Of Shampoo and Fruit Flies
by almaasi

Summary

Dean's roommate is not what anyone would call ordinary. Cas is asexual, and autistic, and he frustrates other people with his unrelentingly 'childish' ways – but it's different with Dean: they have an exceptional bond, something truly profound. Dean figures Cas wouldn't respond to the idea of a crush the way most people would, so he has no intention of telling him he's been harbouring non-platonic feelings for him for years. Then one night everything falls to pieces: Cas overhears something he wasn't meant to hear. Things were never normal between the two of them, but now they might never be comfortable again.

Notes

**Warnings:** Neglectful home upkeep, minor insect infestations, mentions of past sex addiction (Dean), mentions of past Sam/Jess, one use of a reclaimed slur, internalised ableism.

Please note that Cas' characterisation in this fic is only *one* view of the many variations and types of Asperger syndrome. It is by no means accurate to everyone with Aspergers, but that is not to say there aren't real people struggling with the same things as him every day. Castiel displays several of the characteristics of an autistic person in canon, and I'm just playing that up a bit here. No offence is meant to anyone. I'm also going for a demi-romantic grey-A take on his sexuality. Again, it's different for everyone, so please don't take the in-fic explanations as law.
Dean lugged his duffel bag up the dingy staircase that led to his apartment. Second floor, Mr. Beard-and-Smokes hadn’t taken in his evening newspaper; Dean nudged it with his foot so nobody else would slip.

Third floor, Hot-Neighbour-With-Bad-Temper’s tabby cat was crying to be let in. “Can’t do it, puss,” Dean muttered, shuffling past. “Last time I touched that door she slapped me and called the cops.” He glanced back forlornly as he rounded the end of the hall and started on the next staircase. The cat mewedled after him, then started scratching at the door. There were claw marks and no paint on the lower third of the wood.

Dean kept on climbing, sighing as he heaved his travel bag further up his shoulder. The conference on mechanics had been fun, and informative – and exhausting, so he was glad to be home. Even if home was a bit of a wreck.

He reached his front door and dropped his bag to the concrete, fishing in his pocket for his key. He breathed in the scent of stale pizza, stale air, and stale bodily fluids, then exhaled with a smile. “Ahh. Home sweet home.”

The door jammed as he opened it, and he kicked the base of it without thought. The back of the door hit the trash bag, and with his duffel in hand, he edged into the apartment through the two feet of available door space. His boots clung to the linoleum, informing him that the fridge seal was loose again, and the shelf for the orange juice had fallen out. Once a month that happened.

“You home?” he called gently, unsure if Cas was asleep or out. No answer: Castiel was out.

The mismatched mauve and orange curtains were drawn closed on the far side of the micro-apartment, sunlight brightening sharp rectangles across the fabric, keeping the room bathed in a dim umber. Dean smelt the stagnancy of the room, and wasn’t surprised: Cas wasn’t fond of opening windows.

With the front door kicked firmly shut, Dean left the linoleum and went onto the carpet, toeing his boots off at the metal divide. He threw his bag down, then straightened up and stuck his hands on his hips. From where he stood, Dean could see the whole apartment: one room with two floored mattresses, one bathroom with the only functioning door, and one kitchenette on his right with half a bead curtain hanging in the doorway. The jamb had once accommodated a sliding door, until the door became a shield against the daylight over Castiel’s mattress. They’d sworn to their landlord they’d put the door back before they moved out, and they would.

The apartment was a mess. The coffee table in the middle of the room was piled with take-out containers, and a bowl of fruit Dean only knew was there because he’d put it there before he left for Detroit a week ago. There was a stack of laundry on the end of Cas’ mattress, and Dean went over to check if it was clean or dirty. He had a lot to do before Cas came home from wherever he was spending the afternoon, and he may as well start somewhere.

One sniff of a t-shirt and Dean recoiled, nodding. “Laundry first. Let’s see...” He cast his eyes around, checking what else could be washed. He emptied his own duffel bag and tossed everything into a big pile along with the old bedclothes from both his and Castiel’s mattresses.

A dildo and three condoms toppled out of Castiel’s pillow case, but Dean was unfazed; he’d seen worse. This dildo looked kinda fun, with its textured sides and bulbous head, but Dean pushed
thoughts of Cas actually playing with it far from his mind. He set the toy carefully beside Castiel’s mattress, on a clean-looking bit of the floor. There were water rings staining the once-plush carpet, and Castiel’s digital watch was curled up inside one of them. Dean dared not touch it – if Castiel did something unusual that looked like it might have been done on purpose, it probably was on purpose. Dean had upset him one too many times by accident, and he was smart enough not to do anything that would cause another upset.

Cas was amazing. He really was. He was just enormously eccentric. He probably had some kind of disorder, but Dean didn’t care what the diagnosis was. He loved his roommate and best friend, and the weird things Cas did didn’t matter, not when having him around kept Dean from going crazy himself.

Cas could take care of his own life, but sometimes he needed some help. Dean was his help.

Dean smiled, bundling all the fabric together and tying it. If someone didn’t know better, they could easily imagine the lump of laundry was a dead body. If Cas had been here, he would have told Dean to untie the bundle so he could be wrapped up instead, pretend to be dead, and Dean would end up going along with it, no matter how close to the deadline he was for an essay. It had happened before. Deadlines didn’t mean a thing if Cas wanted to mess around. They were both in their mid-twenties, but very often they enjoyed all the frivolities of early childhood together.

Cas brought joy to Dean’s life. Nobody else had ever made him so consistently happy.

Dumping the laundry by the trash bag behind the door, Dean went back and wrenched the curtains open. Dust bloomed in sunlit streaks, and he held his breath so he wouldn’t sneeze. From the window he looked out to see the lousier part of Kansas City, brick apartment buildings and broken windows, a couple of skyscraper-tops in the murky distance. Still, the afternoon sunlight made Dean and Cas’ home almost look like a real living space meant for humans.
The light also illuminated the coffee table and its cityscape of white folding boxes, reeking of three-day-old prawns and noodles. Dean went to the kitchen, sighing as he found the entire contents of the cupboards on the space beside the sink, smeared with grease and dirt – but only a small amount of mould, which he counted as a win. He didn’t understand how Cas could have eaten from Chinese takeout containers and dirtied so many plates, but questioning the logistics of Castiel’s digestive system was above his paygrade. He got the black trash bag he’d gone into the kitchen to get, then returned to the main room, flapping the bag open.

He didn’t bother to check what was inside the boxes as he swept them into the trash. He counted eight boxes, one of which was left with its flaps unlatched, and had a society of fruit flies in orbit. He wrinkled his lips into a revolted sneer, which only got more pronounced when the fruit bowl was revealed. He hadn’t expected things to breed a carpet of mould in only a week, but apparently conditions had been ripe. Yet more fruit flies drifted slowly around greening lumps which Dean could only assume were once tangerines.

Being careful not to inhale any spores, Dean dumped the entire bowl into the trash bag. It had been a nice glazed thing he’d picked up at a garage sale, but with all the dishwashing he still had to do, Dean decided it wasn’t worth the effort. Pretty fruit bowls were not suited to this kind of environment.

It took another two hours, but Dean eventually had the kitchen’s contents back into the cupboards, the surfaces wiped down and disinfected, the sticky orange juice spill mopped away, and the carpet
in the main room vacuumed in any areas there were unidentified specks of debris.

He also had to vacuum the desiccated remains of an entire cupcake, which had been demolished and carried off by a colony of ants. Dean had learned long ago that Castiel did not take kindly to the mass-murder of God Almighty’s beloved formicidae, so Dean forewent the bug spray, instead tracing the line of ants back to their nest and offering them honey, painted with a finger on the wall around the front entrance to the nest. He didn’t much like ants himself, but watching them would occasionally keep Cas quiet for hours at a time, giving Dean the silence he needed to write his papers.

Cas studied too. He studied something. Dean wasn’t really sure what it was, and he doubted there would ever be recognised qualifications at the end of it, but there was knowledge aplenty in that funny brain of his, which Dean was convinced would either lead to a Nobel Peace Prize or the kind of apocalyptic disaster only a madman could cause, some distant year down the line. Not knowing Cas’ motivations for anything kept Dean on his toes. Mostly, the other man seemed happy enough to eat or watch TV, sometimes both at the same time.

Satisfied with a job well done, Dean went into the bathroom for a quick shower. He groaned and slumped against the wall when he discovered underwear blocking the sink, presumably because Cas had run out of undergarments and tried to wash it all himself before giving up. If there was one thing Dean was glad Castiel performed ‘normally’, it was his regularity in body-washing and clothes-changing. For a dude who lived in a dump like this, Cas was actually rather immaculate. He wore neckties sometimes. Not for going out – just for wearing.

Dean wrung Castiel’s underwear dry then poked it inside the wrapped-up bedsheet to be laundered later. Then he cleaned the entire bathroom. Last of all, he poured bleach into the toilet bowl and left it to work its magic, then stepped into the shower stall to take his long-awaited wash.

He breathed deeply, letting the blissfully hot water soak into his hair, darkening it to mud-brown and making it stick to his forehead. He closed his eyes, purring at how good it was to be back home and to stand under this flow. The water pressure in the motel he’d stayed at had been decent, but there was no replacing the dripping, trickling and drooling warmth that slid down his back, paired with the migraine-erasing head massage of this showerhead’s missile launchers.

When Dean reached for soap, he was surprised to find a new bright orange bottle between the lime and bubblegum body wash he liked to use and Castiel’s Coconut Angel Bliss, which had run out while Dean had been away. Obviously the orange bottle was Cas’ replacement.

Picking up the new bottle, Dean read its glitter-laced label. “Tropical Fruit Punch,” he murmured. There were pictures of pineapples and guavas and cherries at the centre of a sparkling rainbow starburst. Dean popped open the bright green lid, lifting it to his nose to sniff.

“Damn,” he whispered, as the Tropical Fruit Punched the inside of his head. His mouth started to water.

Castiel had once said he never understood the evolutionary reasoning behind humanity’s desire to smell edible, but nevertheless, he did enjoy smelling like coconuts. Dean never complained, and had even once fantasised about lapping coconut milk out of Cas’ navel. But that fantasy was nearly virtuous compared to all the things he thought about while sniffing the Tropical Fruit Punch, sneaking a hand between his legs.

Cas was a taut-muscled, naturally tanned fellow; his hair was on the wild side of mussed, the colour of polished dark wood in sunshine. While the inner workings of his mind were fairly unconventional, he was conventionally attractive – from his sharp, stubbled jaw, his blue eyes and
his pink lips, right down to his well-kept unhairy feet. Dean thought about him naked a lot. It wasn’t a difficult image to conjure up, because he saw him naked at least once a day, usually. Neither of them were shameful about their unclothed bodies, not around each other. Cas was often quick to compliment Dean’s stretch marks, as Dean was happy to watch Cas walk past in the nude, dripping wet, fresh from a shower.

Okay, perhaps their incentives were not identical, but again, the point was it didn’t take Dean any effort at all to imagine Cas spread-eagled on a Jamaican beach, stretching out on a bed of fresh fruit, his cock hard because Dean had his tongue in the very delicious crease of his buttocks, tasting a glorious fruit platter as Castiel presented himself to Dean.

Tropical Fruit Punch. God yes.

Dean came on the shower door, exhaling in delighted relief. He breathed in the smell of the new shampoo one last time, dizzy from so much deep breathing. Licking his swollen lips, he snapped the bottle’s lid closed, then set it back down on the shower tray. He kept rubbing his spent erection until it deflated most of the way, his smile fixed on his face.

