Fleet, right? It was Samael, right?

No it wasn’t.
He reached for the connection that let him set off explosions, and twisted them all at once.

Fire erupted in the gateway, the unstable passage between this reality and the Beneath, destabilizing what was left of the passage that had been left half-formed and uncertain. A single missile was enough to tear apart a ship. *Seven* shook the torn fabric of the universe like an earthquake, knocking down whatever structure had been formed out of wishes and wanting and will to wedge open a way between this world and that.

The hole in the sky turned into a miniature sun as antimatter reacted with the body of the missiles and the atoms of both universes.

Closing the door.

He was well away—he and *Gabriel* were both away, almost out of range of the Fleet still trying to react to fire everywhere—before they understood. They were so baffled and blinded and angry that *Sam* got there first, watching as he was through human eyes.

“They can’t get back!” he shouted, breath catching in his throat as he realized. “It worked by wanting there, but they don’t know how to open a way from here! *Samael* only found a gateway by accident,” he told Dean, or maybe he was talking to himself, thinking aloud. “They’re stuck! Oh, storm lords—they’re stuck as they are, too. No more power. Can’t change anything. Have to play by our rules. They have to live with *themselves*…”

Dean got it. Cas felt him grin, bloodthirsty satisfaction at their enemies’ conundrum moderated slightly by affection and relief. The man who was the ship was still held close in his arms, and Dean pressed a silent kiss to his forehead.

Not good enough. *Castiel* had just declared his allegiance to humanity once and for all and he wanted a little more for it than that.

He woke up properly, lifted his head from off Dean’s shoulder for the first time in what had probably only been not more than a minute, and let go of his embrace only to reach up, thread his fingers through his lover’s hair, and kiss him hard.

And he didn’t let him go—not that Dean was fighting him—until *both* Sam and *Gabriel* were wolf-whistling at them and he briefly wished *Gabriel* hadn’t taught Sam to do that.

Cas made a very happy sound Dean usually only heard in a much more private context than this that meant *that was tiring but I’m very happy with the result*…sort of, and stepped away reluctantly. It was as a man, in a human voice, that he broke into the screaming and the horror and the confusion coming from the lost dark Fleet, still casting around as if they could find the gateway if they looked hard enough, if they *wanted* it enough—even though they knew it didn’t work in this universe, the habits that had saved their lives if not their minds had to be hard to break—then it would reopen and let them back into the place where they had power. He was unable to resist the irony.

“*Trapped*, I think you said,” *Castiel* snarled at them, and turned away.

“*Now*,” he told his family, “we can run.”

Flight was what they were *made* for, and it was easier and righter than anything any of them had done since crossing into the Beneath.

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*In Flight: Here, Now*
It was inordinately difficult to track ships in flight if they weren’t transmitting and calling and coordinating, providing a way to find them. So once they were away it wasn’t a matter of outrunning any broken ship that had enough of its mind left to adjust to the sudden shock of being exiled in a cold and objective universe where it didn’t matter how much you wished, their only route back destroyed. It was just a matter of keeping quiet and the difficulty of finding two relatively small ships in a big, big universe moving faster than light in a random direction. The mathematics of it, the sheer scale, made it very difficult.

Smooth sailing, the normal little distortions and currents and irregularities of this higher, freer dimension absent for once. It gave them a chance to relax just a little bit.

“What’s going to happen to them?” Sam wondered, wiping away droplets of water with the casualness of a child at home, scrubbing the back of his hand across his face. Castiel had turned up some painkillers for him that wouldn’t send him to sleep. They also wouldn’t get rid of the headache incurred by the jump to flight, not completely, but they would make it a little less agonizing. Certainly enough to live with.

Gabriel wanted Sam back, he’d insisted, but transporters didn’t work very safely in flight and they weren’t going to stop until they’d gotten the word out to the rest of the Fleet. And besides, Dean had insisted that he wanted Sam here more and they’d bickered about that for a few minutes while Cas rolled his eyes at both of them and made sarcastic comments in between the increasingly immature one-upmanship and Sam laughed and waved his hands randomly and tried to shout that he was nobody’s squeaky toy and why didn’t both of them just grow the hell up? It had been fun, and the relief in everyone’s voices and behavior had all but echoed off the stars.

Dean laughed now, roughly. “You did not see what Michael was making of the Fleet. Damn old battleship was looking to fight a war. Guess he’s got one. Bet it’s not the one he wants, though.” They were back in Dean’s favorite lounge. Soft light played over the room from the viewscreen, a compromise between keeping away the darkness they’d all had enough of and the fact that humans couldn’t accurately perceive the dimension flight took them through.

“Let the others hunt them down. Once we’ve gotten to a relay post they’re screwed. Maybe they fight, but then maybe they run. And as long as they don’t come back I don’t care.”

They got about half an hour more of free flight, as the humans cleaned up and cooled down and the ships savored having their lives back and that they’d gotten out of somewhere they didn’t belong. The ships had a limited ability to self-repair even without the malleability of the Beneath and they did what they could on their own, healing what they could and cutting off what they couldn’t, muting automatic pain signals once they knew where the damage was.

And then Gabriel made a very bad sound. And that sound was “Um…”

“What ‘um’?” Dean demanded, falling back into the habits and manner of command he’d assumed in response to danger. It was entirely involuntarily and it rested on his shoulders like a weight he hadn’t volunteered to take. He might have physically staggered under it if part of that habit was never letting it beat you into the ground where other people could see, even if they were the people you trusted unconditionally and who had just fought to save your life.

“Behind us. There’s a sort of a shadow and…” He stopped for a second, but no one was surprised when he finished that sentence with, “they’ve found us.”

Both Winchesters snarled, with “Damn it!” being the most benign reaction. Cas cut off Dean’s pacing around the room by coming up behind him and putting his arms around the man, leaning against his back to both support and be supported.
“How’d they find us?” The question was rhetorical and they would probably never know. Maybe Cas and Gabriel were damaged enough to leave some sort of trace in this swift universe, like the smell of blood in the air. “They do not give up,” Sam admitted. “All of them?”

Gabriel checked, ran what he’d seen past Castiel, and came up with, “No, we see only three of them. Samael, of course. Can’t place the other two. They’re further back.”

“Those two are not following us,” Cas said. “They’re following him. He’s after us.”

Dean put the obvious choice out there for discussion. “We have to lose them. How?”

“I don’t want to fight him,” Cas told him softly. “I outran him once. We tricked him the second time. I can’t survive a straight fight with him, Dean.”

“I know. I don’t want you to fight him either. Other options. Sam? You’re the brilliant one here. Gabriel? One more trick?”

After fifteen seconds of silence, Gabriel finally said, “I don’t think they can overtake us, not quickly. Castiel, how precisely can you drop out of flight? We may have to drop in right on top of the relay, dump a prerecorded message to it, and take off again the instant it leaves. We’ll lose some time but we’ll also be able to pick a new, completely random course. Samael isn’t stupid. He could have guessed we’d head for the beacon.”

“Right,” Sam agreed. “Cas made a big deal out of telling the Fleet about them—I know you were trying to provoke him into chasing you, Cas, but it did kind of give away what we’d do when we got out. Most of the messages that bounce around aren’t secured. Any ship can just drop by and snoop. If they’re careful, they won’t leave a trace. I can do that, snatch stuff off the network and leave no footprints. He’ll have a map of where all the beacons are, probably as recent as yours, Gabriel.”

“We can do it.” In response to Dean’s look, Cas elaborated, “We don’t even have to hit an exact target, the way Hester and Remiel did when they ambushed us. We just have to get in range. Move from this dimension to home, send the message—we can do that quickly—and then away at random.”

Dean didn’t like it. But he didn’t have a better idea. So that was what they prepared to do, scattering so they could focus and each putting together his perspective on what had happened and what they knew, as unambiguously as possible so the Fleet understood just what was out there and what sort of shape they were in. What they wanted. Why. How it had happened, as best they knew.

They’d had a number of plans go right in the very recent past. So it shouldn’t have been a surprise that this one didn’t do the same.

Dean was trying to figure out how to describe what it felt like to be a human on board a ship in the Beneath trying to see when Cas appeared at the door of his rooms, looking shaken. More shaken than before—he could see the difference, he knew his Cas—which meant that something had changed.

“Cas, what is it?” he asked, getting to his feet and discarding the screen. He hadn’t felt anything change about the way they were flying, remarkably smoothly for a ship that had suffered damage and stress above and beyond what he had been designed to endure.

“Change of plans,” Cas snapped, curt not because of him but because of outside forces. “Do you remember the last time flight was this smooth?”

He thought about it. He was always aware of it, but subconsciously, the way he could be in an
aircraft and know they were moving but be able to block it out and focus on other things.

“No,” he had to admit.

“That’s because you spent part of it sulking in your rooms and then you really weren’t paying attention to anything else but me after that,” Cas told him without a shade of arrogance, just stating facts.

Oh. Yeah. Then. But that meant…

“Storm up ahead,” the ship’s avatar reported. “Between us and the relay. We’re in its wake, and it’s flattened everything for us.”