This was how it always went. Masturbating to the thought of his best friend in secret, for years and years. He had a planet-sized crush on Cas, but Cas simply wasn’t capable of returning romantic affection.

He and Dean talked about his sexuality – with no mention of Dean specifically, but the topic of ‘partners’ or ‘lovers’ or ‘boy/girl/insert-gender-here-friends’ had come up more than a few times. Cas had no interest. Really, he had negative interest. It bothered Cas sometimes, the thought of sexual intimacy. Dean had to be careful about leaving porn lying around, or watching movies with sex scenes, because seeing that kind of thing made Cas irritable, sad, angry, or even self-destructive. His reaction couldn’t be predicted. But never once had there been a positive repercussion from the sight of people having sex, even if the scene was staged.

Dean dried off then dressed himself in his last remaining set of clean clothes: too-tight bleached jeans and a paint-splattered t-shirt with a T-rex screenprinted on it. He had no underwear, but going commando had never been a problem for him like it was for Castiel.

With his towel over his shoulders, he stepped out of the bathroom in a zephyr of steam. Castiel was home, and was standing in the middle of the room dressed in one of Dean’s black t-shirts, boxer shorts, and nothing else, arms wrapped tight around his stomach.

“Hey, buddy,” Dean said, a huge grin rising on his face. “God-damn, I missed you.” He went up to Castiel and hugged him from behind, arms around his middle, chin over his shoulder. He rocked from side to side, swaying the stiff-backed Castiel along with him. “You did fine without me, right? You’re still alive, at least. Told you you could do it.”

Castiel didn’t say a word. Dean slowly unwound himself from the other man’s waist, hand lingering on his lower back. “Cas, you okay?”

Castiel was staring at the coffee table.

Dean inched around him, going to stand in front of him. Cas wouldn’t look at him, eyes still focused on the table, even though Dean’s T-rex was in the way. “Cas?”

At this point, most people would have clicked their fingers in Castiel’s face, shoved him, made ‘yoo-hoo!’ noises, or radioed in Earth-to-Castiel. Dean didn’t even consider such things. He tossed his towel onto the couch, then followed Castiel’s eyeline down, crouching until his hand touched
the exact spot Castiel was staring at. There was no fruit bowl there.

“I threw it out,” Dean said softly. “Everything was mouldy. It was like a science lab in here, and not the cool kind. I mean the kind that the cops enter wearing HazMat suits and breathing apparatus.” Dean tried to grin, but Cas was still staring, so the grin slipped away.

Dean stood up, mirroring Castiel’s position, with his palms pressed either side of his ribs. He licked his lips, tilting his head. “Did I throw something important out? Was it the bowl, did you like the bowl?”

Castiel blinked twice, the first movement Dean had seen him make. Dean let out a breath, glad to get somewhere. “I’m sorry,” he said, holding Cas’ gaze even though he wasn’t looking back. “If you want to help, we can dig it out of the trash together, all right?” He held out a hand for Castiel to take. “C’mon. It’s near the top, we won’t have much excavating to do.”

Castiel lifted his eyes at last, unfolding his arms and reaching out a hand to take Dean’s. Dean squeezed reassuringly, moving past and taking Castiel along with him.

“I fed your ants,” Dean said, leading Castiel to the trash bag behind the front door. “Gave ‘em some of the honey you got for them.”

“They were supposed to be fed at four o’clock,” Castiel said, the bare soles of his feet on the freshly-cleaned linoleum near the door.

Dean checked the clock above the fridge. It was just gone three-thirty. Dean bit his tongue, looking carefully at Castiel’s pretty eyelashes. “They were real hungry,” Dean said. “They ate all the cake, would you believe it?”

“You vacuumed the cake,” Castiel corrected. “I saw the scrape marks on the carpet from the nozzle.”

Dean pulled an awkward expression. “Well. Heh. That explains why they were hungry, then. Cakeless.”

“You’re a bad person,” Castiel said, his eyes on the trash bag. “I don’t want to touch the bag.”

“It’s fine, I’ll get it,” Dean said, slowly letting go of Castiel’s hand. He untied the knot on the trash, holding his breath so none of the rotten fumes hit him in the face. As the plastic came undone, a balloon of fruit flies rose out of the top. They were nothing more than harmless floating black dots, but in large numbers they were cause for concern. In this case, Dean’s concern lay with the fact that Castiel seemed agitated.

“What’s up, Cas?” Dean asked, reaching for the upturned fruit bowl. Cas was standing just behind him, watching with his owlish eyes.

“What if they got squashed?” Castiel said, his deep, toneless voice made deeper by emotional weight. “What if some of them are dead now?”

“Some of what? Hate to break it to you, but this fruit’s been dead for a couple of weeks now, I think.”

“Not the fruit, the flies.”

Dean lifted out the bowl, its clay slimy and fruit-sticky in his hands. Some flies travelled with it as he flipped it upright, but there were definitely a good many less than he’d thrown away. Guilt
started to set in, greying and uncomfortable at the bottom of his stomach. “Uh,” he said, weakly.

“Dean... my flies...”

Oh God, no. Dean turned to Castiel with a pleading, helpless expression on his face that he couldn’t help wearing: it showed exactly how he felt. “Y- You were keeping them alive on purpose,” he said, voicing his terrible realisation. “I killed them.”

Castiel had tears in his eyes, welling up, his mouth set in an unhappy gape. “I- It’s all right,” he said, and the words hurt them both like a kick to the chest. “You didn’t know...”

Dean sucked the inside of his lips, standing there with the ugly fruit bowl in his hands. He’d murdered a few hundred helpless creatures, thinking nothing of it at the time... and now...

“How does it feel to be God,” Castiel said, looking Dean dead in the eye for the first solid second since he’d gotten home. There were still tears in his eyes, but a hard, angry line had set itself in his jaw. “I always thought you had an aptitude for greatness; now you control the balance of life and death, you judge other creatures to be worthless in your world; how does it feel?”

Dean didn’t need to think about it. “Horrible. Really friggin’ crappy, no lie. Shit, I think I’m gonna puke—”

Castiel grabbed Dean’s biceps, tears clearing as he held his eye and stepped forward. “A god does not lose control of himself. Your stomach is fine.”

“But your flies—”

“We can rescue those who survived the tragedy. Charitable donations are being raised all around the world as we speak, news reporters relay the events of the horrific disaster with their findings focused on those flies who will garner the most sympathy to the wealthier masses. Everything can be saved. Everything, Dean. Even gods.”

Other people heard Dean and Castiel talking like this sometimes, and thought they were kidding around. They weren’t kidding. Dean was hurting because Cas was hurting, but he became brave because Cas told him to be brave.

Dean nodded shakily. “Like New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina,” he said, finding strength in Castiel’s blue eyes. “Maybe the hurricane saw what she did and was sorry.”

“Hurricane Katrina didn’t have hands to fix her mess,” Castiel said boldly. “Or a friend to help her.”

Dean managed a smile. “Thanks.”

“Yes.”

Castiel took a few minutes to ready himself. He went and tied a face cloth around his mouth and nose so the smell wouldn’t make him gag, and eventually, he was prepared to touch the bag and put gloved hands into the discarded trash and pull out whatever was left. The flies followed the moving fruit, and once the ex-tangerines were back in the bowl with Dean and Cas’ finger-dents in them, all Castiel had to do was shepherd the last flies to the bowl, and they could safely tie up the trash bag again.

“Mission accomplished,” Dean said, grabbing Castiel’s mucky glove and helping him to his feet. “Good job.”
“You can stop being God now,” Castiel said. “It’s probably very difficult to hug gods.”

“All right, it’s hug time,” Dean chuckled, putting the fruit bowl in the exact place it was before, its recovering community of traumatised flies now rebuilding their lives in its basin.

“But don’t touch me with your hands,” Castiel said, holding his own hands far out to his side. “This is my only clean shirt.”

“It’s my shirt, actually,” Dean grinned, moving in to press his chest to Castiel’s, resting his cheek on his shoulder. He breathed in Cas’ scent, but didn’t smell any of the Tropical Fruit Punch, which was almost a disappointment. He sighed, letting his eyes slip closed. “Black Sabbath suits you.”

“It suits you far better.”

That was Cas telling Dean he’d missed him. Dean smiled.

“Sam says he’ll be here later this evening, between five-forty-five and six-fifteen,” Castiel said as he pulled away, wiggling his fingers, wriggling and squiggling. “He said he’ll bring Charlie, and Donna, and Beer.”

Dean beamed, going into the bathroom to wash his hands clean of mould. “Oh, Beer. Such a good companion on the long, lonely nights.”

“You’re relating alcoholism to sexual activity.”

Dean shrugged. “There’s plenty in the world for people to get lost in. Sometimes we look at things that feel good for a little while but feel bad in the long run, and we see an old friend. You know?” He smiled sadly, wiping his hands dry on the towel he’d used after his shower. He looked over at his best friend taking his gloves off then washing his hands, and thought to himself: it was really true. Cas made him happy now, but ten years down the line when Dean was still pining after him, would it really be healthy? Was it even healthy now?

He couldn’t move on. He never could, because Castiel’s reply came softly, “You make me feel lost, too, sometimes. But mostly, I feel found.”

That was Cas telling Dean he forgave him for the flies, and he loved him. Dean nodded gently, grasping Castiel firmly on the arm as he went past. “Yeah,” he said. “I know.”

He went and turned the TV on, one of the old boxy black ones with the looped antenna. A 90s sitcom flickered into life, the picture whirring and blurring downwards in stripes. “Where were you when I got home?” Dean asked, taking Cas’ hand and going to his mattress, plonking both their asses onto the coverless cushion. “Do anything interesting?”

“I sat on the roof and read the Oxford English dictionary,” Castiel said. “I found three spelling errors and a formatting mishap.”

“Really?”

“No.”

Dean smiled. Castiel so rarely told the truth about where he went and what he did that Dean figured he’d never know. It was nice not knowing, in a way. Everyone had that one unsolvable mystery in their life, and Castiel was Dean’s. The only consolation Dean had to his ignorance was that he knew, absolutely knew, that whatever Cas really was doing, no matter how mundane it might one day turn out to be, it would be magnificent to Dean. If Castiel could devote so much time to
something, it could only be magnificent.

That belief made Dean feel better, anyway. Cas was devoted to their friendship, and by inference, Dean’s other friends could never convince him he was boring, because Cas thought he was interesting.

They sat together and watched a *Home Improvement* rerun, Dean still holding onto Castiel’s hand because his fingers wouldn’t stop wiggling and squiggling and jiggling. Usually after a few minutes his anxiety eased off, but when it didn’t this time, Dean lowered the volume on the TV and turned to Castiel.

“Cas, what’s up?”

Cas didn’t answer, just blinked a lot.

“Tell me why you’re nervous and we’ll talk about it until you’re okay with it, yeah? Like we did the day before I left. And that worked, remember, because you survived all week without me.”

Cas didn’t say anything, but blinked and wriggled and blinked and squiggled.

“It’s your turn to talk, Cas,” Dean prompted.

“Sam is bringing Charlie, and Donna, and Beer.”

“Beer isn’t a person,” Dean said. “We’ll drink some beer, order in some pizza. We’re probably gonna talk about my trip to Detroit.” Cas wanted to know all about it, but wasn’t good at asking things. Dean was hoping if he could save all his stories for when the group was here, Cas would pay attention to the interactive part of a social encounter. Talking to people was one of his greatest weaknesses.

“Sam’s bringing Charlie, Donna, and beer.”