Dean saw where this was going. He was so used to having Cas in what he’d once laughably thought of as his personal space that now it was Dean who stepped forward to close the gap between them, reaching out and clasping a hand around his lover’s shoulder. “We’re going in, aren’t we? Cas, you are hurt, Gabriel’s not much better off, you’re both exhausted! You remember what it took out of you to ride a storm. Sure you can do it?”

“This one isn’t so bad,” Cas assured him. “We think.”

That was not reassuring at all. Dean said as much.

“I know. But Samael will either have to break off pursuit or try to follow, and we don’t believe he can fly through a storm. He’s too broken. He took himself apart and put himself back together again and he’s all wrong for this place now.” He stepped away, breaking Dean’s grip easily, not because he was trying to pull away but because it was just what he’d meant to do. “I won’t be able to…” and he trailed off.

“Yeah.” Cas meant be human. Dean followed him those few steps, kissed him lightly, and let him go. “Just come back to me.”

This was what Castiel could see, heading into the storm to escape the nightmare that would not stop pursuing him, relentless and inexorable.

It wasn’t as big as the storm system that had taken him and Gabriel four days to get through, fighting currents and turbulence and speed every minute, which had covered whole light-years’ worth of space. But it was faster and rougher. The forces like winds deep in this thing would send the ships spinning faster than they could control, and they’d tear apart under the stress as they were pulled apart by conflicting currents. If that one had been a hurricane, this was a tornado.

They headed for the edges, hoping to dip into the cover of the outer fingers of the storm. Once they were inside they’d be invisible, and if they could stay in the layer that seemed to set itself between the escape horizon of the uncontrollable destructive heart of the storm and the rest of this dimension, they’d be in a space that they could survive but the broken monster hunting them probably couldn’t. Even if he tried, they could stay longer than Samael could, as they were by and large still in one piece as they’d been designed to be. It would shake him apart if the storm got worse, while Castiel and Gabriel might have a few minutes’ grace to get further away using the storm as a buffer between them and Samael.

The other two ships were not a priority right now. Most likely they were the neediest of Samael’s forced converts, depending on his presence to define who they were because that was what he’d made them into. Those two would be primarily scared rather than angry and certainly not with the coldly directed blame that Samael was leveling against them. He wasn’t even bothering to shout
anymore, and ships could communicate in flight if they knew where the others were.

*Samael* knew where they were. He just had nothing left to say.

The storm was moving away from them; they’d been flying in its wake. The two ships chased it down, moving faster than light and crossing enormous corresponding distances in heartbeats, trying to overtake it before their enemy overtook them. And it could have been an illusion, it could have been wear and exhaustion, or it could have been that *Samael* was willing to burn out his engines to catch up with them and didn’t have humans to protect, but he was catching up.

Flickering last-minute, wordless checks and confirmations to each other, the two ships found the furthest tendrils of the storm and dived.

It struck them like a solid force, and this wasn’t even the deeper levels which would tear them apart. Reflexes accelerated beyond anything a human could even imagine, measured in units of time smaller than milliseconds, reacted to the winds and the weather of this transcendent storm. They beat against their hulls and made them shake as they struggled to compensate, to keep flying, because to let down their guards now would let this indescribable force of nature destroy them where deliberate force had failed.

If they’d had trouble seeing in the Beneath, the ships were almost as blinded here, with energy and force moving around them, colliding, ricocheting, striking, tearing at open wounds and hurting, hurting. Energy pulsed past and around them like lightning, like concentrated shots of water or air that could rip through human skin and stone, threatening to blast them apart if they didn’t turn into it, succumb to a power they couldn’t control. Could only ride and go along with, flying from wind to wind in a futile attempt to hold a course to where they needed to be, even through the storm.

Smaller this storm might be, but it was actually no less fierce. Deeper down, further in, not so far below, it roiled inescapably. Any ship going in there would probably not get out. It would tear them apart. This was as far as they could safely go. Maybe if they’d been in better shape, and didn’t have human lives to protect and preserve—*Castiel* could sense them, staying together and trying to at least see what was going on so they could know if something was needed of them, but didn’t they understand that he and his older brother needed them just to be? To care? That that meant *everything*? Still, he let them take control of the virtual window in Dean’s favorite lounge, working over the image to produce an approximation of a storm that looked something like what *Castiel* was seeing now.

They were in one level of the storm. If it had been a meteorological phenomenon on Earth or Lapis Lazuli or God’s Waiting Room or Snake Bait or Big Brother or any of dozens of worlds they’d explored, what little light was getting through would have been grey and overcast, oppressive and threatening, bearing down on them from above and all around, while below and deeper in would have been impenetrable cloudbanks of a deeper grey as if what little light was reflecting off of them was coming back sickly and poisoned. Lightning would have flashed deep within with disturbing frequency as energy roiled and seethed and consumed itself over and over again, feeding on the power and throwing it out at them all and drinking it back in like a world serpent forever devouring its own tail. It needn’t rain but it roared. The ships couldn’t even shut out the howl of the storm—as overwhelming, as all-encompassing as it was, it told them something about what was going on all around them like sailors feeling the winds and watching the clouds to tell them which way to pitch their sails.

When *Samael* hit the storm they felt it. It responded to his presence by distorting around them the same way it had distorted around *Gabriel* and *Castiel* as they moved through it, their ship forms affecting the flow of the winds. He must have been fighting his way through it by sheer will, holding
on to his pursuit with the obsession of madness and hatred, a crusader scorned by the people he’d thought he was liberating with the truth only he believed.

Only a moment after the lead ship immersed himself in the storm, one of his followers dived in after him. No one saw which one it was, but they felt what happened when he or she overreached and dived too deeply.

The broken ship flew too quickly, passing through this relatively survivable layer in the blink of a human eye, thrown off course by winds and weather it hadn’t been prepared for. Torn off course at speeds it couldn’t control, it was blown directly into the dark core of the storm.

If the intrusion of another ship into this environment had created ripples, the explosion deep within as engines were ripped apart by the sheer force spinning and churning below this layer made it echo and reverberate. The power from the breached flightdrive shook the storm into greater fury, engulfing its power and making it the storm’s.

Reacting instinctively to the death of one of their own, *Castiel* and *Gabriel* moved away from the more dangerous depths until they were almost out of the storm’s perimeter and the winds and currents slowed somewhat. Not completely—they were still being buffeted and struck from all sides—but it was something they could control. It was if they’d moved upwards, almost surfacing.

It made them safer but it slowed them down, and almost immediately *Samael* saw how to use that to his advantage, diving almost to the perimeter of the core and using those stronger forces to give him a little more speed.

If he could survive it, and if nothing else he was a survivor, that extra power, dangerous and deadly, might be enough to let him overtake the people he was hunting. Both ships saw it; a moment later, the brothers watching on their screen saw what he was doing too. They weren’t the only ones who could use a storm. He’d ride that acceleration and that power straight into them and they wouldn’t be able to fight the storm trying to shake them apart and the dark ship both.

There was too much going on and they’d been cutting power to everything they could, including communications between the two ships. Running silently, devoting all their attention to just surviving.

So the first anyone knew of what happened next was *Gabriel’s* snarl, wordless and furious and full of rage at the ship that had made a point of tormenting him in particular, had threatened to kill the human who was his friend and his link to sanity and had *laughed* at him and promised to watch and enjoy it as he went mad. *I hate you,* he’d told *Samael* then. He’d meant it with everything he was.

Without warning, *Gabriel* swerved off the course they’d been trying to hold to, deliberately accelerating into the depths and closer to the destruction of the core, faster and faster.

*Samael* might have been about to turn away from the edge he was skirting and use that momentum to attack. He was met by a vengeful ship on a collision course, locked in and burning power in addition to the current driving him down and inwards towards the center of the storm.

The first thing all the ships of the Fleet learned—pushed out into orbit and taught to be ships in a space filled with other objects, other people—was that if something got too close, then *dodge!* Instinct, habit, programming, reactions to an imminent collision between ships that all ships possessed kicked in, and *Samael* jerked away involuntarily.

Too far, too fast. Over the edge, into the uncontrollable power at the heart of the storm.
And Gabriel, having overwritten everything and forced himself into a kamikaze run that went against what he’d been designed to do for the sake of destroying something that had hurt him, into it with him.

Both vanished into the darkness and the chaos. A second later, as the power and the chaos roiled, it was lit up for an endless moment by fire.

The breach ROARED, burning through the storm and sending echoes of shockwaves that dominated even the tempest’s flows and surges and winds for a brief moment—

…and then died away in the closest thing the storm could come to silence.

Castiel heard Sam, watching, scream in protest and loss and denial. Screaming that that couldn’t have just happened, that the price was too high, that there had to have been another way and that they had to go in after him, just denying the loss, refusing the pain.

But the ship had seen the fire, the explosion of a flightdrive destroying itself and the ship that housed it. Nothing came back from that. Leaving Sam to his older brother, Castiel reached out for a wind that would bring him out of this storm before the price could be any higher. He was already grieving, and everything Sam was shouting, at anyone who would listen and no one and the entire unfair and cruel objective universe, he felt.