“You know Charlie and Donna and Sam though,” Dean said softly, squeezing Castiel’s hand. He had to be firm with his touches; Cas didn’t like hesitancy or light contact. “Sam’s my little brother, he’s a lot like me. You’ve known each other for years. You play *The Sims* with him, and you like playing that because you feel like God.”

Cas smiled, showing his teeth. “Yeah.”

“Yeah,” Dean repeated. He didn’t say it was ridiculous that Cas saw Sam upwards of three times a week yet remained nervous about seeing him. It wasn’t Cas’ fault, socialising was the hardest thing in the world for him. “You remember how old Sam was at his last birthday? We went to his party.”

“Twenty-one,” Cas sighed. He relaxed, nodding, blinking less. “I’m four years older than him.”

“Mm-hm. And I’m three months younger than you.” Dean smiled, pressing his denimed leg against Cas’ bare thigh. Cas liked comparative figures. Dean hated them – hey, math was never his favourite – but he used solid numbers to help Cas get his bearings.

Other people always seemed surprised to discover Dean was the younger of the pair; to a lot of people, Castiel came across as incredibly immature. Perhaps he was. He could have been eighty and senile, or he could have been three, but he looked twenty-five. Dean didn’t notice and didn’t care what ‘age’ he acted; Cas was Cas – he kind of defied natural age progression.

“Donna,” Dean went on, “You like her because she brings you doughnuts, and she gives really
good hugs.”

Castiel nodded. “And she smells like strawberries. She smells like strawberries. Yes.”

“And what do you like about Charlie?” Dean asked. “I like her a lot ‘cause she’s awesome, but what do you like about her?” These little testing questions were Dean’s way of getting Cas to help himself. If Cas was able to ask and answer without Dean’s help, he’d learn to be more independent. Dean was willing to help him every step of the way, but there were never prouder moments than when Castiel solved his own problems.

Castiel was shaking his head, over and over and over, eyes fixed on the carpet. Dean said nothing, waiting. Waiting, waiting.

“She swears,” Castiel said, tipping his eyes back so he was staring at the ceiling. “She swears in words that aren’t rude. She makes you laugh. She reminds me of the colour red, because of her hair. She knows which movies won’t upset me, she tells me when to close my eyes.”

Dean smiled widely. “Exactly. And when they’re all together they’re lots of fun, right?”

Castiel fingers started wriggling and squiggling faster and harder, his head shaking again. “They’re very loud, Dean. They talk about things I don’t care about, I don’t like sports, I don’t like politics, I don’t like gossip. I want to talk about ants and bees and flies and ticks and mites and fleas and—”

He carried on with his list, and Dean zoned out very quickly. Cas wasn’t as obsessed with insects as he sounded; he started talking about them when he got nervous, like a subject-specific Tourettes. Staring at marching ants calmed him down, reading about bees kept him occupied like nothing else, even if he already knew the information.

Then Castiel finished, “—and I kept the fruit flies because they were the only company I had when you were gone.”

Dean’s guilt eased back into him, but he pushed it away before it took hold. He’d had every right to go to his mechanics conference; Castiel was not a weight tied to his foot keeping him in one place, he was the home Dean returned to. “You know I won’t apologise for going, Cas,” Dean said. “I learned a lot while I was over there, I feel like I’m way closer to being able to set up a workshop now.”

“I know. I know. You want a car workshop. Your favourite thing to do is fix machines.”

Dean squeezed Castiel’s hand until the wriggling slowed down some more. Dean took a deep breath, and Castiel had learned that meant he was supposed to take a deep breath too. They held their breath together, then let it out slowly until their lungs emptied. Dean smiled as they took a normal breath afterwards.

“I guess the flies weren’t that great at keeping you company,” Dean said, pushing his bare foot against Castiel’s bare foot. “Did Sam not visit?”

“Yes, Sam was here. But I like the flies better. Flies don’t talk.”

Dean laughed, feeling a leap in his stomach that made him curl over his bent knees. He rested his cheek on one knee and peered across at Cas, who had a tiny smile on his lips too. Dean wasn’t sure if Cas knew why what he said was funny, but the smile was worth seeing.

Dean’s grin settled, and as it did, he realised Castiel’s fingers had stopped twitching, and he was gazing serenely at Dean without blinking. Dean was the only person he could maintain eye contact
with, and when he did, it tended to last minutes at a time. Dean didn’t mind being stared at; there was an intimacy he enjoyed while holding Cas’ eye.

They sat for those minutes, soaking up each other’s presence. Their hands stayed together, holding tight.

Eventually, Dean had to sit up straight, and he sighed. “There’s a shit-ton of clothes I need to take to the laundromat, will you be okay for a few hours?”

Castiel lifted his watch out of the water ring on the carpet. “It’s almost four o’clock. While you’re gone I can feed the ants properly, go out and buy dinner, have a shower, then fix everything you put back wrong when you cleaned.”

Dean rolled his eyes, grinning as he pushed himself to his feet. “You’re welcome, by the way.”

“Yes.”

Dean chuckled, then went to grab everything he needed. He took every single coin from the pot of change at the nook of a kitchen cupboard, and filled his pockets until he jingled. He put his boots on last. He didn’t have socks to wear, but he would by the time this ginormous bundle of stuff was washed – he could hardly wait for the satisfaction that would bring. He went to the front door, hefted the dirty laundry up onto his back, then struggled to get it through the small gap. He managed it, then popped back inside to wave to Castiel before he left. “See ya, Cas.”

Castiel didn’t give a farewell, but he never did. He fully expected Dean to come back, so goodbye was not in order. There was a lot of trust there, Dean figured. He wasn’t sure what Cas would do if Dean disappeared unexpectedly, or died, but he had no desire to find out. Cas didn’t need to be tested, not when the everyday world did the same thing so harshly. People didn’t understand him. Dean didn’t understand him, but he’d learned to translate his language.

Dean went slowly down the staircase, following the stains on the concrete: spilled black liquid smears, faded by age, dotted with old chewing gum. He crouched to pet Hot-Neighbour-With-Bad-Temper’s maddened cat, sighing when the creature meowed and twined around his hand, starved for attention. “You deserve better,” he said to it, going on his way.

At the laundromat around the corner, he dumped the dead weight into a plastic chair, giving a quick smile to the only other person here, a creaky old lady with brown hair the same colour as her skin. Dean used the floor to organise his laundry into segregated loads, both his and Cas’ clothes together: underwear, then the darks, lights, woollens, bedsheets. He scooped out a fistful of coins, and started five washing machines at once. It was late afternoon on a Wednesday and business was slow, so nobody would mind him hogging a third of the big tiled room.

While he sat and read women’s fashion magazines, his cellphone rang.

“You,” he said, sticking the phone to his ear.

“Hey Dean,” Sam said, his voice tinny over the rumbling and tumbling of the five washing machines and the old lady’s drier. “Welcome back to Kansas. Just letting you know I’ll be back at your place in a bit. I’m bringing the others, thought we could have some drinks and hang out.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” Dean frowned, toes kicking in his boots. “Cas told me.”

“Oh, nice. I was making sure. Because, you know.”

“I know what, Sam?”
“...You know.”

Dean gritted his teeth, making the muscle in his jaw flicker. “Do I? Want to spell it out for me, little brother? Because I’m listening to whatever you want to say about Cas, and I’m taking notes.”

“Uh. Look, I don’t mean anything by it.”

“Sure you don’t,” Dean said bitterly, leaning back in his chair and flipping his magazine closed. “Nobody ever does, and they don’t think it hurts because Cas ain’t listening. Or he doesn’t understand. But Sammy, I swear to God—”

“He’s my friend too, Dean,” Sam snapped, “I just want to make sure you know I’ll be there, it was a hassle for everyone last time.”

“That time he didn’t know how to explain you were moving in,” Dean snapped back. “It’s not like any of us expected Jess to kick you out, and—”

“Would you stop bringing that up?!”

“You started it!”

A wordless lull passed between them, irritated huffs fuzzing out their connection. But then Dean shook his head, and Sam chuckled gently. “Sorry, man,” Sam said, making Dean purse his lips to hide a smile he hadn’t meant to don. “Maybe Cas isn’t the only one of us who needs to grow up.”

“Shuddup,” Dean said, boyishly. Sam laughed.

“Where are you now?”

“Laundromat,” Dean answered, knocking a boot up over his knee and opening the magazine again. “Finished cleaning the apartment, got a buttload of stuff to wash.”

Sam sighed. “Dean, you didn’t need to do that.”

“Uh, yeah I did?” Dean squinted at the five spinning machines in front of him, each of them full to capacity. “You’d take one look at that place and you’d throw a hissy fit.”

“I don’t mean that. I know the place was a pigsty, Cas wouldn’t let me touch anything. I mean the fact you’re doing all this yourself. You just got off an entire day’s bus ride, and then what did you do? You cleaned the apartment, and now you’re doing laundry? Whose mess is that, Dean? It’s sure as hell not yours.”

Dean snapped the magazine closed and smacked it onto the folding table beside him, sitting up straight. “Oh my God. I can’t – literally cannot believe you’re saying this to me, Sam.”

“What? Dean, I’m only making a point. If you had any other roommate, nobody in their right mind would do what you’re doing. Hell, you wouldn’t do it. You never did it for me before, I shared the responsib—”

“Don’t you dare! Cas isn’t like other people! Goddamn it, Sam, I thought we were done with this shit. Yeah, I take on extra responsibility, but he does what he can, all right? He pays his half of the rent. God knows where he gets the money, but he gets it. He pulls his weight where it matters. Right now, he’s on his way to the supermarket to get your dinner, because you expect that to be done, don’t you? I’m doing laundry because it’s my turn to do it. And it’s not like laundry’s difficult, anyway.”
“Oh, right. Yeah. I forgot how much you enjoyed housework.”

Dean scoffed, indignant. “ Seriously?”

“Don’t tell me you forgot about your little maid outfit,” Sam teased. “ With the pink frills? And the stilettos—”

“Sam, shut the hell up,” Dean said, anger gone, replaced with discomfort. “You swore to me you’d never bring that up again.”

“And you swore you’d never bring up Jess again, so there,” Sam said, far too smugly.

Dean rolled his eyes to the ceiling and dragged the magazine back into his lap. “Just get to our place in one piece, and we’ll call it a truce.”

“ Deal,” Sam said, with a smile. “See you later.”

“See ya.”

Dean ended the call with a forceful thumb, and he sighed. Sam was always easy to forgive, but the subject of Castiel’s quote-unquote disability was a hot-button topic. Dean honestly, from the bottom of his heart, felt like he would do anything to make Castiel’s life easier. If that meant doing laundry and sticking his hands into the trash, he’d do it. It didn’t matter what he got in return, because Cas was trying. He never stoppe d trying.

Upon getting home more than an hour later to find Sam and co. waiting outside with folded arms and thunderous expressions, it became clear that nobody else shared Dean’s faith.

“He won’t let us in, and he’s being an ass about it,” Sam said, resting his forehead on his fist, leaning on the concrete wall outside the apartment door. “We’ve been out here nearly forty minutes, I’m starting to consider calling a locksmith.” He shot a dark look at the front door, and added loudly so his voice carried, “Or the police!”

“Out of my way,” Dean huffed, nudging Charlie and Donna apart so he could get to the door. “Cas, open up,” he called, lowering his eyes away from the ticking glare from the overhead light. “I’ll come in alone, the rest of them’ll stay out here until you’re ready.”

“Hey,” Charlie complained.