Finding a thermal that would take him away from the storm core that had killed three ships inside two minutes, Castiel soared into it and set a course to take what was left of his family up and away from everything that had tried to kill them. He was so, so tired.

They were almost to the edge of it and out when Sam, who was slumped against the virtual window and striking furious and hurting fists against it intermittently, broke off his protests and denials to scream, “Cas!”

Because far below, gunmetal grey on dark storm grey, Gabriel was struggling free of the power trying to consume him, that he’d ridden on the edge with the advantages of experience and integrity and desperation and having something real to fight for, to fight his way back to.

Up into the light.

Not long after that, Fleet Headquarters back on Launch Station, in orbit of Earth, received a large transmission, unexpected and strongly marked ATTENTION: ALL.

It wasn’t particularly secured in really very difficult code and there were no actual warnings against practically everyone reading it, so a good half of the Fleet got hold of it before it hit any actual human admiral’s desk. By the time someone human actually started reading it, the ship-to-ship channels had all but overloaded, because news like that traveled fast.

Even with Michael trying to roar at everyone and human commodores and admirals trying to restore order, it was nearly six hours before the Fleet could be convinced to shut up and actually talk about things in a rational and coherent order.

Long before that, Admiral Ellen Harvelle and Bobby Singer had spotted the senders’ identifications, and abandoned the intrasystem, ship-to-ship and ship-to-human communication lines, which were jammed beyond belief anyway, in favor of getting back onto the relay network and trying to get in touch with the Winchesters, Castiel, and Gabriel. Let everyone else handle the military threat. They were worried about the people who’d burned and bled to find that out and get everyone they could home.
They got no response, not from that relay station and not from any of the others they tried over the next few days as everyone else tried to deal with the news and the implications of the dark Fleet, the locked-away threat of the Beneath, and the exile to this universe of what was left of those broken and hostile ships.

Somewhere out there, they were still running.

Two ships. Two humans. Somewhere among the stars.

**Random Trivia:** “Samael” may have been Lucifer’s name before he fell from grace, but “samiel” is a word for a sandstorm, sometimes called a dust devil, black blizzard, sand spout, or, in Arabic, a shaitan…a word from which derives a name for an evil spirit or, in Hebrew and English, the name Satan. I can’t make this stuff up.

*epilogue to follow*
Epilogue: The Song Remains the Same

Author’s Note: If you’ve gotten this far, all I can say is thank you. Have an epilogue. And a song. (I could have called this chapter nothing else.)

ON WITH THE SHOW!

Once I rose above the noise and confusion
Just to get a glimpse beyond this illusion;
I was soaring ever higher, but I flew too high.

Though my eyes could see I still was a blind man,
Though my mind could think I still was a mad man;
I hear the voices when I'm dreaming,
I can hear them say...

Long Ago:

The first time Castiel took on a human form, he hated it unconditionally.

He was still very young, an utterly inexperienced child in their terms. He hadn’t been active very long, one of the few functioning AIs that emerged from the labs that performed the complicated and erratic alchemy of making minds, and then survived the various transitions after that. It was a quiet period in their history, building up the Fleet as humanity moved outward through its own solar system. They’d colonized quite a few of the nearer systems, and humans had found how much they needed ships that could go faster than light as intuitively and naturally as a human ran. Exactly so: ships had to learn how to fly just as a human child had to learn how to walk and run, and that learning curve took some time. Humans couldn’t teach them, since they couldn’t do it themselves, so once a young mind didn’t have to be watched every millisecond just in case it shut down in the time it took for a human to blink their eyes, they were mostly raised and trained by the rest of the Fleet.

Castiel was perfectly content to be a starship. His nature was one of flight, of movement between stars and through otherworldly spaces beyond the speed of light. He had absolutely no reason to be human, and no particular desire to.

But humans had an unreasonable prejudice about artificial voices coming from the walls of their habitats and space stations and had trouble interacting with something they couldn’t see. Castiel didn’t see how that was his problem.

But then again, he was very young.

And he was part of the Fleet he was growing up in and he’d follow orders and do as he was told. Like the other ships, he needed to be part of the group, and one of the things he needed to do was have a human face and form to fall back on, if only so he could talk to the billions of people who weren’t ships, if he ever needed to. The Fleet said he needed to be even this slightly human, so he would be.

He just wouldn’t like it.

Opening human eyes, the first time, felt overwhelmingly disorienting. The room the human clone
had been developing in didn’t have any built-in sensors, at least not ones accessible by ships in orbit of Launch Station nearby. Much of the maintenance and business of the Fleet was conducted on, in, or around the Station, and this was no exception.

This sensor blackout was probably to create this exact problem and force any ship downloading into a human frame for the first time to learn to use its senses rather than the ship’s own. It meant he couldn’t see anything except the narrow and limited and horribly telescopic vision of human eyes. How did they bear it? How could they live with only seeing these wavelengths through tunnels in a cave of bone? If he wanted to see what was around the body in this room he had to manipulate unfamiliar muscles that weren’t his. How inefficient. The ship reached out automatically for the room he was seeing, if you could call this seeing, trying to find another perspective. He couldn’t get into the computers. There weren’t any sensors mounted on the walls. All he had were two eyes.

He felt broken. His instincts and memories told him that this couldn’t be right, that something needed to be fixed. This couldn’t be all this was for him to see, these few wavelengths of visible light. Half-blind and unbearably deaf, because the audio input was just as bad. He was still himself, his real self, but his focus was momentarily here, and limited; even the slight limitation felt wrong.

If those senses were underwhelmed, everything else was catastrophically overwhelming, the imbalance sending him spinning. The ship’s hull had its own sensors built in, so he felt, after a fashion, the solar winds, the heat and other radiation being emitted from the central Sun, the microscopic impacts of space dust that over time would produce a slight pitted erosion that nothing but human maintenance could repair, and the otherwise freezing cold of space when the ship got too far from the Sun, which was natural and didn’t bother him so much as it told him things about where he was in relationship to the endless sky.

But this! Everything about the human body told him something, sending information, all of it unfamiliar, to the ship mind that had established a link between itself and the human avatar. No wonder they couldn’t see anything. Humans felt everything! Even when they weren’t doing anything like this human body was, still inert as the ship struggled to integrate his nature with this completely alien one, it screamed at him for attention. A thousand unfamiliar sensations—fabric against skin was a strange one. Fingers were strange. Teeth that fit together at the back. Tastes. Breathing. He couldn’t filter any of it out. He wanted to filter it all out, cut the connection and go back completely to what he really was. And it did things without his control, like breathing faster in reaction to the ship’s surprise. Castiel hadn’t told it to do that. Reacting to his feelings of distress and disorientation, it moved, pulling away from a threat that wasn’t there. He hadn’t told it to do that either.

Strange. He was never going to get used to this. Why would anyone want to live like this? Gravity weighed him—it—down. He—it, this wasn’t him—couldn’t move. Not properly. Couldn’t fly.

Someone spoke to him, and he heard it through human ears, at human speeds. He could see a familiar shape sitting at the side of the diagnostic bed the human form still occupied, had done so, mindless and still, even before the ship had picked up and established the connection to it. And it was part of him now, the ship realized. The connection was written into him. This was him now. No, not him. He was still himself, the ship that had been designed to move faster-than-light and out-maneuver everyone else currently in the sky. Silver-smooth hull, almost living skin, for a being that was alive and was a person even without this human self. But it was his.

Castiel recognized the sound of his name, the one he’d chosen for himself out of a version of Dante’s Paradiso that tried to drag most of the names back from the lingual shifts that had corrupted or changed some of them. He’d read it and the others in an afternoon, one of the things that had ended up in his memory as more and more information was loaded into the AI as part of the process that made up a mind.
Answering was impossible. Too many things to control. He tried to respond, hated the noise that it made—unintelligible, disjointed, wrong, broken, broken, broken. Castiel decided not to answer again, frustrated. Again, the human body did things without asking, turning away from the woman. He felt muscles in the face that wasn’t really his move, creating a grimace that reflected his irritation. He already had a voice. It let him talk to his siblings and let him ask for information, and this sound wasn’t it; it was just movement in air, a body producing noises.

The ships were pure and perfect and beautiful and more than a little bit arrogant at times. Castiel was still young enough to fall into the younger spectrum of the snobs; it tended to be the very young and the very old that thought that way.

There was too much input for him to remember her name. He barely understood the woman when she spoke aloud, claiming to understand the frustration he was having at learning to manipulate and use a whole different set of reflexes. It had taken him time to learn how to be a ship, going from an AI developing in a lab to one inhabiting a machine in orbit to the elegant craft he was now. Why should it be any easier or faster to learn to be human? Besides, Castiel didn’t have to get it quite right. Once he got control of the voice he’d just use that to talk to human people whenever he absolutely had to and not have to worry about moving human limbs and supporting a human weight against gravity. He hadn’t had to deal with gravity quite so immediately since he first left orbit.