Dean glanced at her. “Just give us two minutes.” He knocked gently on the door, shifting on his feet. “Cas, c’mon, man, I’ve got our laundry and it’s killing my back.”

It took another ten seconds, but finally Dean heard the clack and the dragging chain of Castiel unlocking the door. A crack of warm air escaped, flavoured with homely musk. Dean smiled when he saw the bright blue circle of Castiel’s left iris. “Hey, buddy.”

Castiel sighed and let Dean inside. Together they tugged the laundry in too, grunting as it popped through the narrow space. “There,” Dean said cheerfully, shutting the door in Sam’s face. “So nice to have the place to ourselves, ain’t it.”

Castiel looked at the floor guiltily. “I want to let them in, but every time I see their faces I shut the door in reflex. I think I bruised Donna’s toe.”

Dean sighed, swinging the bundle of freshly-dried clothes underarm so it flew across the room and landed squarely on the couch. It was gloomy in the room; Castiel had shut the curtains and turned
all the lights off, so a muted evening glow was all that lit the side of Cas’ face.

Dean stuck his hands on his hips. “We’re not gonna take the easy option here, Cas. I’m not letting them myself in so we circumvent all your anxiety. You’re going to do it. Hey. Hey, c’mere.” He stepped closer to Cas and took his hand when Cas’ fingers started to tremble. “Why are you nervous?”

Castiel shook his head. “Don’t know. No. Sh-shh.”

Dean squeezed Castiel’s shoulder, crinkling up the Black Sabbath shirt. “You gonna put some pants on?”

“Should I?”

Dean grinned. “I’m not gonna answer that.”

Castiel thought about it. “It’s more socially acceptable to wear pants. I should wear pants.”

“Try your brown jeans,” Dean said, leaving Castiel’s side to rummage through the laundry. “Here.” He tossed the heavy denim over, and Castiel caught the garment with one hand. Dean’s next words, whatever they were going to be, dissolved on his tongue as his eyes locked to the sight of Castiel putting those tight-fitting skinny jeans on. One bare foot, then the other. Dirty soles, hairy legs. Muscular, toned thighs. The final straw was the shake and jiggle of his junk in his boxers as he jumped to get the waistband around him: Dean looked away, fighting the urge to flirt. Even if it had been Sam, Dean would have commented with something jokingly lascivious. But this was Cas: Dean’s exception to everything.

When the sound of Castiel’s zipper announced his decency, Dean looked over. Castiel held his eye, and Dean had to be the first to look away. “Let’s let the others in, yeah?”

Castiel took a long, deep breath.

Dean took Castiel’s hand and held it tight. Not for the first time, he began to wonder: was Cas ever going to help himself if Dean made him think he would always be around to hold his hand? Did he hold onto Cas this way because Cas needed it, or because Dean himself needed it? What if holding on was damaging them both?

“I’m ready to open the door,” Castiel said, pulling Dean out of his own head. “I won’t slam it this time.”

Castiel slid the latch free and pressed the door open as wide as it could go, squashing the trash bag but allowing Sam, Donna and Charlie the space to enter.

“Thank God,” Sam said. “It actually looks habitable in here now.”

“Pas de quoi,” Dean chuckled, slipping his hand out of Castiel’s before anyone had time to notice or comment. “Hey, you brought pizza?”

Charlie set three boxes down onto the coffee table. “One pepperoni, one meat lovers’, and one veggie for Donna.”

Donna lifted her eyes from the slice which was already halfway down her gullet. “Whof,” she said through bulging cheeks. “A gal has ta eat.”

Dean grinned, patting her shoulder as he made his way over to his mattress. “Someone help me put
sheets on this thing and flip it round, then we’ll break out the booze. I’m dying for a drink, I was desert-dry the whole time I was out in Detroit. You know they do breathalyzer tests at the door? Something about a guy who was drunk outta his mind messing up some expensive equipment. The story got grosser each time I heard it, I swear.”

Between Dean and Charlie, they re-covered both mattresses with the only two set of sheets Dean and Cas owned. When Charlie saw Castiel’s dildo, Dean bugged his eyes and set a finger over his lips, urging her not to say anything. Charlie rolled her eyes – for her, not mentioning it aloud was common decency. She was nice like that.

“It’s kinda rank in here, you guys,” Donna said, wiping her hands on a napkin. “Can’t we open a window or somethin’?”

“No,” Castiel said. Dean glanced across the room and saw Cas’ back was turned, making something in the kitchenette. “Fresh air belongs outside.”

“At least let’s open a curtain.” Charlie went to the window and before Dean could stop her, she yanked the orange drape to the side and let a beam of golden daylight fall onto the coffee table, twinkling like a tractor beam from Star Trek.

Everyone saw what was on the coffee table all at once, and there came a collective “Ewwww.”

“Dean, I thought you cleaned up.” Sam complained, looking at the fruit bowl land mass with its hovering inhabitants. “If I’d known there was a petri dish under there I would’ve done something about it the day you left.”

“No,” Castiel said again, more forcefully this time. He came into the main room with five sandwiches on five plates. He handed the first to Sam. “Please accept this sandwich as a gesture of solidarity. I apologise for locking you out; I would appreciate you not doing the same to my flies.”

He went to Charlie, handing her a sandwich too. “I will allow sunlight on account of the fact I like you.”

“Thanks, Cas,” Charlie smiled, taking the plate with two hands. “I like you too.”

Dean felt proud: saying these things was a great achievement on Cas’ part.

Castiel nodded, then passed a plate to Donna, who already had another slice of pizza dangling from her mouth. “You didn’t bring me a doughnut today... That’s okay.”

“Oh, no, I did,” Donna said, chewing the pizza crust at the side of her mouth, “I just ate it because you locked us out and you hit my foot with the door.”

Castiel looked crestfallen. Dean was about to scold Donna for eating her peace offering, but then her mouth pulled into a smile that could’ve launched a thousand ships. From behind her back she pulled out a single-doughnut box, and handed it to Castiel like a trophy. Castiel handed the other two sandwiches to Dean without looking at him, and accepted the doughnut with shiny eyes. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, cupcake,” Donna smirked, rubbing Castiel’s arm gently. He curled away from the touch, arching his body until he was three feet away.

“Oh, yeah,” Dean said awkwardly. “Big touches, Donna, come on.”

“Sorry,” Donna said under her breath.
Things settled after then. Everyone piled onto one of the two mattresses, angled towards the room so they could have their backs against the wall while they ate. Castiel kept to himself, as he often did.

Dean started to talk about his trip to Detroit, and didn’t really stop.

When he talked about the future, and about how all the things in his past led to a future, he blazed from the heart outwards. He knew he had that gleam in his eyes that all the books and movies talked about, where people ‘lit up from inside’. He couldn’t wait to have his hands around metal, tools on his belt. He wanted to be paid to do the thing he loved to do, and what hit him every time he talked about it was that it was actually achievable.

“I’m estimating another a year until my course is over,” he said, nodding and talking between half-bites of the smoked ham sandwich Cas had made him. “Then I jump right into the business side of it. I almost have enough saved up so the bank’ll get me a loan, I could afford a little repair shop downtown, maybe.”

“That’s awesome,” Sam said, clapping Dean on the knee. His grin flickered, and he added, “Not to get on your case or anything, but how come you’re not aiming to finish your mechanics course this year? You’ve dragged it out five years already, it’s only a three-year course end to end. I mean—” He raised a hand to stop Dean interrupting. “It’s not about the money, I know as well as you do that you don’t need to keep working to pay for class. You’ve lived in this rats’ nest and survived on a shoestring budget for years to save, and you’ve saved. So what gives?”

Dean’s eyes went to Castiel involuntarily. Cas was sitting apart from the others, skulking on the side of his mattress shaded by the repurposed kitchen door. He was staring into space. Dean returned his gaze to Sam before Sam could notice the deviation.

“Can you blame me for enjoying the build-up?” Dean grinned, waggling an eyebrow in Charlie’s direction as she rolled her eyes. Sam scoffed in disbelief, and Dean turned up the incredulity factor for the purpose of believability. “Gimme a break, man, you’re not the only Winchester man who likes learning. Don’t look surprised. It’s fun when you do it right. Just so happens you like the wordy stuff, I like the hands-on approach. Grease and dirt is my forte.” His smile turned lewd, and he winked. “In more way than one.”

Sam sneered, while Charlie chuckled. Donna caught Dean’s eye and winked back – she was a secret admirer of Dean’s innuendo. Dean grabbed another slice of pizza and crammed it into his mouth.

When the topic drifted onwards and conversation continued, Dean’s mind was still lingering on the lie he’d told. The part about his love of learning wasn’t untrue – and while, yes, he would always downplay his love of reading, which was probably equal to that of practical learning – he had been lying about his reasons for staying. Why was he still hanging around in this shithole, if in all likeliness, a new car workshop would serve as better lodgings? Why delay? It wasn’t because he enjoyed the wait. Honestly, every fibre of his being said to move on and make his mark.

He couldn’t go because Cas needed him.

Bad things happened to people like Cas. He needed a protector, because ignorance was a better breeding ground for humanity’s worst traits than the goddamn fruit bowl on the coffee table.

The poor guy had suffered other roommates before Dean. Dean had heard a few stories, and each of them carved a deeper awareness of the situation into him. Cas had been beaten up so bad he hadn’t been able to walk for a week. Once, someone damaged his eye and he had needed surgery
because of it. There had probably been worse things, as well as non-physically-damaging but equally hurtful things. And all that was before Dean came along – via a Craigslist ad, which might’ve explained the poor treatment he got from his other roommates. But even recently, Cas had come home from wherever he went during the day with a split lip. He said a twig cut him, but Dean saw knuckle marks on his chin when he’d dressed the wound for him. Cas wasn’t kidding anyone, especially not Dean. His personality made him a walking target for fists and bats.

The worst thing about it, Dean felt, was that if anyone was patient enough to get to know the guy, they soon discovered he was the sweetest creature on God’s green Earth. He was impossible not to love, even when he did things that made life difficult.

Dean was stuck with him. But he wanted to be stuck with him. The fact of the matter was, it was so much easier to care for Cas if Dean was studying rather than off working on his business. So, he couldn’t move on. For now, he was happy like that. And yet, many times a day he found himself aching, trapped. He had trapped himself, and trapped Cas, and Cas didn’t even know how Dean felt.

An hour went by, the conversation growing more spontaneous and their voices more raucous in beer-bottle intervals. Dean had a warm weight in his belly from laughter, Sam was lying back on Charlie’s lap so she could braid his hair. They talked about soda, President Obama, particle accelerators, and rabbit ears. In that order. Donna was doing that thing where she took a break every few minutes to check her phone, but she would always bounce back to converse once her messages were sent.

“You got yourself a booooyfriend?” Dean asked, tilting his head and grinning like a porn star, tongue sliding the curve of his lip.

Donna looked up, unfazed. “Nope.”

“Girlfriend?” Charlie asked, tying up one of Sam’s braids with one of the tiny rubber bands she’d brought along specially. “Any other kinda friend?”

“Nope,” Donna grinned, tucking her phone into the pocket of her pants, then adjusting her top so her belly roll wasn’t obvious. “Naw, I’m single and virginal as a fresh-minted penny, and happy like that, ya know?”

Dean raised his eyebrows. “You’re a virgin?”

“Darn-tootin’.”

Charlie shot Dean a blank look. “You didn’t know that?”

Dean shrugged. “I dunno. I guess I assumed everyone had done it by the time they were twenty.”

Sam laughed. He didn’t explain what he was laughing at, but it was clear he thought Dean’s remark was hilarious. Charlie puffed her bangs out of her face, shaking her head. She didn’t explain her reaction either.

“Well,” Dean said, slowly, catching Donna’s eye, “Yay for you?”

“You betcha.” Donna’s smile was forgiving, and Dean shyly looked down and away, smiling too.

Eventually the sun slipped off the window and the light quality in the room became tepid. Sam hopped up with his head swinging plaited dreadlocks, and he went to turn on the room lighting; everyone winced at the sudden splash of electric light that hit their eyes. Sam whipped the curtain
shut, then re-took his place on the mattress at the very moment Charlie mentioned an offer she’d received to work at Microsoft.

“What!” Donna yelped, tossing her phone aside in favour of grabbing Charlie on either side of her face. “You didn’t bloody tell me about this, you wee nasty little— Aaaah!”

Charlie giggled and headbutted her and they fell into Dean’s mattress with a squeal.

“Hey, watch the bouncing,” Dean warned. “Congrats, and such – but jeez, get a room.”

Charlie and Donna ignored Dean, wrestling each other onto the carpet and kicking each other’s feet in celebration. If they’d been any other women, Dean probably would’ve been cheering on their roly-poly friendship and waiting for the clothes to come off, but this was Charlie and Donna, who, for whatever reason, Dean had never felt any attraction to whatsoever. He was kind of proud of that.

“You’re taking the offer, right?” Sam asked, voicing his question over the unladylike squawking.

“Of course she’s taking it,” Donna declared, sitting upright and combing her flyaway blonde hair back into her bun. “I’ll murder her if she don’t, swear on all the chocolate bagels in the world.”

Charlie snickered, crawling back to Dean’s mattress and flopping against his side. “Ah, I’ll think about it. I don’t know yet.”

Dean shoved her off and rounded on her. “You’re kidding me. You can’t pass this up!”

“Well, it’s a big decision,” Charlie said, wearing her serious face. “It could mean moving, or at least having a flight commute every few weeks. I’d miss my mom, she’s too sick to travel...”

Dean’s face fell along with everyone’s beside him.

Charlie gave everyone puppy eyes. Dean almost got lost in them, sinking into sympathy and pity and— Wait a second.

“You already said yes, didn’t you,” he intoned, eyes sliding away as he smiled. “Your mom—”

“She’ll be waiting for me when I get back,” Charlie nodded, her smile picking up. “Yeah, I said yes.”

Donna shrieked and threw herself on top of Charlie, and Dean did too, just because he could. He laughed as he noogied Charlie’s hair into a disaster of ruby-red, keeping her smiling so she didn’t have to think about how much she would miss her mom. Sam grabbed Donna’s phone and prepared to take a photo, and Dean noticed just in time to raise a hand and give the lens a thumbs up. Yup, that was one for the album.

The puppy pile fell apart as Charlie began rasping “Can’t – breathe – can’t – fudging – breathe—” She was spared, but the giggling didn’t stop. Sam tossed Donna her phone, and Donna beamed at the new picture.

The atmosphere shattered uncomfortably as an unhappy wail caught everyone’s attention. Dean rolled over first, recognising the sound.

Castiel was curled up in a ball on the far side of his own mattress, hiding in the dark. He was whining like an abandoned puppy in a box in the rain; he’d been the only one left out of their celebration.
The room became deathly silent – even Charlie stopped panting.

“Hey.” Dean crawled across the carpet, whispering, “Cas. Cas, roll over, let me look at you.”

Castiel keened lengthily, and the sound broke Dean’s heart a little.

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” Dean soothed, speaking the way he would to a crying child, or a scared animal. “Come on, let’s get you over there with the others.”

“What’s wrong with him?” Charlie asked gently. “Is he hurt?”

“No,” Dean said, folding an arm over Castiel’s torso, sneaking the other under his hip. “No, he’s not hurt. Cas, you’re not hurt, are you?”

Castiel’s lower lip stuck out, and another moan came from his voice box. His eyelashes were dotted with wetness; he’d been crying and Dean hadn’t even noticed.

Dean rested his forehead on Castiel’s shoulder, feeling like he’d failed him. “I’m sorry,” he breathed. “I – f-forgot about you. It’s just hard to pay attention to everyone equally if you’re not all actively present, you know? That’s not an excuse, I know. Come sit with me, okay?”

When Cas only whimpered again, Dean hugged him tightly in their awkward position. Dean huffed, on the verge of amusement. “Quick question. Are you going for ‘baby’ or ‘puppy’? Because either way, if you don’t walk by yourself, I’m gonna pick you up.”

Castiel whinged, and Dean laughed. “Baby it is, then.”

He used all his strength – quite a lot, roaring through gritted teeth as he strained – and he pulled Castiel out of the fetal position and onto his lap. Then he crawled, shuffled, and heaved Castiel off his mattress and onto the other one. Their friends looked on with various thoughts projected into their expressions: curiosity, surprise, and Dean’s personal favourite, what-the-hell-is-wrong-with-him.

Dean grunted and thumped his back to the wall, cradling Castiel on his lap. Cas’ legs sprawled out to the side, his torso angled towards Dean’s chest. “You win,” Dean panted, a small smile playing on his lips. “Heaviest – baby – ever.”

Castiel tried to whine, but he accidentally smiled. Dean headbutted him, head bowed to rest his nose on Castiel’s lips. “You’re such a dick,” he whispered. Castiel’s eyes inched open, and Dean’s smile spread like butter over his toasty-warm face. “A really needy dick.”

Castiel shut his eyes and gave a quiet “Hmph.”

When Dean glanced up, three other sets of eyes were set on him. “What,” he said, defensive. “When Cas doesn’t know what to say in human, he says it in animal-speak. Or baby-speak, apparently. I know what ‘I peed myself’ is in Giraffe, now. It’s absolutely a translation for the guidebooks.” He grinned at Sam, then shrugged. “Makes life interesting, right?”

Sam smiled oddly, eyes flicking to Castiel, then back to Dean. Cas sighed, rearranging himself so his heart was pressed up to Dean’s, cheek to his shoulder. Dean stroked his hair, eyes sliding shut as the repetitive, affectionate motion made him sleepy. It had to be almost nine at night now. It wasn’t even bedtime, but he’d had a long and tiring day.

“Dean,” Castiel murmured.
“Mm, what’s up, buddy?” Dean muttered, as the others in the room started to converse between themselves.

“Pull my hair. Don’t stroke.”

“Pull it?”

Castiel nodded.

Dean swapped stroking for pulling, and Castiel relaxed muscles Dean hadn’t noticed were tense. Castiel’s mussed hair was all thin strands, the way blonde hair often was, but there was so much of it that it felt thick and tufty, true to its dark colour. It slipped between Dean’s fingers and tickled, and as he tugged it in handfuls, he smiled. He inhaled deeply, nose buried in Castiel’s hair.

He loved how Cas usually smelled like coconuts, and tonight he’d been expecting him to smell like Tropical Fruit Punch, but instead, he smelled like Dean’s body wash.

“Bubblegum and lime?” Dean said, eyebrows drawing together. “You’ve been using my soap?”

“I missed you a lot. It smells like you.”

Dean’s heart melted, and he buried his face against Castiel’s shoulder and breathed in again, hiding his soppy smile. “You smell like you.” Dean murmured. “The new fruity one is gonna be awesome on you.” Of course, he made no mention of already having jacked off to the scent. Smelling its flavour on Cas was something to look forward to.

“What fruity one are you talking about?” Sam asked, extracting himself from a Microsoft vs. Apple vs. Linux debate. “The orange one’s mine, I put it in your shower when I came by this morning. Hey, you know what you need in your shower? A squeegee. Those things make everything better.”

Dean had mostly zoned out his surroundings by this point.

The orange one was Sam’s.

Tropical Fruit Punch.

And Dean had... Wait...

Oh Jesusfuckshit no.

“I’m gonna puke,” Dean said, shoving Castiel off his lap and running into the kitchen. He leaned over the sink, heaving his breaths, trying to keep the pizza and beer down. His blood was running cold, his skin too hot. Nausea churned in his gut, and he looked to the ceiling as he begged that if there was a God out there, they would somehow erase this from ever having happened. Shit. Shit shit shit.

“Dean?” Charlie crept into the kitchen, skimming a hand along the sparkling worktop, which was still littered with lettuce offcuts from Cas’ sandwiches. “Dean, what’s going on?”

“Nothing!” Dean panted, blinking rapidly. “Absolutely nothing.”

“Doesn’t look like nothing.”

“Wh- Why did Sam shower in our bathroom?” Dean gritted out, keeping his voice down so his words wouldn’t carry to the others. “What’s wrong with his place?”
“Didn’t he tell you? He said the plumbing went kaput at his place, he’s been sleeping here for a few days. He’ll be gone by the end of the week, apparently.”

Dean shook his head. “What, no. No, he would’ve said. Cas would’ve said.”

Charlie was quiet for a bit. “Would Cas have said, though? He didn’t say anything last time, remember?”

“That was different! He didn’t know what to say. He got really nervous, it was obvious he was trying to say but couldn’t—” Dean’s voice silenced in his throat, and his eyes opened wide. Cas had done the same thing today. Wiggling fingers. Wriggling, squiggling fingers. Dean had been so determined to help Cas help himself and move past his anxiety that he’d overlooked the reason he’d been anxious in the first place. Words stuck, trying to get out.

Dean hung his head, chin to his chest. “God, I screwed up.”

“No you didn’t?”

“I did.” Dean clamped his mouth shut, battling another wave of nausea. He glanced over at Charlie’s concerned expression, and decided to himself he needed to tell her about the shampoo incident, or tell someone, lest he drive himself insane. He grabbed the sleeve of her hoodie and pulled her out of the tiny kitchen, straight over to the front door.

“Hey, where’re you going?” Donna called, but Dean shoved Charlie into the hallway, followed her, then slammed the door.

Dean turned to Charlie as soon as they were standing under the dreary hall light. “I did something really bad.”

Charlie’s lips parted. “Did you kill someone in the shower? Because wow, you could’ve picked—”

“I jacked off with Sam’s shampoo,” Dean said under his breath, so nobody else would hear through the door. He watched Charlie’s eyes widen and her words fall silent, and he shut his eyes so he didn’t have to look at her disgusted expression. “I didn’t know it was my brother’s, okay, I thought it was Cas’."

Dean had not been expecting the peal of laughter that broke across his face as Charlie pushed into him, making him stumble back a step. “What?”

Charlie snorted and giggled, her eyes shining with tears as she straightened up, gasping for breath with her hand clutched on the snout of Dean’s T-rex. “I— You! Ha!” She folded over and shrieked a hysterical note downwards to the concrete floor.

Dean’s tongue felt fat in his mouth. “’s not funny.”

“It is!” She wheezed and straightened up, brushing a tear out from under her eye. “Oh, boy. It is.”

Dean swallowed hard, not even able to work up a smirk. “Charlie, I feel gross. Like, bathe-in-Purell-and-get-therapy kind of gross. I can’t ever look at pineapples the same way! Or myself in the mirror. God…” He turned his head. He was wounded by this more severely than Charlie would be able to understand.

Charlie sobered a little when she saw his face.

She calculated for a while.
Then, quietly, she said, “This is about Cas, isn’t it? Does he know... how you feel?”

Dean scoffed, meeting her eye with a sapless stare. “Cas is as asexual as they come. What good would telling him do?” He shook his head, looking down at his feet. The neighbour’s cat had heard their voices and trotted up to visit, winding its way around Dean’s legs. Dean didn’t reach to pet it, content to feel it nuzzle and twine.