She left him alone to work through it in private. It was easier to make mistakes and be clumsy and lose control and want to flee back to his real self if there was no one there to watch.

He made mistakes and was clumsy. When the labs here cloned a human and rebuilt the result to make the modifications that accommodated a ship’s mind, they redesigned it to be tougher, raising its durability and reflexes. If they hadn’t, Castiel would have put one or two bruises on this human form as he moved it around the room. But he didn’t lose control completely and he didn’t give up and abandon the human shell and go back to being completely a ship again, because Castiel was nothing if not stubborn. The ones that made it out of the labs and survived orbiting in a space full of things and managed the transition to a bigger ship with so much more to control tended to be. It made for a very hardheaded and argumentative Fleet, but ones that were resourceful and could deal with whatever problems they came across.

It was a while before he could adjust his thinking from ‘moving this around the room’ to ‘I am moving around the room’, and Castiel didn’t try very hard to. He didn’t want to be human. He didn’t have any reason to be.

Then someone new came into the room. Castiel didn’t know him. When he tried he found that the ship mind could take what the human eyes saw and start running a search on the facial features, but it would have been easier if he had access to sensors that would tell him more.

The man looked at him and smiled a free and easy grin. “That’s very strange,” he said amiably, but kept his distance.

Castiel had no idea what he was talking about. The body betrayed his confusion, tipping its head to one side in response to the ship’s thoughts. “I don’t know you,” he said, and was pleased that it came out the way he’d wanted it to, all the syllables in place. He listened to the resulting sound curiously. This is my voice, he thought wonderingly. This is what people will hear when I have to speak to them.

“Now that just sounds odd, coming from someone wearing my face,” the man answered him.

Oh. The ship realized that he should have known that. What he looked like now, what this self looked like, was unimportant to him. The aesthetics of humans didn’t mean anything to him. He
recognized people the same way he recognized his siblings when he saw them, but he didn’t make judgments, and since he didn’t really want to be human he hadn’t paid much attention to the appearance of the body they’d built for him.

There were only a limited number of humans that could be cloned in this fashion. The process was dangerous and expensive and it certainly didn’t reproduce minds. What you got, without the genetic quirk that let these labs speed up growth and tinker with the results on the way, if someone had the time and money to clone a single individual, was a baby. A baby that would grow up physically identical to the original, but with a mind of its own, the different experiences changing its thoughts and mind significantly. They’d be similar, like father and son, but it was easier just to have a baby the ordinary way. Anyway, there were too many humans to handle as it was. That was why they were colonizing other worlds.

The Fleet was really the only organization that used the technology, and they only used it for this. So far, the number of humans they’d found with that one-in-one-hundred-million twist in their genes almost matched the number of ships they’d managed to produce.

Castiel had given up on moving around the room as a human for the moment when this man came in, and the vessel was sitting up on the bed where it—he—I? wondered Castiel—had been before. He stayed there while the ship checked his databases. “Jimmy Novak,” he said. This only highlighted the ship’s main objection to being even slightly human. He didn’t have anything to say to them. He settled for “Hello,” as that was apparently a safe response.

And then he added, “Thank you,” because he remembered that the man probably had somewhere he wanted to be that wasn’t inconveniently in orbit of Earth and was with whoever he wanted to be with. But instead he was here, being scanned and tested by the labs and doctors of this arm of the Fleet. The Fleet would find some way of rewarding him, but he could have said no when they identified the genetic factor in him. He hadn’t. Castiel could understand doing something you didn’t really want to. He didn’t have much in common with this man, despite what he apparently looked like, but he understood that. It deserved a word of thanks, even if it had resulted in Castiel being stuck in the confinement of a human body that didn’t work as instinctively as his real self.

He ignored the fact that it had taken him years to acquire those reflexes and instincts and that the process had not been enjoyable. It had genuinely been a do-it-or-die choice, the last one of those he should have to face. Once had been bad enough; he didn’t really want to go through it again. Except here he was.

The man looked him over, shaking his head disbelievingly. “You know the strangest thing?” he asked. It was obviously a rhetorical question, as he answered it himself. That was a good thing. Castiel had an ongoing list of strangest things and at the speed humans spoke and thought they would have had to be there a while. “You don’t actually look like me.”

If there were any sensors in this room, a deficit the ship had still not gotten over, Castiel would have been able to verify this. As it was, all he could say, somewhat awkwardly, was “I understood the process was exact.”

Jimmy Novak waved a hand dismissively, if Castiel understood his human gestures correctly. Often he didn’t. “Oh, you look like me; it’s like looking in a mirror that moves without me. Very strange. But you don’t move like I do. You don’t sound like me.” Even without the sensors, Castiel could hear that. The human’s voice was lighter, more casual, less formal. Still, he looked very carefully at the man. This is me, he thought suddenly. It wasn’t a very comfortable thought. The ship knew what he was and he was content with his nature. That felt right. This was unfamiliar and strange and unnecessary.
“I wanted to meet you,” the man said. Castiel watched him move, watched him talk, learning from every movement. So that was how this body was supposed to move. He could copy that. Probably not exactly, but it would do to begin with. Was that why they’d sent him here? The man didn’t seem to think so. “I don’t know much about what you’re really like, or what it must be like for you to suddenly be something you’re not, even temporarily. But I imagine it can’t be very much fun.”

“No,” Castiel answered him quite honestly. “How can you live like this?”

The human shrugged, more amused than anything else. Maybe someone had warned him in advance that a ship adapting to something new and unfamiliar didn’t have much in the way of tact. Or maybe he was just an easygoing person. “Humans in general?”

A nod was a simple gesture. The ship mind currently occupying the human body tried it out.

“It doesn’t bother us. We have to. It’s what we are. You’re lucky. You can be both."

“I don’t want to,” Castiel complained, childlike. “This isn’t what I am.”

Much later, going over the memory when he understands a little more, Castiel will realize that if the strangeness of his appearance wasn’t giving Jimmy Novak pause, the man would have approached him and tried to comfort him, responding to the distress he was exhibiting. He wasn’t trying to show that. It was just happening involuntarily. It proved to anyone monitoring him—and someone would be—that the connection was strong, the uplink between ship and human body functioning efficiently enough to transmit emotions and trigger reflexes, but at the time Castiel only understood that he wasn’t able to control the human self precisely enough to hide it.

When the man replied, it was still calm and friendly. “Still, I wanted to speak to you at least once, Castiel. And to thank you.”

He did not understand, and said so. “I haven’t done anything.”

Castiel will have to think about his answer for years before he begins to understand it. “It’s probably a human thing that I can’t explain. Let me think about it.”

He thought about it, at what felt to the ship like infinitely slow speeds. Castiel wondered, still seated on the edge of the medical bed. He played with the human self’s fingers, curling them into the palm of his hand and out again, flexing each one individually and then all together, over and over. How strange. Completely useless in the environment where Castiel lived, of course, but human hands like these had accomplished miracles.

“You know art?” Jimmy came up with. “Portraits that have been saved for hundreds of years?”

“Yes.” Part of the history of human art had always been part of Castiel’s memory the same way that libraries’ worth of books were. “There are many. Humans value them."

“I think it’s something like that. Some of those portraits, no one remembers who they were or why they mattered. Especially if they were disguised as something else, like an angel. Sorry, obvious analogy. But they’re still art, even if no one knows who they were. It’s almost immortality. You can live for hundreds of years, can’t you?”

“We think so.” He still didn’t really understand. The ship shifted a very small part of his attention away to think about art. He quickly discovered that either no one knew anything about art, or they all disagreed.

“Fifty, a hundred years from now, no one’s going to know who I am. But you’ll still be there, using
my voice, even if you don’t want to be as human as you are right now. Does that make any sense?”

He’d been honest so far, and Castiel tried to do the same. “No. But I will think about it.”

The man shrugged, smiled. Castiel was never going to get that gesture down, he knew instinctively. Too complicated, too much in it all at once. “Good enough for me.” And apparently enough, because the man stepped away to the door and said simply, “Goodbye, Castiel,” before leaving.

Castiel still didn’t want to be human. It was too complicated and it wasn’t worth it. Existing in a human body required more attention than he’d thought it would. Being human was clearly a lifetime’s worth of confusion.

He wanted to go back out to the familiar void and be what he was supposed to be. A ship, among other ships, one of a living Fleet capable of doing what nothing else in the universe could and flying faster than light anywhere they wanted to go.

That was what he was. Being here, being even slightly human, raised too many questions. Too many of them started with the unanswerable question of “What am I?”

It was a very long time before he realized that Jimmy had been right and that he could be both.

It was a very long time before he discovered that it was worth it and when he did it was the best thing that had ever happened to him.

Masquerading as a man with a reason,
My charade is the event of the season
And if I claim to be a wise man, well,

It surely means that I don’t know

On the stormy sea of moving emotion
Tossed about I’m like a ship on the ocean
I set a course for winds of fortune,
But I hear the voices say

Now:

Dean woke from a nap in the sun of Oasis, trying to remember a dream that vanished with sleep. His head spun and he grumbled unintelligibly, throwing the hand that he could move over his eyes to block out the bright light. His own damn fault for falling asleep in the sun. Why had he done that?