“Can I ask,” Charlie said, glancing towards the apartment door to check it was firmly closed, then back to Dean. “How serious is it?”

They definitely weren’t talking about the shampoo any more.

Dean gulped. “Very.” He put a hand to his forehead, eyes shut. Why did he feel shame over this? He was only human, humans were always at the mercy of their feelings. “I’ve known him five years and it’s only gotten worse. Nowadays the good stuff is better than ever and the bad stuff hurts like hell. It was never this difficult with anyone else. I wish it was easy with him.”

Charlie had known about Dean’s crush from the moment it first sparked. But they never talked about it, and maybe that had been a mistake. Dean was suffocated by it, now, this rollercoaster ride. The Impasse, he’d call this ride The Impasse. No exits.

“I think it’s probably time I decided,” Dean said, as Charlie touched his forearm with her warm hand, offering subtle encouragement. “I mean, who needs who more? Do I honestly want to give more years of my life to someone who can’t love me the same way, or... should I be ready to move on? That’s what I’m looking at. Leave or stay.”

There was a gap in the track up ahead: he had to make the leap or fall. Leave or stay. Cas was holding him back, and he had been for years now.

Or maybe it was the opposite. Dean was afraid of starting a new life as much as he looked forward to it, and he was using Cas’ needs as his excuse, stalling pointlessly.

Leave or stay.

The door to the apartment opened, and Dean turned his face to see Castiel looking straight at him, ghosts in his eyes. Dean’s stomach lurched horribly, and the nausea returned at full force. How much had Cas heard?

“Dean,” Castiel said, in his flat, deep voice. “I have a question to ask you.”

Dean remained outside the door, feeling like a guest visiting his own home. Locked out, offset from his proper place. “Sure, go for it,” he said, his voice distant.

“What is the difference between ‘love’ and ‘in love’?”

The question stumped Dean, it was so unexpected. “Uh.”

Charlie pulled Dean inside the apartment, shooing the cat away, and Castiel stepped aside to let them enter. Dean was nearly unwilling to pass Castiel’s side, wary of this whole situation. Had Cas heard anything, or did he simply have a frighteningly relevant query?

Once Dean was standing barefoot on the metal border between linoleum and carpet, hands curled up in his pockets, his eyes lifted to follow Castiel’s path around the room. Castiel didn’t turn his eyes away from Dean, pacing until his back was to the window, the lampshade casting a halo across his crown of rumpled hair.
“Um,” Dean said, scratching around for words. He looked down to the mattresses on his left, and saw all his friends peering back, waiting for him to answer. Whatever Cas had heard Dean saying to Charlie, Sam and Donna had heard too.

“Well,” Dean began, eyes on Castiel’s feet, “People love things that make them happy. Like, you love doughnuts, and brushing your teeth, and bees. And I love cars, and pie, and Sammy.” His eyes flicked to Sam, and he smiled when Sam made a heart shape with his fingers. Returning his attention to Cas, Dean licked his lips. “Sometimes people love stuff that makes us happy, then sad later. Like alcohol.”

“And sex,” Castiel added.

Dean rubbed the nape of his neck. “Yeah, I guess.” He’d told Cas about beating his sex addiction in confidence, he hadn’t expected their friends to find out. As far as they were aware, Dean was a bed-hopping sex-fuelled maniac, which hadn’t been true for many years. Sex made him mopey in the long run, as Castiel had informed the room so heartily. “But sex is also one of the best things in the world,” Dean made sure to say. The statement felt uncomfortable, given his audience.

He shut his eyes and sighed, sure he was screwing up all over again. “Look... Cas—”

“Please answer my question, Dean,” Castiel said calmly. “Please.”

Dean shook his head, giving in. “Ah... All right.” With a deep breath, he raised his chin and looked Castiel in the eye. “You remember a few weeks ago, after I passed my practical test on wheel alignment?”

Castiel nodded, his arms sliding so his hands cupped each elbow.

“And you remember after? It was really sunny, and you were complaining about the curtain being open, but I just... I couldn’t be bothered sorting it out.”

“You said you didn’t give a damn if my eyes were tired, because—”

“Because you looked amazing in the light,” Dean finished. He smiled, heart glowing. “Yeah.” The room faded away, and they returned to the golden white light, lying back on Dean’s mattress. Cas was laughing, his legs bare, his t-shirt shucked up past his middle. Dean’s hand held his bare hip, thumb pressing a mark into his muscle. He had looked down at Cas and couldn’t believe how beautiful he was when he smiled like that. “And you asked me,” Dean said, “You asked me what that feeling was. Why you were smiling. You wanted to know, ‘cause you hadn’t felt it before.”

Castiel gazed back, haloed in the lampshade, haloed by Eden sun. “So you asked me what I was feeling.”

“You said...” Dean smirked, wetting his lips with his tongue, “You told me you felt twitchy, but you weren’t twitching. Your heart was racing but you weren’t running. You wanted to laugh but nothing was funny.”

“And you smiled and your eyes crinkled up, and you said... you felt the same - and you told me—”

“I told you that feeling was love.”

“Were you lying, Dean?”

Dean’s memory jolted back into the filing cabinet it came from, and he stared Castiel down from across the room. “No!” he said, taken aback. “No, I wasn’t lying.”
“So if that was love...”

Dean swallowed his breath. “Yeah, that was love. That’s how I feel about Sam, and about Charlie, and Donna. That’s how I feel when I’m with them.”

Castiel cast his eyes towards their audience, a thoughtful frown narrowing the space between his eyebrows. “And that’s how you feel for me?”

“No,” Dean smiled, then the smile fell. “I feel something completely different for you. The difference between ‘love’ and ‘in love’ is, when I’m with someone else, the feeling is like— Like ants. Marching up and down. They’re in the room, you gotta remember to feed them at the right time. They live there. But when I’m with you, there’s a freaking elephant. He’s pressing his head on the ceiling and the floor can’t take him, I haven’t got enough to feed him – he belongs in a goddamn zoo, he’s not meant to be with me... but he’s my elephant, you know?”

Emotion started to build behind Dean’s eyes, hard in his throat. He took a step closer to Cas, reaching out a hand which never got close enough to touch. “The elephant can’t fit through the door, Cas, he’s stuck in the room. I love that elephant too much to give him up.” His shook his head, a wobbly smile on his lips.

Castiel was squinting. “We have an elephant?”

Sam and Charlie and Donna burst out laughing, and Dean spluttered until his hands covered his face, hiding his tiny grin. He peeked out from between his fingers, seeing Castiel staring back. He didn’t understand the metaphor.

“No, we don’t have an elephant, Cas.” Dean’s hands slipped down, and he took a step closer, reaching to take one of Castiel’s hands, “What I’m saying is yeah, I love you. I feel the same thing I felt that day, when you asked. But that feeling doesn’t stop. I’m feeling it even when I can’t see you, when I’m off in Detroit or wherever. When I look at you sometimes, even if you’re not looking back, I feel my heart growing, like it’s swelling in my chest—”

“The inflammation of the heart muscle is a medical condition known as myocarditis—”

“No, no,” Dean chuckled, shaking his head. “It’s an emotional thing.” He bit his lip, restraining his grin. He let it free, and finally said, so everyone knew: “I’m in love with you, Cas.”

Castiel’s gaze held firm.

Dean shrugged a shoulder. “And okay, yeah, that does tend to come with some setbacks. I’m attracted to you, I think you guessed that already. But this – you ‘n me – we couldn’t fit as a couple. You don’t need anything more from this relationship than I offer you already, but...” Dean’s eyes shot to the bathroom, then to the floor. “I can’t ask you for something I know you’d never want to give me.”

“What would you ask for?”

Dean shook his head.

Charlie piped up from off to the side, “Dean’s under the impression that you couldn’t possibly be in love with him, because you’re asexual and therefore incapable of having sex.”

Dean screwed up his face, hating Charlie for the seconds of silence which passed after she spoke.

“I should mention,” Charlie continued, “Dean is an idiot.”
“But he’s right,” Castiel said, and Dean looked up to see him speaking to Charlie, pulling his hand away from Dean’s so he could fold his arms around his middle. “I can’t have sex, it wouldn’t work.”

Dean hated himself for letting his question slip out; “What do you mean?”

Castiel looked at him guardedly. “You said sex is one of the best feelings there is. But I try masturbating and all I feel is nothing.”

Dean blushed, setting his jaw tight. “Uh. Heh. Actually, Cas... that’s the kind of thing you don’t say aloud?”

“But it’s true,” Castiel said, stepping closer to Dean and looking into his face imploringly, gaze skipping between each of Dean’s eyes. “I hate watching movies with sex, or seeing people kiss. It hurts! I want to feel how good it is, but I can’t. I’m just...” He stepped away, leaving Dean’s space cold. “I’m broken. I’ve always been broken. I thought you fixed me, I feel better when you’re with me. But I’m still sick, and I think I’ll be stuck this way forever. I already miss out on the complexity of life’s experiences because of how I am, but I can’t even have this one thing. Pleasure is – unknown to me.”

Dean’s heart was in the middle of breaking when Donna cleared her throat very, very loudly. Dean looked over, and saw her wearing her sassy ‘I have something important to say’ face.

When Castiel looked over too, Donna stood up and sauntered up between them, throwing her arms over both their shoulders. “You boys wanna know a secret?”

“All right,” Castiel said.

Donna winked at Dean, then swayed her face to look at Cas. “You’re not broken. You’re asexual. It’s not the same for everyone, it’s as patchy as Charlie’s gayness or Dean’s bisexuality. We’re human and we waver and vary, ya know?”

Sam gave a quiet, “Um.”

Donna spun Dean and Cas around so they all faced Charlie and Sam, who were still sitting on Dean’s mattress.

Sam took a tiny, nervous breath. “Um, I wanted to add something. It’s maybe not relevant—Actually, this is a bad time, ignore me.” He lowered his head, tucking his braided hair behind an ear.

Donna was about to continue, but Dean interrupted: “No. Sammy, what were you gonna say?”

Sam’s lips quivered. “Uh— Only that, if you’re factoring the rest of our sexualities into your equation, maybe you could, um, add me?”

Everyone stared blankly, until Sam mumbled, “I think I’m pansexual.”

Dean smirked. “Knew it.” He winked at Sam, glad to see his smile grow.

“So as I was saying,” Donna said brightly, bouncing on her toes, “Since we’re all having a moment of no-holds-barred, Cas – I’m asexual too. Used’ta think I was straight as a stick, but I figured out, as far as that goes, I didn’t much like the flirting. But talk of sex doesn’t freak me out, not one little bit, ’cause there’s nothin’ to be scared of. You’re jealous of those folks who feel something when they touch. People like me. I can get myself off easy as a flick. But you don’t need to be jealous or
scared, cupcake. You’ve got your own special magic.”

“But Dean’s in love with me and he wants to have sex with me and he’s leaving because I can’t—”

“Cas!” Dean eased Donna off his shoulders, shaking his head as he took Cas’ hand and grasped it tight. “Cas, you’ve got this wrong. I’m not leaving because you’re not comfortable putting out. You’ve missed the point. I’ve missed the point.” He steadied his panicked breath, then gulped.

“Are you – in love with me too?”

Castiel looked afraid. “Dean, I don’t know. I don’t know. I want so badly to feel it but I just don’t understand what you enjoy so much about it—”

“Not sex. Cas, separate the sex from the love. You can be in love and not have sex! We could cuddle. Or hold hands or something – God, I don’t know. All the stuff we already do. It would be the same. It would be exactly the same as it already is.”