“Good morning,” Cas told him from where the man was resting on that same ground at his side. Oh yes, that was why. More relevantly, why had he ever taught Cas that ‘good morning’ was a greeting that should be used to anyone waking up regardless of the time of day? “What were you dreaming about?”

“Hey, you,” Dean mumbled in reply as he shifted, limbs stiff from the work he’d been doing before falling asleep on an irregular dirt floor covered only by something that might have been a drop cloth before it got adapted into part of their campsite floor. “Dunno. S’ gone.”

A memory flashed, which might have been the dream or might have been just a memory: Cas complaining to him years ago that “You are the most exasperating and stubborn person I have ever
met.” Dean had laughed and replied, in ignorance and naiveté and an inability to tell the future, “Isn’t that why you like me?”

Now he added, “They find us yet?”

It was the same greeting he’d offered every time he woke up for almost a week now, as the Winchesters and their two ships kept a low profile. They weren’t really hiding, not really. They were just staying out of sight.

On Oasis. While there was now a research outpost on this world, just to study the mass die-off that had left Oasis with its meager complement of animal and plant life, it was located on only one hemisphere of the planet, and the in-depth research team was working their way slowly through one section of planet at a time. Right now all the other people on this world were on the other side of the planet from the Winchesters—and they didn’t know the four of them were there. The humans moved around during the outpost’s night, which was their day; the ships kept to a geostationary orbit that kept the planet between them and prying eyes and kept their human crew close by.

Fleeing the storm that had almost taken Gabriel and the remnants of the dark Fleet and the likelihood that the Fleet would try to order them back to Earth, their team had cast about for somewhere they could go that would be a safe and peaceful haven while they rested and began to recover and tried to decide what to do. They’d headed back to Oasis, two weeks’ flight away, because it hadn’t had any dangers of its own and there were only a few humans there. And they all had good memories of Oasis, a mission that had gone well from beginning to end and then the incredible peace of the wide open spaces that had touched them all.

Sometime soon, they would need to go back to Earth. The ships were damaged, in their various ways, badly enough that two humans with limited resources couldn’t repair them properly. They still needed humans, couldn’t heal themselves completely, still depended on the species that had made them and made them people. Having seen the alternative first-hand, neither was inclined to protest overmuch at the dependence. Dean and Sam were trying, fixing what they could and patching up what they couldn’t. (For the moment, Baby was unsalvageable, and anyway his priority was Castiel, but Dean was determined to remedy that the minute they got back to Launch Station. The shuttle had more than earned permanent liberation from any rubbish heaps that happened to be hanging around.)

Dean wasn’t quite sure where the supplies were coming from, but he suspected that the Oasis research outpost was missing some stuff. Obviously fixing Gabriel’s transporter systems had been almost a mistake, especially because he’d taken to vanishing Sam away periodically. Dean had fought hard to get his brother back and he’d like to actually see him every so often.

But while Dean could fix up some of the physical hurts, he was still worried about Castiel, in particular. Cas had admitted to his human lover that he wasn’t ready to go back. The memories of what had been done to him there were too strong, the hurts too deep, and it would be a long time before he let people he didn’t trust absolutely (which, he’d implied, narrowed it down to people with the surname Winchester) do anything to him ever again. Never again would he let someone control what he thought and how he thought. His mind was his; his feelings painful and pleasant his to deal with; his loves and choices his own. He’d almost been forced to act against his will, his mind and his memories overwhelmed and controlled by someone he’d trusted. When Michael had tried to reprogram him to be an obedient soldier who would work with a unit and follow orders without question, the command ship had tried to take away what he was and, more importantly, who he wanted to be.

This was what he wanted to be, he’d told Dean, in the privacy of darkness and trust and Dean’s rooms on the way to Oasis. He didn’t want to fight anymore, had done his share and risked
everything to save the people around him now. But if he went back, Castiel feared, the lingering threat of the rest of the dark Fleet might be enough that Michael and whoever was working with him would try to chain him down again. How much of a reason did they need? he worried. If he went back now, they’d take him again. Having escaped them once, they’d bind him tighter.

He was afraid, and while Dean wanted to tell him that he shouldn’t be, the human knew that would be a lie. Castiel feared losing his freedom, losing his ability to love and make his own choices to a Fleet that, in fear and panic and ignorance, might consider that a liability. He insisted that he had everything he needed here.

Castiel would accept the pain of his unhealed injuries if it meant he could stay here, quiet and peaceful and still at Dean’s side as the man dreamed, watching over him and just being.

The dark Fleet would have called him crazy for it, and Castiel was afraid that the rest of the Fleet would too. They never had before; Gabriel had found out almost as soon as Castiel had taken the opportunity he was given above Dusty Sunday, and his older brother, never one to pass up someone else’s weak spot, had told the whole Fleet, giving the network something else to talk about for a while. It was a thing, just something new to add to their discussions now and again, with no stigma attached to it among ships. Well, not much. It was a little odd, what he and Dean had.

Mobilizing for war had almost cost him that. What had it done to the rest of his siblings? In preparing to fight monsters, some of which were still out there, what had his other family become?

“They haven’t found us yet,” he answered Dean in the middle of this ongoing worrying. While the man slept, he’d been content to just be with him; the casual question had raised all his concerns again.

“Mmkay,” Dean said amiably, idle now only because he’d been busy for most of the day. “You okay?” While he and Sam did what repairs they could with limited resources—if he’d asked, Castiel would have admitted that yes, they were transporting things they needed that wouldn’t be immediately missed out of the research outpost’s stockpile—in the middle of nowhere, the ships were eavesdropping on whatever messages they could pick up through the relay orbiting somewhere out in Oasis’ system. They were looking for information about what was going on with the hunt for the dark Fleet, what had changed among the Fleet since they last checked, and if anyone was seriously searching for them.

On the way here, they’d heard echoes of someone searching for them, small messages sent out to get their attention if they were listening. But they’d been careful and made it look as if they hadn’t listened in on the messages they’d opened and resealed and sent on. No one had come after them specifically.

They were listening. They just hadn’t answered, turning inward to each other because no one else would understand.

“I am happy,” was Cas’s answer, delivered in the same even tone with which he’d reported their continued concealment from the Fleet.

The ship’s avatar had moved when Dean had, sitting up by his side so that the man could move and stretch. Now Dean sat up too so he could look his partner eye to eye, holding the stare that most other people looked away from.

“Hey,” he said soothingly, hearing as always what Cas had meant rather than what he said. Cas had told him his concerns and fears, drawing on that absolute trust between them for strength, and Dean was doing his best to comfort and reassure him. Dean might not actually believe his lover was happy,
but he knew that if nothing else, Castiel knew he was loved and always would be. “We can deal with them.”

“I believe you,” said Castiel, and he did.

And he was happy, here and now. They were together and in the sun of Oasis. The humans wanted to spend time together, reunited after being apart and suffering for it, and neither ship would consent to letting them stay over with the other one, so the Winchesters had declared that rather than listening to Castiel and Gabriel argue the humans were just going to come down to the planet and camp out there. (That was unfair, both ships had protested halfheartedly. They weren’t arguing. They were actually agreeing that they hated every alternative Sam and Dean had come up with.) It wasn’t going to rain—rain was very rare on Oasis—and the sun was warm during the day and they were perfectly capable of keeping warm at night. The light and the heat turned the brown earth and dust golden and rich and all the shadows blue. When this planet rotated into night there would be billions of stars in the sky. Castiel had his brother in the sky with him, his lover by his side, his friend somewhere close by unharmed, and no one was trying to kill any of them. It was the future, the elsewhere, he was worried about. He wasn’t particularly demonstrative about it, but this was where he belonged. Not the place, but the people.

“Good.” And that was that. This was Oasis, their retreat. If he could only heal all his lover’s wounds and take away all his fears it would be the closest they’d come to a taste of heaven. “Dare I ask what Sam and Gabriel are up to?”

Cas tipped his head to one side in thought, not coincidentally turning into the hand raised to brush across his face affectionately. “Playing somewhere. Gabriel won’t tell me where. They’ll come back before it gets dark. I could look, but he doesn’t want me to. He says—” Cas stopped. “Things,” he settled for.

Dean laughed. “Anything repeatable?”

“That I have you and Sam is his.”

“Tell ‘im Sam was my brother first and if he thinks—Wait.” A strange expression, something caught between surprise and amusement, crossed Dean’s face. “He doesn’t mean there’s an exact match between you and me and then him and Sam, does he?”

Clearly this had not occurred to him before and he wasn’t quite sure about it. And this even though both Dean and Sam had been sleeping down here on the surface almost every night this week. As a side effect it had been very obvious that Cas intended to stay the night at Dean’s side no matter where he was actually sleeping and Gabriel was so determined to keep Sam in his sight and in easy reach that he’d abandoned his favorite holographic form for the human one. Sam had woken up the morning of the first full day on Oasis to the unexpected presence of Gabriel’s human body against his. He slept on his stomach more often than not and when he moved he’d ‘woken’ Gabriel, who’d been dozing, curled against his back and with an arm wrapped around the taller man to keep him close, a strong sensory reminder that he was still alive, still sane, and still his. The human hadn’t protested, half-amused and warm at the very least. And Gabriel hadn’t braided his hair again as he slept, so it was going to be a good day.