Castiel blinked, and blinked and blinked.

Dean breathed out slowly. “I’ll ask again, okay? I know you love me. But you asked what ‘in love’ means, and I think... I think you asked that because you already know. Don’t you. You’re in love with me.”

“Yes. I’m in love with you.”

Dean grinned hugely, lowering his chin to his chest as tears of relief sprung into his eyes. How had it taken so long to get here? “Thank God,” he breathed.

Castiel let go of Dean’s hand. “I want to show you something.”

He went to the front door, grabbed his trenchcoat from the hook on the wall, then left the apartment, shutting the door behind him.

“He went to the front door, grabbed his trenchcoat from the hook on the wall, then left the apartment, shutting the door behind him.

“Dean, I think you’re meant to follow him,” Charlie said.

Dean stared at the closed door. “What the hell just happened?” He blinked, and discovered his own coat was in his hand; Donna had handed it to him.

“Go!” Donna urged. “Romcom movie ending, this is yours!”

Dean laughed. “Knowing Cas, he’s about to show me a bird nest on the roof or something. It’s hardly a romcom finish.”

“You’ll never know unless you go,” Sam said, standing up and loitering at Dean’s side like Charlie and Donna. “Hurry up, before he forgets you’re not following.”

Dean put his coat on, then hurriedly stuffed his feet into his boots, sockless for the second time that day. He sighed. “See you all later. I guess. And – Sammy, Donna. Congrats on your coming out. Guess we’re all a bunch of friggin’ queers.”

“Birds of a feather,” Charlie said, before shoving Dean out of the door. “Good luck!”

Dean waved, then scampered down the stairwell, hoping he was going the right direction to catch up with Cas. The cat was nowhere to be seen, not on the landing, not outside Hot-Neighbour-With-Bad-Temper’s door. The plexiglass door to the road came into view once Dean got to the top of the last staircase, and he jumped the final three stairs, convinced he saw movement in the street.
“Cas!” he called, bursting onto the sidewalk, letting the building’s heavy door thump shut behind him. The road had a number of cars crawling along, with their low suspensions and their muffled rap music, engines like furious lions; the sun had gone down and electric lights beamed in clusters of red and white. Dean looked left, then right. All he saw, some distance down the street, was the back end of a cat as it trotted around a corner.

Dean had no idea where Cas was, but he took off after the neighbour’s cat, having a gut feeling he couldn’t explain. He’d never associated the cat with Cas, but tonight, right now, he did.

Dean ran down three sideroads, dodging the heaps of trash in the street, ignoring any other pedestrians who looked his way. Every time he reached a corner, the cat was paused at the next turning, like it was waiting for him.

At the fourth corner, Dean made eye contact with the cat. It was sat at a gated entrance, and its eyes glowed with night reflections, two green moons in its head. It got up, then slipped through two of the black bars on the gate.

Nothing magical had ever happened to Dean. But this was so surreal he was seriously beginning to think tonight might change his perspective on reality.

He came to the gate on heavy legs, out of breath, and he curled one hand around a cold metal bar. The gate was spiked at the top like a row of spears, and when he looked beyond it, Dean’s mouth slid open in awe. There was a garden there, toned in shades of night-time blue, but highlighted with spotlights from under fern fronds, pink and blue and purple lighting up the sides of palm trees. The cat was inside, sitting on the finely-gritted path with its body folded over, licking its tail. It seemed not to notice Dean.

“Hey,” Dean whispered to it. It ignored him. “Hey, puss-puss-puss. Where’s Cas?”

The cat got up and bounded away, tail curled at the tip. Dean couldn’t tell if it was going towards something or running away from him.
At a loss for what to do now, Dean looked at the gate again. On one side there was a buzzer with a call button, and from that fact alone he inferred this was a garden belonging to rich people. There was probably a mansion in there, although he couldn’t imagine why someone rich would live in a neighbourhood as ragged as this.

He wanted to get into the garden, but he dared not press the buzzer; random strangers like him would be turned away instantly. Being the kind of person he was, he looked for an alternative entrance.

That entrance happened to be the brick wall five feet along. He hadn’t done gymnastics in high school for nothing. He vaulted up to the top of the wall, perched on his toes like he was a cat himself – then he leapt down, landing in a flowerbed and rolling leg-over-shoulder until he was back on his feet. He brushed himself down, then turned around—

“You squashed my dandelions,” Castiel said, standing ten feet away, lit from the side by a purple spotlight, one half of his angular face cast in deep shadow.

“Uh?” Dean said.

Castiel sighed. “I have a passcode for the gate, if you’d’ve been patient enough to wait for me.”

Dean stepped forward, brushing dirt off his hands. “Cas, what the hell’s going on? Where are we?”
Castiel looked confused. “You followed Artemis here, didn’t you?”

“Well... yeah, but I don’t know why. And – what do you mean, your dandelions? Why do you have a passcode for the gate?”

Castiel turned away and stalked off, passing more of the coloured lights. Dean ran after him, matching his slow pace once he was by his side. Castiel glanced at him, a playful shine in his eyes. He was enjoying messing Dean around, damn him. Dean decided to be patient, sure he’d get his answers eventually.

Castiel stayed silent as together they walked the twining paths; flowers and leaves swooped over the walking space and brushed on Dean’s legs. The smell here was glorious, floral and heady. When Dean heard running water, trickling like bells, flittering like bird wings, he felt a lift of curiosity, and he had to ask, “Cas, what is this place?”

Castiel took Dean’s hand and pulled him up to another spear-like railing, this one thigh-high and painted black like the first. It bordered the banks of a pond, rippling water with more coloured lights floating on its surface, like lilies. Ducks swam about, kicking their paddled feet, quacking. There was a pair of swans followed by a line of six cygnets, one season old.

“This,” Castiel said, “is where I work.”

“You— What?”

“I’m a gardener,” Castiel said, clambering over the pond railing. Dean hesitated, deterred by the spiky railing, but when Castiel held his hand reassuringly, he climbed over too, grasping Castiel’s shoulders for balance.

Dean’s feet were now on damp sand, boots sinking down. Pond reeds brushed his coat, long grasses whispering in a sweet breeze.

“Sit,” Castiel said, plopping his ass down. He still had bare feet, and he dipped his toes in the water that lapped at the sand.

Dean sank down too, undoing his bootlaces. He didn’t know what was happening yet, but putting his toes in the water looked like fun.

When cool water caressed the soles of his feet, and sand grazed his toes, he sighed, starting to smile. “Care to explain yet, buddy? I’m waiting.”

“Isn’t it obvious? I tend to the plants and animals here. The owners employ me indefinitely, and it’s perfect because nobody ever seems to talk to me. I talk to Artemis the cat, though. And the others.”

“The others...? Wait, whose cat is it?”

“Artemis lives here. I told her what our neighbour did to me, and she ruined the woman’s door in retaliation.”

“...Uh— O-okay... I hate to ask, but what did Hot-Neighbour-With-Bad-Temper do to you?”

“It is not of import.”

Castiel then made a scooping motion with his hand, and gave an odd squawk from the depths of his throat – and all of a sudden, the water in front of them rippled harder, all the ducks cutting a path...
straight towards Dean and Castiel. Dean panicked, trying to stand up, but Castiel gripped his jeans to keep him close.

“They’re just saying hello,” Castiel said, reaching out a hand. One duck pressed its head against his fingers, waggling its odd yellow bill against him.

“C-Cas, how— How did you get them to come this way?” Dean’s heart was beating too fast; this evening had surpassed surreal long ago.

“I talk to them,” Castiel said, looking at Dean oddly. “They talk to me, too.”

“No, that’s impossible,” Dean shook his head, inching away from the water’s edge. “Ducks don’t talk to people.”

“Yes they do.” One of the ducks quacked, and Castiel quacked back. It couldn’t get any more obvious, but Dean was still having trouble processing it all.

Castiel scooped up a cygnet into his hands, and it didn’t struggle at all. “Here,” he said to Dean, holding out the baby swan. “She’ll let you hold her.”

“Cas, I can’t—” Dean’s hands took the fluffy wet bird, and all he could do was sit and stare at it. Its black bill was opening and closing, showing off its pink tongue as it tested Dean’s scent. Dean looked up, and saw the parent swans looking at him with no defensiveness or hatred in their eyes, as was common in swans.

“They trust me, so they trust you,” Castiel said. He was holding a duck in one hand and a cygnet in the other, like it was the most normal thing in the world for him.

Dean slowly began to feel less mystified. For so many years he’d known Cas was magical somehow, and this was the proof. “You’re a Disney princess,” he breathed, staring at Cas in reverence. “Man,” he chuckled, stroking his cygnet’s soft head, “I wish I could talk to animals.”

Castiel gave him a hard stare. “Dean, you can talk to humans. I can’t. Talking to animals would just be a novelty to you; I talk to them because I have nobody else to talk to. I know their languages, but Human is so much harder to learn.” He looked saddened, and Dean finally started to understand.

“Sorry,” he said. “This is really important to you, isn’t it?”

Castiel nodded. “I didn’t want to tell you until I thought you were ready. Nobody else knows.”

“And...” Dean’s breath hitched. “And you think I’m ready tonight because I said I love you.”

“No. I think you’re ready... because I— This feeling. This feeling, is fear.” Castiel’s voice cracked, and he let his birds waddle off, back into the water. Dean’s cygnet went too, following its brothers and sisters as they swam away. “I’m scared you want to leave me, Dean. You’re the only human I can understand even a fraction of the time; I couldn’t bear to lose you. You’ve talked of leaving for years, I thought it would be easy when you did – I drive everyone else away anyway, and I never miss them. You’ve done something wonderful for me, Dean, you’ve made me love you. I would miss you. I would remember you, and it would hurt. I’m lonely whenever you’re gone.”

Dean rested his hand over his eyes, smelling the pond water on his fingers. It was cool and calming, but the hot, simmering distress in him could not be cooled, nor calmed.

“You know I like to pretend to be God,” Castiel went on, his voice slower, sadder. “I play that
game with you, and sometimes Sam, and it’s good for me. You help me have control. A deity. Control over all. Control over myself. To know myself. It’s a miracle, you’re a miracle for me.”

Castiel swallowed, then softly finished, “But even that is a feeling that pales next to the love I feel for you. If I lost all of myself, I couldn’t lose what you’ve given me. What all of you have given me. I will miss Charlie when she goes too.”

Dean pressed his hands into his eyes, trying to keep tears from spilling. This wasn’t even a guilt trip – Cas was being as honest as he’d ever been. He didn’t want Dean to leave, and yet, he had not said a word to convince him to stay. It was like Cas had resigned himself to losing him.

Dean shook his head, sniffing as he sat up straight, sliding his feet back into the water. “I, um,” he mumbled, licking his lips. “If this is us being totally open about the situation: leaving you, leaving our apartment for a potential career is not what I want to do. Why do you think it’s taken me so long to get my act together, huh?” He gave Cas a weak smile, shrugging. “If I could somehow take you with me, I would.”

Castiel examined the dirt sifting between Dean’s toes. “I’m good with numbers,” he said.

“What?”

“But car workshops are noisy,” Castiel muttered, shaking his head. “Very noisy. Earmuffs? Hm.”

“Cas, what are you saying?”

“If I was your accountant, I wouldn’t have to talk to anyone but you.”

Dean realised what Cas was suggesting, and as he did, he began to smile. “Yeah,” he whispered, “Yeah, all right, we could work that out.”

“Earmuffs and sunglasses,” Castiel nodded. “So the noise and the sparks don’t affect me.”

Dean chuckled, running his fingers against his lips as he gazed out at the brightly-lit pond. “Damn. Why’d it take so long to think of that?”

“Oh, it didn’t. I decided I would work with you the day you told me about your life’s dream. I want to tend a magnificent garden somewhere, and in the middle, you’ll have your car workshop. I just hadn’t worked out how to tell you yet.”

Dean raised his eyebrows, staring at Castiel’s cheeky smile. “You little shit.”

Castiel cocked his head sideways, and for once, Dean interpreted it to be closer to flirting than an expression of confusion. “Do you want to kiss me?”

Dean gaped, stunned Castiel had asked. “Uh... Are you asking about in general, or— or right now?”

“I’ve never kissed anyone before,” Castiel said, blinking twice, pulling his arms around his knees. “The idea fascinates me, like sex does.”

“But I thought sex grosses you out. Doesn’t it?”

“No, it makes me curious. Not for myself - I don’t expect to enjoy it - but I’m curious about the act. Until tonight I thought there would be no opportunity to try anything, and that frustrated me, which is why I’m asking: do you want to kiss me?”
Dean shook his head. “Cas, you were pretty damn clear earlier. You don’t like the sexy kind of touching. I don’t want to mess up and ruin what we have.”

“I don’t enjoy sexual contact, no. And you ought to stay as far away from it as possible, unless I’m mistaken. You were addicted to sex once. You mustn’t be tempted, lest you fall off the wagon.”

Dean swallowed, resting his chin on his knee. Cas was right, as he often was. “You’re basically saying we’re perfect for each other, aren’t you?”

“It could be interpreted that way, yes.” Castiel blinked and blinked; his fingers twitched once. Dean reached over to touch him before they twitched again. As their skin met, Castiel’s eyes lifted to stare at Dean. “I want to kiss you.”

Dean’s lips parted quickly, and he tingled with excitement, but it was overshadowed with worry. “What if you don’t like it?”

“Then we can try again some other time,” Castiel said, reasonably. “After all, I think we will have many years to try.”

Dean smiled, then nodded. “Yeah. God, Cas – that makes me really happy. Thanks.”

“Yes. Happy. Yes, me too.” Castiel leaned closer, looking at Dean’s lips. “Will you use your tongue?”

Dean panted a little, wetting his lips. “U-um,” he stammered, “Um, do you want me to?”

“Okay,” Castiel said, breathing on Dean’s mouth. “You smell like beer. And your pupils are dilated, I think you’re aroused.”

Dean giggled, almost butting Castiel in the nose with his cheek. “Uhm, yeah—” He grinned. “Yeah, I’m a little excited. Sorry.”

“It’s a positive reaction,” Castiel whispered, gazing closely at Dean. “I too feel exhilarated by our proximity.”

“Ah- Awesome.” His breath kept hitching, every time he felt a funny thrill; the thrills came in waves, hot and cold at once. “N-Now’s the part where we touch lips,” Dean muttered, feeling his lips shiver, yearning. Cas was so close he could count his eyelashes, taste his ginger-beer breath. Cas wasn’t going to close his eyes if they kissed, and Dean didn’t even care, he just wanted this so badly—

Dean’s phone rang, vibrating in his pocket. Castiel pulled back, a hand going to touch the phone in Dean’s jeans, only to make Dean yelp. “Whoa! Wrong bulge, Cas, wrong bulge!”

Dean, blushing, pulled his cellphone from his pocket, digging his toes into the wet sand. Grinning softly at Cas, he stuck the phone to his ear. “Yeah?”

“Hey, it’s me,” Sam said. “You find Cas yet?”

Dean laughed, screwing up his eyes and thumping his forehead to his knee. “Yeah,” he grinned. “Yeah, I found Cas. You kind of called at a bad time.”

“Oh... sorry. Um, I’ll hang up—”

“No, it’s okay, I have a minute,” Dean said, watching Cas happily reach for a duck who swam
close on its way to its nest. Cas didn’t seem bothered by the interruption at all, and Dean was sure he could learn to be the same. Besides that, he was relieved that talking to Sam wasn’t giving him some kind of accidentally-incestuous rash. “Since you’re here, Sam... I wanted to confirm – you moved in, right?”

“Well? Come on, man, I told you over the phone earlier today, you said Cas already told you. I was feeling guilty about you doing all my laundry, maybe I wasn’t clear enough—”

“You didn’t tell me shit! We talked about last time, with Jes—”

“If you say one more syllable I swear to God I will march over to Donna and Charlie and I will tell them all about your love of girls’ panties.”

Dean rolled his eyes. “I’m talking about this time, Sam.”

“Maybe you misunderstood,” Sam said, words accompanied by the jolt of a brisk shrug. “Cas has his issues with letting me into the apartment, but I still have the key you gave me. Really, I’ll be gone before you know it, then you and him can get back to rolling around in sunlight, or whatever else you two do together when nobody’s looking.”

“Snuggling and holding hands, mostly,” Dean smirked. Then he shrugged, giving in. “Fine. You do whatever you need to, our casa is your casa.” He looked over at Castiel, watching him lovingly stroke his duck. The sight of Cas doing something so competently made Dean fall in love all over again, and the feeling rose up in him until he pressed the phone to his mouth and said to Sam, “See ya, Sasquatch. I’ll be back whenever, don’t wait up,” then ended the call without looking.

Smiling at Cas, he said, almost dazed, “You’re really beautiful, you know that?”

Castiel’s eyes were shining with quivering pink light from a watery reflection as he gazed back at Dean. The duck quacked and hopped off his lap, and when it was gone, Castiel inched through the sand, closer and closer until he was pressed to Dean’s side. “Thank you,” he said, tenderly. “You are also aesthetically pleasing. Your nose is particularly well-formed.”

Dean didn’t even need to laugh, it was a nice thing to hear. “Thanks.”

“Let’s kiss now,” Castiel said, leaning in again, slowly, giving Dean time to race back to his sultry mood. Oh, Jesus Christ, this was really happening. First kiss with the guy he loved. Holy crap.

Castiel’s lips were warm, artlessly placed on Dean’s mouth. Dean widened his own lips to accommodate Castiel’s unsure press, and he pressed too, holding his breath as he felt Cas’ tongue lick his teeth, then his nose squash into his cheek. Castiel surged his tongue straight into Dean’s mouth, and Dean’ eyes opened wide in shock, coughing the choking hazard back out. Saliva twinkled between their mouths until it fell in a starlit strand.

“That was nice,” Castiel said.

Dean laughed, shaking his head. “No.” He shut his eyes and shook his head again, restraining a snigger. “No, Cas, that was really, really awful.” He looked up at Cas, unable to stop smiling. “Do you wanna do it again? I could show you, it could be better.”

Castiel thought about it. “Maybe just once more. It’s very intimate, and not the kind I like.”

Dean paused before they could kiss again. “What kind do you like?”

“When you get very close to me when nobody else is around,” Castiel said. “I don’t mind touching
then. Also, if we enter into a romantic relationship, I’d very much like to see you naked more. And please you.”

Dean almost shivered. “You— You wanna touch me?”

“Yes. But I touch you, you don’t touch back. Or perhaps you could simply touch yourself while I watch. I want to see what happens to you when you feel pleasure.”

Dean was astounded by that. “Whoa. S- So you’d actually be okay with some sex stuff?”


Dean grinned. “Oh, man. That’s – awesome. But— just so we’re clear, I’m not in this for the sex alone. I like the bits when we get really close, too. And even the normal things, like the talking. That’s the best thing. Just knowing you.” He gestured a finger around the pond. “Knowing about your magic.”

Castiel looked genuinely flattered, and his smile was easygoing, his fingers spreading out between Dean’s. “I’m curious— How did you ever learn to talk to me?” he asked, frowning daintily. “I used to be a burden to you, then one day it stopped. Why?”

Dean nestled up against Cas’ shoulder, rocking against him. “I did what you did with your ducks and your cat. Back when you and me first met – and I’m not proud of this – I thought you were some... freak, a dumb animal. I thought you were stupid, and that made me pretty snippy, you know? It was maddening, I couldn’t get a straight answer out of you. But,” Dean sighed, squeezing Castiel’s hand, “then I realised you were just speaking a different language. You’re good at some things, you’re bad at others, the way a cat can jump five feet high to catch a bird, but can’t cook its own dinner. I was expecting you to be a cat who could cook dinner. And once I realised that, I stopped treating you like the person I wanted you to be, or expected you to be, and I started treating you like the person you are. With that came trust. From me, and from you, Cas. You taught me how to understand you.”

“You taught me the same,” Castiel nodded. “You taught me how to make friends. Nobody ever made the effort to communicate with me before. Even my parents thought I was impossible.”

Dean rested his forehead in the crook of Castiel’s neck and jaw. “You are impossible. Like talking to cats is impossible. And yet...?” Dean grinned. “I like impossible.” He nuzzled his nose against Cas’ neck, breathing in bubblegum and lime. “Mm.” He sighed. “I wanna kiss your cheek. That okay?”

“Yes,” Castiel said. “I’d like that.”

Dean slowly lifted his head, gazing serenely at Cas. He really was a beautiful creature, inside and out. Without further preamble, Dean pressed his lips to Cas’ stubble, eyes slipping closed, breathing out a breath heavy with all the wonderful emotions trapped inside him. Castiel sighed, a soft murmur breaking from his throat. Without warning, he turned his chin, and Dean’s lips were caught by Cas’ – and this time it wasn’t uncomfortable. Cas put gentle pressure on Dean’s lips like his hand would for a wound, and in the same way, the touch healed.

Dean broke off first, grinning as he caught his breath. “Wow. That was awesome.”

“I think I could find kissing enjoyable, with you,” Castiel said, squinting. “Yes, it was very pleasant.”

Dean nodded. “We’ll try it again tomorrow, maybe.” He smiled, basking in the glow of flashing
green fireflies and pond lights in front of them both, the swish of cool water on his toes. “Take it as slow as we need to.”

“The future seems far more promising now,” Castiel said, lifting their joined hands to his jaw and running the point of his chin firmly against Dean’s knuckles. “I barely feel anxious at all.”

Dean swung an arm around Cas’ shoulders, tugging him up close. “I’m proud of you.”

“And I, you.”

Castiel caught Dean’s eye, and they stared for a while, sharing one of those intimacies they both enjoyed. Lights twinkled around them, the garden blossoming thicker, faster, more remarkably, but neither of them noticed.

Some magic in their world was normal. But some magic was too spectacular for them to even comprehend. It was precisely that kind of magic which had them step, protected, onto their newly-mapped paths in the days which followed, together from that moment forth.

There were ups and downs as there were in anyone’s time, but the one constant was their incredible friendship. They had created their very own language, and it was that language with which they spoke for the rest of their lives.

{ the end }

End Notes

Thank you for reading! I hope this was enjoyable. (Psst! Feedback is my favourite thing, and would be really helpful to me as a writer! ...But even if you don't feel like leaving a comment, clicking the kudos button would go a long way towards letting me know the temperature of the pool, so to speak. Thank you so much ❤️)

Also, in case anyone is interested, I plan to attend DestielCon in June 2014, and help run some form of panel with fellow Dean/Cas writers CloudyJenn and HigherMagic, among others (see here for more details). I’m very excited! I would be ecstatic to meet any of my readers there, so if you’re reading this and you’ll be attending, please let me know and we can meet up and scream at each oth— I mean, discuss matters like adults. *cough*

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