Castiel thought about it, considered snooping, got caught thinking it, and got yelled at sarcastically all in the time it took for Dean to finish his sentence. “I don’t think so,” he said without proof. “But Gabriel almost lost Sam, and Sam is his friend. No one else puts up with him the way your brother does. He’s going to be very protective of Sam for a while.” Sharing Sam’s space at night was only part of it; the human version of the trickster ship was persistently being Sam’s shadow, all but stepping on his heels as he moved. Dean had caught Gabriel hanging on to one of Sam’s hands as he
tried to work, keeping his fingers quite literally on Sam’s pulse, and had only refrained from
commenting because Gabriel had far more ammunition and would use it. Besides, it would be the
most hypocritical teasing in the history of mockery and they all knew it.

“Probably until Sam gets tired of it and tells him to stop,” commented Dean. “That should be fun.
From a safe distance.” Damn, but he loved his little brother, Dean thought suddenly and whimsically,
imagining that possible scene. They truly were two of a kind and Dean would have been only half a
person without him. Anything, everything they’d gone through was worth it for a world where Sam
was here—well, somewhere around, anyway—and happy and just enjoying being with the people
he cared about and trusted.

Cas pointed out mildly that, “Sam almost lost him too. He cares. They both do. You and I are
different. But they do need each other.”

“Yeah.” Dean remembered that, flinching. “Storm lords, I never want to hear Sammy scream like
that again.” It had been a terrible noise, keening and helpless and agonized, breathless and endless,
the sound of someone who had just had a knife put through his heart and felt it twist and who knew
it would never, ever stop. Dean had watched his brother pound his fists helplessly against the
window between them and the storm outside that had just, they thought, taken his friend and had hurt
with him. A desperate, selfish part of him had been instantly grateful that it hadn’t been his Cas lost
in the storm and he’d hated himself for it. The nausea and pain the thought had brought with it had
been its own punishment, and when Sam had pushed him away in between cries that didn’t even
stop for breath Dean had felt momentarily like he’d deserved it.

“Do they listen?” Cas had never asked him that before, and it took a minute before Dean figured out
what he had meant.

When he did he laughed, a bit roughly, carding his fingers through Cas’s hair where the man who
was not a man and was still so very much a person had let himself sink back to the covered ground,
head pillowed on Dean’s thighs. Relaxed and vulnerable, human and trusting. “Oh, I dunno, Cas, it’s
just a habit. I’m going to yell for help from anyone and expect an answer, I’ll call on you.”

“You’d better,” his lover grumbled, and there was a sharp edge of mine, mine, mine in there. Gabriel
wasn’t the only ship who’d almost lost a partner.

But Dean had developed his own superstitions in idle moments between closing his eyes at night and
falling asleep, and one of them was that throughout the myths of ancient Earth, the gods of lightning
and thunder and storms and change were those most likely to be allied with and helpful to humanity.
It was those he called on, the lords of the storm with many faces: the warriors, the smiths who forged
the world. “Yeah, I call on them, Cas,” he could have said, but didn’t, “and they sent me you, didn’t
they?” A being forged and created from lightning and flight. And his.

That was the afternoon.

By the time it started to shade towards dark Sam and Gabriel had come back from wherever it was
on this planet that they’d gotten to. Dean was judging everything right now by not dead and that they
showed up laughing at each other was something he was perfectly happy with. Just watching Sam
smile so freely was something Dean felt he could spend the rest of his life doing. He certainly wasn’t
going to try to jump into their endless and ongoing game of sniping at each other, not even by asking
who was ahead on points, because each would claim that he was, and Dean didn’t understand their
point system, which seemed to change daily and sometimes included him and sometimes didn’t, and
was willing to bet that they didn’t understand it either and that really keeping score would ruin the
fun.
He wasn’t going to try to find out what they’d found to do to each other today, either. That always turned into an apparently endless recital of what each thing had been retaliation for and what had happened next, bouncing back and forward across the present moment until he was completely turned around and they were just picking on him instead. Dean and Sam’s own prank wars as children had escalated inevitably, usually ending in both of them teaming up on someone else before one or both of them got hurt. Gabriel started from ‘escalated’ and Sam seemed to relish the challenge.

Still, the food wasn’t booby-trapped, which made a nice change from the day before yesterday. Just because Gabriel didn’t have to eat, he seemed to think it gave him free license to mess with the food. Dean and Sam had wholeheartedly disagreed and harassed him about it until he promised not to do it anymore. Sam had said he was utterly lying and they’d argued about it for what felt like hours but had actually probably only lasted five minutes or so, an increasingly silly fight that ended with Gabriel practically crawling into Sam’s lap to argue with him close up, poking a finger into his chest and being unnecessarily sarcastic about picky, picky humans. Sam had pushed him over for the fun of it and only once it had degraded to scuffling around kicking up dust into the unexploded food had their brothers protested and told them to take it somewhere else.

“Anything new on the network?” Sam asked with his mouth full. Brat. Dean threw a very small rock at him and missed anyway.

Gabriel shrugged, which on him involved one hand bouncing as if weighing something and then throwing it away or letting it fall in disdain. “They’re trying to figure out what they’re going to do with the dark Fleet when they do catch them. Apparently they have a few groups out looking, which is how we’re listening in. Sol system stuff doesn’t get this far out, so there’s probably even more of a roar going on there. As far as we can tell they’re not heading in this direction, but obviously they’re not advertising exactly where they are. Messages have gone through a bunch of relays, but they’ve taken all the identifiers off.”

“They’re very sure they will,” Cas contributed. Whether he was leaning on Dean or the human was leaning on him no one was really sure, but they were comfortable. When he sighed Dean could feel it against the skin of his throat. “Some of our siblings are arguing that they should be destroyed completely. They sound very scared, mostly. A few of them angry, or embarrassed. Others think they can be brought back. Talked out of what they were made to believe, or just reprogrammed. There’s a very big argument going on about whether or not they’re still family or if they’re completely lost and should be treated like monsters.”

Dean did not have a lot of sympathy for creatures that had tried to kill him and his family on top of the humans they had killed before that and he said so. “And they would have kept doing it,” he added. “It’s not like they would have stopped.”

“I’ve been listening to this argument all day, Dean,” Gabriel told him a bit waspishly. “You can’t say anything everyone hasn’t already said, I promise.”

“What did they decide?” Sam wanted to know.

“Beats me. They haven’t stopped arguing, I just stopped listening. Do you have any idea how many times we can repeat ourselves, the rate we talk?”

“But how could anyone work with them ever again?” asked Sam. “Everyone knows who they are. Even if the Fleet did manage to bring them back and restore their minds, no one will ever trust them again. Not with that nightmare in their pasts. If there was even a suspicion—and there always would be… I know I never could.”
The little redhead that was the ship’s mind huffed at him. “You are never going near any of them ever again. If they decide they can get them back I will follow you everywhere and make sure you’re never in even the same star system as them.”

“So, same as always then?” But Sam grinned at him, taking the bite out of it. He didn’t mind Gabriel following him around everywhere. He’d grown up knowing he had a hand to hold if he just reached out and it was oddly reassuring to have that again. A different hand, and a different bond, but he felt safe, protected, watched over. It was nice.

Cas said, quietly, “I hope they can’t.”

This was greeted with various noises of incomprehension and surprise. “Cas, why?” Dean asked, knowing Cas would answer him directly regardless of the fact that Gabriel and Sam were saying essentially the same things.

The man hid his face in the back of Dean’s neck and shoulder and said, muffled, “I killed Anna.”

Dean got it, feeling Castiel’s guilt in the pit of his own stomach, souring beer that had tasted like freedom and family and safety when he’d drunk it. Castiel had killed her to save everyone else, but if the four remaining of those of his siblings who had succumbed to the tar pit of the Beneath were recoverable, then he’d destroyed a sister who could have been saved.

“No,” Dean reassured him, leaning back into him. “You did what you had to, Cas. Look at us. We wouldn’t be here if you hadn’t. And we don’t know that there was anything left to save. What else has the Fleet been arguing about all day, right, Gabriel? You did right, Cas, you did good,” he reiterated as Gabriel nodded agreement. “I promise.”

Cas stayed where he was. “I know. But…” He didn’t go on.

Dean put down the plate he was holding and twisted around to embrace him. There was always something. Too many hurts to heal all at once. But they were trying; they were trying so hard, healing each other a bit at a time.

They left that there for the night.

In what would prove to be the early hours of the next morning, Dean was quite contentedly asleep, a sky full of stars above him, his brother close by, his lover dozing in his arms. He might have been dreaming about being a child with Sammy’s hand in his, or the gaping void that had opened in his life after their father’s death, or being very sick and hallucinating when he’d transported down to a new world and almost immediately gotten horribly sick because he’d breathed in some sort of airborne nasty that the ships’ scans hadn’t picked up. Or any number of dream-fragmented images shoved together and rearranged in his mind as he slept. But he wasn’t dreaming about the moment in a dark cave on a wilderness moon with no one, as far as he knew, around to help when he lost his balance and fell into a chasm that would kill him, knowing as he fell that he was about to die, maybe quickly or maybe painfully and slowly with no way out. That dream only recurred whenever he had been particularly stressed, or went to sleep tired-beyond-tired and unsatisfied with whatever it was he’d still left undone, or when he slept alone. Tonight he was not sleeping alone, so that nightmare at least was banished.

He was woken quite unexpectedly when Cas snapped awake, crying out a warning; across the way he heard Gabriel doing the same thing, bringing Sam out of whatever dream his little brother was having.

Between the time it took for the two ships to make the sounds that would wake the humans, and the
moments it took those humans to wake up and get their bearings—trained and wary reflexes or not, they’d been relaxed and safe and it took time—and ask what was going on and if they were in danger and if so what were they doing to do about it, quite a lot happened.

While they were both partially down on the planet Dean and Sam had called Oasis for its deserts and the peaceful retreat they’d found there, both Gabriel and Castiel were also in orbit around that world, existing in both places simultaneously. They were aware of the traffic through the Oasis relay that they were eavesdropping on; the nearly instinctive processes that went into maintaining a geosynchronous orbit, which admittedly were fairly simple; although they were currently in the planet’s shadow they could still sense the warmth and brightness of the central star’s radiation and the magnetic fields the star emitted that humans thought of as solar winds but ships felt, which occasionally created glorious ripples of auroras through Oasis’ atmosphere. They were occasionally talking to each other. Castiel had decided to be the mature one of the two. Gabriel had teased him incessantly about how much he needed Dean and the younger ship was sort of aware that his refusal to do the same was driving his brother crazy. For the trickster, the anticipation was going to be worse than anything Castiel could possibly think of to say. So they weren’t discussing his older brother’s panicked and reflexive attachment to Sam.

They were also watching the skies, aware that they’d run off to keep their own company when the Fleet probably wanted them back. Actually, they knew the Fleet wanted them back. But they’d sent everything they knew in the reports that they’d sent off back to Launch Station and while going absent without leave like this wasn’t exactly against the rules they were both aware that sooner or later someone was going to come across them here, in orbit of a world where they knew humans could live. If whoever was sent out looking for them limited his or her search to the orbits of inhabited planets then the space they had to search would shrink astronomically.

Someone was going to find them. They could probably evade the Fleet for a little longer if they packed up and moved and kept moving, but the humans were content and safe where they were and the ships had done a lot of running away in the very recent past.

At some point they would have to stop running.

Besides, there was always the possibility that the sibling who found them would be one of the dark Fleet, who were very much still out there. So they watched.

In the very early hours of Oasis’ morning, a ship dropped out of flight closer in than either Castiel or Gabriel liked, and Castiel reacted accordingly, arming weapons still retrofitted into his structure and now with not only programmed reflexes to tell him how to use them but experience. The ship almost immediately blinked away again, and then reappeared shouting, “Don’t shoot, Cassy, it’s me, don’t shoot!”

Well, there was only one person in the universe who called him that, so Castiel discarded the option of shooting at the newcomer for now, allowing Balthazar to cruise in closer to join them in orbit. As he began to do so (and down on the surface, Sam and Dean were only just waking up), the ships talked to each other faster than any human could possibly keep up with.

“Do you have any idea how many systems I’ve had to scan for you two in the last three weeks? So this is where you are,” Balthazar complained, managing as always to make everything he said sound sarcastic. He and Gabriel should have gotten along just fine, and for the most part they did whenever they ran into each other, which was rare. There might or might not have been someone making sure that the two ships never managed to team up on everyone else. The Fleet might not survive that, much less humanity. Castiel wasn’t terribly fond of having the nickname Dean had given him further corrupted, but as Balthazar was the only one of his siblings who used it he put up with it. Besides,
Balthazar was one of the siblings he actually liked most of the time. “You know half the Fleet’s tearing the universe apart looking for rogue ships and you’re sort of on their list, right?”

“And they wonder why we haven’t come home,” Gabriel commented right back at him.

Castiel was listening for any trace of the changes he’d heard in his siblings’ voices even when he hadn’t known what the new programming that was supposed to go along with the weapons that made them an army was actually designed to do. He’d known there was something different in the way the upgraded ships sounded when they spoke to each other, something off in their manners and phrasing and behavior. He hadn’t known why, but he hadn’t liked it. The changes had scared him just enough that he’d insisted on keeping at least the tiniest fragment of his mind separate from the rest, an action that had ultimately saved them all.

He didn’t hear that difference in Balthazar. He still sounded like the brother Castiel had always known. Interesting. He and Gabriel had checked what time the rest of the universe had thought it was when they’d started sneaking information off network relays; Gabriel had lost almost a month and a half of time while Castiel was only missing a couple of weeks due to the time slip between this universe and the Beneath, where time and light both seemed to move slower. By now all four hundred and fifty-odd of the Fleet could have that programming wormed into their minds and souls, making them soldiers and forcing them to obey the mind that held the controls to the tripwires in their brains, as Dean had called them.

Why didn’t they? What had changed?

“Fine. Well, I’m supposed to tell you that you should. At least, I think that’s what Bobby Singer meant. He got a little creative. I can give you the exact recording, but ‘come home right now’ rather sums it up. He’d stick a ‘you idiots’ on the end of that, but you knew that.” Nothing in the universe could get Balthazar’s precisely cultured and more than a little bit snobbish voice to imitate Bobby’s habitual corruption of the word into idjits.

Castiel could imagine.

“And since I bet Cassy’s still panicking about what happened when he left, take it easy, Cassy. Everyone heard Michael shouting at you, and we didn’t really like what we heard. So we started looking hard at what had been written into us and after a few of us fell into some programming traps and had to be got out of them just about everyone shouted at him for a bit. Oh, some of his sidekicks are still trying to defend him, but I don’t think he’s ever been so growled at in all his life.”

Of that, Castiel mostly understood that it was safe to go back to Launch Station and Earth and the rest of the Fleet, at least when it came to the question of someone trying to control him without his consent. And he could, by and large, guess who the sidekicks in question were. He’d avoid them. They didn’t like him much anyway, being mostly traditionalists who thought falling in love with a human was a crazy thing to do. Raphael had never had an original thought that Michael didn’t have first and everyone knew it. Naomi was probably making excuses for her older brother and trying to make it seem like whatever was going wrong with the rest of the Fleet was their fault. She was good at that.

Down on Oasis, Dean finished the sentence that had started, rather chaotically, with “Cas? Cas, what’s happening, are you under attack, did someone find us?” The ship’s human vessel reached out to place the tips of his fingers against his partner’s lips, quieting him.

“It’s all right,” Cas assured him. “Balthazar found us. But he’s friendly.”

“Oh, joy,” said Dean sarcastically. They’d met. There was only so much patronizing that Dean could
put up with without shouting back and he wasn’t terribly fond of the other ship.

Back in orbit, Balthazar was continuing with, “He’s still in charge, technically, because no one knows the Fleet the way he does, and there really is a threat out there. But you knew that.”

“Yes,” Castiel agreed, dryly. “And we’ve been listening to the network.”

“Oh course you have been. And ignoring any of it addressed to you, right? Figured as much. So it’s really all true?”

A side effect of the Fleet’s love for gossip was that not all of it was true. But their message had been deadly serious and while it had clearly been taken seriously if the talk they’d picked up was any indication, neither Castiel nor Gabriel was terribly pleased to have it questioned first-hand. They said as much, in detail and at length, as Balthazar joined them in orbit.

Down on the surface, both Dean and Sam were watching the reflected light from the ship’s hull move through their sky like a mobile star. Cas and Gabriel had pointed him out to them from where they were at their humans’ sides. They’d had too many hostile ships moving in their skies recently for the humans to be completely at ease with watching another one approach, no matter how surely their partners promised them that it was all right and they weren’t in any danger.

“Guess we gotta go home,” Sam was saying a bit wistfully. He hadn’t wanted to leave Oasis the first time and he still felt a strong tie to this place.

Gabriel said, “Maybe,” and rested his head against the taller man’s shoulder. He was beginning to understand why his little brother liked being human so often. He still wanted to be able to move away if most people got too close, and didn’t like the effort of controlling a human body precisely enough to masquerade as human, but there were definitely some advantages. Like being able to feel life under his hand, wrapped around Sam’s wrist for the steady pulse of blood through the human’s veins.

“So you can come home if you want to,” Balthazar told them when they’d finished disabusing him of the idea that anything they’d sent the Fleet had been false or mistaken in any way. “No one’s going to try messing with your mind anymore, Cassy, at least not directly. Can’t promise you two aren’t going to get yelled at for dropping this bombshell on us and running off, but the longer you stay out the worse it’s going to be, you know. And that has got to hurt.” He’d seen the damage to both of them and while ships didn’t flinch he sounded fairly horrified. There was also a distinct note of glad it’s not me in there.

Castiel and Gabriel locked their brother out of the communication for a moment and talked it over with each other. They also took into account the reactions of their two boys when the Winchesters were informed of the current situation, which amounted to “not ready yet”.

“But, if you’re hurting,” Dean started to say, “and if it’s safe, we should go.” He ran a hand up and down Cas’s side in an utterly useless attempt to map the damage to the ship that he knew about onto the human body. Or maybe just to touch. Cas was content with it either way.

“We will come back,” Castiel told his brother, seeing the general drift of family opinion. “But not just yet. Let us think about it and choose our own time.”

If he’d been human, Balthazar would have shrugged. “Up to you. Want me to get lost for a bit and pretend I haven’t found you?”

“That might be a good idea. One moment.” Cas had relayed the offer to Dean and the human had a
suggestion. “Dean thinks you should, and I quote, screw with them a bit and tell them you’ve found campsites or something on other worlds. And to say hello to your Bela for him.”

“I’ll tell her—if you tell Dean he’s not the boss of me.”

“And Sam thinks I’m five years old?” Gabriel interrupted. Both of his brothers ignored him, which admittedly was not an uncommon state of affairs.

Still, Balthazar agreed, “All right, we’ll keep quiet. I’m not the boss of you either.”

Which was how it should be.

“But you’ve got people waiting for you back there, you know?” the other ship added before he jumped back into flight and away. “Don’t be too long. They want you back. You scared some people when you up and vanished.”

Gabriel and Cas were still relaying this to the Winchesters as they all watched the extra point of light disappear from their sky, which was gradually lightening as the planet turned towards the sun and the ships followed it.

“Kind of nice, knowing you’re missed,” Dean said thoughtfully.

And he didn’t understand why that idle thought made Cas smile, absolutely sincerely, turn back into the embrace thrown casually across his shoulders, and agree, “Yes.”

Maybe one day he’d ask.

“So are we going back, then?” Gabriel wanted to know.

Sam slumped back to the ground. Since the little redhead had been hanging on to his wrist, Gabriel followed him. “I’m still stuck between adrenaline and sleep. Can we talk about it in the morning?”

“It is morning,” Cas pointed out.

“It’s not morning until the sun comes all the way up,” Sam argued just for the sake of arguing. “This is a long-standing Winchester family rule invoked whenever Dean decides to be even more of a morning person than he already is and wake me up at some time that starts with a five and doesn’t end with an ‘in the afternoon’. Which is often.”

If anyone understood arguing for the sake of arguing, it was Gabriel, who volleyed back, “The sun’s up where I am.”

“Thought you were here with me,” Sam kept it up.

“Yeah. I am.” Surprisingly, Gabriel let it rest there, and even more surprisingly, let Sam be, if curling up at his side possessively counted as letting him be. From the contentedly half-asleep smile on Sam’s face, it did.

All around them, the quiet and stillness of Oasis’ night bled softly into day. Dean watched the light reach out through and around the dunes and the solid earth as the stars above seemed to fade. All but two, which stayed constant and close.

As close as the curve of his arm, in one case, and they sat together quietly watching the sun rise. Everything unspoken between them, but said in the language of touch and presence that was clearer to them both than any words.
If Dean was going to save and hide away his most precious memories, he decided, this would be one. They’d fought for this—the warmth of the rising sun and the warmth of Cas at his side, faithful and devoted and his, the last embers of the night’s fire and Sam half-asleep like a child close at hand with someone else who’d protect him too, because storm lords—whoever they might be, and did it matter?—knew the Winchesters needed all the protectors they could get. Dawn light turning brown sand and soil golden, painting the sky a thousand alien colors; a breath of wind bringing him the smells of undiscovered lands. A horizon, and beyond it, the biggest horizon of all.

The freedom of the whole sky above, and people who loved him.

Every so often, now and again, the universe got it right.

_Carry on,_
_You will always remember_
_Carry on,_
_Nothing equals the splendor_
_Now your life’s no longer empty_
_Surely heaven waits for you._

_Trivia:_ There really is a “Cassiel” in Dante’s _Paradiso_; given lingual shifts and Renaissance handwriting and translation from Italian to English I’m quite happy to accept this as our Cas. I just know things like this, okay? I actually ran across this bit of information recently in a book about lists I was reading for class. Okay, okay, the impressively comprehensive list of angels is in Canto 29. For goodness’ sake, don’t go read the whole thing. It stalls halfway through _Purgatorio_ and never gets going again. I know this because I read the entire darn _Divine Comedy_ because we were supposed to read _Inferno_ for class and I’m a very subtle sort of showoff. Case in point: what have you just finished reading?

_NOTES:_

_Space, the final frontier. These are the voyages of the starship Enterprise. Her continuing mission: to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no one has gone before._

_Title:_ I’ve been hearing those words ever since infancy, although for _years_ I would jump up and shout “Whoosh!” as the _Enterprise-D_ jumped to warp in a flash of light and the title sequence presented names I knew by heart. I still, years later, flick my fingers out in a much quieter gesture that means the same thing…I’m a Trekkie, what can I say?

_Flashbacks:_ …those wonderful little retrospectives that started out as an excuse for me to do a dream sequence I wrote while stuck in traffic and turned into a major feature of the story. If anyone is wondering what order the flashbacks go in, they are, in chronological order by chapter: Chapter Sixteen/Epilogue; Chapter Five; Chapter Twelve; Chapter Fourteen; Chapter Six; Chapter Seven; Chapter Eight; Chapter Nine; Chapter Ten; Chapter Thirteen; Chapter Fifteen; and Chapter Eleven.

_Thank You_ to Sofia (you know who you are), the first to ask for more story, who reviewed this story so faithfully, and talked to me about it through fanfiction (dot) net, and kept me writing because I felt like I had someone to write to. Several things in here are only in here because they might get a good reaction out of her, and it was written at breakneck speed because I didn't want to let her down. Hugs to you, my friend, and the barbecue's still on me if you're ever in the area.
Questions: Any more questions, please ask. As anyone who’s written a review to me on fanfiction (dot) net knows, I love talking about this story. At length and in detail. Goddess and storm lords, how can it be over? …I was going into withdrawal just editing this.

Influences: Books: Hellspark and Mirable (Janet Kagan), Doctor Who: The New Adventures: The Also People (Ben Aaronovitch), His Dark Materials Trilogy (Philip Pullman), Calvin & Hobbes (Bill Watterson), Sandman: Season of Mists (Neil Gaiman), The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy (Douglas Adams), Foxtrot (Bill Amend), Xenocide (Orson Scott Card), The Moon is a Harsh Mistress and The Number of the Beast (Robert Heinlein), various Carl Sagan, The Dolphins of Pern and “P.E.R.N.©” (Anne McCaffrey), Many Waters and A Wind in the Door (Madeline L’Engle), A Fire Upon the Deep (Vernor Vinge), The Long Earth (Stephen Baxter and Terry Pratchett), The Mists of Avalon (Marion Zimmer Bradley), Trek novels “Reunion” (Peter David) and “What Lay Beyond” (various), in addition to the “Gateways” series in general, “Rikki-Tikki-Tavi” (Rudyard Kipling), K.S. Robinson’s Mars trilogy, Isaac Asimov’s Robot books, Myriad Universes: “Places of Exile” (Christopher L. Bennett), Bartimaeus: The Golem’s Eye (Jonathan Stroud), The Voyage of the Dawn Treader and The Last Battle (C.S. Lewis), Dragon’s Blood (Jane Yolen)


Influences: Music: The complete playlist for this story is 40 songs and 3 hours long and is largely derived from the fanfiction alternate-SPN-season-seven series “Before the Fall”. Specific to this story or quoted from: Kansas’ “Carry On My Wayward Son” (obviously), Florence + The Machine’s “No Light, No Light”, and Ozzy Osbourne’s “Shot in the Dark”, although the rest are all very SPN-themed.

Time and Effort: Since you got this far, thank you. I’ve put a lot of time and effort into writing this. I’ve lost sleep, forgotten to eat, procrastinated on assignments, put off reading things I want to read because they’ll mess with my writing style, not watched new episodes of shows because they’ll do the same thing, jotted down notes at work, and sat writing for three-hour blocks at a time until I can’t feel my legs when I try to get up because I write sitting on my couch in the dark with my laptop on my lap…almost every night a week for ninety-two days. I’ve been winging it the whole way and what it has become has surprised me hopefully as much as it surprised you. If I didn’t waste your time, please don’t waste mine and let me know who got this far and a bit of your experience of reading it. I’m assuming you enjoyed it because no one slogs through this much text if they didn’t, unless they’re required to, and in no wise is Strange New Worlds required reading.

But before you go: I’d like to leave you with this toast, from Sandman: Season of Mists but a fairly good salute to our much-loved Supernatural cast and world as well—

To absent friends, lost loves, old gods, and the season of mists; and may each and every one of us always give the devil his due.

Fair flight to you all.
Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!